



WASHINGTON STATE
UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION



BEGINNING FARMER PROGRAMS AT WSU

BY THE NUMBERS

Cultivating Success™ in
Washington

- 4,485 students.
- Approximately 300 students annually.
- 108 Hmong students.
- 295 Latino students.
- 50 East African students.
- 80 instructors trained.
- More than 150 farmer mentors engaged in course instruction.
- 25 certified farm internship hosts.

Farm Walk Program

- More than 110 innovative sustainable small farms featured since 2004. Average of 45 participants per walk. Participants farmed an average of 115 acres in 2015.

2016

ISSUE

Declining farm numbers and an aging farmer population highlight the urgent need to support new entry farmers in Washington. Almost half of all Washington farmers are over age 60 and less than 5% are younger than age 35 (2012 USDA Census of Agriculture). A significant transfer of farming knowledge, skills, and assets to the next generation will be necessary for Washington agriculture to remain vibrant. However, new and aspiring farmers face myriad challenges, including acquiring production and business knowledge and skills, securing profitable markets, and gaining access to affordable land, water, and equipment. Beginning farmers tend to have limited access to capital and start small in terms of acreage and sales. On the last agricultural census, more than 75% of beginning farmers* operated fewer than 50 acres and had sales under \$10,000. Beginning farmers also were more likely to be women or immigrants than established farmers.

RESPONSE

Increasing consumer demand for local products has created new market opportunities. However, incoming farmers need practical tools to evaluate their resources and develop feasible farm and business plans. Needs assessments with beginning farmers indicate that they prefer peer-to-peer, on-farm, and interactive learning formats. In response, the WSU Small Farms Program has developed a community-based, participatory education program in partnership with county Extension offices and local producers that includes semester-long evening classes, a farm-internship program, advanced short-courses, online resources, and an interactive Farm Walk, on-farm education series.

The collaborative Cultivating Success™ Sustainable Small Farming Education program is designed to educate and mentor entering and transitioning farmers at the community level by engaging successful established farmers as mentors and drawing upon the expertise of university faculty and other agricultural professionals. Over the past decade, semester-long courses have been offered in 24 different Washington counties, online, and in 4 different languages. The main courses offered are (1) Sustainable Small Farming and Ranching, (2) Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Business Planning, and (3) On-Farm Internships.

**A "beginning farmer" is defined by the U.S. government as someone who has been farming for 10 years or less. In 2012, 8,133, or 22%, of Washington farmers fit this description.*



QUOTES

"Sometimes there's success in not going down a road that would have been unsuccessful."

"My business was profitable in its second year. ... Each year my sales have grown."

"I am now looking to upgrade my farm to a larger place and am digging out my old books from the class to revise my farm plan. The resources are timeless."

"Gave me skills, confidence, connections, knowledge."

FUNDING AND PARTNERS

Funding Sources:

- USDA NIFA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, USDA Risk Management Agency, USDA Higher Education Challenge Grants, and USDA Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and Rancher Grants

Partners:

- University of Idaho, Rural Roots, Tilth Producers of Washington, Seattle Tilth, and Viva Farms Incubator

IMPACTS

Beginning farmer programs at WSU have attracted high numbers of participants. During the three-year period from 2013 to 2015, a total of 3,120 participants attended 128 English language and multilingual programs. Evaluations indicated that more than 95% of participants reported an increase in knowledge and more than 90% planned to implement something they had learned through the program in their farming operation. Twenty-three percent of those evaluated said they planned to start a farm, while around 60% of Farm Walk participants, 21% of Sustainable Small Farming and Ranching course participants, and 41% of Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Business Planning course participants already were farming.

End-of-course evaluations indicated that for the Cultivating Success™ Sustainable Small Farming and Ranching course specifically, 98% of student respondents increased their knowledge of available farming resources, and more than 90% improved their understanding of principles of small farm sustainability and sustainable farming practices. For the Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Business Planning course, 100% of respondents said they had improved their knowledge of how to write a business plan and 90% said they had improved their understanding of farm profitability. More than 80% of respondents said they felt more prepared to evaluate their human and financial resources and to assess the feasibility of a small farm or ranch enterprise.

After participating in a short course, 100% of those who responded said their knowledge had increased somewhat or greatly, and 81% said they planned to change a farming practice. More than 96% of Farm Walk participants said their knowledge increased somewhat or greatly. Specifically, after participating in the program, 63% of Farm Walk participants said they would make a marketing change on their farm, 53% said they would make changes to improve labor efficiency, 47% planned to improve their nutrient management practices, and 42% said they would change their pest management practices.

On a 2012 survey of former Cultivating Success™ students who had taken courses at some point during the past 8 years, 28% said they had begun a farm or ranch as a result of participating in the program. More than 56% said they were currently a principal operator of a farm and 9% were working on someone else's farm. Cultivating Success™ graduates offered numerous examples of how taking these courses had helped them avoid costly mistakes and strategically target the most effective market channels.