

ALL HEART AT OAK HART FARM



Article & photos by Jennifer M. Lee
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Most of us know the dramatic difference between the taste of a tomato from the grocery store and one fresh-picked from your garden or local farm. No comparison, right? The difference between a visit to your local supermarket and Oak Hart Farm, a small family farm located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Clarke County, Virginia, is equally dramatic.

Like that ripe tomato, fresh off the vine, Oak Hart Farm delivers flavor, nutrition, and wholesome goodness to your spirit as well as your body. Yes, their tomatoes – over 40 varieties – are what BLT dreams are made of, but it is the sense of community and care that makes Oak Hart a delicacy.



Roots on the Farm

Shawna Hartsook grew up on the land where she farms, harvesting and preserving food with her father and mother, Rufus and Barbara Rinker, and five siblings. "I didn't realize until I was an adult how fortunate I was that my parents chose to raise us knowing where our food comes from and providing fresh food to our family," she says.

In 2007, with her husband Woody, Shawna founded Oak Hart Farm to grow and sell fresh vegetables to the local community. She started with a small CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program and Farm Summer Camps and sold through a couple of Farmers Markets. Realizing they were best suited to keep operations on the farm, Shawna opened a farm stand that has grown in size and offerings over the past 17 years.

Oak Hart continues to offer CSA memberships for patrons who would like a self-selected assortment (or "share") of seasonal produce each week, throughout the growing season.



Shawna likens the connection of the farm, its food, and its customers to the relationship between mycorrhizal fungi, plants, and soil that collaborate, exchange nutrients, and provide one another protection. “In essence, I believe our farm community is bound together by what I like to call ‘mycorrhizal love’ – a deep-seated commitment to one another’s well-being, an understanding that we are stronger together than we could ever be apart, and a willingness to lend a helping hand whenever it is needed,” she says.



That said, “There is always more work than there are employees to cover the work,” Shawna says. Oak Hart currently has three full-time employees, including Shawna and Woody, five seasonal part-time employees, and multiple volunteers who help in the growing, harvest, and selling of the produce.



The generational involvement of family members also helps sustain the farm, with Shawna and Woody’s three children and their spouses and seven grandchildren sharing in the effort. Hoop houses are named for each grandchild to give them a sense of ownership and relationship to the plants grown on the farm.

What’s Growing?

Nine acres of the farm are currently allotted for food and flower production, with about five acres in active production at any given time and four fallow acres planted with cover crops. Everything is grown without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, or genetic modification.



“We grow as many different types of vegetables as we can,” Shawna says. “We have our clients’ favorites, but each season we trial new varieties. It is better for soil health to grow as many different things as possible. Crop diversity aids in pest and disease management, weed suppression, enhanced biodiversity, reduced soil erosion, and improved water efficiency. Overall, growing a variety of vegetables contributes to a healthier, more sustainable, and resilient agricultural system.”

The growing season begins in December with the start of seeds to be transplanted in early spring. “We are a 10-month farm so we almost always have something seeded and transplants waiting to be planted in succession for the next crop of vegetables. For example, we may plant squash and zucchini up to five times in a season, depending on the weather and pest and disease pressure,” Shawna explains.



Oak Hart also grows about 25 types of flowers that make up the fresh-cut bouquets offered at the market, as well as adding to the biodiversity, pest management, and soil health of the entire farm – not to mention, the beauty! They are planning to expand the floral offerings next year, with a focus on peonies, lavender, and hydrangeas for use in bouquets and for people to come cut their own.

By growing organically and utilizing practices such as planting cover crops, hand weeding, rotating crops, companion planting, and applying natural fertilizers, not only is the food healthier, but so are the land and its wildlife inhabitants. Shawna remains dedicated to her father’s practice of leaving natural borders and wild spaces on the farm for the abundant wildlife this part of the world enjoys. Maintaining and enhancing this biodiversity creates a more vibrant and sustainable environment for the plants, insects, animals, and people who inhabit it.

The Market & Kitchen

The Market at Oak Hart opened in 2008 to provide a selling space for their produce as well as to more deeply engage the sense of community that is of paramount importance to the Hartsooks.

“This is a Community Market, first. When you visit OHF, you’re not merely picking up your weekly produce and groceries, you’re entering part of a community fondly referred to as our “Village” by one of our friends. Here, you come to say hello, catch up, and be a part of something special,” Shawna says.

In addition to all the produce, herbs, and flowers Oak Hart grows, the Market offers shelves of bulk spices, grains, beans, and nuts; environmentally-friendly cleaning products; refrigerators of milk, cheeses and meats from nearby farms; as well as specialty drinks and fermented products. Every single item is carefully vetted by the Oak Hart Farm Team to ensure it’s nutritious, delicious, and produced by people who share their ethos of sustainability and quality. “We want all of our products to be as clean and local as possible,” Shawna says.

The Kitchen at Oak Hart utilizes the farm’s produce and market products to make a seasonal assortment of to-go salads, soups, sauces, and other treats. Early spring menu offerings might include a cheddar baked potato soup and roasted beet hummus while late summer might inspire creamy gazpacho, a hearty stir-fry mix, and apricot omega bars. Always homemade, wholesome, and fresh.



Fans of the farm also have the opportunity to participate in cooking classes and other intimate events on the Farm that bring the customer closer to their food and to their local community.

One recent event brought together a chef specializing in dishes using local, seasonal ingredients with the farmer, Shawna, who grew them. Participants had the opportunity to tour the farm, harvest the food, and use the produce to prepare and share a super-fresh and delicious meal.

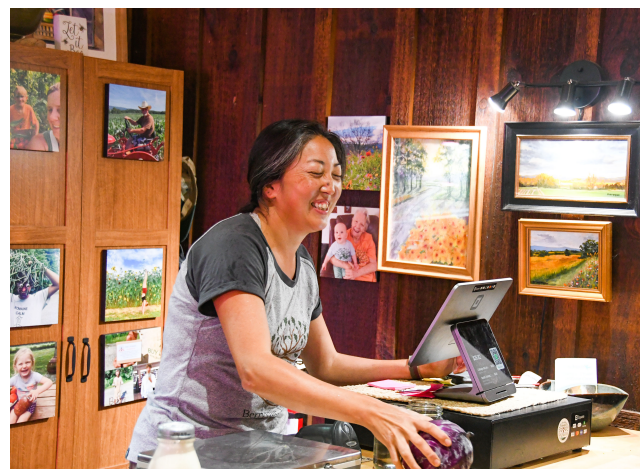


Community

What shines through on every visit to Oak Hart Farm is the deep sense of connection to the land, the food it produces, and the people who support the farm and benefit from its bounty.

"The reason we farm is to provide our family with the best nutrition we can, be good stewards to the land that has been placed in our responsibility, and to provide good food for our community. We are deeply committed to giving back to the community that gives to us," Shawna says.

She is continually touched by how the Oak Hart "family" takes care of each other. An anonymous donor covers weekly food purchases for a grandmother raising her young granddaughter alone. A neighbor uses the farm's flowers to make fresh bouquets for Hospice patients at the Inpatient Care Center in Winchester, Virginia.



"We all seek a sense of belonging, and by visiting OHF, you become part of something much larger than yourself. You join a loving, giving community that cares deeply for one another and the land that sustains us."

Farm patrons and volunteers alike speak to this connection. Volunteer Sue Walden says, “I have enjoyed the privilege of volunteering at Oak Hart Farm for the past three years. The strong sense of community that Shawna and her family represent and promote is touching. The harvest is lovingly grown and pesticide free. It is so much tastier and healthier than anything you can buy in the grocery store.”

Shawna also sends an informative and inspiring weekly e-newsletter to share what’s growing on the farm and new in the market as well as recipes, fun photos, delightful quotes, and feedback from the OHF community.

Risks & Rewards and How To Support

“I want my grandchildren to have the opportunity to go into farming because it’s a viable way to make a living,” Shawna says. But that hope is not a likely reality for most small farmers. Shawna and Woody are clear that they couldn’t run the farm without supplemental income.

“We have an HVAC business to support my farming habit,” Shawna says. Dean Hart, Inc. is the residential heating, ventilation, and air conditioning business that Woody has operated since 2009 and is instrumental in their ability to keep Oak Hart Farm growing, literally.



Whereas large and corporate farming operations – primarily growing corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, and cotton - receive roughly \$30 billion in government subsidies annually from the United States Department of Agriculture, small family farms receive less than 10% of this support, according to a 2023 briefing paper from the CATO Institute.

There are also economic and environmental benefits to purchasing your food locally. It is estimated that buying local keeps 65% or more of your dollar within the community vs. 40% if shopping at large chain stores.

Supporting local food and farming preserves farmland, reduces fossil fuel consumption, air pollution, and gas emissions and helps preserve cultivar genetic diversity.



What can we as consumers do?

“Begin by taking the time to visit local farms and support them by purchasing their seasonal products. Support is crucial not only during challenging times but also prosperous ones. If every community consistently supported small, local farms, it would enhance national food security, overall physical health, and the personal connectivity we all need,” Shawna says. “Vote with your fork!”

Patronizing small farms is good for your health, your local economy, and land preservation. Small farms also help ensure food security for a community. “Consider the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people turned to local farms for the safety and availability of food, especially when supplies were limited elsewhere,” Shawna explains.



A long-time patron of Oak Hart, Mindy van Seeters, shares what she has learned from her visits to the Farm. “I came to realize this little gem of land was worked and cared for by a beautiful community and that the intentions mixed into the soil not only support its bountiful harvests but the entire community that they are shared with. That this kind of nourishment of land, food, and communal support expands across the wholeness of one’s well being. Visiting Oak Hart is like a re-fuel for the soul. You are enveloped by abundant land, views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and met with people whose thoughtfulness is felt through their work and care for the community.”

Oak Hart Farm is located 4 miles east of Berryville, Virginia at 822 Shepherd’s Mill Road and is open March through December, with days and hours changing somewhat throughout the year. It is currently open Thursdays and Fridays from 10am to 6pm and Saturdays from 9am to 2pm.

