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Program Helps Participants Get ‘Second Shot’ at Farming Dream

Clara Vaughn, Delmarva Correspondent Aug 18, 2017



A self-proclaimed hippie from Ann Arbor, Michigan, Sue Bromm always envisioned working the land on her own homestead.

But living in cities for most of her life, the Mardela Springs, Maryland, resident worked retail and restaurant jobs instead.

Now, Bromm is getting a second shot at her farming dream through a program led by Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture.

“It was part of my retirement plan to grow our own food, and so it sounded like a really wonderful opportunity to be able to learn,” Bromm said of Future Harvest’s Beginner Farmer Training Program.

The free program, launched in 2009, has helped more than 100 farmers in the Chesapeake region acquire the skills they need to succeed in agriculture.

It has blossomed from 13 trainees two years ago to 71 this year, thanks in large part to a three-year grant of about \$600,000 from the USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, designed to combat the rising age and shrinking number of farmers in the U.S., said Sarah Sohn, who is director of the Beginner Farmer Training Program.

With more trainees, the program has been split into three tiers to fit trainees’ different schedules and goals, Sohn said.

“The overarching goal of the expanded program is to equip new farmers across the Chesapeake region with the knowledge and hands-on experience necessary to first start a farm and later to manage that farm skillfully,” she said.

Level 1 beginner farmers need no prior experience and can hold other jobs while participating in the program while Level 2 trainees must have at least one year farming experience and take part in 200 or more hours of hands-on training.

Farmers in the Level 3 program must have three to five seasons of experience either running their own farm or managing someone else’s.

All trainees attend Future Harvest’s three-day winter conference as well as participate in a winter classroom series, field days and workshops at farms across the Chesapeake region.

Dean Snyder founded Coops and Crops farm with his wife, Jane Malone, in Kennedyville, Maryland, in 2014 and applied to be a Level 3 beginner farmer last year.

As part of the program, Future Harvest matched him with a consultant to guide Coops and Crops toward reaching its specific goals. In return, mentors receive a stipend from Future Harvest CASA.

“Trying to turn our interests into a profitable business is where we have needed the most help,” said Snyder, a former Methodist minister who worked in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and other urban areas before retiring.

Sohn matched him with Salisbury, Maryland, farmer Lisa Garfield, who helped Coops and Crops chart a planting schedule that provides a steady supply of produce, lay irrigation lines and even determine prices for vegetables at the market.

“It was extremely helpful to be able to ask someone questions regularly and to be able to get advice,” Snyder said. “You have someone somewhat experienced in what we’re trying to do that you can get feedback and answers from.”

For others, however, the Beginner Farmer Training Program is about exploring farming for the first time.

“I wasn’t sure what, specifically, I wanted to do,” said Lauren Giordano of Schoolhouse Farmhouse in Cordova, Maryland.

“The program was a nice introduction to everything,” said the former graphic designer, who hails from Long Island, New York.

The Level 1 beginner farmer applied for the course last year based on her love of cooking and exploring quality ingredients.

She has since collected a small flock of heirloom hens that provide eggs, which she sells to farmers markets and friends, and grows produce on about three-quarters of an acre.

Giordano plans to get broiler chickens, too, to fill a need she sees for sustainable poultry, and is looking forward to the Beginner Farming Training Program’s September field day on processing animals.

“I don’t think I would’ve had the confidence to tackle that ... if somebody didn’t have my back,” she said. “There really is a community of people and a lot of people that just want to see you do well and succeed.”

For Bromm, that sense of community is what makes farming worthwhile.

“I have recommended the program to so many people,” she said, adding that she now grows fruits, vegetables, and herbs for teas and dyeing wool on her 1-acre farm.

Applications for Future Harvest CASA’s Beginner Farmer Training Program are open now through Oct. 15.

They are reviewed on a rolling basis, and Sohn encourages participants to apply as early as possible.

Last year, 110 applicants vied for the 71 spots in the free program, which is open to those in the Chesapeake region including Maryland, Washington, D.C., Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware and Pennsylvania. The program is free for participants.

Sohn is also looking for mentors and consultants in the region to pair with Beginner Farmer trainees.

Visit www.futureharvestcasa.org/field-school/beginner-farmer-training-program to learn more about the program or to apply online.

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