

A publication of  
**Growing New Farmers**

**A northeast service providers consortium**  
GNF Professional Development Series #206



**Program:** Operating a Profitable Small Farm  
**Organization:** Maryland Cooperative Extension  
**Targeted to:** Startups and Re-strategizers  
**Dates:** 1996 to present

**Need**

New farmers need to learn farming basics. To create sustainable agricultural businesses, they also need support in selecting an enterprise and developing a business plan, produced in conjunction with a marketing plan.

**Program Development**

The need to develop targeted programs for the beginning farmer audience became apparent, as current programs were not attended by beginning farmers although requests for information and resources from this audience was increasing.

A targeted program was developed that included creating teaching materials and offering evening classes by Cooperative Extension Agent Terry Poole. These classes start with the basics of farming and move on to the topic of developing a farm business plan. The classes are generally geared toward nontraditional farming enterprises that serve niche markets.

Operating a Profitable Small Farm seeks to improve the profitability and enhance the viability of small farm operations.

**Program Presentation**

The program consists of a two-part curriculum of seven consecutive sessions each. The first part meets in the spring and the second in the fall. Approximately 40 students meet at the Extension office one evening a week for seven weeks.

The program begins with the basics – soil type and planting – then moves on to understanding hay quality and pasture management. Participants also learn about record keeping and financial management and information on various computer-based record keeping programs is presented.

During the fall sessions, classes touch on topics such as cover crops and goes into more detail on financial management, business planning and provides information about governmental cost-share programs.

Students explore what information they need to help them select enterprises that allow their farms to be sustainable. Classes cover the importance of securing a market,

including many of the nontraditional niche markets, including organic, natural and ethnic markets.

Program participants are diverse representing both traditional small-farm agricultural producers and those not typically reached by traditional Extension programs including beginning, new immigrant, limited-resource and minority farmers.

### **Funding**

The Maryland Cooperative Extension, with its traditional funding sources of local, state and federal governments provides the resources for the program, there is no additional funding. Participants are charged a small fee to cover the cost of snacks and materials.

### **Partners**

Guest speakers and materials are sought from many different organizations.

### **Outreach**

Information on the program is available on the Maryland Cooperative Extension website for Frederick County: <http://agnr.umd.edu/frederick>

Classes are advertised in local newspapers and flyers are circulated and mailed to a list of farmers developed by Extension agents.

Word of mouth from farmer to farmer is the greatest advertisement for Mr. Poole's course on operating a profitable small farm. While originally a program for residents of Frederick County, participants now come from all Maryland's counties and even from out of state.

### **Analysis**

**Successes:** Two factors signal the success. Attendance has spread from the county of origin and the majority of program participants currently run successful small farm enterprises at a time when the economy has caused many farmers to have financial difficulty.

**Challenges:** The creator of the program plans to retire within the next three years and would like another Extension agent to pick up the torch and continue the program, not only in Frederick County but expand it throughout the state.

### **Next Steps**

Continue to offer the program and promote expansion in other regions of the state.

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