

SCNLA Board Member Profile:

Helen Legare-Floyd, Legare Farms John's Island, SC

By Ellen A. Vincent, Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist



Helen Legare (pronounced LeGREE) is a second generation nursery person and a ninth generation farmer. She is heir to an agricultural tradition that began in 1725. Her ancestors first farmed row crops, moved into vegetables, and evolved into ornamentals and sod during her father's time. Today, agri-tourism, ornamentals, sod, and cattle pay the bills.

Helen is clear about her roots. They are in agriculture, not nursery production, not marketing, not design. "Our nursery isn't pretty", she claims, "We aren't a garden center. We are a family farm."



And the family runs the farm. Siblings Linda, Thomas, and Helen all partner with mother Ann, to manage the business.

Helen attended Clemson University and recalls the shock of being in a biology class that was larger than her entire high school graduation class. She made lasting friends at Clemson and earned a bachelor's degree in agronomy. She is a frequent garden club speaker, and the next president of the South Carolina Nursery and Landscape Association.

Tom Legare, Helen's father, was looking ahead to new markets in the 1980s, and moved the farming operation into sod production, then nursery plants. He died in 2000 and Helen remembers, "We didn't just lose our father, we lost our business partner. He was our sounding board, always there to fall back on."

Helen recalls her father's view of the nursery, "It tickled my daddy to his dying day that we sold bermudagrass and wax myrtles. He spent most of his life as a farmer trying to get rid of them and now they make us money."

Today, they offer centipede and St. Augustine sod and containerized woody plants, annuals, and perennials. The woody plants range in size from diminutive four inches to large scale 30 gallons. The majority of selections appear in one, three, seven, and 15 gallon sizes. Best selling plants include lantana, ligustrum, wax myrtle, and crapemyrtle.

They cater to smaller landscape companies and to residential homeowners. On a pretty Saturday in April, according to Helen, sod by the piece is a hot selling item. "We can't keep up!" Homeowners will drive up to the sod pallet, open the trunk, and Legare Farm staff load in several to many pieces to patch a place or two.

They keep their customers and their employees by sharing the family atmosphere. Mykal Harley, nursery manager, excels at customer service, and along with Helen will spend quality time with each customer. New visitors receive a thank you card and a gift certificate in the mail to encourage a return visit.

Children are valued at Legare Farms and employees are granted flexible schedules to accommodate children's needs. Some employees bring their children to work with them when no other care is available. "We're a small family farm", explains Helen, "We treat people like family."

Chocolate milk cows and a new niche
Legare Farms is located on scenic John's Island, an ideal location for coastal living. The farm is within a short drive of Seabrook Island, Kiawah Island, and other residential resort communities. While this location bodes well for attracting landscape customers it also drives land prices and taxes sky high. It also has Legare Farms scrambling for new lucrative market niches.

Continued on page 18





On two separate occasions Helen's sister, Linda Legare Berry, overheard visiting children report, "There's a brown cow-that's where chocolate milk comes from." Linda was horrified that these children were so out of touch and proclaimed, "We need to educate these kids!"

It just so happened... as it usually does in the good stories... that a national organization promoting agricultural tourism was meeting in Charlotte around that time and Linda caught wind of it. She participated in a tour of ag-tourism sites and then attended the conference. In June of 2003 Legare Farms held their first sweet corn festival. They marketed the event to local schools, didn't make much money, but had a positive experience. They were told by other ag-tourism vendors that they needed to have a pumpkin patch and corn maize if they really wanted to be successful. But that was out of the question, their friends down the road owned a pumpkin patch and corn maize and competition was

simply not an option.

Right around this same time...as always happens in the really good stories...the farm experienced a sod accident that involved a truck turning over, in the pouring rain. Helen thought about ag-tourism as she shoveled sod out of the road in the pouring rain...The ag-tourism schemes started looking very good. Out of the blue, the very next morning Legare Farms received a telephone call asking if they would like to purchase their friends' pumpkin patch and corn maize. And the rest is history.

In 2004, over 7000 school children participated in ag-tourism activities at Legare Farms. Schools can select from "Lets Milk a Cow"; Enchanted Gardening"; "Thanksgiving on the Farm"; and "Battle of Charleston" plus others. They offer summer camps, birthday parties, hayrides to feed the animals, bonfires, and three festivals to the general public and organizations. Children can also "rent-a-chick" for two weeks.

They return the chick and pick up a dozen free eggs once the chicken starts laying in the fall. "We made money", reports Helen, "And we had fun. We were excited again!"

Value added food products followed the ag-tourism events and jams, pickles, and salsa were produced by North Carolina



Mennonites for the Legare Farms label. Sales in hormone free beef and eggs from Legare farm animals have also risen with the ag-tourism venture.

Ideas for new events are blossoming. Bird watching, war re-enactments, nature walks...we'll have to see what appears next. "Every year is better," claims Helen, "It's a good experience-people don't complain. I like running the hay wagons; I can't hear the Nextel [cell phone] going off. It's very peaceful."

Times have changed and Legare Farms is adjusting. The family however, remains true to task and clear about mission. "Our goal" Helen states, "is to continue the family tradition and heritage while everything else is being developed around us."

