

## Running on elbow grease

Local "Crop Mob" tackles farm chores in group raids

BY VICTORIA BOULOUBASIS

**O**n a sweltering Sunday last August, a peaceful mob of 35 local farmers, armed with shovels, hoes and wheelbarrows,

raided Serendip Farm in Orange County.

**eat  
beat**

But instead of a traditional raid, which is about taking, this raid was about giving: The Crop Mob, as the group is known, spent five hours cutting down starter crop, tilling beds, weeding and mulching—for free. For the past year, the local Crop Mob, mostly landless, self-proclaimed farmers, has spent one Sunday each month "raiding" a small farm that is not theirs, working the land and planting and harvesting crops.

"We farm because we want to, not because we need to. At some time or another, we were infected with a desire to give and take from the dirt," writes organizer Trace Ramsey, 35, about the group's mission on its blog, [cropmob.org](http://cropmob.org).

Popular among the rural communities in Chatham and Orange counties, the Crop Mob represents a resurgence of small-scale sustainable farms throughout the Triangle. The number of small farms, those fewer than 10 acres, in the Triangle grew 14 percent from 2002 to 2007, from about 4,400 to 5,000, according to Roland McReynolds, executive director of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association. By comparison, the total number of farms of all sizes statewide dropped 2 percent during the same period, McReynolds says.



The Crop Mob descended on Serendip Farm last August. PHOTO BY D.L. ANDERSON

An emerging generation of local young farmers are defying the traditional definition of "farmer" and gaining national recognition from publications as varied as *Bon Appetit* and *USA Today*. While the average American farmer is 57 years old, the Crop Mob is made up of activists in their early 20s to late 30s.

"Everybody has their own definitions of a farmer and what constitutes a farm. I don't have a fixed definition of a farmer in my mind," says organizer Rob Jones, 27. "A lot of the folks involved in Crop Mob are growing food on a significant scale that they kind of define themselves. People have to claim it for themselves. A lot of the Crop Mobbers are interns and apprentices on farms around the region. Many are landless. A lot of it is coming together and helping each other

out with the farms they work on."

The August Crop Mob happened on a quarter-acre plot at the Serendip Farm at the Breeze Farm Incubator in Orange County. Among the new members, there were seasoned farmers in the mix, including Thomas Savage from Allied Organic Farms in Hurdle Mills, Haruka and Jason Oatis of Edible Earthscape in Moncure, Sun Butler of Raleigh's Inter-Faith Food Shuttle community garden, and the crew from Circle Acres, a collective land project in Chatham County that includes Ramsey.

About a third of these folks serve as unofficial mentors to newer members, such as Steven Horton, a 25-year-old recent N.C. State graduate who helps manage the community garden at the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle. Like other Crop

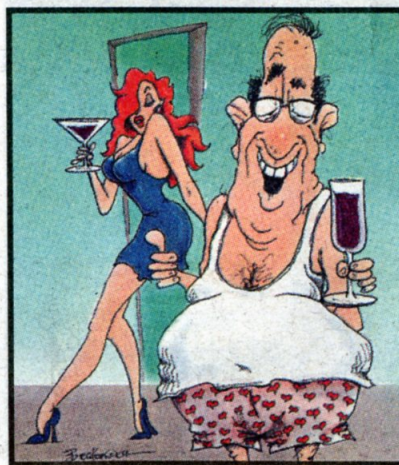
Mobbers, Horton became involved in farming to create positive social change.

"I like how we all came together," Horton says. "There's a beautiful group of people that has some sort of social justice idea. They want to do good and invite anyone to come join us. Once you learn something, you share that. Just like that saying, 'Each one teach one.'"

The mob started a year ago, growing out of a group discussion among young people involved in the local food movement. They focused on issues facing young farmers—including access to land, health care and fair wages. But the discussions felt detached from the land they longed to work.

"One of the folks in that meeting said meetings were a waste of her time," Jones ▶

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says. "She felt she built better, real relationships with people by working side by side. Later that month, we organized the first Crop Mob at Piedmont Biofarm and just kept on going."

About 15 people participated in the October 2008 mob at Piedmont Biofarm. After just a few hours' work, they had harvested 1,600 pounds of sweet potatoes.

Educational programs, such as the sustainable agriculture curriculum offered at Central Carolina Community College in Pittsboro, are supporting and advancing sustainable, small-scale farming. Most of the mobbers met through this program, including Danielle Lazarus, 33, Brandon Hines, 26, and Kevin McDonough, 23, all of Serendip Farm. They applied for the plot at Breeze Incubator, a program of the Orange County Cooperative Extension and Orange County Economic Development offices that offers beginning farmers an opportunity to practice. After completing a series of classes, as well as a business and crop plan, prospective farmers are eligible to lease quarter-acre plots for up to two years.

Lazarus, Hines and McDonough, who were present at the inception of Crop Mob, say their

### Join the mob

Help the Crop Mob celebrate its first birthday Oct. 25. Piedmont Biofarm hosts the celebration from noon to 5 p.m. Get your hands dirty digging sweet potatoes, listen to local bands and call yourself a mobber. For more information or to RSVP, contact Rob Jones at [rejemail@gmail.com](mailto:rejemail@gmail.com).

particular mob saved them at least 70 hours of labor. Their farm beds are now filled with growing seedlings of kale, beets, mustard greens, arugula, carrots and turnips.

The Crop Mobbers are willing to work hard—peacefully, honestly and with purpose, which makes even inexperienced farmers feel like a part of the group the moment they stomp the shovel into the dirt.

A vegan since age 14, Lazarus moved here from Ohio because of the community's commitment to sustainability. "It's an inspiring atmosphere," she says.

Crop Mobbers attempt to work the land by hand, minimizing the use of gas-powered machinery.

"You feel more connected," says Hines, whose agricultural background consists of stealing fresh coconuts and star fruit off neighbors' trees in the Miami suburbs where he grew up. "You think of every step involved and have more ownership of what you're doing."

Being involved with the mob has expanded the members' knowledge and experience.

"Learning new methods, learning from older farmers to create a more sustainable model, we make connections," Lazarus explains. "It is cooperative in and of itself, and a less formal way to talk to each other. There is a feeling of mentorship and always new faces."

The Crop Mobbers are foodies, too, and share a meal provided by the host farm at the end of each mob. Mob members cherish homegrown food and enjoy building



Adah Frase works the land during a Crop Mob at Serendip Farm. PHOTO BY D.L. ANDERSON

communities that sustain themselves and one other, one raid at a time.

They've created a utopia on these tiny plots. "There's no bickering, no arguing. Everyone's welcome. If you mess up, someone will help you out," Horton says. "And you have the freedom to come and go as you please. It's very loose-knit."

Horton expanded Crop Mob into Raleigh last month, dubbing it Guerrilla Growfair. "You have to recognize that what you are doing

is having an effect. It's steering society in the direction you want to see it."

The mob collaborates on even menial tasks. Ramsey describes it in a blog entry: "Sometimes I know that rocks need to be picked and weeds need to be pulled," Ramsey writes. "These tasks are best accomplished with more than one person, in a mass of asses and elbows, jabbering on and on about everything other than rocks and weeds and tasks that really have no end." ☒

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