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Roadside produce stand on honor system



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By: Scott Nicholson

While produce stands are a roadside fixture in the High Country, Springhouse Farm in Vilas has a built-in advantage.

Springhouse Farm has a new self-service, around the clock produce stand funded by WNC AgOptions, a grant program that uses tobacco funds to expand agriculture. The farm's owner, Amy Fiedler Johnston, received \$3,000 to build the produce stand, which she keeps stocked with fresh, in-season organic crops. The stand operates on the honor system, with a price list and a money box where people can leave payment after picking out their goods. Johnston started the idea last year, her first operating the farm, and now has a regular customer base on Silverstone Road.

Megan Riley, project manager for WNC AgOptions, paid a site visit to Springhouse Farm Friday. She said the project fit the AgOptions' model of sustainability and fitting in with the overall farm operation. The produce stand also ensures longevity and benefits the community, Riley said.

"She proved very well that she had customer demand, so we knew it would be a success," Riley said.

"Amy's been a leader in the agricultural movement around here. She's always giving tours out here and we appreciate that she's educating new farmers."

Mark Skenes, a carpenter who helped build the produce stand, said, "I've known Amy a long time and I've been involved in local food."

Riley said WNC AgOptions had been focusing more on local food movements, which connect farmers to consumers in their community. The grant program is administered through the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service and was formed in 2004.

Though Johnston sells at several High Country farmers' markets, she said it's easier to have customers visit because she can spend her time tending crops instead of packing up produce to take to crops. "When you farm, the best way to make it work is to never leave," Johnston said.

Johnston is president of the Watauga County Beekeepers Association and often gives classes on raising bees. She also works with Appalachian State University, hosting interns on her farm, as well as being a member of the High Country Community Supported Agriculture project.

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