

There's Diamonds in These Hills

By Cynthia Wallis-Hill

Just beyond the center of the small town of Vass, in the Sandhills of Moore County, a woman's dream is taking shape. **Susan Rice**, of Pinehurst, North Carolina, envisions turning two hundred acres of former tobacco-producing land into the largest truffle orchard, or truffiere, in the United States.

Before establishing **Black Diamond French Truffles, Inc.**, Susan was a successful real estate property investor. One day, three years ago she got a call from a friend about some farm land she wanted Susan to see. Susan agreed and when she saw it, immediately felt something unique and special about the land. The owner, a woman named Harriett, was adamant that the land not be turned into a development and was seeking a buyer who would honor her request. Susan agreed, feeling a strong connection to the woman and the land, yet faced a dilemma: how could she preserve the beauty and integrity of the land and create a profitable enterprise as well?

At first, the idea of growing truffles was a whim born of Susan's discovered love of cooking with them. After several months of researching and exploring, her decision was solid. When she told her husband of her plan to grow truffles, he said that it just couldn't be done and as Susan put it, "That's all it took for me..." She took up the gauntlet and the rest is history in the making. Her son, Corey, whose love of the land rivals her own, runs the physical operation. Together they are learning from a variety of experts in the field of truffle production, in the U.S. and in Europe and have traveled to France and to Spain to see first-hand what comprises the successful growing and selling of truffles.

Last year, Susan and Corey planted thousands of young hazelnut and oak trees in sweeping rows on their 10 acre test site. Another 100 acres will be planted this year and by the time planting is complete, there will be 200 acres of truffle producing trees. The climate



"We invite all that are interested in participating to contact us and become part of this story of orchard development." Their Web site is: www.BDFT.com. "Napa is to wine as North Carolina can be to truffles she says. "We are growing a rare gem in these fields."

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Left: Susan Rice in her office where she oversees soon-to-be 200 acres of truffle-producing trees. Below, Susan walks her field of young hazelnut and oak trees. Photography by David. R. Nicoll.

and soil is well suited for truffles, with lime being added to raise the pH level. Hazelnut and oak trees are the hosts for truffles. Their sapling roots are inoculated with truffle spores before being planted. Typically within 5-6 years the hazelnut trees produce truffles and it takes 10 or more years for oaks to produce. This combination of tree types can allow growers to harvest sooner and produce truffles for many decades. The harvesting of truffles requires the talents and efforts of dogs and men.

Specially trained dogs that can sniff out truffles begin digging the ground around a tree when the scent of truffles is picked up. Then human hands will dig several inches down to unearth them.

Susan Rice's dream goes far beyond personal success. She is committed to being a good steward of the land and a good neighbor. She believes it is possible to make North Carolina as important to truffle production as any place in the world. Susan believes that this crop could replace tobacco and single-handedly revitalize our farming industry. As leaders in the truffle industry, Susan's management team, panel of experts and staff want to help farmers and others in discovering the true essence, taste and culture of the Black Diamond French Truffle here in America.

