

Farms that teach

Providing pathways to the future

by Sue Wasserman

Peeking into Meredith Leigh's email inbox is not for the faint of heart. On a daily basis, it's brimming with questions and comments from people around the world concerning countless topics ranging from soldier flies and biochar production to food fermentation and no-till farming.

While she sometimes feels overwhelmed, Leigh couldn't be happier knowing that Living Web Farms is accomplishing its mission of providing food to the hungry (the farm donated approximately 16,000 pounds of food last year) and pathways to the future through classes in farming, food preparation and the creation of alternative energy sources.

Living Web Farms, which functions on several parcels of land in Mills River, is one of many farms and agri-businesses in the region focused on providing practical education and inspiration to help individuals understand how to tend both the land and themselves.

"So many people are feeling powerless in the world," Leigh says. "They don't feel healthy. When they see what organizations like ours offer, they become feverish to get as much usable technical information as they can."

Builders-to-be, for example, can hone their skills at the Women's Basic Carpentry Class or Tiny House and Natural Building Intensive classes taught at Weaverville-based Wild Abundance. Founder Natalie Bogwalker, who built her own timber home on the organization's grounds, waxes philosophical about the diverse classes she offers such as humane slaughtering and butchering and hide tanning.

"I want my programs to demonstrate what living in an

earth-centered way looks like and how that can influence the decisions individuals make," she says. Permaculture Design for Land Stewards, a five-day intensive geared towards landowners who want to better understand how to design their property, is one such program that helps individuals make a direct impact on their quality of life and the health of their surrounding environment.

Like Wild Abundance, Black Mountain-based School of Integrated Living (SOIL) also offers a permaculture certification program. The program is taught on the grounds of Earthaven Ecovillage, a 330-acre intentional community

dedicated to learning and demonstrating ecologically responsible forestry, agriculture and living.

"Our flagship program is a three-month residential intensive offered here in conjunction with the Asheville Institute," says Earthaven resident and SOIL instructor Zev Friedman. The permaculture design certification curriculum is offered on its own but can also be incorporated into the larger program.

"Earthaven is a great living

laboratory," he says. "The program culminates with small groups working to design for sites we've chosen within the community. A nine-month distance mentorship follows."

A personal vision process helps participants focus on how they want to apply what they've learned to their daily lives. "The process is a transformative one," Friedman says. "We're intent on creating change agents in the world."

NEVER TOO EARLY TO LEARN

Of course, it's never too early to transform lives and instill a healthy understanding of our natural environment. Cedar Mountain-based Green River Preserve, which



offers a summer camp as well as outdoor learning opportunities for students throughout the year, is focused on using nature as the classroom. One of its signature programs, Kids Agriculture Learning Experience (KALE), takes place at the non-profit's nearby farm.

"Over the course of the half-day, we talk about producers, consumers and decomposers as we explore the five learning centers we've created," says farm manager Rachel Meriwether. "One of the activities my husband Phil and I involve them in is planting strawberries and digging and eating carrots."

Meriwether loves when kids tell her they didn't know freshly dug carrots tasted so sweet. "It's exciting to see their faces as they explore in the stream, meet the farm animals, get their hands dirty," she adds. "Our goal is to expand their ideas of what farming is, help them understand how a farm impacts the ecosystem and how they can make choices that have a positive impact on the environment."

While KALE offers a taste of environmental learning, The Outdoor Academy, located in Pisgah Forest, provides a residential semester school for sophomores and select freshman and juniors. "Our environmental education curriculum is informed by the intuition that the environment may well be the biggest issue confronting our students' generation," says Roger Herbert, Outdoor Academy director. "We empower our students to find their place in the world, create practical and sustainable solutions, and effect positive change."

Through wilderness trips, students develop technical skills,



Green River Preserve Farm, photo by Rachel Meriwether

CHOOSE YOUR LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Living Web Farms

176 Kimzey Road, Mills River
828.891.4497
livingwebfarms.org

School of Integrated Living

Black Mountain
828.669.2204
schoolofintegratedliving.org

Wild Abundance

72 Sanford Way, Weaverville
828.775.7052
wildabundance.net

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS


Green River Preserve KALE Program

6371 Green River Road, Zirconia
828.698.8828
greenriverpreserve.org

The Outdoor Academy

43 Hart Road, Pisgah Forest
828.877.4349
enf.org/outdoor-academy

practice leadership and learn teamwork, and gain a sense of responsibility for sustaining our unique Blue Ridge Mountain environment. By helping produce the seasonal fruits and vegetables they eat, students learn about the art and science of horticulture and gain a better appreciation of how food gets to their plates. In creating a close-knit residential community, students learn to live well together and be their best selves.

Since change is a constant, participants can count on seeing all of these existing offerings shift and new learning opportunities being added. Friedman puts it best. "The programs evolve as we evolve." 

Sue Wasserman has written for The New York Times, Southern Living and Our State, among other publications. In 2013, she published Walk with Me: Exploring Nature's Wisdom, which combines her nature photography and uplifting messages gleaned from her adventures.



Earthaven, photo by NikiAnne Feinberg