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## Back Home on the Hobby Farm

By Dan Kadlec

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When he was a child, Walker Miller would pick berries and bring them to his mother, who baked "the best blueberry pie you ever ate," he recalls. Today, Miller, 66, a retired Clemson University plant pathologist, has found a way to return to a bit of that past: he owns a 9-acre (3.6 hectares) pick-your-own farm in rural South Carolina, which he named the Happy Berry. At least some of the local children who pick blueberries for their mothers today pick them from Miller's fields. This pleases him--as does the simple hard work the place requires. "I enjoy being outside," he says. "I enjoy sweating."

Miller and his wife Ann (who still works for Clemson) are among the tens of thousands of recent retirees finding meaning and fun back on the farm. Their tiny operation also happens to generate half their annual income. But others are raising cattle or seeding small plots with no regard for revenue. These gentlemen--and gentlewomen--farmers are drawn to the country by a love of nature, affordable real estate and, in some cases, Internet connections that allow them to keep working as lawyers, writers and consultants.

The number of farms in the U.S. has been shrinking for seven decades. But the rise of "lifestyle," or hobby, farms--typically about 30 acres (12 hectares) that produce little or no income--promises to halt the decline, say officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Largely because of hobby farms, whose numbers are growing 2% a year and now account for about half of all farms, the population of rural counties is up 12% since 1990--the first gain in such areas since the Depression.

"Many of these people are businessmen or bankers," says Karen Keb Acevedo, editor-in-chief of Hobby Farms. "They start on weekends, wanting a better quality of life." The hot spots, she says, are in areas that are one to three hours outside of big cities on both coasts and throughout the Southeast.

Big commercial operations are still gobbling up family farms and producing an increasing share of farm output. But in some cases, rather than demolishing yet another farmhouse and barn and turning that small portion of the land over to industrial cultivation, new owners will put those buildings and a few acres on the market untouched, and find ready buyers among the city slickers yearning to raise llamas or alpacas or grow grapes or lavender.

The trend is giving rise to a curious new customer at the local supply store. Dude farmers, says Carol

Ekarius, author of *Hobby Farm: Living Your Rural Dream for Pleasure and Profit*, are "picking up bales of hay in their Jaguar." Amusing as that is, the results are not all good. Hobby farmers drive up land prices in hot areas. They also raise big-picture concerns about total farm output. Hobbyists get far less yield per acre than the lifetime pros, and in times of food shortage they would further crimp the supply, usda officials warn.

But there appears to be no stopping the trend, which is fueled not just by retirees getting in touch with the land but also by a rapid rise in the market for organic foods, which these farms tend to produce. If it sounds like something you'd like to try:

**GO SLOW.** Visit several farms to determine what kind of work you would enjoy. Most hobbyists prefer to raise animals, which they can pet, as opposed to, say, watching corn grow.

**START SMALL.** You can get a taste of farming with a big garden and a few goats. This is work. Do you want more?

**WATCH YOUR BUDGET.** Don't count on being profitable. The average hobbyist has other income of \$75,000 a year, says Ekarius, and many have a working spouse with insurance and benefits. You can pay \$1 million or more for 15 pristine acres (6 hectares) near a city or \$150,000 for 40 decent acres (16 hectares) in the middle of nowhere.

The best advice, however, may be to weigh the intangibles. Don't skimp on the pleasure you might get from waking with the sun and going to sleep to the sound of crickets just because you can't calculate a market value for them. In cities, says John Ikerd, an agricultural economist and professor emeritus at the University of Missouri, "people buy things like views, good schools, health clubs and privacy." In the country, he says, be prepared to assign a value of perhaps \$100,000 to the simple asset of quality of life. Do that, and peaceful living starts to look like a smart buy too.

*The original version of this article gave the incorrect spelling and title of one of the persons quoted. Karen Keb Acevedo is the editor-in-chief of Hobby Farms.*

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