



CLOSE CHECK: Black Diamond French Truffles president and founder Susan Rice, farm manager Corey Rice and Moore County Extension agent Taylor Williams check out truffle trees at the orchard site. Growing an exotic crop like truffles is a ground-breaking challenge in North Carolina.

Truffles, anyone?

WHEN Susan Rice bought some farmland in Vass, N.C., near Pinehurst, she was challenged how she would use that land.

Somewhat whimsically, she said, "Maybe I'll farm truffles. I like those."

Once the idea occurred to her, it took root. Susan had purchased truffles before at Christmas and loved to cook with them. "I knew I could make money with them if I could raise them," she explains. "I wondered if they would grow here."

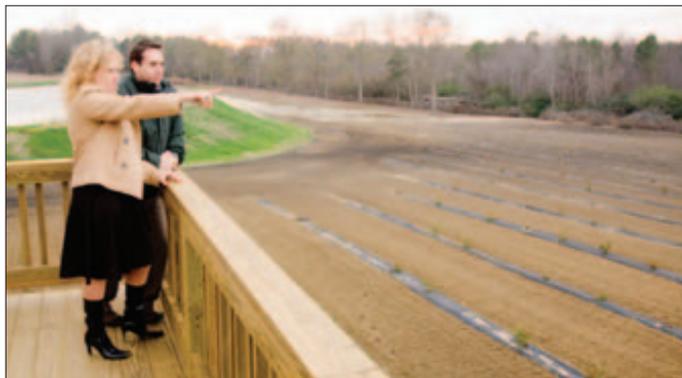
Susan began to research the idea. She studied truffles on the Internet, and people she met sent her articles.

North Carolina seems an unlikely place to grow truffles, but actually, she says, the Tar Heel State is one of the few places in the world that is suitable for the crop. Although it is uncertain how commercially viable the crop can be, one thing that is certain is that truffles will grow in some parts of North Carolina, at least on a hobbyist basis. Indeed, truffles are being produced in the state today.

Exotic new crop

Truffles are fungi that grow on the roots of host trees such as oaks and hazelnuts (filberts) and that are extremely rare, extremely prized by culinary experts and fabulously high-priced. The pungent taste is nearly indescribable — dark, musky and unique. In Europe, hogs have traditionally been used to snort them out, but these days dogs are often used for the purpose.

The Perigord truffles that Susan is attempting to grow can bring from \$350 a pound to more than \$2,000 per pound,



SURVEYING THEIR PROGRESS: From the vantage point on this balcony, Susan and Corey Rice check out the acreage they planted in oaks and hazelnut trees this year. This is the first stage of the project that will eventually put 200 acres into truffle production. In the background is the irrigation pond they constructed for the project.

Key Points

- Truffles could become a new crop in North Carolina's tobacco country.
- The profit potential for the high-value crop could be great.
- Until proven, however, the crop is a high-risk venture.

depending on the marketing season. Because of the weather, this year they brought up to \$2,200 a pound. They are grown only in a few places — exotic locations like Spain, France, New Zealand and Tasmania. North Carolina has soil and climate very much like the truffle-producing region of France, Susan says, and she is confident enough that

the company she has founded, Black Diamond French Truffles Inc., is staking nearly \$25 million to make it happen on 200 acres. That is about 10 times more land dedicated to truffle production than any other site she knows about in the United States. Teamed with her son, farm manager Corey Rice, company vice president Charles Warren and others, Susan is now on a mission to fulfill her dream — to make North Carolina as important to truffle production as any place in the world.

"Napa is to wine as North Carolina can be to truffles," she says. "We are growing a rare gem in these fields. This crop could replace tobacco and single-handedly revitalize our farming industry."

Susan was able to obtain trees from Franklin Garland, a truffle pioneer in King, N.C., who was the first to successfully grow truffles in the U.S. It took him more than a dozen years to harvest his first truffle but now that time span is typically down to five to seven years.

Meeting challenges

Every step of the process has been challenging, farm manager Corey Rice says, since it is such a new business. From an observation balcony in a former tobacco barn that is a now a work building, he and Susan look out over the acres they planted this year.

"Everything has had a steep learning curve, from planting to irrigation to weed control," Corey says. "We pretty much had to learn everything as we went. We couldn't call up Extension and say, 'Hey, we want to plant some hazelnut trees and raise truffles. Can you tell us how to go about it?'" It is such a new industry there is no real guidebook."

Is it a risky business? No doubt, as any unproven business is. But that risk is part of what makes the Rices excited. Obviously, financial profit potential is an important aspect of the enterprise, but building something new and important in the Tar Heel State, has them as charged up and enthusiastic as any profit motive. Perhaps Susan Rice started out as an investor, but when she talks about being on the farm, about watching plants grow and about getting others involved, it is obvious that along the way she has become a farmer.

Learn more by visiting the Black Diamond French Truffles Web site at bdftr.com/index.cfm.