

Pineywoods Revival

A group of Alabamians is betting the farm on a scrappy, sustainable breed of cattle descended from livestock brought by Spanish explorers

By Jennifer Stewart Kornegay



THE USE OF “ALABAMA” AND “BACKWARDS” IN THE SAME sentence is usually a bad thing. But the folks at Bois d’Arc (BDA) farm just outside of Marion, Alabama—in the state’s Black Belt region—are flipping the script on the connotation. They’re purposely turning the clock back by growing heirloom crops and augmenting the farm’s grass-fed cattle operation with a herd of Pineywoods, returning this heritage breed to part of its historic range. These rare little cows are a big piece of BDA’s plan to prove that sustainable, regenerative farming is not just possible—it can be profitable too.

“I think the Pineywoods are pretty, with their smaller frames, curved horns, and so many coat color variations: red, black, white, brown, both solid and spotted,” says Martha Skelley, livestock manager at the farm and one of two herdsman who work with the Pineywoods. She’s sitting in the driver’s seat of a UTV parked in one of the farm’s pastures while explaining grazing techniques.

Tall broom grass is sweeping the tree line at the pasture’s edge. Shorter species like millet and several others fill in the gaps, creating a variegated carpet of pea green, sand, and gold. “It’s important to have that diversity for the health of the cows and the land itself,” Skelley says, squinting and pointing to a stubby specimen she can’t name. “I don’t know them all ‘cause I’m still new to this area.”

She recently came to BDA after five years working with cattle out West, but she grew up in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley and studied sustainable agriculture at a college outside Asheville, North Carolina. “I always wanted to come back South, so this was a perfect fit,” she says. And she’s excited to be working with Pineywoods. “Hey, girl. We being too loud for you?” She’s chatting up a curious ruddy brown dam who’s moseyed over to the UTV to investigate it with a long sniff. “As a breed, they can be a bit wild. That’s partly genetic, but we’ve worked hard to tame this herd,” Skelley says. “And they’re such survivors.”

Older Than Dirt

Pineywoods are an endangered heritage breed and one of only two landrace cattle breeds in the United States. The designation means that an animal not native to a specific environment has been there a long time and has adapted to thrive in it. In the case of Pineywoods, “long” is more than 500 years; the descendants of Pineywoods cattle came to North America with Spanish explorers in the 1500s and were the first cattle introduced to the New World. For hundreds of years after, these bovines lived wild. Some of the herds brought and left

Photography by Kim Box

here by explorers roamed west toward Texas. Others stayed in the southern reaches of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida, where they naturally evolved in harmony with the thick forests and dense brush of their surroundings.

They were domesticated in the early 1800s and seen as an all-purpose cow, used to pull wagons and do other labor. They were also milked and were slaughtered for meat. “Back then, that versatility was a large part of their appeal,” says chef Scott Peacock, who’s helping BDA promote its Pineywoods herd. He remembers a few around when he was a kid growing up in Hartford, near Dothan, Alabama.

Though Pineywoods were once ubiquitous—in the Black Belt, they were so prevalent, ranches with 2,000 head were common—breed numbers started to dwindle by the late 1800s as they were steadily replaced with “improved” English and European breeds. Today, there are fewer than 2,000 registered Pineywoods cattle in the whole country. Though only two-thirds of the BDA herd is officially registered, 120 Pineywoods currently reside on the farm.

Peacock got involved at the request of BDA owner Hunter Lewis, the co-founder of a global investment firm, author of multiple books on economics, and the US president of the Alliance for Natural Health, an organization committed to sustainable living. While his family has roots in the Deep South (which kindled an interest in the area), Lewis lives in Virginia. Even from afar, he’s involved in the farm, but he entrusts the day-to-day operations to Skelley and others, with a few duties falling to Peacock, who stresses he’s no cattle farmer. “I’m a consultant, kind of like the cows’ agent,” he says.

Pastures Past

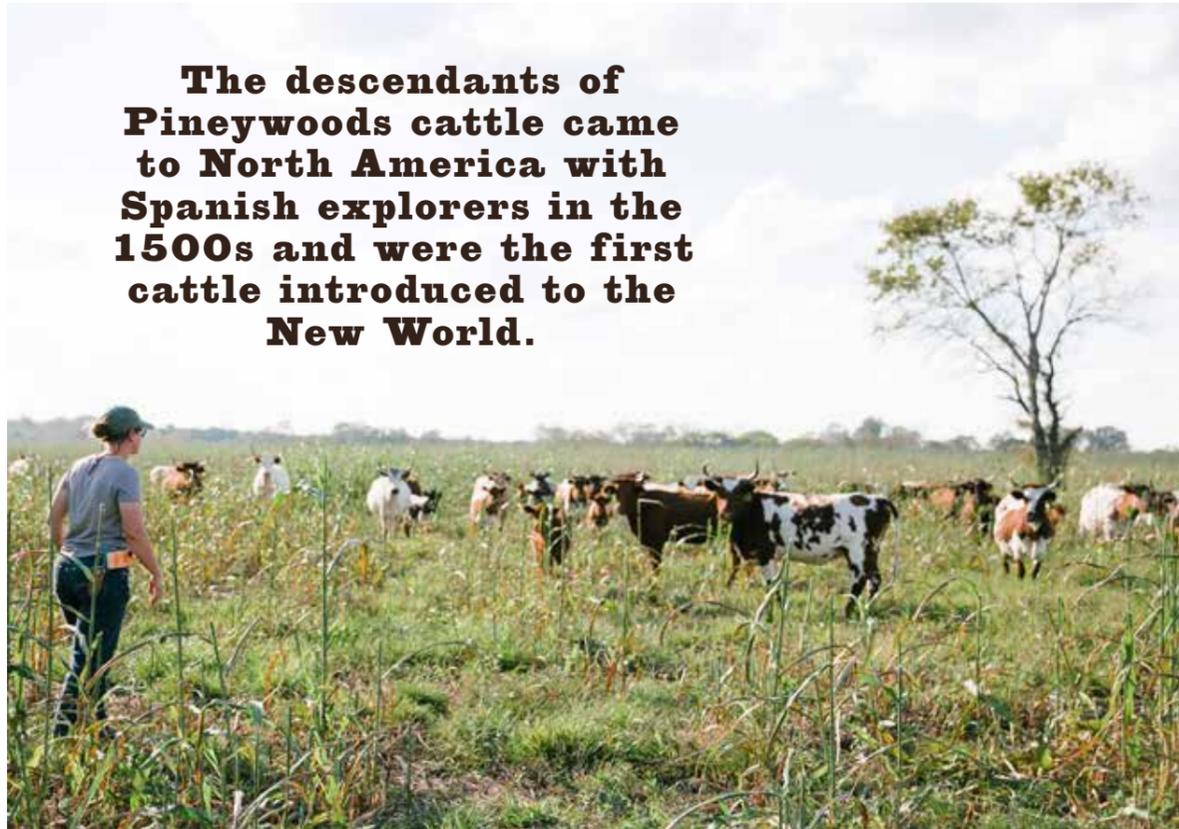
Peacock first came to the Black Belt in 2008 to collect oral histories from some of its oldest residents, to plumb their deep memories in

search of forgotten Southern dishes and culinary traditions teetering on the edge of erasure. Shortly after he bought his house in Marion in 2010, he heard about Lewis and how he had bought one of the town’s most grand homes, a gleaming white Greek Revival called Reverie, built shortly before the Civil War. Peacock didn’t yet know who Lewis was but saw a shared interest in historic preservation. “As soon as we met, we became friends,” Peacock says.

and Mississippi, vast stretches of farmable land not subjected to as many chemicals still exist.

This combo of factors made the Black Belt the perfect spot for Lewis’ plans—but that’s not the only reason. The rural scene from the windows of Peacock’s van, complete with leaning, weathered-grey fence posts and hovering buzzards, prompts a heavy sigh. “The Black Belt is so beautiful; parts of it are almost

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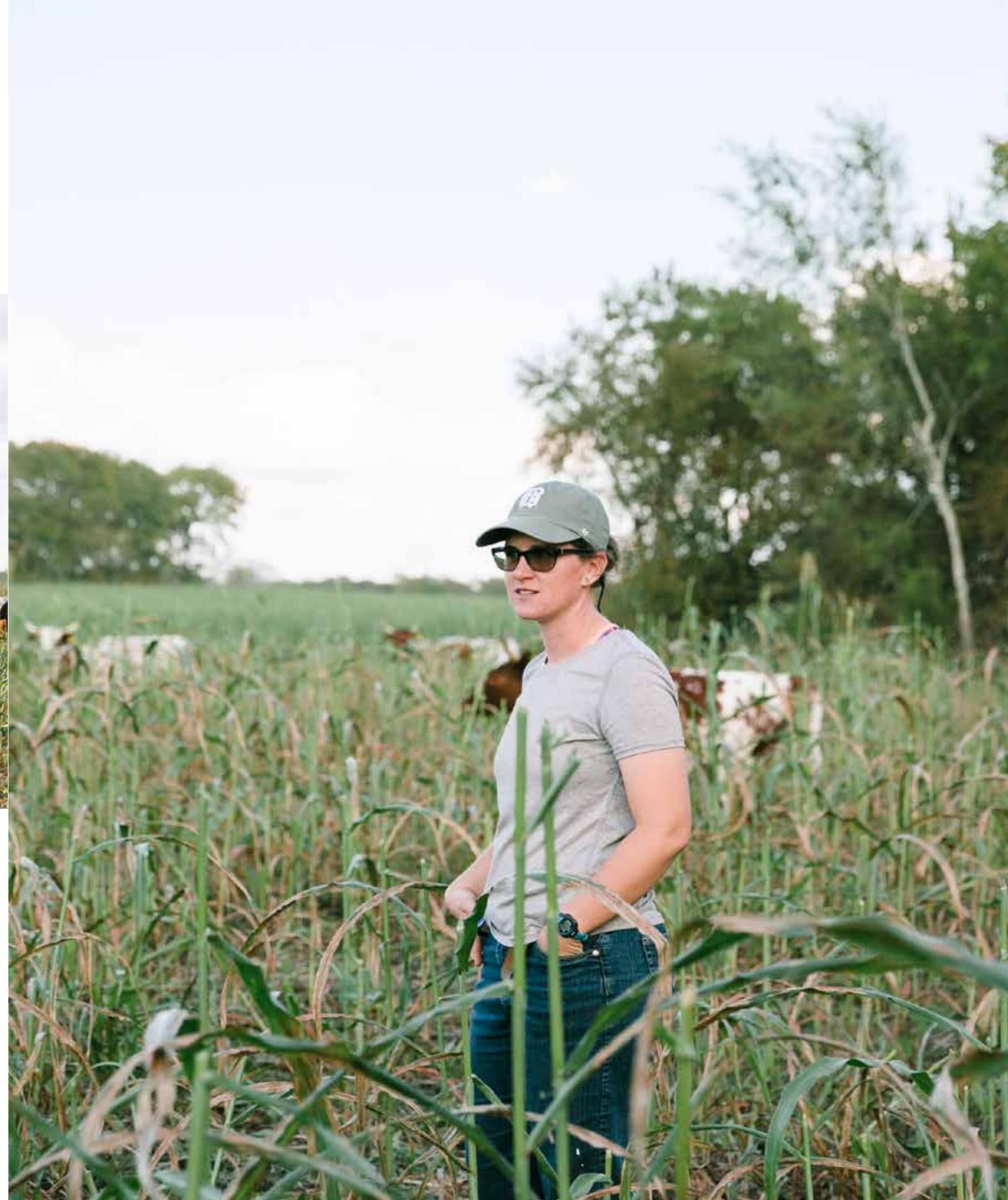


Lewis’ preservation philosophy extends beyond structures and into the ground itself; he was looking for a place to create a large-scale organic farm that would protect and replenish its land and, by being successful, encourage others to do the same. The rich, dark dirt of the Black Belt caught his eye, but its former place of prominence in America’s agricultural heritage held equal significance. “The area was once the number-one spot for farming in this country, but for a long time, that title has been held by the Midwest,” Lewis says. But in the Midwest, many conventional farms, reliant on pesticides and herbicides, have sullied a large number of its acres. In Alabama

painfully beautiful,” he says. And parts of it are simply painful. Holding some of the state’s poorest counties within its borders, the region is one many see as left behind, not on the leading edge. The work BDA is doing could help reshape both the region’s image and reality.

“We’re on the main tract now,” Peacock says, turning onto farm’s dirt road, pointing to a lone Pineywoods cow lounging in the distance. “So pretty, right? Hunter has 6,000 acres here,” he says. “He wasn’t exactly sure what all he wanted to do with it at first, but

Pineywoods cattle boast coats of many colors. **Opposite:** Martha Skelley, livestock manager at BDA Farm.



“These cattle give us that glimpse back in time; they’re returning a lost Southern flavor. That’s meaningful.”



a friend who’d help save a Northern heritage breed of cattle told him how the Pineywoods breed was in peril and their relationship to this area.” Lewis began assembling his herd of Pineywoods and asked Peacock to help.

Reclaimed Flavor

Peacock’s primary role is chief storyteller. He’s telling anyone who’ll listen about Pineywoods cattle—but currently, mostly chefs and restaurateurs. It’s a classic underdog narrative. “They’re pretty to look at, but that’s not what the modern commercial cattle industry cares about,” he says. “Even grass-fed organic beef is so geared toward a quicker yield and uniformity, because that is what the consumer wants. Pineywoods have some things going against them in those terms.” They’re lean,

The entrance to BDA Farm. **Opposite:** Thanks to their curved horns, Pineywoods cattle are sometimes confused with longhorns, but their horns are shorter, as are the cows themselves.

although according to Peacock, they’re “not as lean as some people think, and even in a grass-fed system there are ways to improve on that.” They’re slow growing and never get as large as more common and popular breeds.

But they’re hardy. And that scrappy resilience has earned the admiration of many, including Skelley. “They’re so adaptable and low maintenance, making them low-impact on the environment,” she says. “They’re extremely heat tolerant, very fertile, they’ll forage and graze on almost anything, and they’re very resistant to disease.”

Peacock is sold on Pineywoods. “I believe in these cows,” he says. Thanks to decades as a chef (in the Georgia governor’s mansion and at Atlanta restaurants that earned him a James Beard award) and a cookbook penned with Edna Lewis, he’s got the necessary culinary connections, and his opinions carry weight. “I’m fortunate because I know the chefs who care about these things,” he says. He recently

What’s In a Name?

Bois d’Arc Farm (pronounced *bodock*) is often referred to as BDA Farm. But even if the full name is not commonly used, it’s worth knowing what it means. The literal translation from French to English is “wood of the bow,” and it refers to the Osage Orange tree.

Thanks to the tree’s extremely strong, hard wood, it became the material of choice for Native Americans when making bows and later, for settlers building fences. BDA owner Hunter Lewis chose the name because the property is packed with Osage Orange trees. Folks in the area (and other parts of Alabama) may know the tree better by another name, Mock Orange.

got Sean Brock's attention. "He knew about Pineywoods but didn't have a lot of experience with them, so I went up to Nashville and took him some meat." Peacock says. "He loved it." Yet most have required some persuasion. "Even with friends in the industry, it's taking time to get them to listen," Peacock says.

Add the complexity of USDA processing and bringing Pineywoods beef from pasture to table is fraught with hurdles. But when it does make it to a plate, on a fork, and into a mouth, all the issues fade into the background. Peacock witnessed this a few years ago. "When I first got involved, I took a half carcass, literally with a tarp and a bunch of ice in the back of my van, to an industry friend in Atlanta who had a hanging room," Peacock says. The meat hung and aged for six weeks, and then an artisanal butcher broke it down by hand. "He did all these cuts a standard butcher would never do, went into hip sockets and found steaks," Peacock says. "Then we had a tasting. It just blew us all away. The flavors there were things I'd not encountered in modern beef, a bit floral with some minerality."

Peacock admits until that point, he'd been thinking Pineywoods were probably suited to really delicious ground beef. "And that's not a slight. I love hamburgers," he says. "But at that tasting, we all realized there is much more potential here." The experience also showed that the right amount of aging and the proper techniques in the kitchen are key to get the best from Pineywoods beef.

But with the aforementioned challenges, the team at BDA knows Pineywoods beef is not going to end up on grocery store shelves any time soon.

Cattle Country

Time was, cotton was king in Alabama agriculture. But today, it ranks behind cattle, which comes in as the state's second-largest commodity. Agriculture of all kinds remains important in Alabama; the land is still an essential component of the economy, culture, and the collective emotional landscape. It's why Skelley believes even though BDA is bucking the current farming system, it will find at least

some of its niche customers right at home. "The folks in Alabama are already embracing the land-to-food connection; that market is here," she says. "This is an ag state. Land means something here. It always has."

Peacock echoes Skelley. "These cows are such a full expression of this land, and yes, with so many variables, it has been and will



be hard work to get people initially interested. But it's worth it for the taste alone," he says. There's also the preservation aspect, which has captured Peacock's heart. "I'm so interested in what a beef recipe from one hundred or two hundred years ago tasted like," he says. "These cattle give us that glimpse back in time; they're returning a lost Southern flavor. That's meaningful."

The cows—and the way BDA is raising them—are returning vitality to the land too. "The herd is of this place. Even though these exact cows have only been here since 2012, it is good for them and they are good for it," Skelley says. "It's compelling, their ties to

this land."

Their link to the land promises benefits for other breeds and for the farm's sustainability as well. "Because they're adapted to here, we can cross them with other cattle to increase those breeds' desirable traits, like heat tolerance, that make them easier to raise here," Skelley says.

BDA's Pineywoods cattle are straddling the past and present and, Lewis hopes, painting an appealing picture for the future. "We want to demonstrate that farming heritage breeds and doing it this way can be highly profitable in this area so others will adopt these methods," he says. Skelley agrees. "We're showing how to do it and why it matters, and we're already seeing some more traditional farms around the region moving in this direction."

Pasture to Plate

BDA is still small scale in terms of its Pineywoods production, only harvesting a few animals at a time, but five years from now, both Skelley and Peacock believe that will have changed. They see Pineywoods meat on menus, earning praise and driving demand, with consumers ordering direct from BDA and maybe buying it at some specialty stores. "It is a Rubik's Cube with a lot of steps and many unknowns when it comes to who's going to buy it," Peacock says. "But that's what I'm doing, identifying the chefs and restaurant groups who want it and who can take a whole animal—that's the only way this

really works. They'll introduce it to the public and educate them on using it." To that end, he's looking at hosting some events in Reverie's newly updated kitchen to whet appetites. Lewis says the farm is also exploring the herd's milk.

Skelley is focused on raising a quality animal, using practices good for the cattle and the earth. She likes to imagine the ideas behind these efforts add another note to be savored. "I'd like to think people who eat this product can taste our respect for the animal, the land stewardship that went into raising it, and sense the breed's half-century of history here," she says. That's a mouthful to be sure, but quite a powerful bite.



At BDA Farm, cultivated organic crops like rosemary (opposite) share the soil with native Osage Orange trees for which the farm is named.