

# News from the Ridge

June 15, 2004

## Field Report

- By Christine Qualls

### The Three Sisters of Gardening



This week we will start a Three Sisters Garden. Three Sisters is a traditional method of planting used by Native Americans. The Three Sisters are corn, squash and beans. The idea is that the beans, as nitrogen-fixing legumes, produce fertilizer that is then available to nitrogen-hungry corn. The beans use that corn as a trellis and grow up the stalk –

remaining off the ground and less likely to rot (and easier for the farmer to pick). The winter squash or pumpkins grow around the base of the corn and beans. The large leaves of the cucurbits provide two important functions. They shade the corn and beans roots thus keeping them cool and needing less water. The large leaves also shade out weeds from growing up close to the corn and beans. Each of the sisters provides an important supportive role for the other two sisters (just like in good family). I have used the Three Sisters method in a severe drought and found that the plants thrived with very little water. Meanwhile, I had planted the same crops and same varieties using the more common row method. These row crops needed constant water and weeding to survive and they never thrived. We got a much a higher yield from The Three Sisters Garden with fewer hours spent watering and weeding.

We are in the very first phase of planting the Three Sisters Garden. This week we will work in the cover crops of Hairy Vetch and Crimson Clover that had been growing in that patch since last summer. The next step will be making mounds of soil and compost into which we can plant our seeds. After the seeds are planted we will mulch with a layer of straw. The Three Sisters Garden is a great gardening project for kids. If anyone would like to come out and join us as we rake, plant, and mulch, just let me know at [cqualls@brces.org](mailto:cqualls@brces.org).

## Volunteer Dig Days Begin

The first archaeology volunteer dig day at the Ridge was a fantastic success! Volunteers Deborah Jiles and Brian Justice helped excavate at the Derry/Long House (a.k.a. the Stone House) on the Farmstead Loop.

Built around 1860, the Stone House is a unique structure in this part of Loudoun County. Whereas most 19th century houses were log cabins chinked with field stone, the Derry family built this house solely from stone in a



*Brian Justice screens for artifacts*

fashion reminiscent of an early 19th century Pennsylvanian style. It was continually occupied from the time of its construction until the 1960's or early 70's.

This continuous occupation makes it likely that artifacts dating from numerous periods will be present at the site. In the first 10 centimeters, we've already uncovered numerous pottery sherds, broken medicine bottles, a toy horse and toy car, and various kinds of glass. As we dig deeper, we'll find older material—perhaps Civil War artifacts, and possibly evidence of Archaic Native American occupation, as was found in the front yard of the main house on the land in previous years.

As always, everyone is welcome to volunteer. The dig will continue for the next two Saturdays in June, and will pick up again in August. If you're interested, call or email staff archaeologist Tim Parsons for more information. Please be sure to R.S.V.P., as due to logistical restrictions there can be no more than five people digging on site at a time (there are only two pits at the moment!). Bring a bag lunch and a water bottle, wear old clothes and comfortable shoes, and don't forget the sunscreen!



### Blue Ridge Center & Mountain View Farm

11661 Harpers Ferry Road  
Purcellville VA 20132  
phone: 540-668-7640  
web site: [www.blueridgecenter.org](http://www.blueridgecenter.org)

### To contact our staff:

Farming: Christine Qualls, [cqualls@brces.org](mailto:cqualls@brces.org)  
Nature: Fiona Harrison, [fharrison@brces.org](mailto:fharrison@brces.org)  
History: Timothy Parsons, [tparsons@brces.org](mailto:tparsons@brces.org)

## BRCES volunteer named Virginia Volunteer of the Year

American Hiking Society has named Gary White Virginia's Trail Volunteer of the Year. The national organization selects one trail volunteer in each state for the award, which is announced during the annual celebration of National Trails Day in June. Gary, a member of U.S. Trailriders (USTR) and tireless trail worker at the Blue Ridge Center, won the honor for his work here.

The Blue Ridge Center has more than 10 miles of walking and riding trails that are open to the public. Equestrians who ride at the Center must join the local chapter of USTR and pitch in on trail work. Gary has organized several major volunteer events, works closely with BRCES staff on trail planning, and regularly shows up with tools in hand to put in a few hours of work.

We all are grateful for Gary's work and leadership, and thrilled that he has received this award.

To learn more about USTR: [www.cadcol.com/ustr](http://www.cadcol.com/ustr).

## Other News on the Farm

Thank you to Margie Dunlop for giving our sheep a hair cut and manicure last week. Our ewes are very happy to be running around the pastures in their birthday suits as the weather heats up! We have a Dorset ewe that is pregnant and

likely to lamb sometime in the next two weeks so she is especially happy to be free of her winter coat. The wool went to our neighbor, Hope, who will hand spin the wool.



*So, you're worried about bikini lines?! Our pregnant ewe is shorn by master shearer, Margie Dunlop, just in time for the summer heat.*



## Family Farms

- By Andrew Pressman

A recent Canadian Supreme Court decision pits agri-business giants against small farms and natural growers. The court sided with Monsanto Corporation in a suit against small farm owner Percy Schmeiser, for having Monsanto's patented genetically modified seed in his canola seed. The implications for small farmers are immense, especially because it has been proven that the Monsanto seed drifted into Percy's fields by air or by bird. The seed contaminated a canola seed strain that Percy's family had been saving for over 50 years.

While we don't raise canola here at the Blue Ridge Center's Mountain View Farm, all independent farmers could be under threat of genetically modified organisms drifting into their crops. And not only from wayward GMO seeds. Local conventional farmers raise "Roundup-Ready" soybeans. Roundup Ready means that the soybean can be sprayed with Monsanto herbicide, Roundup, to control weeds without killing the beans. One of the real threats for natural farmers is that genetically modified organisms will drift into our fields and create a weed that cannot be controlled organically. Another concern is that the bacteria spliced into some types of field corn and many conventionally grown potatoes to control pests will make it very difficult for us to grow corn organically.

Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is a very effective bacteria used by organic farmers to kill pests of potatoes and corn. It is a useful organic pesticide because it only kills specific pests, not harm insects, birds, bees or humans. However, scientists have spliced the bacteria into potatoes and corn. Many natural and organic farmers are concerned that these insects have already developed an immunity to this bacteria and are rendering this important organic tool useless. The scientists will likely then develop a strong chemical that can kill these now-resistant insects, but these chemicals will not be suitable for use by natural growers.

Like Percy Schmeiser, we don't plan for this type of thing to happen at . However, just like with Schmeiser, our crops can become contaminated with patented GMO seeds, putting our crops at risk. The greatest irony is that the growers whose crops have been contaminated are can be the ones to be sued.

You can learn more about how GMO foods affect natural farming at [www.organicconsumers.org](http://www.organicconsumers.org).



Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship  
& Mountain View Farm  
[www.blueridgecenter.org](http://www.blueridgecenter.org) • [info@blueridgecenter.org](mailto:info@blueridgecenter.org)  
(540) 668-7640 (tel) • (540) 668-7649 (fax)  
11661 Harpers Ferry Road, Purcellville, VA 20132-1944