

A publication of
Growing New Farmers

A northeast service providers consortium
GNF Professional Development Series #214



Program: Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation

Organization: Cornell Cooperative Extension of Allegany/Cattaraugus counties, N.Y.

Dates: November 2001. Repeated February/March 2002 and April 2002

Targeted to: Explorers, Planners and Startups

Needs Addressed

The small, part-time farming segment of the agricultural community is increasing in New York's Allegany and Cattaraugus counties. Many small-farm operators come from non-farm backgrounds. Because they often don't have farm experience, these operators critically need basic, fundamental information on farming and technical assistance to help select a successful enterprise.

Response

The Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation program was started to expose people interested in farming to sound, basic agricultural information and to answer their question: What should my farm produce?

Armed with information, program participants can make educated decisions regarding the type of enterprise best suited to their interests and resources. It will help ensure that Explorers, Planners and Startups can develop successful enterprises.

The information provided in Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation fills each individual's knowledge gap. Some people came with more technical knowledge of agriculture but need business and marketing assistance. Others came from a business background but need practical assistance in production agriculture.

Program Description

Originally program organizers scheduled four classes:

1. Ag 101: An introduction to farming terminology and basic facts for those considering a career in farming

2. Basics of Soil and Plant Fertility
3. Pasture Management and Hay Evaluation
4. Marketing What You Produce

Organizers added a fifth class covering tax information and basic bookkeeping in response to participant interest. Two farmers attended that session to share their experiences with and give advice to startup farmers. As they discussed the development and ongoing operation of their enterprises, the two farmers reinforced information presented throughout the series. This was a positive addition to the program agenda.

Each class session ran two hours and included a formal presentation on the evening's topic, resource materials and hands-on or interactive time to encourage participants to use the information presented during the session. Each family/farm received a notebook binder of educational materials.

The instructor allowed time for participant questions at the end of each class and started the next class with information to support answers to specific questions from the previous week. This satisfied the need for more technical or species-specific information that was not covered in the class because of time constraints.

This format allowed for flexibility in program content. Although a lot of information was presented in each class, participants appreciated the classes' being on schedule.

Because people had conflicts during the fall session and others inquired about the course after it began, part one of the series with all five classes was held in February/March 2002.

In April 2002, Part II of the series was held. It focused on the interests that participants identified in evaluations from the introductory series. Part II is a four-week course, focused on enterprise selection, developing businesses, financial management and marketing plans.

The series of classes were followed by two one-day farm tours, one of a grass-based livestock operation and the other of a horticulture/agro-forestry enterprise. These tours created opportunities for participants and local farmers to exchange ideas and to create a network for future mentoring.

Funding

A Cornell Cooperative Extension Small Farm Task Force grant and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Allegany/Cattaraugus counties supplied funding. A \$20 fee per family/farm was charged.

Partners

Participating farmer, who serve as mentors and share experience with participants, partner in Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation

Outreach

Organizers advertised the program through local media, flyers, direct mail and Cooperative Extension publications.

Analysis

SUCSESSES: Of the eight participants, two were involved in what they described as "hobby operations." One couple was selling standing hay. As an expected outcome, both of the "hobby farmers" looked to expand into farming enterprises: one as a full-time operation for the couple, the other as a second income for the family.

Two of the participants plan to develop a beef cow/calf enterprises; one was undecided as to the enterprise best suited to her resources and interest.

All of the respondents gave positive evaluations of the workshop series and were interested in attending future workshops.

From contact with small-farm operators, they indicate that they support this type of project. They are willing to work with Extension to provide additional programs that support the growth and economic vitality of the small farm as a way to strengthen local communities.

CHALLENGES: The Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation program encountered no challenges.

Next Steps

Upon request, the Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation series was offered a fourth time. Species-specific or crop-specific workshops are offered to meet a continued need for education among the participants.

Additional Resources

The Beginning a Successful Small-Farm Operation series was adopted from a program offered by Terry Poole of Maryland.

For more information, contact Lynn A. O'Brien of Allegany County Cornell Cooperative Extension at 5435A County Road 48, Belmont, NY 14813. Tel: (585) 268-7644, Ext. 18. E-mail: lao3@cornell.edu.

Resource notebooks are available for \$22. They include the newly printed "Farmers Pocket Guide," sponsored by a Small Farm Task Force grant.

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