

CONSERVATION Showcase

NRCS program protects sustainable farm from urban encroachment

In Seattle’s sprawling metropolis, nestled near Highway 405 between NE 124th Street and Woodinville-Redmond Road, you will find a little patch of country living – The South 47 Farm.

The farm is home to you-pick fruits and vegetables, community garden pea patches, a corn maze, and a farmer’s market stand.

“You come to the farm for the experience of being at a farm,” says Roger Calhoun, general manager and farmer, for Farm LLC, owners of The South 47 Farm. “Our business is about relationships, about knowing your farmer and buying food from a person,” says Mr. Calhoun.

Before supermarkets, people either grew their own vegetables, or purchased them directly from the farmer. “Buying from local farmers provides you with the freshest, best tasting, nutritious, fruits and vegetables. And supporting the local economy helps to keep our green spaces

green,” says Mr. Calhoun.

In the Beginning

This piece of property lay fallow for over fifteen years. In the 1960s it was a dairy. With pressure mounting in the valley for development, the county’s agricultural

program focused on finding a farmer for the property.

“People driving by saw it as a waste land,” says Mr. Calhoun. “Mostly landowners were not interested in seeing it farmed – though it was zoned for agriculture and in a designated Agricultural Production District (APD). They would rather sell it for regular commercial use,” he says.

In 1999, a small group of community-supported agriculture members formed

Farm LLC, a limited liability company dedicated to protecting local farmland while promoting sustainable farming. That same year, Farm LLC, purchased The South 47 Farm and placed it into King County’s



Running The South 47 Farm requires a skilled and dedicated crew. Pictured above is Roger Calhoun (left), the general manager and farmer for Farm LLC, along with his wife Carol and son Andrew.



Looking above the corn field, a church is under construction directly across from The South 47 Farm. Urbanization is slowly encroaching onto prime farmland in King County.

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**Roger Calhoon,
general manager/farmer,
South 47 Farm**



On the opposite side of the farm urban sprawl can be seen coming down into the Sammamish Valley, surrounding The South 47 Farm.

Farmland Preservation Program (FPP) and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) administered by USDA’s - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

“FRPP is a voluntary program. Its purpose is to prevent agricultural land from being converted to non-agricultural uses,” says Jeff Harlow, NRCS Western Washington Program Liaison. “The South 47 Farm became the first parcel in Washington to enroll into the program,” he says.

The property was the largest unprotected property within the Sammamish Valley Ag Production District,” says Judy Herring, King County’s FPP Program Manager. “The fact that it was large, still undeveloped, within the designated APD, had ag soils and a history of ag use, made it a good candidate for acquisition,” she says.

According to Mr. Harlow, by enrolling into the FRPP program, the landowner was paid for the development rights. “In return NRCS got an easement in perpetuity, so the property will never be developed,” he says.

The South 47 Farm is guided by their mission statement: To protect farmland and promote sustainable farming for the benefit of farmers and the community. “We believe that, given the right resources, farming can be economically viable,” says Mr. Calhoon. “We know, from our own experience, what a rich resource it can be for the community,” he says.

Cultivating Success

Surrounded by housing developments The South 47 Farm is cultivating success one grower, one producer, one family, at a time.

“The South 47 Farm is located at the intersection of two major arterials in an APD that is sandwiched between two suburban cities,” says Herring. “I think that Roger and the others involved at The South 47 Farm have done a super job in

taking advantage of this great location.” The farm leases land to five farmers. Famai Chang and Neng Vang grow flowers and vegetables to sell at the Pike Place Market; Claire Thomas grows vegetables for her community-supported agriculture farm, the Root Connection Farm; Brian Scheehser, executive chef at Trellis, grows produce that ends up on his customers’ plates at the restaurant; and The Herbfarm Restaurant grows vegetables and herbs for use in their culinary creations.

“You need someplace, an incubator to give people a chance to learn about farming. We try to support future sustainable farmers,” says Mr. Calhoon. “There are a lot of folks looking for this kind of thing,” he says.

Then there are all the things The South 47 does at the farm with you-pick fruits and vegetables, a corn maze, community garden pea patches, a petting zoo, and the farm stand. “Almost everything we sell is basically right here off the farm,” says Mr. Calhoon. “We sell to local restaurants as well as selling directly to consumers at our farm stand. We have this great location, probably the closest farm like this to the city, two miles off the highway, easy to find,” he says.

According to Mr. Calhoon the farm is just another way children can learn. “The farm is the ultimate teacher for your kids, showing them that food doesn’t come



Cinderella pumpkins are one of the varieties of squash grown at the South 47 Farm.

frozen, wrapped in plastic, or from a box,” says Mr. Calhoon. “We try to be extremely kid friendly, using a soft education through positive farming,” he says.

Becoming a farmer

Growing up in Ohio, Mr. Calhoon could not image becoming a farmer when he was a boy.

“It was never in my list of thoughts for careers,” says Mr. Calhoon. “I went into science and got my doctorate in biophysics. I didn’t want to go into business, or be in retail, and deal with a lot of strangers – basically all of the things that you handle in this operation,” he says.

Ohio must have left some deep farming roots in him though. Now, Mr. Calhoon cannot imagine doing anything else.

According to Mr. Calhoon, becoming a farmer made life a little simpler. “It was pretty obvious rather quickly that Carol’s life (his wife) was better because I was a nicer person doing this,” says Mr. Calhoon. “Before, I had a series of pretty awful bosses. Now, I am working more hours, working a lot harder, but sleeping better, enjoying things more,” he says.

“I see myself when I am 80 designing the corn maze and puttering around on something,” says Mr. Calhoon. “I do not know what I would do for a living if I wasn’t farming.”

Farming is a 180-degree change from a career in biophysics, but Mr. Calhoon uses the scientific methods he has honed over the years each growing season.

“We try new things all the time,” said Mr. Calhoon. “It is really kind of a hunt for new



A variety of farm goodies available for purchase at the Farm Stand. “Almost everything we sell is basically right here off the farm,” says Mr. Calhoon.

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Hay rides give visitors an opportunity to see the variety of crops that grow on the South 47 Farm.

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The South 47 Farm incorporates kid-friendly activities enhancing the experience of being on the farm.

opportunities, figuring them out, and making it work,” he says.

According to Mr. Calhoon, the best part of the job is cutting open that new melon you haven’t tried before while standing out in the middle of the field – tasting it to see if it is good.

Farming for the future

So what’s the next step? “I am still thinking on that usually in November or December, when we decide what to strengthen and where to expand,” says Mr. Calhoon. “We have to be careful about over stretching our resources.”

The South 47 Farm is looking into other farmer’s markets to sell their goods as well as becoming “certified organic.” “There is a whole host of value-added things like jams, pickled jalapeno peppers, herb garden, and distilling essential oils (lavender, rosemary, oregano) that can be produced,” says Mr. Calhoon.

The South 47 Farm is trying to diversify operations to keep their employees hired through the winter. “We have great people who work here – from the field crew to the farm stand operators,” says Mr. Calhoon. “Field workers are critical when we are producing 200 different varieties of crops. You want to have people who enjoy the whole experience.”

To Mr. Calhoon it is all about the people, the connections, and their returning to see the same people. “The first year I realized that people were bringing their friends to the farm or meeting them at the farm,” says Mr. Calhoon.

“Recently, I had someone come up to say his child says my name every time they drive by my farm, says Mr. Calhoon. “That is just hugely satisfying.”

The South 47 Farm will likely continue to bring satisfaction to many thanks to the help provided by the USDA-NRCS and King County’s farm preservation programs.

*Kelly Sprute, NRCS Washington
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