

# A publication of **Growing New Farmers**

**A northeast service providers consortium**  
GNF Professional Development Series #207



**Program:** Growing Places: Exploring Opportunities & Realities of Owning an Agricultural Business

**Organization:** A collaborative effort of the University of Vermont Extension System, University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture

**Targeted to:** Recruits, Explorers and Planners

**Dates:** 1995 to present

## **Need**

Frequently prospective farmers lack the basic information required to make informed decisions about whether farming can fulfill their career and family needs and goals. This is particularly true for people who did not grow up on farms or around agriculture. They also may not be aware of support programs, regulations and environmental realities that impact farm success.

## **Program Development**

Growing Places is an 18-hour class designed to guide participants through the process of clarifying their goals, developing a decision-making model, finding resources, and determining an appropriate scope and scale for their agricultural businesses.

Growing Places is organized into six sessions, each addressing a different aspect of farm business development. In addition to Women's Agricultural Network (WAgN) staff, experts in particular areas lead the lecture, discussion, and hands-on exercises of each session. Guest speakers and panelists are an important component of the sessions. By sharing their experiences with the group, they offer a much-appreciated realistic perspective.

## **Program Curriculum**

Following are summaries of each of the six sessions:

### **Session I. Mission Statement and Goal Setting**

This introductory session helps participants explore their values, needs, and preferences, looking also at how these relate to a business plan. Students examine how business decisions affect family and others close to them. Determining current levels of satisfaction and hopes for the future is critical to successful business planning.

Once participants have established a set of values, they develop a mission statement, or goal that captures the essence of what they want to have accomplished by

the end of the course. The mission statement plays a critical role by focusing potential farmers on the most important aspects of their businesses.

### **Session II. Decision-Making**

Participants learn a system to help them arrive at the best possible choice for a situation that confronts them. Students learn how to use their mission or goal statement in the decision-making process, and how this process will help them to make important decisions with confidence and with significantly less conflict and stress. This decision-making process is particularly helpful when participants face major decisions, those complicated and consequential choices that result in long-term impact, involve significant risk, increase stress levels and require careful research and exploration.

### **Session III. Resource Evaluation**

Resources are the building blocks of profitable small businesses. Successful small business owners tend to be excellent resource managers, knowing how to combine different products, ensure a higher quality product, add value, and/or change direction quickly. As potential small business owners, participants can be more flexible than owners of large businesses can. Learning how to use this flexibility is the essence of resource management.

In this session, participants define resources, identify those they have, examine their availability and, then, with help from others, identify some potential combinations of businesses that would best use the available resources.

### **Session IV. Financials**

Students receive a basic introduction to financial management, learning the language and concepts of financial management. Time is also spent on discussing the intricacies of borrowing money and credit.

### **Session V. Marketing**

Using their idea for a preferred enterprise, participants explore the market for their product/service. They will answer these questions: Who will buy? How will I sell to these buyers? How much are they likely to purchase? How much are they willing to pay? Who is the competition?

Students also complete a product/service definition, explore market research techniques and develop a personal market research plan.

### **Session VI. Next Steps**

During this last session, students reflect on what they have accomplished and come up with a plan for future action that will move them toward meeting their personal goals. Participants develop a timeline that answers these questions: What would you like to get done? How would you like to do this? When?

Participants also learn more about various agencies and programs available to support agriculture.

### **Funding**

Participants pay a \$75 registration fee. People who require special accommodations or financial assistance to participate in Growing Places are assisted.

## **Partners**

Growing Places is a partnership of United States Department of Agriculture, University of Vermont Extension System, University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Women's Agricultural Network-Maine, Beginner Farmers of New Hampshire, Vermont Women's Business Center.

## **Outreach**

The program sends press releases to local news media and places notices in newsletters sent to past participants of Growing Places. Former participants are very helpful in providing information and talking about their experiences to others considering agriculture as a career. Partners in Growing Places receive flyers and registration materials, and are helpful in disseminating information.

## **Analysis**

Since Growing Places began in 1995, there have been 12 cycles and 158 graduates. Of the Growing Places graduates, 42% decided to start an agricultural business. Of these, 21% started their agricultural business within six to eight months of enrolling in Growing Places.

The program's success is best seen by meeting some of Growing Places graduates:

- Carolyn D'Luz and Jennifer Gilligan completed Growing Places in the spring of 1996. Jennifer was in the process of taking over her family's farm and deciding what to do with 200 acres. Carolyn has a passion for horticulture, especially vegetables, but no access to land. In the summer of 1997, they began a cooperative venture on Jennifer's land. Carolyn started a greenhouse tomato business while Jennifer is raising sheep and starting a roadside stand.
- Margo Tucker and her partner, Mike, were planning to start a sheep dairy. Margo, with no previous agricultural experience, completed Growing Places in the fall of 1996 and Start Up in the spring of 1997. In the fall of 1997, Margo and Mike received an operating loan to begin Ewetopia Farm, a sheep dairy. They are now part of Vermont's growing sheep dairy industry and supply raw cheese to Vermont Shepherd Cheese Company, a nationally recognized and growing company.
- Robin McKnight graduated from Growing Places in the spring of 1997. She recently completed the development of her new mail-order business, Robin's Summer Kitchen Soaps, which specializes in the sale of herbal soap products using herbs that Robin grows on her East Topsham, Vt., farm.

## **Challenges**

Growing Places faces two challenges:

1. Finding profitable sectors of agriculture that can be done on a small scale.
2. Program funding, given that resources for this program – and many others – are scarce.

## **Next Steps**

Growing Places looks forward to having the complete program accessible on line by the fall of 2003. A more advanced Growing Places group is being developed for people who need to refine their business plans after they have been farming for a few years.

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