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Dec. 26, 2012

When Joseph Fields deployed to Iraq for the third time with the Kentucky Army National Guard in 2008, he and his wife, Heather, had big plans for their recently purchased 7-acre farm just outside Berea.

Growing up in Barbourville on a small "hobby farm," Joseph, now 35, knew something about growing vegetables, about beekeeping, about what it would take to get the enterprise off the ground while he worked an outside job in corrections or security.

What the Fieldses didn't plan on was a career-ending back injury that kept Joseph from working for months after he came back to Kentucky in February 2009. That created a serious financial setback.

"It's taken us 41/2 years to get to where it is now," Heather Fields said of the farm. They have focused on organic farming, with game chickens, hair sheep and miniature donkeys to guard them from coyotes.

Last year, she and Joseph decided to sell flower baskets at the Berea farmers market. But they had to wait until it warmed up to plant their impatiens and petunias; the baskets weren't ready until later in the season, long after people start looking for something to spruce up the porch.

Next year, things will be different. The Fieldses' farm will be the pilot project designed to nurture veterans with an interest in farming.

The program, Growing Warriors — headed by Michael Lewis and Mark Walden with

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Those veterans already are asking how they can break into small-scale farming and get their fruits and vegetables to market, Lewis said.

Joseph and Heather Fields also are looking ahead to planting “you-pick” fruits and vegetables for the summer and putting up a roadside stand along a busy commuter route.

“We can’t compete with growers in Mexico, but we can get it to people a lot cheaper and put something back into the local economy,” Joseph Fields said.

Resonating with veterans

That is something the burgeoning veteran farmer movement is keen on nationally. This is a population big on self-reliance.

Where they need help is with understanding how to run a small business.

“The business component is the most scary part,” Joseph Fields said. “I’ve always worked for the state and federal government.”

Lewis and other farmer vets from around the country have worked to get USDA recognition of disabled veterans as a “socially disadvantaged group” so they can qualify for micro loans at better interest rates.

Now a whole support system, including educational components on farm-business planning from the University of Kentucky, is starting to come together.

“Our goal is to make sure they are successful,” Lewis said. “Seven or eight years ago, I thought, ‘I’m going to be a farmer,’ and I’ve learned so many things in the last few years that I never saw coming.”

Efforts to improve local economies and give families sustainable food options also

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rural roots. If we can harness that power, ... I think that will be just unstoppable.”

Walden, of Growing Warriors, said veterans can't turn off that “service” impulse.

“I'm not a veteran, but in my experience they tend to ask, ‘What can we do to help you out?’” he said.

And for many of them, the way to serve country and community these days is not with a gun but with a plow.

“That geopolitical stuff all comes down to our local economy,” Joseph Fields said. “It's all tied together, for me anyway.”

‘People were searching’

Lewis realized that farming might be the answer for a lot of vets. He is working with Michael O’Gorman, founder of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, which began in California in 2009 and now is reaching out to Kentucky and other farming states.

O’Gorman’s roots are in organic farming; he was one of the first to grow for legendary chef Alice Waters, and he ran one of the largest organic vegetable operations in the country. Now his focus is on veterans.

“I never thought it would become the big project that it is,” O’Gorman said. “The more we do, the more we impact. As soon as we posted something online with ‘farmer’ and ‘veteran,’ we began hearing from veterans around the country. People were searching.”

O’Gorman, too, has noticed the correlation between the military and farming.

“I think there’s something really attractive about the sense of service. Feeding people, the need for new farmers, the sense of mission,” he said. “When you come out (of the

military), that's what you miss." Vets are thinking, "Where do I regain that sense of

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Homegrown by Heroes, to put on veteran-grown products. The logo will be unveiled next month.

— Radcliff-based USA Cares, the largest non-profit veterans service organization, will help match vets looking for a niche in agriculture with farms looking for motivated workers.

— Grow Appalachia, funded by philanthropist John Paul DeJoria (of Paul Mitchell hair products fame), is providing seed money.

— Vets themselves are eager to pitch in.

"Every veteran that gets started wants to help others," O'Gorman said.

His group is now in discussions with the state Department of Agriculture on licensing the Homegrown by Heroes logo nationwide to promote veteran-grown products at point of sale.

"I think it's fantastic," O'Gorman said. "It's all about pride — the fact that they can grow something. That's part of the story the veteran wants to tell. ... It's a very visceral attraction, that realness. I think it will help sell it. But that's secondary. Lots of people who see that label will want to say hi, hear their stories."

Those stories often are about saving themselves by saving others.

A new call to service

It's hard to see a tomato as heroic, but soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan say farming has become their new call to service.

And along the way, many are finding a kind of solace in soil.

Michael Lewis learned that firsthand as he watched his brother, Fred-Curtis Lewis,

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two years in Washington, D.C., with the 3rd Infantry Honor Guard, sometimes escorting four flag-draped caskets a day at Arlington National Cemetery. After hundreds of funerals, he said, he needed to put something in the ground besides fellow soldiers.

Farming gave both brothers something back

“Having been around those families and that much despair, at last I have something hopeful,” Michael Lewis said. “I see a lot of hope in agriculture and the peace and clarity it brings.”

To support his family, Fred-Curtis Lewis has returned to Fort Bragg, N.C., teaching his hard-won skills to new Special Forces medics. But he wants to get back to farming full-time.

“In the military, our whole entire life is service — service to our country, to our brothers in arms, to our families,” Fred-Curtis Lewis said. “Take a guy like me: I served 14 years. It was my whole life. I got injured, became a civilian not by choice but because I couldn’t do the job any more. But I didn’t want to do any other job.”

And, Lewis said, it is very hard to find anything in civilian life that fulfills that need to serve.

“You start to farm and you realize it could benefit your family, your community, and that’s extremely rewarding,” Lewis said. “You’re bettering your country.”

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Small Business

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