

AGRICULTURE

Local farmers find diverse ways to live off the land

By Carol Kinsley

"When you try to get into farming, it's better to have more than one income stream," advised Tina Hill, who has shared with her husband, Marvin, in diverse methods of making a living on and off the land. "There are good years and bad years, and when they're bad, they are really, really bad," she said. "The year we built our house, in 2007, we had a crop loss on every field we grew except 50 acres of string beans. We let a dairyman have whatever he got out of one cornfield. He got two round bales out of 10 acres. There was nothing there."

Marvin has had a lot of experience. He grew up on a farm, actually his great-grandfather's farm in Milford, which — by virtue of having been continuously owned and farmed for more than 100 years — was designated a Century Farm by the Delaware Department of Agriculture in 2010. Marvin's father, Benton Hill, grew corn, soybeans, wheat and barley, then built his first chicken house in the early 70s. Marvin started helping with the chickens at age 9.

Marvin continued to help his dad while attending Milford High School and drove a school bus for a local contractor when he got out of school. "It was a separate pay check," Tina noted.

In 1991, Marvin had his first chance to get into the school bus business himself, with one bus. Then he bought two more. "It's one of those things that grows," Tina

said.

Marvin and Tina had married in 1989. She continued working in town at Bonanza Restaurant even after the birth of their son, Keith, in 1991 and daughter, Wendy, in 1994. Again, it was a separate pay check.

"I loved working with the public," Tina said, "but at some point, you realize you're never going to own the restaurant and that you wouldn't want to own it. So you decide to do something crazy, something on your own. I did it so I could be home with the kids. I sold flowers."

The Hills put up a 10-foot by 20-foot canopy on the Milford-Harrington Highway in 1996. At first, most of the product sold came from local farms. The roadside stand proved popular, so the Hills built a permanent structure the next year. The following year they built a greenhouse so they could grow more plants and produce of their own. Sixteen years later, they were selling not only produce but bedding and vegetable plants, herbs, potted plants and local meats.

That same year, 2012, the local school district got out of providing its own buses for special needs students and offered them to their interested contractors.

"We saw it as an opportunity," Tina said. "I called for information. I talked to someone I knew in another district. There was so much to process I couldn't talk for two days."

"A special needs bus is on the road all day, with little breaks. There's a bus driver, plus an aide. There are students in



Things on the farm look different from atop a combine, Cameron Kenton seems to be thinking. He is held tight by his grandfather, Marvin Hill.

wheel chairs, autistic children, some with a nurse accompanying them...

"We put our name in the hat. Three contractors out of 10 were interested. The district picked two others, not us. Each got three buses. We were disappointed."

"The next day, when I was in the greenhouse, one of the contractors who got picked called. He had other things going on and couldn't take this on right now. Did we want to have his three buses? I

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Shown is a typical swarm on a tree branch.

Spring time and honey bee swarms

By Christel Hixson

Just as a new year is beginning for us human beings in this very different and somewhat unpredictable time of our lives, honey bee colonies will be beginning to build up population and their annual cycle of reproduction via swarming as the spring season arrives. Swarming is the honey bee colony reproduction and the main goal of every colony, whether it is living in a hollow tree, in a beekeeper's stack of hive boxes in the backyard or in a new, old or

abandoned structure. Because of this natural instinct of reproduction, spring is a very exciting and busy time for beekeepers. Honey bee colonies stop their foraging activities during winter as there are no blooming flowers for them to gather nectar and pollen. The queen therefore, stops laying eggs. As daytime temperatures then begin to slowly climb, beekeepers start seeing more flight activity outside of their hives. Foraging bees begin transporting pollen in their pollen baskets...yes, honey bees have little

built-in "baskets" on their hind legs for transporting pollen back to their hive to feed developing larvae in the broodnest. This is a sure sign that spring as we know it is right around the corner!

Now...as exciting as it may be to observe a colony in the act of swarming and settling on a tree branch or landscape structure, catching that swarm and successfully getting it into a hive box, beekeepers usually do not want to see their own hives swarm. This is because roughly half of the colony will leave with the "mother" queen and the other half of the original colony's population is left behind with a queen cell from which a new, young queen will soon emerge. This usually happens when the beekeeper least needs them to as the flower buds are getting ready to burst open into beautiful blooms which provide the sweet nectar for the main honey production.

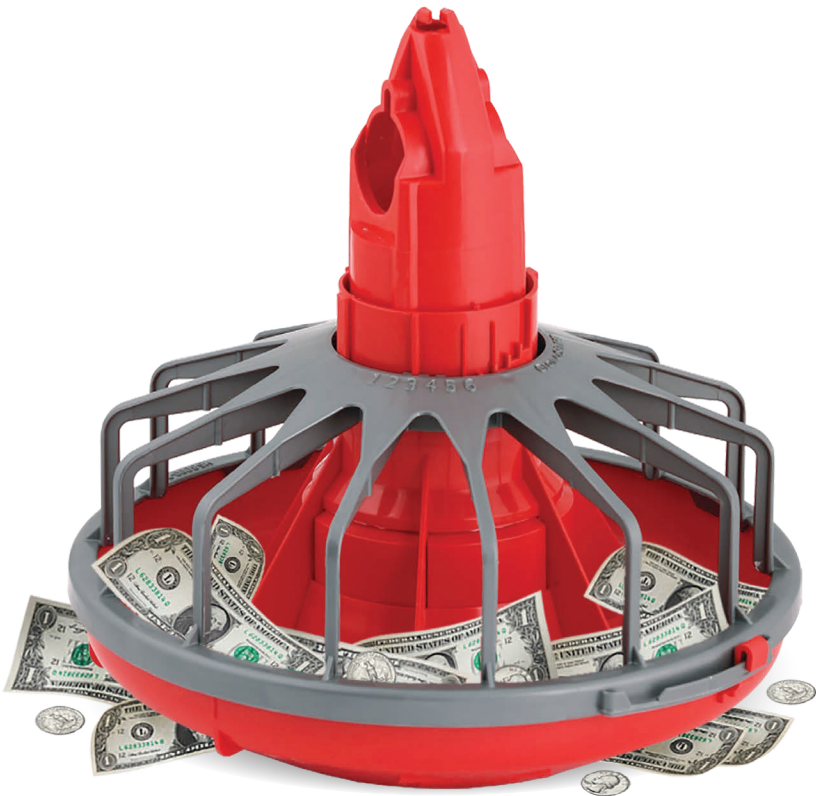
For this reason, beekeepers are almost as busy as the bees implementing management techniques to try to prevent their colonies from swarming. However, as hard as they may try, bees can still outmaneuver beekeepers and swarm anyway!

Swarm season in this region of the U.S. is usually between the end of April through the beginning of June. This is when you, as part of the community and hopefully, as one who appreciates the fascinating and necessary existence of these creatures, will call a local beekeeper, county extension agent or local beekeeping club if you ever spot a colony of bees clustered somewhere they should not be. Beekeepers who are interested in retrieving swarms usually put their names and contact information on a swarm removal list with their club. They will gladly collect swarms if easily accessible from a tree limb or landscape structure but often will charge a fee, especially if a colony

has moved permanently into a gap or cavity in a building, for example, in a soffit or behind the wall of a building. When swarms take up residence in such places, it often requires a lot more time, effort and expertise to remove them safely and completely so that no trace of comb or scent is left behind to attract a future swarm.

A few good things to know about honey bee swarms is that when they are in that cluster, which can range from just a very small fist-size ball of bees to a much larger (think two to three times the size of a football) cluster, and when seen on a tree limb, shrub or maybe a fencepost, this is usually a temporary resting place. Then the swarm begins complex decision-making that helps them locate and then travel to their new chosen home. The swarm can fly away within a few hours or possibly the following day. Also, these swarms are generally very docile as they have no "home" yet to defend.

It is still best to stay on the side of caution and keep a reasonable distance away. If possible, it is often helpful to snap a photo of the swarm to send to the beekeeper whom you can hopefully communicate with so that he or she can confirm that it is definitely a honey bee swarm and bring the correct size box and equipment in order to successfully capture the swarm. If possible, try to observe the beekeeper collecting the swarm as it is an interesting and fascinating procedure! You might be surprised at how easily done it can often be. It may even trigger your curiosity so much that you may think about becoming a future beekeeper! This would be wonderful as there can never be enough beekeepers in the world. Let's look forward to springtime showers, bees and flowers!



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Study shows family farms are the backbone of American agriculture

By Carol Kinsley

Over the last two months, 36,000 of the two million farmers in the United States received the 2022 Census of Agriculture Content Test, a sampling which will help the USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) prepare for the 2022 Census of Agriculture. The census is done every five years.

Data from the 2017 Census of Agriculture was released in January 2019, but the Farm Typology report from that year, which details family farming operations was only released last month. It shows family farms are still the backbone of American agriculture, making up 96 percent of all U.S. farms.

According to the typology report, there were 2,302 farms in Delaware with a total of 525,324 acres in agriculture. Average farm size was 228 acres. Of the total number, all but 92 were family farms.

The market value of agricultural products sold and government payments for all the farms equaled almost \$1.5 billion in 2017. Poultry and eggs, raised on 734 farms, accounted for more than \$1.1 billion. Grains, oil seeds, dry beans and dry peas grown on 948 farms amounted to almost \$234 million. Vegetables, melons, potatoes and sweet potatoes were grown on 212 farms and accounted for \$60.6 million in sales. Sales of nursery, greenhouse,

floriculture, sod and Christmas trees together amounted to a little more than \$24 million.

Delaware has its share of four-footed animals on farms. Some 6,700 head of cattle and calves were sold on 192 farms and brought in \$5.8 million in 2017. Milk income from cows amounted to \$16.7 million.

Fifty farms sold a total of almost 6,000 hogs and pigs, which brought in \$2.7 million. Some 122 farms raised sheep and goats, selling the animals and/or their wool, mohair and milk for \$260,000.

You’ll find horses, ponies, mules, burros or donkeys on 130 farms, where sales of these animals amounted to \$1.7 million.

The figures above, it should be noted, are gross income. Total farm production expenses, according to the census, were \$865.5 million, or well more than half the income.

The census includes other interesting information about Delaware’s farmers. Half the farms listed more than one producer on the farm, so there were a total of 3,963 producers. Of those, about 2,500 were male; 1,400 female. Of all the producers, some 3,000 live on the land they farm. Nearly as many have been on their present farm for 10 years or more. About half worked off the farm at least some of the time.

Delaware Farm Bureau receives national recognition

The Delaware Farm Bureau received national recognition in January for its support of the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture.

The Scholar Award was presented during the American Farm Bureau Federation’s annual convention in January to the top Farm Bureaus with the highest total donations to the Foundation within their membership group, including the Delaware Farm Bureau.

The organization also received an Apex Award honoring state Farm Bureaus which have increased their total contributions to the Foundation by 10 percent or more over the previous year, according to AFBF.

“In spite of everything that has happened over the last year, this award shows just how dedicated the membership of our Delaware Farm Bureau is to educating our communities about agriculture,” DEFB President Richard Wilkins said. “Our farmers and ranchers help carry us through this pandemic every day and the Foundation helps enhance their roles in our community through education and community support. Our membership knows that those elements are critical to the future successes of the agriculture industry, and it shows thanks to the Scholar Award.”

Chicken economic report shows effects of COVID-19 headwinds

Delmarva’s chicken community raised 570 million chickens with a wholesale value of \$3.4 billion in 2020, according to newly released economic data from the Delmarva Chicken Association. The DCA report shows chicken production on Delmarva dipped about five percent in 2020 compared to the prior year because of economic contractions and supply chain disruptions felt most acutely at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several metrics that measure year-to-year growth of the Delmarva chicken industry – including pounds of chickens processed, number of farms, chicken company payroll and wholesale value – all shrank in 2020. Still, chicken companies paid the independent farmers they contract with to raise chickens \$280 million in 2020, an 0.2 percent increase from 2019. And the chicken community’s important role as a major customer of grain farmers for feed ingredients was preserved, with more than \$1 billion spent on crops like corn, soybeans and wheat, most of it purchased locally.

The chicken community’s long-term investments in Delmarva’s economy and its environment did not falter in 2020, the report shows. The five chicken companies spent \$115 million on capital improvements to processing plants, hatcheries and wastewater treatment systems. With the help of DCA’s vegetative environmental buffers program, chicken growers and allied businesses planted more than 6,000 new trees and living buffer elements during the year – green features that will improve neighbor relations and protect water quality for generations to come.

“This year’s economic snapshot captures the impact on our chicken community from COVID-19, from the chicken processing companies to the growers and everyone in between,” said Holly Porter, DCA’s executive director. “But it also speaks to the resiliency and strength of this economic driver on Delmarva and the commitment our members live up to by not only powering our Delmarva economy, but also feeding each and every one of us even during a pandemic.”

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Shockleys receive Delmarva Chicken Association's Outstanding Grower Award

By Carol Kinsley

Blair and Julie Shockley of Laurel were among 10 recipients of Delmarva Chicken Association's Outstanding Grower Awards for 2020. Winners are chosen by the poultry companies with which they contract, based on criteria such as environmental stewardship, cooperation, attitude and achievement. Some 1,278 poultry growers on Delmarva raised 570 million chickens in 2020 and generated \$3.4 billion for the area's economy.

For more than 60 years, those recognized as "exemplary farmers raising broiler chickens" have been saluted at an annual banquet in the spring. COVID-19 prevented the banquet from being held in 2020, but these winners are no less deserving.

Both of the Shockleys are third generation farmers.

Blair grew up on a poultry farm in Laurel. His family had three chicken houses there that are still in operation today.

"My dad's been growing chickens since 1981," Blair said, "and my grandfather grew birds from 1973 to 1995. My father took over his operation in 1995 and I took over in 2002."

Blair's grandfather had four poultry houses measuring 32 feet by 300 feet which Blair leased in addition to two more down the street. He grew chickens from 2002 to 2005. When he graduated from Delaware Tech in 2005 with an associate's degree in applied agricultural technology, he went to work for Perdue Farms in research and various grow-out roles, including flock supervisor and area supervisor.

"We tore down the four houses my grandfather bought and paid for and built two new ones across the street from where we built our home," Blair said. The new houses were twice as big, measuring 63 feet by 600 feet. Blair farms with his father, who has three poultry houses of his own and they lease two others. Together they raise about 165,300 birds per flock for Perdue Farms in a total of seven houses. The birds have a target weight of seven pounds.

In 2014, Blair joined the Northeast Agri Systems team, selling poultry equipment. He currently retrofits and remodels exist-

ing poultry houses and handles construction sales. "It's really rewarding to see potential and existing customers achieve their dreams of being successful poultry producers," he said.

Farming with his father gives him the ability to go to work off the farm. "Dad's here if something happens. Julie takes care of our two houses. I oversee them, but if I have to travel, between the two of them they can figure it out if something happens."

Blair married Julie Joseph, whose grandmother on her mother's side, the late Mary Anne Reed, had a farm not far from their current farm in Laurel, which is still in production with Mountaire Farms. Julie's uncle, Bobby Reed, takes care of the farm now.

Julie was a cosmetologist, which worked out even after their daughter, Harper, was born seven years ago.

"The majority of the world works until 5 p.m., but the salon closed at 9, so Julie worked 9 to 9," Blair said. "We decided to have another child and then we found out she was expecting twins!"

They checked the price of day care, which would have been \$440 a week, and realized Julie would be working just to pay for day care. Blair told her, "If we build chicken houses, you can take care of the daily routine and I can manage them, and you can stay home with the kids."

That's when they built their poultry houses. "It has worked out," Blair continued. "I enjoy the competitiveness. Every flock is different. Settlement is on a tournament system, so the better chickens you put out, the more money you make. It's fun, but it takes a lot of time."

The twins, Asher and Rhett, are now in pre-school, and Harper is in first grade. When school is in session, Julie tends the birds while the children are at school. When school has a day off or in the summer months, Julie goes out to tend the chickens at 5 a.m. before Blair has to leave for work.

"Sometimes it's a struggle, but we make it work," Blair said. His mother, who is chief financial officer at Tidemark Federal Credit Union, would love to retire someday and watch the kids, but not yet.

Blair and Julie Shockley decided to get back into the poultry business so Julie could stay home with the children. In this photo from fall 2019 are, from left, twins Asher and Rhett and big sister Harper, with their parents.



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Hills

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said, ‘Sure!’ He gave us the opportunity by turning the deal down.”

Tina admitted, “We didn’t know what we were getting into. We ordered the buses. The drivers who worked for the district came on with us. Wow, what a lot of time it took. It really added to my work load!”

The couple talked about it through the summer and by the fall 2013, they knew something had to go.

“We loved the market, but it was a lot of hard work,” Tina continued. “People have no clue. The market was closed on Sunday, but you still have to water, even though we had put in a lot of irrigation.”

“The market served its purpose. We chose to shut it down, and it was a good decision. In farming you have to learn not to get sentimental with things.”

From its inception, the market had done better every year until 9-11 hit in 2001 and changed things. Then in 2008, the market was really hit. There was no increase. “All the inputs were up and the profit down. It wasn’t paying us for the time we were putting in. The reward was not enough,” Tina recalled.

So they did not order crops for the spring of 2014. Dave Wilson held an auction sale for them.

“It was amazing. Eighteen years worth of stuff gone in 8 hours,” Tina said. “It was all turned back into a little field. But you can’t get sentimental. The market ac-

complished what it was meant to do. It was time to cut our losses and get out so we could do something even greater.”

Benton Hill had passed away in 2002, and Marvin took over his ground, too, including arranging with landlords to continue farming on rented land. Like his father, he grows corn, soybeans, wheat and barley. He also grows vegetables, something he had encouraged his father to get into. Lima beans, peas and sweet corn are grown for processors such as Seabrook Brothers and Hanover.

The Hills are still growing chickens, in addition to doing poultry house work for other people, such as poultry crust out and hauling manure to fields. Again, that’s part of the necessity of needing to do more than just farming, Tina noted. “It is all a team effort. Our son, Keith, works full time and has expanded our farming operation by the poultry crusting and manure sales and hauling. We could not do what we are doing without his vision and energy.”

The family currently grows about 90,000 birds at a time for Mountaire in three of the four poultry houses on the property. The two newest are 60 feet by 600 feet and were built in 2015. The fourth is to be demolished this spring, but Marvin and Keith have plans for the space it will open up.

Tina concentrates on the bus business, driving when necessary, but keeps her eye out for grants and other ways to improve the farm and poultry business. An energy audit provided by EnSave through the Energize Delaware Farm Program, for example, helped identify needed improvements for all three houses, such as insulation.



Marvin Hill, left, and his son, Keith, are shown in one of two poultry houses constructed in 2015. Each measures 60 feet by 600 feet.

The Hills have reached out to experts such Cooperative Extension poultry experts and other growers who are doing well.

“We ask others how they’d fix a problem. There’s a lot of competition, and adjustments can make a difference in our pay,” Tina said.

She offered advice that applies to anyone, not just farmers: “There’s always something to do. Don’t let it overwhelm you. Do the most pressing thing. The goal is to get ahead, but it’s not easy. Don’t let it get the best of you. Take it one day at a time, and try to find help.”

The Hills do have lots of help, including several family members who are full-time employees for the bus service and farm, and some who are occasional helpers.

Keith’s wife, Caitlin, works off the

farm but helps in the poultry houses when needed. She grew up on a poultry farm in Laurel. The couple and their two sons, Shepard and Granger, plan to move to the farm after some renovations are made to the farmhouse there.

The Hills’ daughter, Wendy, has her hands full with three little ones, Joshua, Cameron and Casey, although she occasionally fills in as a bus aide. Her husband, Bryce Kenton, helps with water testing and the Stenner pumps in the poultry houses.

“We’d love to find another experienced farm worker who can plant and spray, who has mechanical skills, who is able to drive a truck,” Tina said.

The Hills are looking for help for the bus service, too — reliable drivers with CDL licenses. Contact Tina at 302-422-0219.



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Cat rescue organization provides rodent control services

By Carol Kinsley

The ad appears under “employment” in the classified section of an agricultural trade newspaper. Entitled “Working Cats Looking for Employment,” it reads: “Do you have a rodent problem? Free services available. Needing to place cats in a safe habitat in exchange for rodent control. Fully vetted, large selection, full set up provided. Call 302-547-8720.”

A reader’s first instinct might be, “What kind of new scam is this?”

A check with the classifieds department at the newspaper, however, revealed it was no scam. It’s a legitimate ad placed by a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, “Andy’s Friends Cat Rescue,” which is run by Beth Allen of North Wilmington. She really is looking for homes for cats.

Her non-profit, Andy’s Friends, is dedicated to the memory of Andy, an orange tabby cat who was not able to be rescued in time from the neglect and hunger of living on the streets. He begged for his food and lived without love or compassion, eventually succumbing to disease.

Andy’s Friends is a no-kill, all-volunteer cat rescue organization focused on the toughest of cases and the most vulnerable beings, who may be injured, neglected or in need of care beyond what can be provided.

“We take cats in as a result of a variety of circumstances, but most are owner surrenders, strays and rescues from shelters where adoptable animals are in danger of

being euthanized,” Allen said.

Cats also are rescued from areas where there are just too many. “We take colonies of cats from where they are multiplying like crazy. The gestation period for a cat is 63 days. In the summer, a female can have three litters. And the kittens grow up and can have babies at five months,” Allen explained.

She works with other area rescue organizations, some of which trap cats, spay or neuter them, vaccinate them and make sure they are healthy, then return them to the area they came from. If the cats are friendly, they are made available for adoption at a store like PetSmart.

There are some places where cats are in danger of being shot, burned or having their ears cut off, Allen said. “We need to find a safe place where they can live out their lives.”

In the 18 years she has been doing cat rescues, Allen has placed 3,000 cats.

Finding a home for a calm, loving cat or kitten is easier than placing a cat who hasn’t had a lot of human contact, or has been mistreated. Allen is concerned about the less domesticated cats who don’t want to be inside. They want a place to play and hunt, to be an outside cat.

That’s why she wrote the ad. Allen said, “It has gotten a lot of response. I’ve placed 50 barn cats since I wrote it and began running it in newspapers.”

That’s a good many cats, but she still has another 50 to place, and they continue

to come in as quickly they go out.

Allen said cats make great employees. They never take vacation or need personal days off. All the new owners have to do is feed them twice a day.

“We make sure they are safe. They will hunt mice and rats that go after grain. Cats also run off foxes from chicken farms. They are territorial. They’re like little farm managers,” Allen said.

There is a protocol the barn owners are asked to follow. “You can’t just set a cat down and say ‘stay.’ We provide instructions and materials, including a large cage for the cat to stay in for three weeks. As the owner feeds the cat twice a day, it gets conditioned to bond with the owner, to get acclimated to a new caretaker. The idea of getting fed ... it’s classical conditioning.”

The new “employees” have been spayed, neutered, vaccinated, blood tested, dewormed if necessary and flea treated. They get a rabies and distemper vaccination, preferably good for three years, so that when they go to a barn they’ve been fully vetted. The “employer” won’t have

to do anything for a while. “We provide food, cages, all of that during the acclimation period. There is no expense at all to the barn owner for that initial period.

“It’s a win-win-win solution. It’s really a win for the cat. It’s a win for me, because I don’t have to worry about the cat any more. And it’s a win for the barn owner, who has someone to take care of a maintenance problem. Most these cats wind up being really loved.”

Since some shelters will kill feral cats, Allen believes the more barns she can find, “the more lives I can save.”

Allen is located in North Wilmington, but her cat rescue services an area up to three hours away, including southern Delaware. She has a pet sitting service, Cat’s Pajamas, and owns nine cats of her own. “They’re all the friendly ones no one wants — those with no ears or no teeth or with diabetes. One has three legs.”

Beth can be reached at 302-547-8720 or by email at allen1724@comcast.net or info@andysfriends.org. Visit online at andysfriends.org.

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Invasive plant bill takes effect next summer

By Carol Kinsley

Chinese wisteria, Japanese pachysandra and English ivy ... Perhaps you have planted these and watched them take over. One speaker at a horticulture meeting advised, “If you plant English ivy, you should put it in your will who is going to be responsible to keep it under control after you die.”

You may not have purposely planted Japanese stilt grass, but it grows all over shady yards in Seaford, mingling with and

crowding out other desirable plants.

All of these plants and 34 others are listed in Senate Bill 22, “An Act to Amend Title 3 of the Delaware Code Relating to Invasive Plants.” (See sidebar.) The bill was passed by the Senate on Jan. 22 and by the House on Jan. 28. It takes effect on July 1, 2022.

The new legislation prohibits the import, export, sale, transport, distribution or propagation of any plant identified as an invasive plant by the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, with the advice of

the Delaware Native Species Commission. A violation of this act may result in a civil penalty of \$50 to \$500, but only after the person has had the opportunity for an administrative hearing and the opportunity to come into compliance with this act.

The act also requires that plants identified as potentially invasive be sold with a tag that identifies the plant as such. To date, a “Potentially Invasive Plant List” has not been developed.

The Act is the result of the Delaware Native Species Commission’s work to im-

plement the recommendations of the statewide Ecological Extinction Task Force. Senator Stephanie Hansen, D-District 10, who was the primary sponsor of the bill, had worked with the Commission since the summer of 2018 on these regulations.

In a press release from the Department of Agriculture, Jeff Brothers, environmental program manager and plant industries section-nursery unit supervisor, explained, “Invasive plants can adversely affect habitats, causing ecological, envi-

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Delaware approves continuing education alternatives for pesticides and nutrients following COVID struggles

Over this past year, Delaware farmers and pesticide applicators have had to pivot, joining the rest of the population in utilizing online learning to earn continuing education credits. However, dealing with limited internet options in rural Delaware communities and other technical challenges, many individuals have been prevented from gaining the credits needed to maintain their nutrient management or pesticide certifications.

“I have heard from many of the people we serve about the hardships they have faced trying to go online and participate in training. Our producers are used to going to Delaware Ag Week, attending field days and workshops in person. Sitting at a computer to take an eight-hour training doesn’t work when you need to be in the field harvesting,” said Delaware Secretary of Agriculture Michael T. Scuse. “We know broadband and high-speed internet can be non-existent in Delaware’s rural communities. And when you offer suggestions on how you can remedy this and advise where to turn, the standard recommendations don’t work during a pandemic.”

The Delaware Department of Agriculture (DDA) is offering extensions and COVID credit exemptions depending on the type of recertification to accommodate individuals who have exhausted all options in earning their continuing education credits.

At the Delaware Nutrient Management Commission meeting on February 2, Secretary Scuse asked the commissioners to consider extending the time for which Commercial and Private Nutrient Handlers and Nutrient Generators have to accumulate six credit hours of continuing education. The commissioners voted and approved an extension increasing the time from three to four years for those certificate holders expiring on May 1, 2021.

University of Delaware Nutrient Management staff has held a record number of virtual events through 2020 and 2021, as well as increased on-demand education from their website in response to the COVID-19 pandemic aiding the roughly 1,800 certificate holders in keeping up with their credits. Additionally, course packets are available with materials eligible for up to six credits that can be mailed to farmers free of charge if they have difficulty connecting to online resources. For more information or to obtain a packet, certified individuals can contact Hilary Gibson or Sydney Riggi at the Kent County Cooperative Extension Office at (302) 730-4000 or email nutrient-management@udel.edu.

Commercial and private pesticide applicators who have explored all training options and are still falling short of the quota needed must contact the DDA Pesticides Section by the extension date of March 31, 2021. Applicators can review their credits at <https://dda.force.com/pesticide>. Pesticide applicators can request a COVID credit exemption by contacting Kenda Galipo at (302)698-4571.

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Del Tech's Farm Manager Justin Grimminger, left, and landscape and ornamental horticulture student Evan Strazzella harvest ripe hydroponic tomatoes from a greenhouse on the college campus. Students in the ag program all gain cooperative work experience by hands-on work in the greenhouses and farm market, even when it is closed to the public.

Delaware Tech farm market educators reflect on 2020, look forward to spring 2021

By Carol Kinsley

Educators involved in the farm market at Del Tech's Owens Campus in Georgetown looked back over a tumultuous year and discussed plans for spring 2021 in a recent interview via Zoom.

Dr. Daniele Kidd, applied agriculture department chair and instructor, recalled, "When the coronavirus first hit, no one knew what was going on in every aspect of life, and we were scrambling, trying to figure out what in the world we were going to do with the plants we had raised. How were we going to put everything online, and how were we going to take payment?"

After talking with staff members and the deans, they decided they could roll from doing a virtual plant sale, where orders were taken and delivered to customers who arrived by appointment, to offering produce online as well.

The market was shut down in March 2020, but crops already planted continued to grow. The market is an important hands-on component of classes in small farm production and marketing. While staff worked to set up an online ordering process, fresh produce was donated to the Food Bank of Delaware in Milford. From March through June, Farm Manager Justin Grimminger personally delivered 1,867 pounds of food to the Food Bank on his way home from the campus.

Grimminger is also the one who updates the website weekly. Normally, agribusiness management students would be helping with that task. Consumers can go to <http://go.dtcc.edu/owenscampusfarm-market> to see what is currently available. Orders are then placed by email for curbside pickup on Tuesday or Thursday, between 12:30 and 2:30 p.m. An invoice is sent by email with instructions on how to pay by credit card and a link for choosing a pickup time.

Customers must wear a mask, and no "drop-in" visitors are allowed. Grimminger knows when to expect each customer and watches for them. He goes out, makes sure it's the right person, then takes the produce out to put in the vehicle's

trunk or backseat. He said he can usually recognize the vehicles of regular customers.

There is one student on campus every day of the week, Monday through Friday, to help with the harvest, prep the produce and get it packed. Grimminger makes the deliveries to the parking lot, just to keep things uniform.

Students are also working in the high tunnel, especially at this time of year, explained Kidd.

"These are all cooperative work experience students. All students in the ag department, no matter what program they're in, have to do co-op work experience. Other students may be working off campus somewhere to help in actual production. They're all contributing to what we are doing."

Class sizes are not what they were pre-COVID-19, and their class schedules are quite different, Kidd continued.

In Christel Folke's hydroponics class, for example, there are a dozen students. Six of them come in every other week on an alternating schedule. "The scheduled class time is four hours, but each group of three students is actually there an hour and 45 minutes," Folke said.

Kidd added that class instruction is hybrid, like a lot of schools. "We're really limiting who is here. It does impact the market, because the students provide the labor for what we're doing."

Online ordering has had a positive impact. Grimminger said, "People order what they get ahead of time, so we know what to harvest. We don't just pick what we think we might sell. There's less waste. We can harvest exactly what we need."

"We do sell out of certain items, such as green peppers. But for the most part we have what's standard each week. We have also adjusted the amounts being seeded and what's actually transplanted, because we're not at normal capacity."

Folke said in the hydroponic tomato greenhouse, normally there are five rows of plants. Now there are three. "It has worked out well. There is more space for social distancing for students who are in there when they are working."

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Landscape and ornamental horticulture student Evan Strazzella, left, and Farm Manager Justin Grimminger check on greens growing in a high-tunnel greenhouse on Del Tech's Owens Campus in Georgetown. Fresh greens and other produce is available online at <http://go.dtcc.edu/owenscampusfarmmarket>. Photos courtesy Del Tech

The campus has a total of 10 greenhouses, including one for germination. Some are traditional polycarbonate; three are high tunnels covered with plastic. The greenhouses were funded by private donations.

Plants are already coming in for horticulture sales later this spring, although the quantities have been cut back, as with produce, to reduce waste. Students will be getting these plants potted in the next three weeks, then start seeding vegetables, Kidd said.

She added, "We will keep this process going until we transition back. The whole world has changed because of COVID-19.

Now we know we can do these things. Even after things open back up, we might leave the ordering information online because of the convenience. With just a couple of clicks, you can see what's available."

As for when the market might open up with produce displayed in the market and visitors allowed in, there has been no official word. Looking on the bright side, Kidd said, "Even though some things do get put on the back burner, we've been very fortunate that even though we're virtual, our classes are running and we do have students who have been doing Zoom classes.

Local teens make the most of growing up on a farm

By Carol Kinsley

Brayden, 15, and Kassidy Hearn, 14, are making the most of growing up on a farm. In addition to helping with the family's produce stand, in the past several years they have won ribbons, banners and trophies by showing pigs, goats, lambs and horses in competitions such as the Delaware State Fair.

The teenagers are encouraged and supported in their endeavors by their parents, Brian and Stephanie Hearn, and all of their grandparents, who live nearby.

Brian, a Laurel native, worked with melon farmers as he was growing up. He met Stephanie Townsend at Delaware Valley College in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, where she was an animal science major.

Brian majored in horticulture. They married in 2001.

After graduation, they looked for a small farm to buy, but they couldn't find 12 acres of flat land in Pennsylvania. They did find land in Laurel and established Sandy Loam Farm there. When their produce operation called for expansion, they rented another 15 acres.

They raise watermelon, cantaloupe, squash and zucchini which they sold wholesale in Pennsylvania for five or six years, but with the farm, children, animals and off-farm jobs, they're too busy for that now. They do sell watermelons wholesale.

They sell their fresh produce at Lakeside Greenhouse on Route 24 in Laurel. Brian has previously worked with the

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"We will have more than 20 students graduate this May. We appreciate those who hang in there, working and continuing to go to school. We recognize it is hard, and we appreciate it. And we appreciate all the people who buy from us, who support our program."

Income from the market goes back into the ag program.

Available at the Owens campus market the last week of February were bok

choi, kale, kohlrabi, Swiss chard, turnips, sweet potatoes, carrots and beets, plus hydroponic lettuce, tomatoes, European cucumbers and bell peppers. In addition are several varieties of hot pepper jelly made by Backyard Jams and Jellies in Milton from peppers grown on the college farm and Ray's Local Honey produced in Georgetown.

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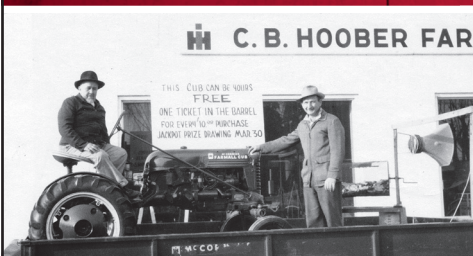
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Hearns

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owner, Jay Windsor, a former University of Delaware Extension ag agent. Brian went to work for the university after college and is currently the farm manager at the Carvel Research and Education Center in Georgetown.

Stephanie is account manager for Dutch Valley Foods, a family-owned bulk foods distributor in Pennsylvania.

At this time of the year, the Hearns are planning for produce season, ordering seed and getting plants in.

"The kids are more and more involved as they get older," Stephanie said. "We all pick and set up the market in the morning, then clean up in the afternoon." Sales are on the honor system.

"We expect to open mid-June and have product available all throughout the summer," Stephanie said.

Late winter is also time for birthing piglets. The Hearns had four litters born in mid-January and one more in February. When the babies are old enough to have had their vaccinations, the Hearns will open the barn to potential buyers. The Hearns are not raising pigs for the meat market. The genetics of these pigs destine them for the show ring. "We have 40 pigs to sell," Stephanie said.

Brayden was delighted when the Delaware State Fair instituted a new division in the pig department, the "bred and

owned" category. The exhibitor must be the owner of the sow (female pig), and breed it, then show one of the babies. He showed the grand champion bred and owned pig at the 2020 state fair.

"The premise is to encourage people to keep breeding, showing and promoting pigs," Stephanie explained.

This year Brayden added another pure-bred sow to the operation, a Hereford that he had a very special connection with. "He has forever had a goal to breed show pigs," his mother said. "He favors the Hereford breed." Hereford pigs are mostly red, with a white face and three or more white feet. Known for their docile dispositions, the breed is an excellent choice for 4-H and FFA projects. "Brayden's goal is to be a pig breeder that breeds all around the country, all Herefords," Stephanie said.

Brayden ordered the semen, bred the sow, ultrasounded to make sure she was pregnant and was there when she was delivering. "Mama Herf" had a very nice litter, Stephanie said. "These are clearly Brayden's favorite in the barn."

Last year Brayden bred a Duroc, and one of the babies was named reserve grand champion Duroc at the Delaware State Fair. He also showed the grand champion Yorkshire and the grand champion Hereford, both gilts (a female that has not had a litter). He won his showmanship class in pigs.

Not limited to pigs, Brayden also won his showmanship class in lambs and his lamb won its market class.

Kassidy, who started showing at the fair when she was 18 months old riding



Posing with one-day-old baby pigs are Brayden Hearn, Clay Jestice, Kassidy Hearn, Coleson Jestice, Clyde Jestice and Haley Deiter. The photo was taken after the children helped in the farrowing house where the piglets were born.

lead line on a horse, won her showmanship class in pigs also. Her Duroc gilt won a banner for "Best Female in the Breed" for supreme gilt overall.

Kassidy also won reserve senior showman in the goat division, where she had the grand champion market goat and the reserve. Both of her goats and two market hogs made the fair's Junior Livestock Auction, which was held electronically this year. Fair rules limit each exhibitor to

three animals in the auction, so one goat was pulled and rewarded Kassidy with a kid this year.

The Hearns participate in special livestock sales in Delaware, Maryland and even Indiana. Stephanie's father, Steve Townsend, who has an efficiency apartment on the farm, started a small farrowing operation called Pops Show Pigs and

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AUTISM Awareness Month

Morning Star Publications will publish a special section in the Thursday, April 1 issue of the Seaford and Laurel Star.

April is Autism Awareness Month. The Autism Society, one of the leading autism organizations, established the observance month to "promote autism awareness, inclusion and self-determination for all, and to assure that each person with ASD is provided the opportunity to achieve the highest possible quality of life." There are many steps people can take to help the group achieve that goal, both in April and throughout the year.



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Hearns

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most of the pigs are sold through the operation's Facebook page.

Brian's parents live next door. Stephanie's mom and her husband live across the street, so the kids have all their grandparents within walking distance.

"We wouldn't be able to do what we do here without everyone's participation," Stephanie said. "The grandparents support the kids at shows and like to watch them here on the farm every day, too."

The children have had other mentors, including Brayden's FFA ag teachers, Sarah Ruggiero and Matt Wood, and Mindy and Madison Cook from Cool Rock Stock in Newark. Brayden and Kassidy now are old enough, and experienced enough, to be mentors themselves. For example, the Jestice family, who live down the road, found the Hearns on Facebook, bought pigs from them and became friends. Now the Jestice boys, ages 8, 5 and 3, come every Friday and hang out and Brayden and Kassidy go weekly to their home to help them work with their fair projects.

"We keep it fun," Stephanie said. "There is running around and playing, but when it's time to be serious, like when we're delivering baby pigs, they understand there's a work and play balance."

Kassidy, an eighth grader, has been an FFA chapter officer for two years. Recently she hosted an hour long FFA meeting

via Zoom in which she "took" participants into the baby pig barn and went over simple things about pigs and what her family does on the farm. She talked about breeding, vaccinations and litter responsibilities — how to take care of the baby pigs.

"She did it by herself, because I was working," Stephanie said. "Her advisor said she has a lot of knowledge that her average peer does not."

Brayden described some of their techniques in preparing for the show ring: "We buy the animals as babies. The pigs are about 60 pounds going in. We let them be friends before we push them too far. They love marshmallows. That gets their attention. We get them hooked on feed. We go outside with them and create a bond so they feel trust when we're out there with them."

"As they get bigger, we give them different supplements to enhance different parts of the body. We take longer walks to build stamina and endurance. You always want to have a good experience so the next time they won't be scared. You want to end on a good note."

Kassidy added, "We groom the pigs every day. We use a special lotion, a moisturizer, and with a long brush, rub into skin to keep it moisturized. It's better than playing in the mud."

"We wash them and sunbathe them so when they go to the fair, their black or blue parts get dark. It makes them look better in the ring."

Brayden has excelled in more than the show ring. In 2019 he attended a national competition in Indiana, representing Laurel Middle School with a tomato project,



Brayden Hearn joins a mix of crossbred and Hereford piglets in a pen. All were born within a day or two of each other. While most will be sold, but not as meat animals, Brayden will likely train at least one for the 2021 Delaware State Fair.

and placed fourth out of 16 in the nation. The project that Brayden and his partner, Adian Bell, worked on was about the use of humic acid on tomatoes to improve efficiency and yield.

"It was a big deal," his mother said. "He had to win at the science fair over summer and at the state fair. He's starting center for football — his dad is one of the coaches — but he missed a game to go to Indiana. There was a lot of discussion

of whether he should go, but it was the chance of a lifetime."

Brayden is still active in FFA, even though meetings cannot be in person. He is working on proficiency awards and filling out applications for scholarships. "The more I do, the better I get at filling them out," he said. A 10th grader, he is on a hybrid schedule at school.

"If you can find a silver lining in this whole COVID-19 shut down," Stephanie

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Steve Townsend, called "Pops," started a small farrowing operation in Laurel with his grandchildren, Brayden and Kassidy Hearn. These are some of the piglets born this year.

The role of technology in agriculture

When asked to think of industries that utilize technology in unique ways, few people may immediately think of agriculture. But technology has left a significant footprint in every industry, and the agricultural sector is no exception.

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture notes that modern farms operate a lot differently than the farms of yesteryear. Dramatic changes have taken place within the agricultural industry over the last few decades, helping farming operations become more efficient and profitable as well as safer and more eco-friendly.

Robots, temperature and moisture sensors, aerial images, and GPS technologies are now routinely employed within the agricultural industry. The NIFA notes that the value of such technologies cannot be understated. Thanks to the technologies at their disposals, farmers no longer have to uniformly apply water, fertilizer and pesticides to their farms. Technology now allows them to use only the minimum amounts required as they zero in on

individual plants and target specific areas of their farms. The NIFA notes that the utilization of these technologies produces some very real benefits, including:

- Higher crop productivity
- Reduced impact on natural ecosystems
- Less runoff of chemicals into rivers and groundwater
- Increased worker safety

Safer, more efficient and more eco-friendly operations can only make the agricultural industry more successful in the decades to come. That's especially notable as the world continues to confront climate change and how it might affect the food supply.

Though few may recognize the role of technology in modern farming, there's no denying the impact that various technologies have already had on the agricultural industry. And that impact figures to become even more profound in the decades to come.

said, "it's probably the fact that we can still communicate, sometimes on a wider span not limited by time schedules and travel."

The Hearn's are rightly proud of their children. Stephanie said, "None of their success would be possible without us

working with great livestock breeders/mentors and having a family that supports them. We believe banners and ribbons are won at home, working consistently when no one is looking. They have certainly accomplished a lot in a short period of time."

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Invasive

Continued from page 8B

ronmental, and/or economic damage. If left uncontrolled, invasive plants can and will limit land use now and into the future. Non-native invasive plants are a threat to the nature of Delaware as they can out-compete, displace, or kill native species of plants and animals.”

Dr. Sue Barton, University of Delaware professor and Extension specialist, said, “This invasive plant bill is important because it removes ... invasive plants from commerce. Delawareans will no longer be able to sell, buy, propagate or plant these species. While this does not remove these plants from our natural areas into which they have already escaped, it does reduce the chances of the disruption of more natural areas, especially those near suburban developments.

“This law is especially important for Sussex County, where natural areas have not been as badly invaded as the rest of the state. It is much less costly and more effective to limit the spread of invasive plants if they are caught before they have become thoroughly established.”

Blake Moore is a member of the Delaware Invasive Species Council, a nonprofit, non-regulatory organization comprised of nearly 100 scientists, botanists, and ecologists with government, academia, and nonprofit organizations. DISC’s mis-

sion is to protect Delaware’s ecosystems by preventing the introduction and reducing the impact of non-native species.

Moore said the new legislation will be “a valuable tool to help prevent new introductions of invasive species.” These plants are here already, he continued. The law will help prevent further spread and new introduction.

“A lot of these plants, when first introduced into the industry, were not known to be a threat. Take Callery pear, for example. The first cultivars were sterile. They didn’t spread much, but the branches broke off easily. Then the Bradford pear cultivar came out, and the trees spread quickly. In the spring you see white flowering trees along Route 1 — they’re all Bradfords. There’s no diversity,” Moore said.

“Porcelain berry is everywhere in Milford. Birds spread it. It climbs trees, pulling them over,” he continued. It’s like wild grape, which does have a place in our landscape, but wild grape is nowhere as dense as porcelain berry, which can take up all the space and all the nutrients.

The new act will help with education and outreach, and hopefully people will chose native species instead, Moore concluded.

A 2008 publication, “Mistaken Identity: Invasive Plants and their Native Look-Alikes,” offers side-by-side comparison of many of the invasive plants on the list and better behaved native substitutes. The book is available online at https://www.nybg.org/files/scientists/rnaczi/Mistaken_Identity_Final.pdf.

Invasive plants named in legislation

Specifically named in currently passed legislation, the Delaware invasive plant list includes the following plant species:

Multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*).
Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*).
Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*).
Japanese stilt grass (*Microstegium vimineum*).
Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*).
Autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*).
Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*).
European reed (*Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis*).
Hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*).
Morrow’s honeysuckle (*Lonicera morrowii*).
Mile-a-minute weed (*Persicaria perfoliata*).
Yam-leaved Clematis (*Clematis terniflora*).
European Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*).
European Sweetflag (*Acorus calamus*).
Wineberry (*Rubus phoenicolasius*).
Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*).
Lesser periwinkle (*Vinca minor*).
Garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*).
Winged euonymus (*Euonymus alatus*).
Porcelain berry (*Ampelopsis glandulosa*).
Callery pear (*Pyrus calleryana*).

Marsh Dewflower (*Murdannia keisak*).
Lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*).
Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*).
Amur honeysuckle (*Lonicera maackii*).
Tartarian honeysuckle (*Lonicera tartarica*).
Tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*).
Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe* subsp. *micanthos*).
Creeping water primrose (*Ludwigia peploides* subsp. *glabrescens*).
Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*).
Parrot-feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*).
English ivy (*Hedrix helix*).
Orange daylily (*Hemerocallis fulva*).
Yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudoacorus*).
Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*).
Japanese pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*).
Chinese wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*).

The Act takes effect July 1, 2022, and businesses or individuals will no longer be able to import, export, sell, transport, distribute, or propagate any plants on the invasive plant list.

The Delaware Department of Agriculture, Plant Industries Section, is the delegated regulatory agency to administer and enforce the new regulations. DDA’s nursery inspection staff will monitor for compliance with the new invasive plant act and the Secretary may make alterations to the invasive plant list.

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