

This Food Does More Than Feed a Community

In retirement, Jim Sander found a new job: farming. Using his land, time, and knowledge, his food is bettering the lives of more than just those who eat it.

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Rays of sunlight broke through a thick tree canopy, illuminating the tops of bushy pepper plants. Two smiling faces emerged from the thick rows of tangled green branches; another woman fixed her hat outside of the cab of her pickup truck; and a man navigated through a patch of red lettuce as he walked up the dew-soaked hill.

The early November cold snap in central North Carolina stole some of the liveliness from the vegetable plants in Jim Sander's field, but his crew of volunteers still filled the crisp air with an infectious enthusiasm. Peppers needed picking, buckets required filling and a community awaited nourishing.

Sander has now retired from multiple careers: teaching special education and film-making, building houses, and selling books. Now at 70 years old, he is dedicating his time, knowledge and passion to growing the highest quality organic produce for Table, a non-profit that provides food to children and families in Orange County, N.C. The catch? He does it all for free.

"I'm retired. I don't need the money," said Sander as he walked through his 0.75 acre vegetable plot in Effland, N.C. We wove between rows of peppers. Pausing occasionally, he points out some of his different crops or his management techniques. Every plant is strategically placed in order to maximize the limited space that he is cultivating.

Tomato plants, now just brown skeletons of plants once bursting with round red fruits, were closely abutted on either side by kale, which cropped in the cool spring weather, then survived the hot summer in the tomato's shade before being revived for another crop in the fall. No land went to waste.

Sander opened the door to his passive hoop house, a type of greenhouse that only uses energy from the sun for heat. The plastic and metal structure provided respite from the unseasonably cold weather. A small fan buzzed in the corner, constantly blowing air between the two layers of plastic, providing the greenhouse with a layer of added insulation.

"The only power I have is that fan and a drill," Sander said, the pride in his tone obvious, "and both are powered by my solar panel."

No tractors, no gas-powered machinery -- just a fan and a drill. This is the difference between the no-till practices and conventional agriculture. Sander and his volunteers—students, retirees, and other community members—do everything by hand and do not dig or weed any more than is necessary for their crops.

Another difference, largely due to the lack of monetary pressure, is the work environment. "We try to only work when it's nice out," said Sander. "It gets too hot in the middle of the summer days, so we work a morning and evening shift. Nobody comes in if it is cold and rainy."

In 2010, after a year of taking courses and apprenticing at Breeze Farm in Hillsborough, N.C., Jim broke ground on the vegetable plot that he is still farming today. For seven years, he labored for nine months

out of the year to sell fresh, organic produce to local restaurants, community supported agriculture subscriptions, and even Whole Foods. The amount of work did not equate to the payout, nor did he feel like stores that sought high profits valued his products. "I realized that I could have a lot more fun and meaning if I just gave the produce away."

Naturally, that is just what he began to do. He walked into Table, a non-profit food organization that provides food to children and families in Orange County, N.C., and proposed his idea. He would provide the land, expertise, and his time in exchange for Table providing volunteers and paying for necessary materials. Everything grown on the farm would go straight to Table for distribution.

"Jim came to us and offered this partnership more than once and I don't think we realized how great of a proposition he was handing us," said Laura Dille, the director of operations at Table.

Neither of Jim's two requests were difficult for Table to accommodate. Generous donors and grants took care of the costs, and volunteers appeared in excess.

"I had volunteered at Table for a while when I read about Wildflower Lane Farm via their weekly newsletter," said Abigail Bethune, who was at the farm picking peppers that day. Abby got her master's degree in Resilient and Sustainable Communities and was looking for experience and education in food production.

Now in her third year at Wildflower Lane, she is the only paid employee. Abby was hired this season in order to give Jim more time to share his model with other farmers.

"Besides growing food for people who need it, we are giving people really good experiences," said Jim. Obviously, the teacher that he once was has not faded. He eagerly tells his volunteers about how he is growing such nourishing food, explaining the concepts of organic and no-till farming. Everyone comes away from the farm learning something new.

Ginny Richter, a retired neurologist, volunteers regularly at Wildflower Lane, and has been doing so since the partnership with table. "There is nothing quite like being in the country," she said after pulling a muddy tarp over what used to be rows of lettuce. Pulling the tarp tight and placing rocks on the edges served to tuck the fields in for a winter of rest.

Unable to have a garden at her current home, Ginny volunteers for the good of the community and for her own good, fulfilling her need to connect with nature.

Inherently, Jim continues farming for his love of growing food, tangible results from hard work have a magical aura to them. He is also driven by a desire to learn and improve, though.

Pointing to the various plots of peppers, Jim noted their yields from the season and said how he planned on increasing that for the next season. Improvements in one crop leads to improvements for the whole farm.

"It's like breaking the four-minute mile for runners, \$100,000 per acre used to seem impossible," he said. "Once one person did it, though, lots of people started doing it."

This past season, Jim produced upwards of \$80,000 in fresh organic produce for Table, costing them only \$9,000 in materials and \$6,000 for a part-time employee. They paid less than 20% of market value for produce that often is picked within hours of being in the hands of the customers.

Sanders aims to produce \$120,000 of fresh vegetables by 2023. In addition to the increased donations to Table, he has visions of teaching the community and other farmers about his model of farming.

“It could be a great way to supplement income,” Jim said. Farming is a volatile business, crops fail, droughts happen, businesses cancel contracts, the list continues. Suggesting that other farmers receive compensation for their knowledge and time, Jim’s model could provide a buffer.

Money aside, Ginny put everyone’s intentions at Wildflower Lane into words, “I believe in the cause of growing food and dispatching it to those who need it.”