

EAST GREENSBORO, NC - Millard and Connie Locklear, a Robeson County couple who grow fruits, vegetables, and culinary and medicinal herbs, were honored as North Carolina's 2022 Small Farmers of the Year, a recognition awarded by Cooperative Extension at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University as part of its annual Small Farms Week.

Since 2015, the Locklears have grown organic collards, winter and spring root vegetables, and herbs on their 30-acre farm. They also sell poultry products, homemade jellies and jams, pickles, chow-chow and other delicacies for the Southern palate. Their work stresses health, safety and environmental stewardship, and they have worked closely with N.C. A&T Cooperative Extension and other agricultural agencies to develop a food safety plan and support on-farm research and training programs for students.

"Mr. and Mrs. Locklear have both been an integral part of Robeson County Cooperative Extension for the past 15 years," said Nelson Brownlee, Extension agriculture and natural resources agent in the county. "Their goal has been to add new, innovative practices that improve profitability, protect farm stability, diminish risk, and strengthen their farm's overall sustainability."

Small Farms Week, N.C. A&T's annual tribute to small-scale agriculture statewide, features educational programs, panel discussions and farm tours, this year held in hybrid format. The weeklong annual celebration was launched by Extension at A&T 36 years ago to connect with small-scale farmers—including minority farmers and those in limited-resource communities—and ensure they receive the latest research-based information on farming techniques, new tools and technologies. It also gives the public a chance to meet their agricultural neighbors and learn about farm operations and food production.

The Locklears worked with N.C. A&T to adopt high tunnel production to lengthen their growing season and control pests. As a result, they have increased their profits by 50%, Brownlee said.

The couple has also become certified in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Harmonized Good Agriculture Practices (GAPs), which allows them to sell to wholesale markets. They have converted land that was damaged from overuse of pesticides into a chemical-free organic farm using integrated pest management techniques.

The Locklears share their knowledge and passion for farming with their community in a variety of ways, including working with the University of North Carolina at Pembroke to offer research opportunities and hands-on experiences for students in the university's sustainable agriculture program. They have also partnered with the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina to help establish a farmer cooperative and a young farmers program.

“To me, farming skills are life skills,” said Millard Locklear. “It is vital that we teach kids about farming so we can sustain small farming as a viable profession, and let them know where their food actually comes from, how to grow it, prepare it and get more of it.”

The Small Farmer of the Year award was presented at the Small Farmer Appreciation Luncheon, one of the highlights of Small Farms Week. The Locklears received a plaque, monogrammed jackets and \$2,000.

“Small Farms Week brings us closer to our purpose as a land-grant institution and to our mission of educating farmers across the state with our knowledge,” said Kenneth Sigmon, PhD, vice chancellor at N.C. A&T. Sigmon was among the university and agriculture sector VIPs to attend the appreciation luncheon. Others included Steve Troxler, North Carolina commissioner of agriculture; Mohamed Ahmedna, PhD, dean of the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences; Shawn Harding, president of the North Carolina Farm Bureau; Rich Bonanno, PhD, Extension director at N.C. State University; and Barbara Board, interim administrator of Extension at A&T.

The event also included a keynote address from P.J. Haynie III, a fifth-generation Black farmer and chair of the National Black Growers Council.

“We have to do our part to grow the next generation in agriculture,” said Haynie. “Show your children the science, the engineering, all the aspects that go into agriculture. It is so important that all farmers have a seat at the table—small, large, organic, black, white—to fulfill our charge of feeding nearly eight billion people around the globe.”

Small Farms Week educational programs will be posted on Facebook as videos. Visit the Extension at A&T Facebook page ([CooperativeExtensionatAandT](#)) to enjoy sessions on plant and animal production, the impacts of climate change and COVID-19 on small farmers, hemp production and more.