

Michelle **PACE DAVIS**



Davis grew up on her family's tobacco farm in northern Johnston County, where her ancestors have been farming since 1906. However, the town's close proximity to the rapidly evolving Raleigh metro area meant changes had to be made at Pace Family Farms.

Davis, 29, graduated from N.C. State University in 2014 with a degree in agriculture education and a minor in business, then taught agriculture at Corinth Holders High School in Wendell. After three years of teaching, she returned to the family farm armed with new ideas. The game plan was to figure out a way to grow crops on less land and make the same amount of money with lower labor cost.

This led her to steer away from tobacco and plant strawberries starting in 2016. The next spring, the farm opened to customers who wanted to pick their own berries. It's been a major success, prompting the Pace family to add new

crops. The farm now includes about 20 acres for produce and sells broccoli, cabbage, squash, cucumbers, watermelon, corn and other vegetables.

Davis also started hosting family-friendly events at the farm, such as Friday movie nights. One of the most important parts of the business is the relationship the farm has built with the community, she says. "When our customers come by, we know their name. We know their family," Davis says. "That's really special, that connection we have with our community members.

Davis' parents also work at the farm full time, while her husband, brother and sister-in-law have part-time roles. She also runs the farm's social media accounts, posting photos and notes on activities including upcoming events. Her goal is to help followers get a better sense of the work involved in running the farm, which also involves raising cattle and hogs and growing corn and soybeans.

She says she wants to "let people see the good, the bad and the ugly of farming and what it takes to produce the food."

The Farm Credit Associations of North Carolina named Davis the state's Innovative Young Farmer of the Year for 2020. She has also helped the farm receive the Clayton Chamber of Commerce's Business of the Month award.

Davis wants to keep innovating and may add fresh-cut herbs to the product mix.

Business North Carolina's Trailblazers, 2021.