



VINE AND BRANCH — Richard and Linda McIntosh take the biblical reference imprinted on their Vine and Branch Farm signage very seriously. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing," John 15:5 reads. They open up access to their hundreds of berry plants and vegetables each season as a means of ministering to families.

Vine and Branch is mission for local couple

By **KAREN CAMPBELL**
Press Reporter

Farmers and pastors are students of planting and harvesting. For one, it's a matter of livelihood here, for the other it's about life everlasting in the hereafter.

For Richard and Linda McIntosh, it's both.

Though retired from a career that included years at the Goodyear plant and in carpentry, Richard continues to enjoy the fruits of his labor as a photographer, custom framer and furniture builder, and farm owner. He, Linda, and Sawyer, their German shepherd, tend to 700-800 blueberry plants, 100 blackberry plants, various vegetables and some loganberries at Vine and Branch Farm, 1623 Chestnut Glade Road, in Martin.

While the berry-picking season runs from May to the end of July, Richard's work as a volunteer chaplain with the Tennessee Department of Corrections is an ongoing commitment. He's been ministering to inmates in Tiptonville and Fulton County for 18 years. And, he says, when he opens up the ber-

ry patches for individuals, and especially families with children, he and Linda continue to minister.

The couple bought the 20-acre farm in 1990. They did their first test plot between 1996 and 1998 and went big in 2002 and again in 2006.

"We put out 1,100 plants initially," he said. "And through trial and error, I managed to murder a few," he laughingly added.

Since 2006, pickers have become "regulars," often planning vacations around the time when they can explore the acreage and fill their buckets with a bounty of berries.

"It's a ministry to give a place for people to bring their kids and grandkids," Richard shared. "We try to open our home up to people in the summer and let them enjoy the outdoors. As Christians that's what we purpose to do. It's best to use (the farm) in ways that will glorify God."

Calling their farming efforts a "stewardship issue" of best using what God has provided, Richard is obviously both amused and amazed at the opportunities. He tells of once

welcoming a daycare center and soon the kids were wearing buckets for helmets and throwing berries at each other. A business would probably not stand for that, but a ministry certainly would.

A business might also say yes to the winemakers who have approached the couple about purchasing their entire crop but, again, they opt for servanthood over high sales.

"That's not what we are in it for. We are in it for people to come and enjoy and us to enjoy them."

"Enjoying" translates into ensuring that the 80-foot long rows are kept clean and free of chiggers and briars, he says. A pavilion provides a chance to get out of the sun and "watch everybody else pick," he jokes.

With his long list of hobbies and interests, Richard's current so-called retirement reflects the same kind of resourcefulness that a few decades ago, saw him and Linda transforming a house that was closer to being bulldozed rather than rebuilt.

The two had been helping a family going through

hard times, sponsoring their Christmas. Delivering gifts, he pulled up to what Richard describes as a "pitiful" house built in 1902 and looking every year of it. He stopped in awe. Years prior, he had taken a drafting course in Florida, and had designed and drawn the plans for almost an exact duplicate of what he saw before him.

They eventually purchased the property and began working on the house. They still are, having completed an addition last year.

And once again, Richard sees a message for the heart in the work of his hands.

"It's what our life is," he concluded. "Everything we do. Like the property in bad repair, we were in bad condition and the Lord thought well of us to restore us into a reusable condition. Restoration — that's basically about it. It's therapeutic ... on your knees digging in the dirt, with the dog beside you and loving life."

Vine and Branch keeps their customers informed of the latest happenings with announcements in The Press and on Facebook.

How to feed Northwest Tennessee in 2050?

By **Samantha Goyret**
NWTN Local Food Network Executive Director

In Weakley County alone, our agricultural output has a total estimated economic impact of \$1 billion (UT Extension County Level Ag Economic Impact). This figure shows how productive agriculture is and the benefits it provides to our communities, including area jobs and rural economic health.

Our area yields thousands of tons of food, yet we still have a hunger problem. Weakley County has a higher than 20 percent poverty rate (US Dept. of Health and Human Services) with nearly 11,000 residents living in areas considered to be low income and with low access to healthy food options. How do we reduce hunger issues in our county with the resources we already have?

What will feed and nourish the hungry in our communities? Public investment in small-scale food production.

Throughout the world, 75 percent of the poor live in rural areas and rely primarily on agriculture for their livelihoods (fao.org), and their incomes are directly or indirectly linked through agriculture. This reality may bring up visions of small-scale farming in underdeveloped countries, but small-scale farming has the same benefits here in Weakley County where hunger is an issue, although it often goes unnoticed. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the U.N. report confirmed the consensus that the best area to invest in agriculture is small-scale farming, where the "yield gaps" are the largest and where hunger is the most prevalent.

The Northwest Tennessee Local Food Network (LFN), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is working on growing solutions to increase access to locally grown and produced foods in our region. Since its founding in 2015, the LFN has reached more than 15,000 people in our area through community programming, Farm-to-Table Forums, farmer and con-

sumer workshops and mostly, through the distribution of the Northwest Tennessee Local Food Guide.

The LFN envisions an equitable food system in Northwest Tennessee that uses locally-grown and produced food to sustain healthy communities and local economies through agriculture. The Network's approach is to empower communities, grow connections and mobilize resources to increase access to local food for all. The LFN is increasing the demand and supply of locally-grown and produced foods in our region because the idea is simple: the more food we grow for our communities that stay in our communities, the healthier our communities become — not only physically, but also socially and economically.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), people who shop at farmers markets eat more fruits and vegetables than those who shop at grocery stores, and proximity to a farmer's market is associated with a lower body mass index. Farmers markets also improve a community's social health. Data from USDA surveys reveal that people who shop at farmers markets report 15 to 20 positive social interactions per visit, compared to one or two at a grocery store.

Markets serve as business incubators, a means to improve products and decision-making. The average American farmer receives about 17 cents for every dollar spent on food purchased through a grocery store, but farmers who sell at a farmer's market earn about 90 cents (PickTN).

By 2050, instead of feeding the world, can we bring our food closer to home and feed those who need it most in our region — maybe even by growing local food on a parcel of crop field or in a farmers' cooperative association, gleaning from our backyards, opening a community kitchen, teaching kids to grow food on school grounds, or buying from a farmer at an area farmers market?



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