Business reborn as Winding Stair Farm Nursery

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New ownership has taken root at the site of the recently closed Spring Valley Nursery on the Highlands Road after a brief period of inactivity this fall.

The Winding Stair Farm Nursery, as the nursery is now known, officially opened on Dec. 18 with a grand opening event slated for early March. Between now and then, the new management will be hard at work getting the business fully stocked and staffed ahead of the spring season.

"We're open regular hours, but we might be without somebody here every now and then just because we aren't fully staffed yet and we don't have a lot of inventory at the moment," said Ezra Gardiner, who will run the nursery on behalf of Winding Stair Farm. "We'll be stocking up over the next few months and getting point of sales systems up and running. It's more informal, but we'd like for people to come in and meet us if they want."

Once things are up and running, Gardiner said, he hopes to continue the work that former owner Marian Bridges developed during her time running the nursery.

"For the most part, it'll run as it has been," he said. "Anyone who's been here many times before will definitely be able to recognize it. We'll have some ways that we'll sort of use what we have going on with the farm to move it in our own direction, too."

Gardiner is no stranger to the agricultural industry in Macon County – he's spent time working as a horticulturist for the Highlands Biological Station Botanical Garden and helping to run the farm supplying Old Edwards Inn in Highlands with fresh produce. For three years now, he and his wife, Michelle Ruigrok, have been the caretakers for Winding Stair Farm, a five-acre farm west of Franklin on the Nantahala River. Both the farm and the nursery are owned by Greg Mullins and Stacy Briedendieck, who initially hired them to oversee a part-time residence before the property evolved into a full-fledged market and restaurant farm. Now, Gardiner will handle the nursery while Ruigrok continues to manage the farm operations.

The two businesses will work hand-in-hand in many ways. Gardiner said he plans to sell products created on the farm at the nursery once things are up and running in March.

"What we're really trying to do is find something unusual to have kind of a finished, value-added product. A unique yarn, or hot sauce with a pepper that's difficult to find, that's a lot of what we'll offer here as far as retail goes," he said. "We're able to produce things here that we can take out there, and we can produce things there that we can take here. We're able to have an area where we can work more on volume and an area where we can work more on the produce, the edible side of it."

Produce will be more of a focus for the nursery as the group works to rebrand the business. While there will be ornamentals and trees and other plants regular customers would expect from the nursery, there will be more vegetables on display and, during the warmer months, fresh produce available as well.

"We'll be doing more heirloom vegetable starts. We'll probably have some produce and products available from the farm, that kind of thing. And our CSA boxes we do at the farm will probably have pickups here, too," he said.

Overall, though, the approach to running a nursery will be the same under the new management. Gardiner said Bridges' approach to the business was in keeping with his philosophy on growing resilient, quality plants on a large scale.

"Marian's always had a great sort of old-world approach to running a nursery, where you start a lot of plants a lot younger and tend them until they turn into a bigger, nicer product rather than buying a finished product to turn around and sell," Gardiner said. "For me, that fits a little better with systems that we've put in place with the farm and how it works, that kind of mindset."

The nursery will draw on a wide range of sources for its plants, ranging from vegetables started from seed at the farm to ornamental plants sourced from across the eastern seaboard. The nursery is fortunate, Gardiner said, to have access to an extremely diverse variety of native plants found growing in western North Carolina.

"There's a history here of self sustenance and growing your own food, as well as a history of gardening and beautiful gardens," he said. "Because we're here in the middle of one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, we have all these great native plants and we're able to grow so many foreign plants as well."

With such a range of options for native plants, and access to the farm and all the resources it offers, Gardiner said he hopes to be able to fine tune the offerings at the nursery and provide plants that will thrive in this area in ways that plants produced at a larger scale for a wider consumer base might not be able to.

"What we're able to do is take the time to learn what the best possible products are to do that with, and have something a box store isn't going to have – that kind of interesting, slightly more hardy, slightly better quality plant," he said. "Because we're willing to put the labor in to grow it from something smaller, we have ways to keep it affordable to have that kind of local quality plant."

Press photos/Carter Giegerich

Ezra Gardiner prepares plants inside a greenhouse at Winding Stair Farm Nursery.

Winding Stair Farm Nursery offers a wide variety of grasses and herbs. A full line of plants will be available in the spring.