

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see [farmtogethernow.org](http://farmtogethernow.org)

## **Chapter 8**

### **Mountain Gardens**

Burnsville, North Carolina

Organizing body: 1 staff, 1 full-time resident, and up to 6 apprentices

Scale: 2.8 acres and on-site pharmacy

Type: for profit

Currently producing: Chinese and Appalachian medicinal herbs

In operation: since mid-1970s

Iconic plant/animal: southern ginseng

Website: [www.mountaingardensherbs.com](http://www.mountaingardensherbs.com)

In the mid-1970s Joe Hollis left the city of Detroit for a life at the foot of Mt. Mitchell in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. He wanted to break free of the economy and politics that he thought promoted war and oppression in favor of a life that would build on Gandhi's principal of "being the change you want to see." The change he wanted was minimal money

economy, less harm to the earth, and egalitarian human relations. For the last three decades he has sought to live out his theory of “Paradise Gardening” joined by a rotating cast of natural builders, medicinal herbalists, family members, and interns. Inspired by his time in Borneo serving in the Peace Corps and his dedicated reading of philosophy, religion, anthropology, and plant science, Hollis has always sought to put ideas into action.

Mountain Gardens has one of the largest collections of Appalachian and Chinese medicinal herbs in the country. The Mountain Gardens land itself serves as an incubator for a wide variety of projects, from herbs to medicines to natural-building experiments. The most impressive part is the patience displayed there, with the first many years serving as a period for clearing land, sorting out the available resources, and considering possible futures. His many visitors can observe that almost everything is placed meticulously and comes from the land itself. Mountain Gardens is an example of an immersive, life-long practice rooted in a place and a self-made philosophy.

**Describe the southern Appalachian region.**

**Joe Hollis, founder:** Well, ecologically, they’re very old mountains. Oldest on the continent, probably. Mt. Mitchell, the highest mountain in the east, is one of the more biodiverse areas of the southern Appalachians because there’s a mixture of southern and northern floras. Because of the glaciers, plants moved south along the mountains and then moved back north as the southern things moved up. They mingled here. A lot of the plants that grow here are related to the plants that grow in eastern Asia. They are sister bioregions, or what’s called a botanical “disjunction.”

There's also topographic diversity and different plant communities. It has mostly to do with elevation, moisture, and pH variants. There's a long heritage of collecting and gathering medicine herbs around here.

### **How did Mountain Gardens begin?**

My intention was to try to develop a lifestyle that would present a solution to all sorts of problems. Which comes down to a) preventing ecological destruction, b) peace and justice, and c) what I consider indispensable, personal happiness. I had the idea that I would spend my life doing one project, so I wanted it to be as perfect a project as I could come up with. I spent some time thinking about how. . . . Because I wanted to develop a lifestyle that would be as widely applicable as possible, I knew I would have to grow food.

I'd go down to Chapel Hill in the winter for a couple months and bury myself in the library. I read about ecology, about ways people lived all around the world at different times, about civilizations, anarchy, gardening techniques. I read about sustainability, looking for unusual forms of agriculture that seemed more permanent, stable, tree crops, that kind of stuff. A lot of it was like anthropology. At some point, it just jelled: The difference was, either you are living as part of civilization—the State or the Economy—or you're living as part of the natural system. There's a big divide.

During the long hours I was making the garden, I was thinking about how to integrate new information and ways of thinking about the plant world. I considered a certain amount of politics

and principles having to do with hand labor, using strictly the materials that were here, stuff like that. After seven or eight years, I had a pretty clear idea of what I was trying to do.

**What were some of your early projects?**

The first spring I was here, I learned how to build a log cabin. I didn't know anything about it. It took a couple of years to build.

For about five years I just worked on making garden beds. When I started off, I'd clear little areas and sort rocks for steps, flagstones, walls, gravel paths. A friend had a gravely tractor, like a roto tiller but more powerful. He went round and round, just hitting huge rocks. It was ridiculous—[the land] was about 70 percent rock all the way through. That's about the only time there's been a machine on this property. A lot of those terraces down through the vegetable garden got made in the first five or six years.

**At what point did you start doing things with medicinal herbs?**

At first I put myself in the landscaping business. I already had a lot of flower gardens: colorful English flower gardens, perennial borders, et cetera, which was relatively unknown in this country, certainly in this area at that point in time. I had this place planted up with plants to use for putting in gardens for other people.

Then at some point I realized that I was spending too much time away from home, and too much of my energy was going into gardening for other people. So my garden shifted from growing

plants I could use for the landscape business back to the original concept of growing useful plants. The idea of a paradise garden began to shape up: It would be beautiful *and* the sum total of all the plants would be enough to live on.

In the course of that shift, I turned my focus to compiling a database—this was before computers—of “the thousand most useful plants,” a project that has been ongoing. I went through maybe fifty different books about useful plants, ranging from *The Dictionary of Economic Plants* and *The Encyclopedia of Edible Plants of the World* to the *Medicinal Plants of the Cherokee Indians* to the *Wild Edible Vegetables of Northern Japan*. I had already worked out the bioclimatology of this area and matched it to similar areas, so that the plants that people use elsewhere could be naturalized here. Again, that was part of the concept—to have the plants be naturalized so that you’re not constantly working against nature to keep them alive.

I assigned a reference number or letter to each plant that was mentioned in each book. I used green if it was in reference to its edibility, red if it was in reference to its medicinal properties, or black if it was for some other use, like craft, fiber, paper, basketry, et cetera. Certain plants would just jump off the page, like chickweed, which has about thirty references. Eventually I’d like to print a guidebook that would tell you what you’re looking at when you walk through the gardens here. Every plant has a story.

### **Is there one iconic plant that’s most associated with Mountain Gardens?**

The plant that a lot of people would probably associate with me, the plant I promote fairly enthusiastically and sell the most of, is called *Gynostemma pentaphyllum*, or Southern ginseng,

immortality herb, magic grass, or sweet tea vine, even though it actually tends to be bitter. It's got a lot of the same properties and compounds as ginseng just more of them. You don't have to dig it up, and it grows like a weed. You harvest it aboveground, and then you can dry it in a day or two, and you can make a tea out of it. In every respect, it's a lot easier than ginseng. It has adaptogenic properties—it's good for immune systems, it's being used a lot for cancer prevention, blood-pressure regulation, cholesterol regulation, weight loss, and stamina.

**What are some of your current projects?**

I'm part of the Medicinal Herb Consortium, a nation-wide group of growers who are the first generation of people in this country trying to grow Chinese herbs. The whole concept is about fifteen years old. I'm also part of an alternative agriculture working group seeking to develop Chinese herbs as alternative crops to tobacco in this area. I grow the plants and have the propagating material. We have way more buyers than we have growers. So we're looking to set up about ten test plots around the western part of the state.

At the same time, I have this project going with oriental perennial vegetables and native wild foods. I'm really interested in perennial food plants. You don't have to disturb the ground every year. I've been growing some of these perennials for twenty-five years and nobody ever asked for any of it from me. Suddenly, I am getting a lot of interest in these things, which is great.

I'm going to set out little areas of the garden for things like Indian cucumber root, which is a delicious little tidbit, but usually too small to be economically practical. So I'll just work with it.

There's another one called Giant Solomon's Seal. There's a half dozen native food plants that I'm experimenting with cultivating in a way that does not disturb the ecosystem, such as the local wild food plant called ramp.

### **What is the economy of Mountain Gardens?**

If I can make money by figuring out how to grow these wild food plants and perennial vegetables in a more intensive fashion, that'd be more productive. I still don't produce nearly all the food that I need to feed everyone who works here. As it is, I live on under \$8,000 a year. I stay below the poverty line. I really do spend all my money on my garden.

### **What is the range of things that are currently for sale?**

Primarily plants. And also seeds and tinctures. A lot of those are made from things that are harvested off the land. Hopefully there will be more in the future—with more people, more can be harvested off the land and turned into a value-added product. I'm not into selling produce; I'm into selling value-added products. My money comes increasingly from teaching, selling to restaurants, and also from prescriptions down at the herb shop as well.

**Another thing about the philosophy that you have is a belief in a democratic principle, that paradise gardening is something that should be available to all people. Can you talk a bit more about that principle?**

“Democratic” to me means making a positive value of living within our share of resources. As

long as you have an unequal distribution of wealth, you will have war, people trying to dominate other people. So it's a matter of setting up an entirely different value system. And that's where this dichotomy comes in of living on earth versus living in civilization.

A conclusion I reached in the course of my reading is that consumption is basically communication. Once you get beyond basic human needs, we are consuming to basically make a statement about who we are by where we live, what we wear, where we go on vacation, what we do for entertainment. That's not part of being human, that's part of being civilized. If you get back to being human, you have a lot of hunter-gatherers who absolutely wanted to have the minimum amount of stuff because they had to carry it around with them. There is a value system in having as few possessions as possible, to know how to make your living from where you are, throwing together a shelter or whatever.

**Working in this way seems to require that people come out and visit. How do you outreach to others and promote your ideas?**

I do a lot now through the Internet that I could never do before. And I try to get as many people out here as I can on farm tours. All of this [is done] up to a point, because if I really was successful at [doing outreach and promoting], I'd never get anything done. There's no doubt a fine line with it.

I read an essay a long time ago that influenced me a lot: "An evening with M. Teste" by Paul Valery. The gist of it is that by virtue of the fact that somebody is known, or makes themselves



known to you, they are that much less than this theoretically perfect genius you never heard of. There are these theoretically perfect geniuses out there, whom you've never heard of, because they are so theoretically perfect and self-contained that they don't do any outreach whatsoever. And they're almost invisible. That idea always stuck with me.

I could just do 100 percent my paradise garden, and it would be better than it is. On the other hand, the whole point for me is the outreach, to try to influence people. There is always that back-and-forth.

**Where would you like to see Mountain Gardens in five years?**

The fact is, I've got too many irons in the fire. My eyes are bigger than my stomach. I feel like they're all good, interesting projects, and there should be people out there interested in doing them. I've got the beginnings here, and I'm just looking for people who want to take it up and really see where they can go with it.