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Hampshire College Farm Center: Educating the Next Generation

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NEW FARMERS

Hampshire College Farm Center Educating the Next Generation

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"Is the Hampshire College Farm Center a test bed for future farmers?" According to Nancy Hanson, CSA Manager and Leslie Cox, Farm Manager at the Center, the answer is... "Sort of; but not really."

The fall semester at this private college in Amherst, Massachusetts often begins with 45 ambitious student workers, many possessing a rosy outlook on farming as a path toward a wholesome and rewarding lifestyle. When October rolls around and the intensity of the labor becomes apparent, about ten students will remain on the job.

AN ON-FARM REALITY CHECK

And as far as Nancy and Leslie are concerned, that's just fine. This self-selection is part of each student's personal response to the challenges of farm life. "They may only last one day," says Nancy, "but that day deepens their understanding of where lettuce comes from. Their experience on the farm is often their sole opportunity to produce their own food."

She reminisces about an Asian student who helped harvest daikon radishes one season. Dangling a freshly dug root in his hand, a grin of realization crept across his face as he exclaimed, "Hey Nancy! I've been eating these all my life but I never knew how they grew!"

Rather than growing a crop of new farmers, the Hampshire College Farm Center is educating the next generation of wise consumers as well as agricultural entrepreneurs, educators, and policy makers. The Center, which includes a 14-acre Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), provides a small but robust and viable business model. Here, students become conscious of the structure and operations of a New England farm and the lifestyle and workload of the producer.

FOUNDED BY STUDENTS

Against the backdrop of a working farm, the Center serves as a thriving research, education, and outreach facility dedicated to sustainable agriculture. Programs for the college, local community members, and school groups are also offered. Originating in the late seventies as an experimental project of the Natural Science faculty, it was two Hampshire College students who collaborated on the Division III project (final project) which launched the CSA on the land in 1992.

Like many "DivIII," this one took root and became an established aspect of the College. The CSA's winter greens offerings began in a modest hoop house designed for another DivIII project centered on trialing varieties. Funds donated by an alumnus allowed for the structure to expand into a 30' x 96' heated greenhouse. Recently, another student transformed her DivIII project into a cookbook called *Local Delectables: Seasonal Recipes from the Pioneer Valley* (author: Andrea Davis, available at Collective Copies in Amherst).

A host of other impressive innovations have been completed by students over the years. They include: building a cob oven for baking bread; compiling seeds and data for growing heirloom tomatoes; designing a tractor fueled by sunflower oil; building systems for composting food waste from the dining commons; designing an instrument for controlling corn ear-worm; and constructing permaculture and dye gardens.

Nancy reports that only about one student per year chooses farming as a vocation. Rather, students leave the Center with a firm grasp on small-scale farming, farm education, agricultural policy, and the social implications of our food system. Some also go on to own and operate small enterprises like beekeeping or maple sugaring.

Leslie points out that the diversity of student projects truly reflects New England's



Hampshire College student Mirada Cook weeds her 4 season garden in November before enclosing it with plastic.

agricultural history. Lessons learned are reinforced at the annual Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) conference, held on the campus each August. At NOFA, students meet apprentices from other farms and proudly present their personal efforts during tours of the Center.

CONNECTING CURRICULUM AND COMMUNITY

Back in the classroom, Nancy co-teaches a course about agriculture, food and human health with a professor of epidemiology. Part of their students' assignment involves harvesting and delivering 25 shares of CSA produce to Women Infants and Children (WIC), a program designed to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children who are at nutritional risk. Through this interaction, students become acutely aware of an irony-- while the USDA implores citizens to "eat more fruits and vegetables," it subsidizes mostly low nutrition foods. Aiming to bridge this gap, students are inspired to take an active role in advocating for the availability of healthier food for everyone.

Another professor teaches a course called Zymurgy, which examines the technological and biochemical aspects of the brewing

process. An extra-curricular outgrowth of the course was "Friends of Fermentation," a student group dedicated to making and consuming their own fermented products. Palpable signs of their enthusiasm can be found in the form of cheese dripping in the bathtub at the farm house.

FALL-SEASON CSA

The CSA runs from the first week in September until the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Serving those in the 5-College system*, this fall-only operation eliminates competition with other CSAs in the area. Members joining in the summer can also pick their own tomatoes, herbs, and flowers.

Being a fall-only operation requires some creative thinking and organizing. "The trick is to get the plants through the heat of the summer," explains Hanson. To this end, they have adapted their irrigation nozzles to emit a fine spray. The result is extra flavorful vegetables that mature under cool weather conditions.

And while the Center is not officially certified, their vegetable growing practices reflect official organic standards. For instance, compost from the dining hall, ani-

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AGR-Lite

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claim until you file your taxes. So you won't get immediate cash in case of a crop failure like you would with traditional crop insurance. As with traditional programs, you should still report major problems (like when the well runs dry) to your insurance agent within 72 hours and document them when they occur. It's important to have a good working relationship with your insurance agent.

So how can you tell whether or not AGR-Lite is worth looking into? Why not go ahead and dig out those Schedule F's. Has your income been erratic or consistent? If erratic due to fluctuating markets and fickle weather, it's more likely that this program might work for you.

If you like figuring things out for yourself, you can visit our Risk Management for Horticultural Crops website to read more about AGR-Lite. There's also an online tool at the USDA's Risk Management Agency website that can help you calculate AGR-Lite premiums.



AGR-Lite may help reduce direct-marketing risks says Wen-fei Uva (right), farm business expert at Cornell University. Craig Cramer, photographer

You should also talk to a crop insurance agent and attend one of the educational meetings sponsored by the New York State Crop Insurance Education Program, or similar programs in other states. See Resource spotlight sidebar for more information on all of these follow-up steps.

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