



Francis Tree Farm Continues Family Legacy

In 1905, a group of eight African American men purchased a 2,000-acre tract of land in Halifax County for \$10,000. Each investor received a portion of the property, on average 200 acres, on which to develop a farm. An evangelist preacher named Joe Silver organized the group and led the farm cooperative, collaborating with each member to help maintain the cooperative's financial stability and ensure agricultural success. Initially most of the men were skilled in cutting shingles and logging with only a basic familiarity with farming. But they strove to develop self-sufficient farms growing corn, peas, cotton and tobacco.

In 1911, James H. Francis became a new investor in the cooperative and purchased a portion of the land owned by one of the initial investors. Over time, he became a prosperous farmer who exemplified the self-sufficient goals of the cooperative. The Francis Farm was virtually self-sufficient by 1937, providing all the food needed except for tea, coffee and sugar. The farm included 200 orchard trees, 300 chickens, five mules, modern farm equipment, vineyards and vegetable plots that produced 300 canned goods per year. During the Depression years, it was the most prosperous of the cooperative farms.

Today, 119 years later, James Francis's grandson Tony Francis and his wife, Louise, manage the Francis farm, carrying on the Francis family's legacy. Now called Delmar Farm, the farm encompasses 380 acres, including 219 acres of Tree Farm certified woodlands. "Our goal with our farmland is to be a sustainable family farm growing produce the old fashion way, without the use of chemical insecticides, pesticides or chemical fertilizers," Tony Francis said. To that end, the Francis family uses only natural and organic-based products in their vegetable production, and they strive to "produce the highest quality beef while caring for our animals humanely and with compassion," he said.

On the Tree Farm portion of the property, Francis grows loblolly pine and is focusing on thinning and burning to "improve the stand over time," he said. One of his objectives is to enhance wildlife habitat, particularly for songbirds and small game. He plants native flowers for songbirds and retains unmowed field borders where wildlife can find cover and a place to nest. "We're careful about how we manage ditch banks too so that we leave enough growth for cover," Francis said. "Our primary management goal for our Tree Farm is to have a sustainable forest operation, provide wildlife habitat through conservation practices and to ensure that the farm continues in our family for another 100 plus years." Delmar Farm is located between Enfield and Halifax adjacent to the Marsh Swamp and the CSX Railroad.