

## From Kentucky Bluegrass to the North Carolina Sandhills: Hoke County's Mary Hollingsworth

“When’s the best time to start a garden?”

Pose this question to a group of experienced Sandhills growers and you might get a few different answers, but “August” probably won’t be one of them.



For gardeners and farmers in Hoke County, August of 2007 turned out to be the perfect time to begin growing a new gardening and farming program when Hoke County Cooperative Extension Director **Keith Walters** welcomed **Mary Hollingsworth** to the staff as the Agriculture-Horticulture Agent.

“We are fortunate to have hired Mary Hollingsworth,” Keith said. “She’s in charge of working with Hoke County homeowners, horticulture businesses and many other agencies and groups to encourage the growth and development of Hoke County’s horticulture resources. Mary’s priority is offering educational horticulture programs for residents, businesses, and public entities, helping them to make decisions about plant selection, placement and management. Her programs are already helping clients accomplish many goals, including decreasing water consumption and preserving and improving water quality; reducing erosion and energy consumption; expanding wildlife habitat; improving real estate value; and of course, improving their diet and nutrition.”

“I was born and raised in Kentucky,” Mary noted. “Growing up on a small family farm, I always knew I wanted to work in agriculture. My father was a great mentor and often made my brothers and me work in the vegetable garden tending to the crops or helping out with the livestock. Later, I earned a Bachelors degree in Agriculture Sciences from Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. My emphasis was in Animal Sciences, but I worked in the MSU nursery and greenhouse as well as on the university farm while I earned my degree. Now I’m attending NC State University where I’m pursuing my Masters in Extension Education. It has always been a passion of mine to teach others how to produce their own food, and to teach them that food really doesn’t just come from the grocery store.”

At the Hoke County Cooperative Extension, Mary has found many opportunities to work with children, teaching them how to grow their own food. She has a strong interest in sustainable and organic agriculture, and is sharing her enthusiasm with children and adults alike.

“As the Horticulture Agent for all of Hoke County, I have to keep an open mind toward all aspects of farming. However, I try to help residents understand that reducing conventional fertilizers and pesticides and choosing to produce natural products can provide many benefits to the environment and the people. The education we provide -- about topsoil depletion, groundwater contamination, the decline of family farms, living and working conditions for farm laborers, increasing costs of production, and the disintegration of economic and social conditions in rural communities -- is making a difference.

“Hoke didn’t have a Horticulture program prior to this position, so I knew I could build the program the way I wanted it. I’ve been building the program from the ground up for the past two years. In that time we’ve held our first beginning beekeeping course, created a Hoke County chapter of the NC State Beekeepers Association, and we’ve started a Junior Master Gardener Club.”

Wondering what’s ahead for Hoke County horticulture in the New Year? Want to join in the fun, take a workshop, or volunteer? Get out your calendars! Here are some dates Mary has provided for upcoming sustainable horticulture and agriculture activities in Hoke County:

“On Tuesday evening, **January 12<sup>th</sup>**, we’ll start our second annual beginning beekeeper course. Thursday, **February 4<sup>th</sup>** will be the day we kick off our very first Master Gardener course. In **early March**, we’ll be starting our Spring Gardening series with work on the new Hoke County Community Gardens.”

To learn more about horticulture in Hoke County or to sign up for workshops or Mary’s newsletter, contact her at the Hoke County Cooperative Extension Center, 910-875-3461, email her at [Mary\\_Hollingsworth@ncsu.edu](mailto:Mary_Hollingsworth@ncsu.edu), or stop by and say hello at 116 West Prospect Avenue, Raeford, NC 28376.

August – or any month you choose – is the right month to start “growing” sustainably in Hoke County.