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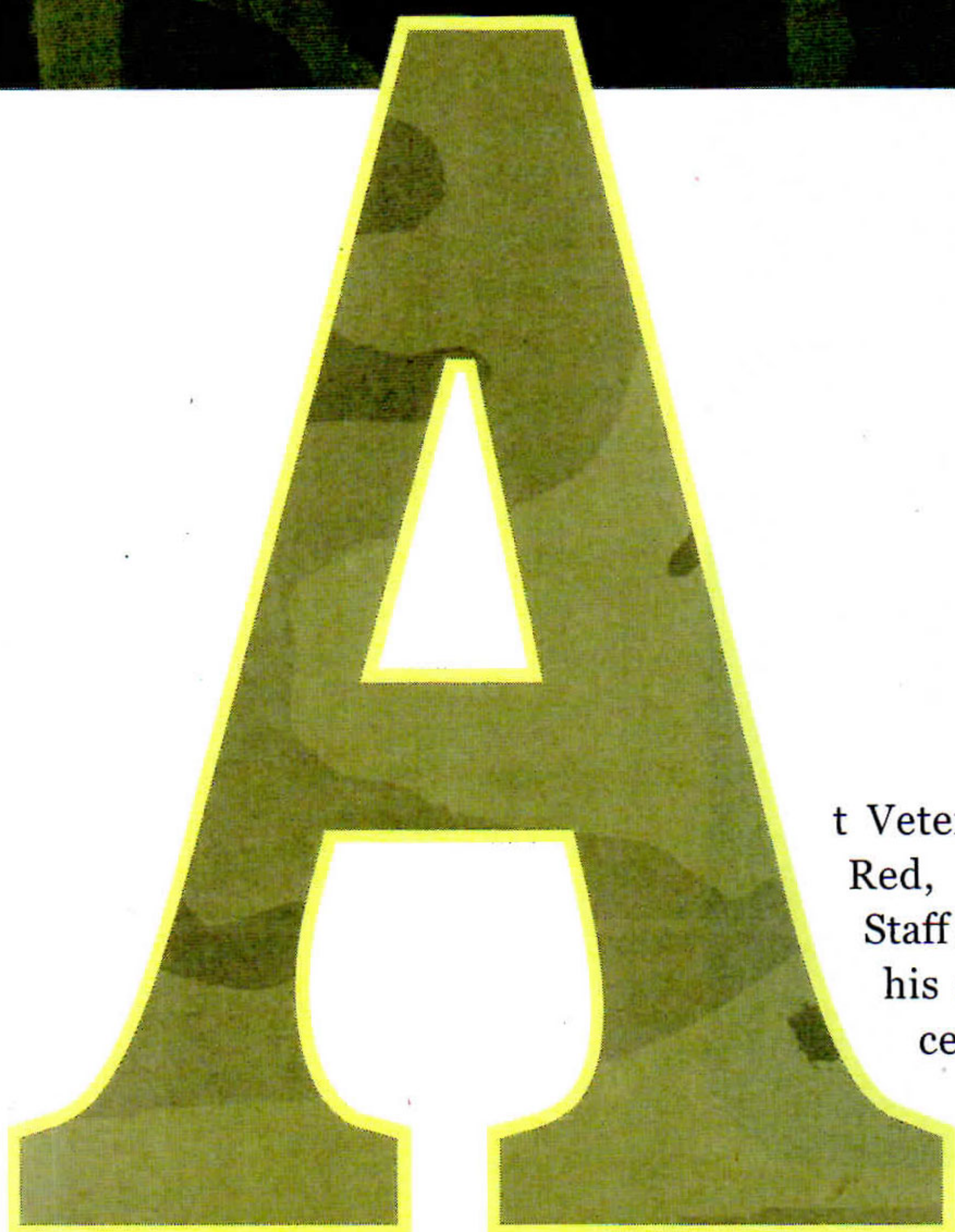
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## Home from foreign wars, soldiers find work in agricultural pursuits.



At Veterans Farm: Home of the Red, White and Blueberries, Staff Sgt. Adam Burke draws on his skills as a soldier to succeed as a farmer, taking a tactical approach to growing blueberries and raising chickens and bees. He studies weather

patterns, repairs equipment and monitors crops on the 13-acre farm in Jacksonville, Fla., keeping meticulous records of his work. The long hours and blazing sun remind him of previous deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I'm a mission-driven person," explains Burke, a Purple Heart recipient who served with the U.S. Army from 1995 to 2004. "In the military, my mission was protecting our freedom; now, my mission is providing fresh food for

disorder and a traumatic brain injury, Burke returned to Florida and took an office job. However, he felt overwhelmed and anxious in the 9-to-5 setting. When his parents offered him a plot of land on their farm, he accepted.

"There is a cliché that says that dirty hands create a clean mind," he says. "Farming gives me something else to think about. Instead of going to bed thinking about war, I started thinking about what needed to be watered in the morning. It helped my mind focus on something other than what I had been through."

Burke is part of a growing movement: veterans who are trading rope climbing, weapons training and overseas deployment for a different kind of boot camp. Armed with shovels instead of machine guns, former members of

*After Jeremiah Butler (opposite page) was discharged from the service in 2011, he started an organic farm in Connecticut, with aid from The Bob Woodruff Farming Fellowship, which he received from the Farmer Veteran Coalition.*

## FROM BATTLEFIELDS



our country." It's a mission Burke never expected to undertake.

Growing up on a farm in Florida, Burke saw the military as a way to escape farming and rural living. He joined the Army when he graduated from high school and vowed he'd never return to his agricultural roots. "I wanted a different life," he recalls.

All of that changed in 2004. Just weeks before Burke was due to return home from Iraq, he was injured when his unit was attacked. Diagnosed with combat-related post-traumatic stress

the Marine Corps, Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard are in new trenches, learning how to plant, irrigate and harvest.

"This country was built on the backs of farmers and soldiers," says Chandler Goule, vice president of government relations for the National Farmers Union. "Training soldiers to become farmers can help rebuild rural America and provide meaningful jobs for our veterans."

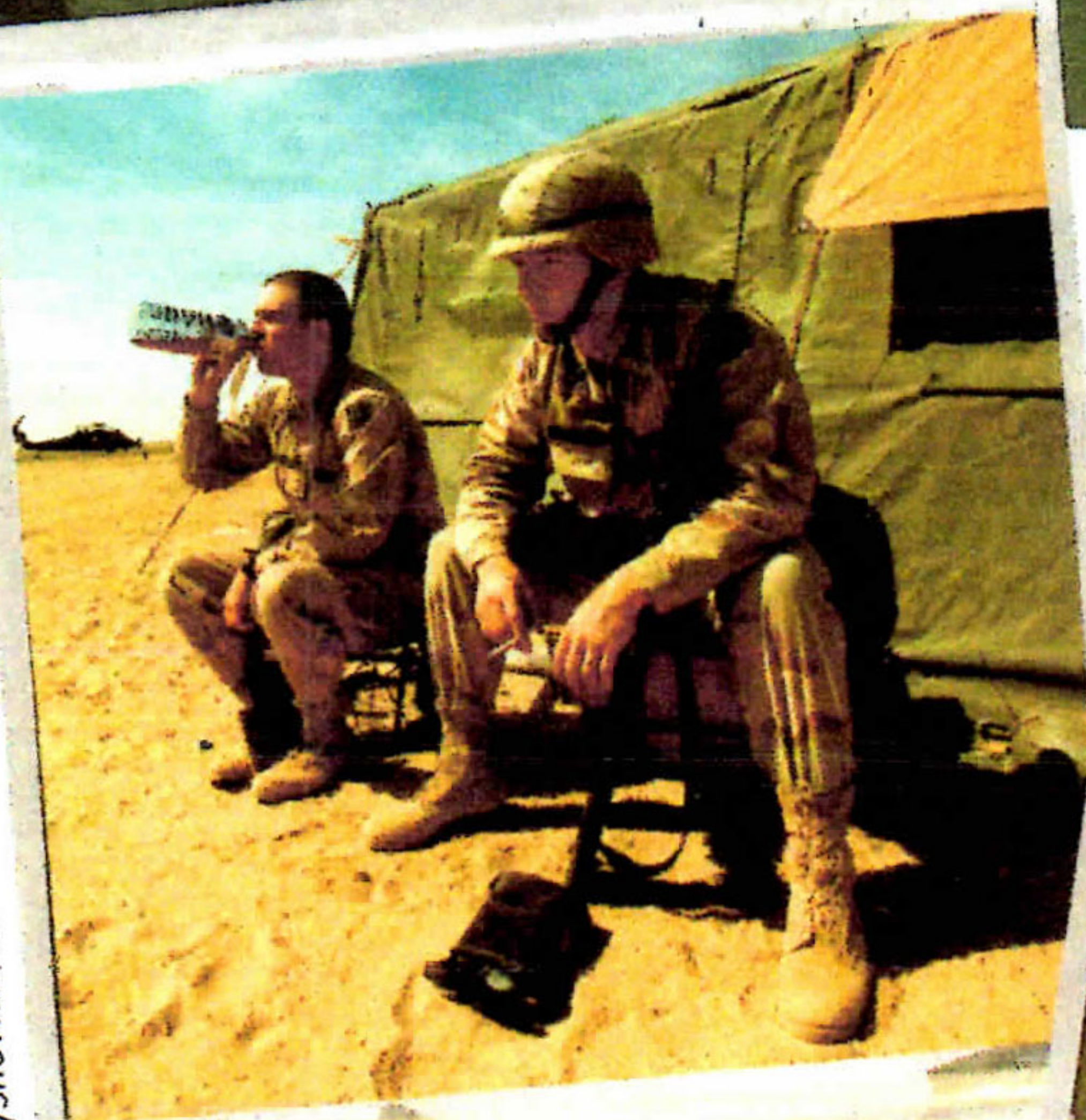
It's not just military veterans who come from rural areas and want to





TO CORNFIELDS





Some former American soldiers are finding opportunities and new ways of living.



They are now fighting potato bugs, instead of wars in Iraq (left) and Afghanistan (above).

return home after their service who are pursuing farming. In fact, the bulk of the calls received by the Farmer Veteran Coalition, a nonprofit organization that provides resources and mentoring to help veterans transition into farming, is from soldiers who live in urban or suburban areas and have no farming background.

Michael O'Gorman, founder of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, links the soldiers' interest to the sustainable, urban-agriculture trend. But there is another reason they're eager to transition into farming: "Veterans view farming as an opportunity to have employment on their own terms," O'Gorman explains. Since its inception in 2008, more than 300 veterans have used the program's services.

## GROWING A NEW GENERATION

Programs like the Farmer Veteran Coalition and Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots, a two-year program introduced by the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in 2010, offer basic agricultural education as well as mentorships with already-established farmers and ranchers.

Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots also offers to help veterans obtain low-interest loans to purchase equipment and livestock. In partnership with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, the program also helps create succession plans between new and retiring farmers, administering tax credits to encourage established farmers and ranchers to rent land, equipment and livestock to newcomers.

Even the U.S. Department of Agriculture, through its Office of Advocacy and Outreach, is working to create programs to help veterans transition into agricultural jobs.

"The military teaches discipline and hard work, skills that are essential on the farm," explains Weldon Sleight, Ph.D., dean of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture. "We expand on the skills [that soldiers] learned during their service and teach them how to apply them to agriculture."





Nonprofit organizations, colleges and government agencies hope that programs encouraging soldiers to trade their tanks for tractors will help combat high unemployment rates. Compared with the national average of 8.7 percent, unemployment rates for Gulf-War-II-era veterans topped 12.1 percent in 2011, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Soldiers may also be the solution to solving the agricultural crisis: With the number of farmers dwindling — two farmers retire for every one entering the field, according to the National Farmers Union — military veterans are being tapped to help save American farms. “Veterans have the opportunity to revitalize the agricultural field,” O’Gorman says.

## WORK THAT MATTERS

Although Karen Archipley knew organic farming was a growing trend, she wasn’t thinking about the future of agriculture when she convinced her husband, Colin, to trade his tank for a tractor, proposing they turn their 5-acre plot near San Diego, Calif., into a farm. “Starting the farm meant Colin wouldn’t go back to war, and I was willing to do whatever it took to make that happen,” she explains. Between 2000 and 2006, Sgt. Colin Archipley had completed three tours in Iraq and was considering reenlisting in the Marine Corps. To Karen’s relief, he agreed to trade in his fatigues to start a farm.

By 2007, the couple had launched Archi’s Acres, growing basil, avocados, lemons, kale, chard and heirloom tomatoes for local farmers markets and the nearby Whole Foods Market.

“In the military, you have to understand the environment and how it impacts your operations,” Colin says. “It’s the same in farming. The work is hard, and the days are long. But in farming, just like the military, the work matters.”

Finding work that matters also led former U.S. Army combat engineer Justen Garrity to pursue a career as an agricultural entrepreneur.

Although he didn’t grow up in a farming family, Garrity knew his best choice for employment after he left the military was a “green” career. “I can’t imagine sitting in a cubicle, crunching numbers,” Garrity says. “I wanted to work with my hands to produce

something and do a job that had a mission and a purpose.”

After serving in the Army from 2004 to 2010, an entrepreneurial spirit led Garrity to research businesses ranging from solar energy to recycling. He decided to start a commercial composting business in Aberdeen, Md., because it provided an opportunity to have an environmental impact and serve a niche market.

Garrity started Veteran Compost in 2010. He collects food waste from restaurants, schools, hospitals and supermarkets and turns it into compost that he sells to gardeners and urban farmers. As the only licensed food-waste compost facility in the state, the business collects 3 tons of food waste per day and creates approximately 100 yards of compost per month, creating enough work to hire four other military veterans.

“There are so many intangibles you learn in the military — discipline, leadership, motivation — that are important on the job,” he says. “I wanted to get [other veterans] dirty and teach them a trade.”

## SEEKING SUPPORT

A growing number of nonprofit organizations, colleges and government agencies are helping soldiers become farmers. To get more information, check out these sites:

**Archi’s Acres:** [www.archisacres.com](http://www.archisacres.com)

**Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture:** <http://liferaydemo.unl.edu/web/ncta/combatcowboyboots>

**Farmer Veteran Coalition:** [www.farmvetco.org](http://www.farmvetco.org)

**Veterans Farm:** [www.veteransfarm.com](http://www.veteransfarm.com)

**Veterans to Farmers:** [www.veterantofarmer.org](http://www.veterantofarmer.org)

*Farming and the U.S. military partnership go back a long time. This Victory Garden poster urged Americans in rural and urban areas to help feed the country during World War I.*



FRANCES ROBERTS/ALAMY





*Former Army Staff Sgt. Adam Burke holds a handful of datil peppers and is surrounded by his veteran crew (from left to right: former Marine Shaun Valdivia; Burke; former Marine Brent Borders; and Patrick Sanders of the U.S. Navy). All have served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and have been wounded in combat. "Wounded but not broken," they continue to serve a new mission back at home.*

Burke has also recruited former soldiers to help him in the field, turning Veterans Farm into fertile training grounds for a new generation of farmers.

At Archi's Acres, as production and sales increased, so did the Archipleys' passion for helping veterans transition into agricultural careers. Having developed partnerships with other growers, retailers and corporations, the couple hopes to turn their small farm into a thriving national organization that provides fresh food and a fresh start for soldiers transitioning out of military careers.

To date, the Archipleys have helped some 50 veterans move from the military to farming. In September 2010, a private investor agreed to provide capital to help Archi's Acres expand its operations. The funds will allow the Archipleys to start farms in Washington, D.C.; Boston, Ma.; and San Francisco, Los Angeles and Irvine, Calif.

## INVESTING IN AGRICULTURE

Unfortunately, a passion for farming and skills that transfer from the battlefield to the cornfield are not enough to guarantee success. All new farmers face another critical barrier when it comes to starting a farm: capital. According to Sleight, it can cost upward of \$1 million to launch a successful farm.

"A lot of the soldiers who come through our programs want to own farms and ranches, but they think it's out of their reach," Sleight says.

## SHOP FOR CHANGE

The Rodale Institute partnered with Nature's Path Organic, Brad's Raw Food, EcoTulips and other suppliers to launch Your 2 Cents.



Through the program, suppliers donate 2 cents from every case of product sold to sustainable farming initiatives, including scholarships to students studying organic agriculture.

Rodale Institute partnered with the Farmer Veteran Coalition to provide funding to returning soldiers who want to begin farming or access agricultural education to work on sustainable farms. For more information, go to [www.rodaleinstitute.org/your2cents](http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/your2cents).

In fact, the International Farm Transition Network at Iowa State University, a program designed to foster the next generation of farmers and ranchers, cites difficulties acquiring capital investments and identifying farming opportunities as barriers to entering the field.

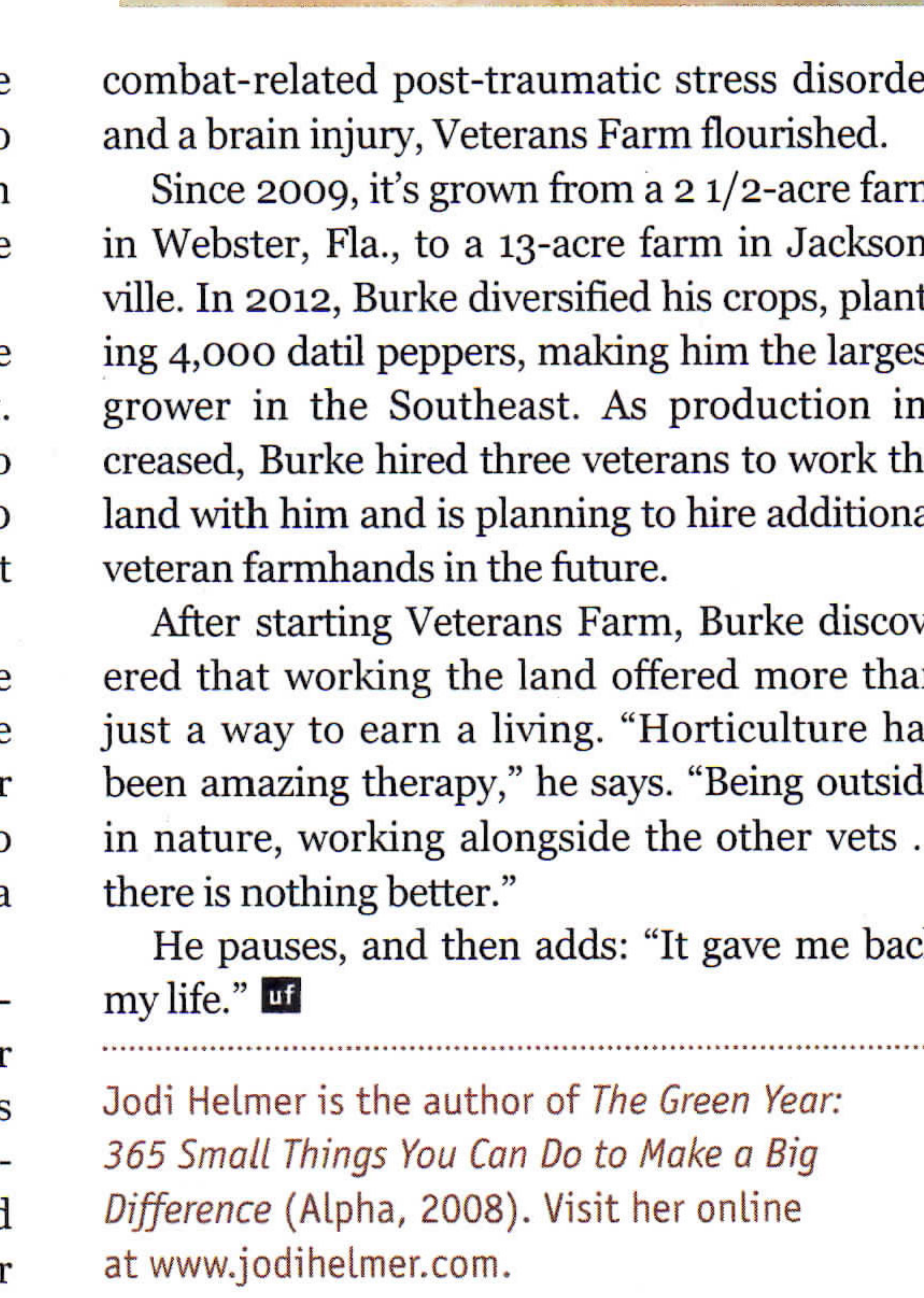
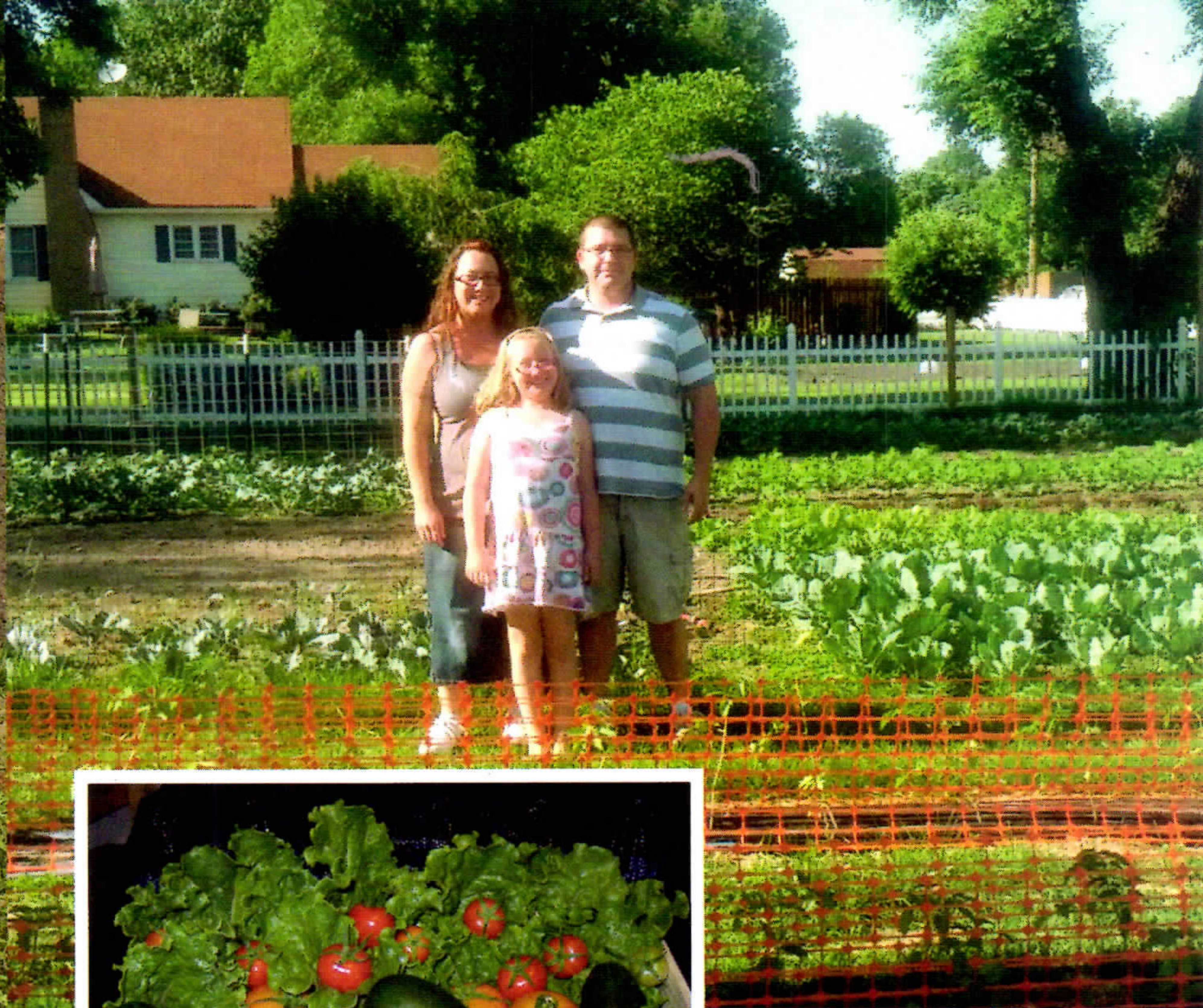
Starting a CSA [community-supported agriculture program] on his 1/2-acre property in Wood River, Ill., allowed Brian Holmes to go from a senior airman in the Air Force to an urban farmer in 2011. As the founder of Foxes Boxes, Holmes grows produce that includes green beans, spinach, cauliflower, sage, okra and cilantro in his backyard and distributes it through a CSA.

"There are a lot of farms around us growing GMO [genetically modified organism] corn and soybeans but nothing we can eat," he explains. "I think it's absurd to go to Walmart in the middle of the summer to buy produce from Mexico, especially when we live in one of the most fertile farming areas in the country."

A lack of access to fresh foods made Foxes Boxes popular. When the weekly produce delivery service was launched earlier this season, 20 customers signed up, and Holmes started a waiting list. He charges \$10 per week for a standard box and allows customers to add to their product delivery with *à la carte* pricing.

Using small plot intensive (aka, SPIN) farming, Holmes was able to launch his CSA without investing in additional land — a factor that contributed to his decision to start farming.





“We were going to put a pool in the backyard but decided this was a better use of the space,” he says. “In the military, I was used to getting up at dawn and working until it’s dark. It’s a very similar schedule and work ethic to farming so it was a natural fit.”

Providing capital to ease the financial burden on veteran farmers is one of the goals of programs such as Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots and the Farmer Veteran Coalition.

The coalition works with veterans to secure grants and fellowships ranging from \$500 to \$5,000 to purchase livestock fencing, farm equipment, and even chickens and cattle. There is also a strong emphasis on mentoring.

When he started Veterans Farm, Burke leaned on O’Gorman for advice and support. O’Gorman was so moved by his motivation to pursue farming that he wrote a check for \$5,000 from his personal account to help Burke start Veterans Farm.

“For Adam, the farm began long before he owned land or put his first blueberry bush in the ground,” O’Gorman explains. “Putting together the plan for the farm was part of his road to recovery; it helped him heal. We knew he had a solid plan, and we supported it.”

Burke used the seed money to purchase blueberries, pots and soil. Through the Farmer Veteran Coalition, he also secured fellowships and grants to buy additional land and equipment to increase production. While he juggled farm chores with intense rehab sessions for

combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder and a brain injury, Veterans Farm flourished.

Since 2009, it’s grown from a 2 1/2-acre farm in Webster, Fla., to a 13-acre farm in Jacksonville. In 2012, Burke diversified his crops, planting 4,000 datil peppers, making him the largest grower in the Southeast. As production increased, Burke hired three veterans to work the land with him and is planning to hire additional veteran farmhands in the future.

After starting Veterans Farm, Burke discovered that working the land offered more than just a way to earn a living. “Horticulture has been amazing therapy,” he says. “Being outside in nature, working alongside the other vets ... there is nothing better.”

He pauses, and then adds: “It gave me back my life.” **uf**

*After serving in the Army from 2004 to 2010, Justen Garrity (above left) started Veteran Compost, a commercial composting business in Aberdeen, Md.*

*Using small plot intensive farming, aka SPIN farming, on his 1/2-acre property, former Senior Airman Brian Holmes (above right) was able to start Foxes Boxes, a community-supported agriculture program in Wood River, Ill., without investing in more land.*

Jodi Helmer is the author of *The Green Year: 365 Small Things You Can Do to Make a Big Difference* (Alpha, 2008). Visit her online at [www.jodihelmer.com](http://www.jodihelmer.com).