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FARM TOUR

County farms open gates to the public

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City folk got a taste of the country this weekend as part of the Know Your Farms tour of the Charlotte region's agricultural centers.

Several Union County farms opened their gates and barns to the public. Kids and parents peeked inside the greenhouses of Windcrest Farm in Monroe. Mary Roberts Tarlton and her husband Ray started Windcrest in 1978. Now it is among only a few certified organic seedling growers in North Carolina.

"We sell to other commercial certified organic farms and to home farmers," she said.

The food grown at the farm is used by upscale Charlotte restaurants. Several greenhouses shelter organic ginger plants that Tarlton will harvest next week. Inside the biggest greenhouse, the smell of ginger mixed with the sweet scent of basil, parsley and fresh tomatoes.



RICK CRIDER / Enquirer-Journal

Visitors to Peaceful Meadows Farm in Marshville were treated to a personalized tour of the farm. Phillip Brooks piloted the tractor while his dad, Jeremy Brooks, rode with the guests in the trailer, narrating the tour.

It was on the Know Your Farms tour last year that Andy Thewlis got involved with Windcrest Farm. He is now an apprentice but began as an intern with the farm six months ago.

"As a little kid growing up in Ohio, I had a proclivity for plants," Thewlis said. "I got to the age where I started thinking about what I wanted to do when I grew up and I wanted to be a farmer."

He remembered that childhood dream when he first walked through Windcrest's greenhouses.

"There was all this life. It was almost palpable when I got here, the feeling that the farm was full of life," he said. "This isn't your run-of-the-mill farm. There's no chemicals, no artificial fertilizers and no pesticides."

A little less than ten miles away, Phillip Brooks and his son

Jeremy took visitors on hayrides around Peaceful Meadows Farm in Marshville. Jeremy stopped the tractor beside a pasture of red and black Angus cows. The sound of them munching grass was audible several yards away.

The Brooks family raises organic, grass-fed beef. They sell to individuals and at the Waxhaw Farmers Market. During the day,

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Brooks is a farm tractor dealer, but on the weekends, he and Jeremy tend to the herd.

"We move the cattle to a new pasture every day," Brooks said. "We do that so they always have fresh grass to eat."

He compared it to letting a child eat whatever he or she wanted. They usually won't eat what doesn't appeal to them. Cows are naturally grass-eaters.

"This is kind of like feeding them ice cream every day," Brooks said. "Cows like to choose what they eat, so we let them pick from all the fresh

grass in the pasture each day."

A diet with variety keeps cows healthy, Brooks said. Certain grasses have certain nutrients, which helps the animals fight disease. Moving them often keeps them cleaner so they do not stand in their own waste like cows on commercial farms

Approximately 2,500 visits were made to the 34 participating farms in counties surrounding Charlotte, Know Your Farms tour coordinator Wes Shi said.

"We started this tour to try to help farmers increase their profitability and take some of the burden of marketing their products to the public off their shoulders," Shi said.