

MOUNTAIN Express



the dirt

farming & gardening



Dig It!

Extension grants help local farmers grow

The WNC Agricultural Options Program recently awarded 42 farmers the seed money they need to complete a variety of diversification projects. This year's recipients, who are sharing a total pot of \$225,000, are selling locally raised meats at the WNC Farmers Market in Asheville; creating additional markets for established strawberry, trout and edible-landscaping enterprises; and introducing innovative crops to the region such as milkweed (for sale to butterfly farmers) and mosses (for landscapers).

Frank and Jeanette Wilson of Hominy Valley Farms - Land and Cattle in Candler are opening a market stand for local meat at the WNC Farmers Market at Asheville. Besides selling their own meat and poultry, they'll also offer Sunburst Trout Co. products and goods from other local farms, all under the Loca-Motive brand.

No less than 13 AgOptions recipients, in fact, are completing livestock projects — a sign of the growing demand for locally raised rabbit meat, beef and poultry.

Haywood County residents **Ronnie and Kathy James** will use their grant to further diversify their tomato and pepper farm. Acquiring a Polyplanter seeder will enable them to ramp up production while saving hundreds of dollars per acre compared with the cost of hand-planting. This income boost is crucial for the couple as they continue to test new ventures. They hope to establish Haywood County's first CSA, a kind of subscription service in which area residents pay up front for a season's worth of farm-fresh produce.

Meanwhile, over in Mitchell County, **Cynthia Sharpe and Dwain Swing** of OakMoon Farm & Creamery are growing the scope of their cheese-making and goat-husbandry workshops. They'll use their grant to improve infrastructure in support of the farm's agritourism project, a key source of off-season income. "When people attend our workshops," says Sharpe, "they stay



Say cheese: An AgOption grant will help Cynthia Sharpe and Dwain Swing of OakMoon Farm & Creamery in Mitchell County grow the agri-tourism side of their business.

in local accommodations, eat in the restaurants and visit galleries. They get to see what this region is like, and this helps put Bakersville on the map."

Other 2010 project awards include: a produce-packaging facility to facilitate sales to local grocery chains; a propagation house for food and medicinal plants; hops production on steep terrain; a cooker for finishing maple syrup; no-till production of specialty winter squash; a screened greenhouse for raising disease-free strawberry plants; and an on-site retail store in Barnardsville offering grass-fed beef and pork.

"When burley tobacco was king in Western North Carolina, it and other commodities defined mountain agriculture," says Madison County Extension Director **Ross Young**, a WNC AgOptions steering committee leader. "Many

farmers are realizing that it's becoming increasingly more difficult to farm by raising crops destined for a commodity market. The WNC AgOptions Program has been instrumental in assisting farmers as they transition to direct markets and local sales. Instead of selling to warehouses, packing sheds and stockyards, many farmers are selling directly to local groceries, restaurants, cafeterias and other consumers."

For more information about this year's AgOption grants, visit mountainx.com at <http://bit.ly/cnUDxx> or wncagoptions.org. X

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