

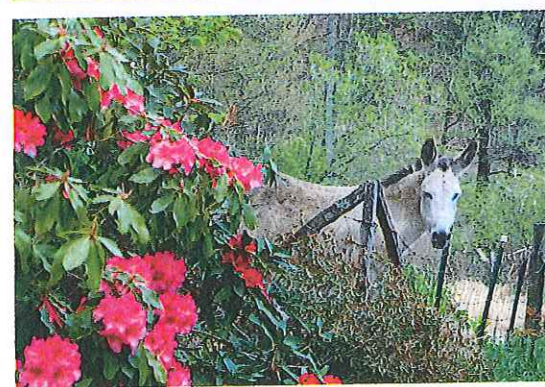
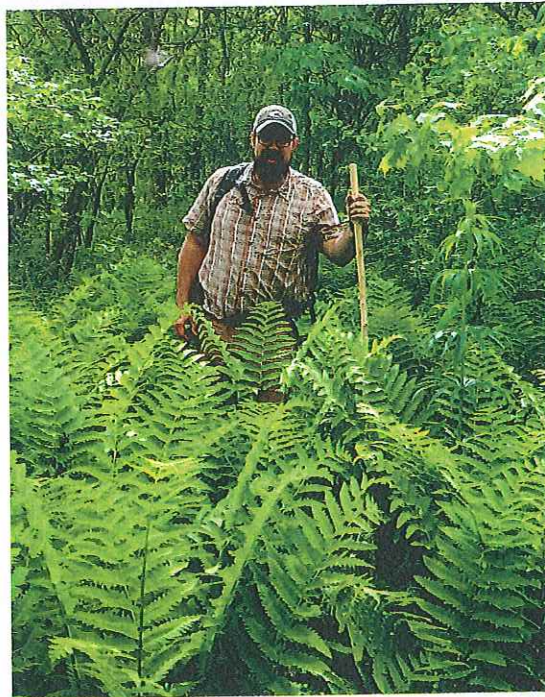
# Sandy Mush community strengthens its agricultural assets through conservation

by Terri Wells and Frances Figart



Northern view of Big Sandy Mush with Madison County mountains in the distance. Photo by Ken Abbott





Chickens by Terri Wells; hiker and mule by Christopher Jayne; turnips by Terri Wells

In the northwest corner of Buncombe County lies Big Sandy Mush valley. Surrounded by scenic ridgeline with high mountain pasture, the valley boasts prime farmland along the creeks with historic barns, farmhouses and livestock dotting the rolling landscape.

Visit the community of Sandy Mush, and you will find a strong sense of place among the residents, whose connection to it is palpable regardless of whether their families have lived here for generations or they have chosen more recently to call this place home. This shared love of Sandy Mush, with its agricultural heritage and pristine mountain landscapes, has spurred a number of families to make a formal commitment to land conservation in order to preserve a valuable resource that is becoming more rare: a community spirit built on the economic model of the small sustainable farm. Here are some of their stories.

### LONG BRANCH ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER

Paul and Pat Gallimore made their initial commitment to environmental conservation when they moved to Sandy Mush in the spring of 1974 to start the educational nonprofit Long Branch Environmental Education Center (LBEEC), now in its 40th year.

“We founded the center out of a sense of protecting the ecological values of these ancient mountains as well as to help others see, understand and begin to value the eastern temperate rainforest, the watersheds, the wildlife habitat and the rare, threatened and endangered plant species, salamanders and soils,” says Paul Gallimore, who, along with his family, moved to the area from Virginia.

Working with thousands of students over the years, the Gallimores have taught ecological agriculture, permaculture design, edible landscaping, sustainable building design, energy efficiency and ecological restoration with native plant, shrub and tree species. In 1995, they protected 601 acres of land with a conservation easement through the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC)—the first conservation easement on land in Sandy Mush. In 2001, they conserved an additional 644 acres.

“As indigenous cultures know so well, and what they continue to teach us, is that the role of the human beings is to be the guardians, protectors, and caretakers of this beloved biosphere,” says Gallimore. “We include the human family as a living, contributing part of the ecosystem that actually enhances living systems in these mountains by practicing ecological restoration and expanding biological diversity.”

### THE BILL DUCKETT FAMILY FARM

As County Extension director for Buncombe County, Steve Duckett is responsible for county office administration, community and rural development programs, row crops and pond management.

“My decision to pursue a degree in agriculture and work with Cooperative Extension was in great part influenced by my father’s values; he loved farming and rural life,” says Steve of his dad, the late Bill Duckett, a fifth generation Sandy Mush farmer and early supporter of the land conservation ethic. “I saw working with the Extension Service as my best chance to contribute to the people and communities that had taken care of me so well and taught me so much growing up.”

The Duckett family has been farming in Sandy Mush since the early 1800s. Steve and his brother Kevin continue to raise beef cattle and grow



hay on the farm. Since 2007, the family has conserved nearly 300 acres of land with the help of SAHC, including prime farmland and a high mountain pasture, an act that made Bill Duckett proud, according to Steve.

“Our dad always believed that it was important to give back to your community, and to do that we needed to protect and care for one another as neighbors,” he says. “He realized we needed natural resources to work for us, but we also had a responsibility to keep that resource available for future generations.”

### SANDY MUSH HERB NURSERY

Many know where Sandy Mush is from having visited the Sandy Mush Herb Nursery. Surrounded by nearly 400 acres of native forests, the cultivated gardens feature plants from around the world, creating a botanical paradise. Located on the upper reaches of Surret Cove, the land ascends to the Buncombe-Madison County line, near Big Sandy Mush Bald.

“We found this mountain cove in the very area described by Dean Jensen of Warren Wilson College, as ‘the most beautiful in the Southern Appalachians,’” nursery owners Kate and Fairman Jayne say. “We moved here in 1972 to raise our two children

Christopher and Nicketie, who played in the streams, roamed the coves, learned about animals and plants and the nourishing earth.”

Today, with the help of their children, the Jaynes continue to operate the mail order herb and native plant nursery. In 2009, the family conserved more than 400 acres of their land situated at the headwaters of the French Broad River. At the behest of his grandmother, Miriam Hearne, Christopher Jayne, who has a degree in landscape design, worked with William Hamilton, farmland preservation director with SAHC, to help craft new conservation easement language to allow more flexibility for the future. The Hearne/Jayne families conserved

another 500 acres at Willow Cove, a working sheep farm.

“Sandy Mush is unique, in my knowledge, in having the number of acres and number of individual property owners who have put their land in easements,” says Christopher Jayne. “As a result, we have clear, dark night skies. We have the knowledge that local food production is still an option. And we have clean water, although it still might get some sand in your mush because of its jubilant travels from the high mountain springs to green valley below.”

### THE WELLS FAMILY FARM

In 2009, Pearl Wells Black, Keith Wells and Beth Wells Shook, along with their families, conserved close to 600

acres of their working farm. They agreed that the land should continue to be actively farmed, as has been done since the early 1800s. Four generations of the family live on the farm and continue to work on diversifying the operations to improve its sustainability, both environmentally and economically.

Cousins Charles Shook and Terri Wells, this story’s co-author, are the 9th generation of their family to farm on this land. Shook manages a 250-Angus-pair beef cattle herd on the farm, as well as on additional conserved farmland in the area. He worked with SAHC and says that because the land



*Readying hives for spring honey flow, Bee Branch Farm. Photo by Terri Wells*

he farms and leases has a conservation easement in place, “it keeps the land from being sold for development, which makes our farm life more sustainable for my children and future generations.”

Wells, who returned to the family farm after a career in education, runs Bee Branch Farm, which provides a vegetable CSA and honey. “Growing up on this farm and in this community instilled in me a strong work ethic, a sense of community and a value for our farm’s interdependence with our natural resources,” she says. “I think of my papa, Charlie Wells. He loved farming, and he loved his community; I know he would be proud that our family has honored that heritage and made a lasting commitment to it.”



## THE EVERETTS' SANDY MUSH FARM

Among several newcomers to the valley who share the long-term natives' passion and commitment to seeing Sandy Mush conserved are farmers Dave and Kim Everett. A cattle farmer, Everett keeps no more than 30 Angus and Baldy cows and heifer calves on his century-old 130-acre Sandy Mush Farm.

When they purchased the property in 2001, the Everetts set an intentional course for continued, sustainable agricultural use through a permanent conservation easement administered by the Buncombe

County Soil and Water Conservation District. "The easement brings a legalized stability to the land, eliminates much doubt about our farm's future or worry whether the next generation will manage it wisely, allowing us to be better present-day stewards," says Dave Everett.



*Newborn Angus calf on Shook Farm. Photo by Katrina Ohstrom*

One of the appeals of small-scale agriculture, Everett believes, is that it is small enough to pay attention to intrinsic values like the health of the land and the preservation of viewsapes. "One quickly discovers that it is often as easy to do right by the land and its inhabitants as not," he says. "Mitigating our environmental impact by growing healthy foods, controlling use of chemical contaminants like pesticides and herbicides, ensuring humane animal treatment, preserving open spaces, improving wildlife habitat and water quality is not that difficult a choice."

For example, at Sandy Mush Farm, cow manure is regularly applied to enrich soils and minimize use of chemical fertilizers. Owl and kestrel nest boxes have encouraged these beneficial predators and increased rodent control without the use of poisons. Rather than converting a spring-fed riparian wetland to a pond site, this thousand-year-old bog is preserved as habitat for a variety of amphibians, turtles and wetland plants. Two miles of riparian boundaries have resulted in dramatic increases in songbird and small mammal populations and noticeable improvement in creek water quality.

"In attempting to holistically manage a farm ecosystem, it becomes necessary to place subjective value on things for which there are no dollar equivalents," Everett says. "We traded some corn for indigo buntings and gold finches, a family of river otters and a cleaner creek. We think we got a pretty good deal."



## Why farm conservation?

Farming communities that are kept intact have the best chance for survival due to access to infrastructure, community resources and overall agricultural support and awareness. Working farms with adjacent forest provide many benefits:

- A safe and abundant supply of locally produced food
- Preservation of soil and clean water
- Open space for wildlife and scenic beauty
- Preservation of cultural heritage
- Tax benefits because of minimal need for public services on working lands
- A significant economic force for agricultural products as well as agritourism.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

In order to conserve our agricultural heritage and ensure our farms remain viable for the future, we must have local leadership with vision and a plan, and an educated public who advocates for farmland conservation and farm viability.

To help, you can:

- Contact your elected officials and tell them you support farmland conservation and farm viability programs. Ask them what their plan is for our future.
- Purchase directly from local farmers and ask that your store carry local farms' products.
- Join your local land trust.
- Learn more about and support local farmland conservation programs at: **buncombecounty.org** (soil and water; conservation; farmland preservation) **appalachian.org** (conservation work; farmland)





*Sandy Mush Herb Nursery. Photo by Christopher Jayne*

## New Farm Heritage Trail to spotlight Buncombe County

Buncombe County's agricultural history dates back more than two centuries, and its northwest farming area claims the most working farms in Buncombe County. These will be showcased in the new Farm Heritage Trail, a project of the Farmland Preservation program of Buncombe County Soil and Water District.

Opening in April, the trail is a scenic drive through the rural agricultural communities of Alexander, Leicester, Newfound and Sandy Mush, with several conserved family farms along the route. There will be farm stops open to the public, and an ongoing calendar of events, hikes and activities throughout the year.

"We want to engage our Buncombe County citizens and visitors to learn more about our important farming heritage and conservation efforts," says Ariel Dixon, farmland preservation coordinator for Buncombe County. "We want locals and guests alike to visit and support our farms and to have a memorable experience to share with family and friends."

The trail's grand opening event will be held at Everetts' Sandy Mush Farm on Saturday, May 7. Learn more at [farmheritagetrail.org](http://farmheritagetrail.org).

These families, along with others, have contributed to a total conservation of almost 7,000 acres in Big Sandy Mush. More than 10,000 acres have now been preserved in the greater Sandy Mush area, which includes adjoining land in Haywood and Madison counties as well as Buncombe County. In addition to the significant and generous donations from individual landowners, SAHC has invested more than \$8 million in funds—raised from philanthropic donors and county, state and federal grants—to purchase conservation easements that enable families and farmers to continue productive agriculture in Sandy Mush.

The Sandy Mush conservationists have set a valuable precedent in the protection of their individual pieces of paradise. Their stories demonstrate an abiding love for this rural, agricultural community; they represent not only a respect for its history, but also a commitment to its future. There is a desire among the residents of Sandy Mush to actively shape that future for themselves, rather than passively allowing their community to lose its character, to lose its sense of place, to lose the open fields and unmarred mountain vistas.

"The fact that western North Carolina has become a popular place to live and visit makes it incumbent upon land owners to responsibly conserve their mountain landscapes," says Dave Everett. "The notion of 'growing houses' on prime soils seems an environmentally and societally reckless choice. The subsequent homogenizing of mountain vistas risks making our area indistinguishable from everywhere else. On that basis, joining like-minded others who have used conservation easements to keep their farms and agrarian landscapes intact is a logical choice." 