

# Physician-Farmer Aims to Heal the Land

**P**ITTSBORO—Fifteen years ago, Bill Dow moved to North Carolina to teach and practice medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Now he's growing herbs and vegetables for a living on his 22-acre farm in Chatham County. But Dow hasn't forgotten his medical training while pursuing his new trade. Instead of conventional agriculture, the retired physician farms "organically"—that is, without using pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

"I'm doing this because it's the right thing to do," Dow says. "We spray food with stuff that intentionally kills insects, and yet we have not demanded enough information to make sure it doesn't hurt us. The problem is: You can see a caterpillar, but you can't see what somebody sprayed on your food. Unfortunately, people think what you can't see ain't there. In the future, I think people will look back at [pesticide users] and say, 'What was the matter with them? Weren't they thinking?'"

The main reason Dow shuns pesticides is that he's not convinced researchers have studied them enough to assure that they don't cause health and environmental problems. "Most of the chemicals on the market don't have that [testing]," he says. "It may be that they are all fine. But if I handed you a gun with one bullet in it, would you fire it at your head? And that's what we're doing with pesticides. . . . Pharmaceuticals are required to be tested intensely before we allow people to ingest them. I think no less should be done for the chemicals we put on food."

Despite his medical background, Dow is no stranger to conventional agriculture. He grew up on a farm outside Meridian, Miss., where his father grew soybeans and raised cattle. "I used to go home during school, when it was time to plant and harvest," he says. "One day I told my family, 'I'll do anything else but spray the herbicides.' I wasn't comfortable with them—the pollution, getting into the groundwater. They just couldn't handle that."

Most farmers dismiss organic farming, he says, because they think you can't make money at it. But Dow says he makes a comfortable living—even though he actively cultivates only about two acres of his farm. "If I had 10,000 acres of corn, I'd probably be losing money," he says. "But we're making a good income. We're busy from the first of March through Christmas time."

The secret to Dow's success, he says, is diversification. He grows a wide variety of herbs, fruits, and vegetables—carefully chosen for their marketability. Such crops yield a high value per acre because they are in strong demand by nearby restaurants, consumers, and grocery markets. "I talk to the chefs in restaurants and ask them, 'What is it that you need that you can't get?' Then I'll try it out. There's been a lot of things I've

learned from the chefs. So, it's been very rewarding."

In the spring and fall, Dow grows cool-weather crops like broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, and a range of cabbage and lettuce varieties. In summer, he focuses on hard-to-

---

***"The real value of the farm is the soil. As far as pesticides and fertilizer are concerned, we just don't need them."***

—BILL DOW OF PITTSBORO  
ORGANIC FARMER AND PHYSICIAN

---

Tom Mather



**Bill Dow, organic farmer and physician from Chatham County.**

find varieties of tomatoes and peppers—such as the large red and yellow sweet peppers that command top dollar in grocery stores. He also grows an assortment of fresh herbs, including sage, fennel, oregano, mint, tarragon, thyme, rosemary, dill, and Italian parsley. His other crops include blueberries and fresh cut flowers.

“If you asked me five years ago if I’d ever grow cut flowers, I’d say you were crazy,” he says. “But they’re selling just great. You won’t make it on one crop. You need to grow a lot of different things. Every summer I lose at least one crop. But I make up for it with other things. When you grow all of one crop, you end up selling it for not as much—because there’s a lot of it on the market.”

The diversity of crops also helps discourage pest problems. Other ways Dow avoids pests include mulching, rotating crops, and regular cultivation and weeding. Plus, he says his fields have a good supply of natural

predators—such as certain kinds of wasps that feed on tomato worms—because he doesn’t douse his crops with insecticides. He fertilizes crops with manure, compost, lime, and bone meal.

“The real value of the farm is the soil,” he says. “As far as pesticides and fertilizer are concerned, we just don’t need them. . . . If we need a pesticide, it’s for deer. We probably lose \$2,000 a year in crops to deer.”

Another factor that has helped Dow is that he sells his produce directly to his customers—who include more than 20 restaurant operators in Pittsboro, Durham, and Chapel Hill. “The problem with a lot of farmers is they say, ‘My job is to grow it, not sell it.’ But they’re hardly making any money growing it, and the guy in the middle is making all the money. A lot of farmers are going out of business. They should try something new before they decide to quit. There’s a lot

—continues

***"We spray food with stuff that intentionally kills insects, and yet we have not demanded enough information to make sure it doesn't hurt us. The problem is: You can see a caterpillar, but you can't see what somebody sprayed on your food. Unfortunately, people think what you can't see ain't there."***

—BILL DOW OF PITTSBORO, ORGANIC FARMER AND PHYSICIAN

## Physician-Farmer

—continued from previous page

of folks doing what I do, and they're making it. I can't speak for anyone else, but we're doing fine."

North Carolina has an estimated 500 organic farmers, according to the Agricultural Resources Center, a Carrboro-based environmental group that promotes alternative farming methods. The growing interest in organic farming has even prompted action by the N.C. Department of Agriculture. In February, Agriculture Commissioner Jim Graham announced the opening of a 2,300-acre experimental farm near Goldsboro that will be used to conduct research on organic farming and other kinds of "sustainable" agricultural techniques.<sup>1</sup>

But, for evidence that organic techniques

can work, one only needs to look at the produce that Dow grows on his farm. His tomato vines bend from the weight of lush, red fruits. His pepper plants are laden with huge, shiny orange and yellow pods. The fragrant herbs can be smelled just walking through the orderly rows of crops.

"The bottom line for most people is, 'What does it look and taste like?'" Dow says. "We can compete with the best of them."

—Tom Mather

## FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Agriculture's experimental farm is called The Center for Environmental Systems. The department is operating the farm in partnership with the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at N.C. State University and the School of Agriculture at A&T State University. For more details, see Martha Quillin, "Pesticides no longer the pick at Cherry Farm," *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.), Feb. 2, 1994, p. 3A.

—continued from page 90

pesticide programs based in environmental agencies in only one category, the number of complaints investigated.

Spalt, of the Agricultural Resources Center, says the survey clearly shows that the N.C. General Assembly should move pesticide regulation from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources. "The data shows that if a pesticide program is in an environmental agency, the fines will be much higher," Spalt says. "Even in the areas where North Carolina's numbers look good, they're less than half what they are in the environmental states."

But state agricultural officials say the survey results show they are doing a good job of balancing agricultural interests with health and environmental concerns. "The basic premise is that we don't act against agricultural people, when in fact we do," says Pesticide Administrator John Smith. "All you have to do is look at our case files. You will see farmers, commercial applicators, corporate giants—all where we've taken actions against them. But we don't have a police state. Our efforts are to educate, to try to get them to do it the right way. And then we use the regulatory system to ensure compliance. . . . We've got a strong commitment within this department to carry this program out."