

Two Boots Farm owner mentors beginning growers



The Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture beginner-farmer training program teaches participants how to farm sustainably for the environment and for their communities. The organization provides a 10 week classroom series and hands-on training at one of 13 training farms.



By **Michel Elben** • **Contact Reporter**
Carroll County Times

APRIL 10, 2016, 5:00 AM

Preparing for the coming farmers' market season, Two Boots Farm owner Elisa Lane and mentee Veronique Williams transplanted kale into reusable landscape fabric. Williams, of Baltimore, is one of 30 farmers enrolled in the Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture beginner-farmer training program.

"It's an interconnected network where you can learn everything about farming. You get to see farmers making a go of it and doing a good job. It's inspiring," Williams said.

According to Future Harvest CASA Director Sarah Sohn, the program teaches participants how to farm sustainably for the environment and for their communities. The organization provides a 10-week classroom series and hands-on training at one of 13 training farms. Participants are required to work at their training farm for an average of 200 hours during the growing season.

"With the average age of the farmer increasing, we want to replenish the next generation of farmers," Sohn said. "The program is steadily growing, and 74 percent of graduates are still farming."

According to the 2012 [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) preliminary ag census, only about 5 percent of all principal farm operators are 34 years old and younger, while 35 percent are age 65 or older. In Maryland, the average age of farmers is 59. Lane, a 2010 graduate of the program, is 35.

"Elisa is farming at scale where potential urban farmers can learn relatable skills. She brings the strength of somebody who is close to the experience of starting up on her own. She's made a really successful go of it," Sohn said.

Lane moved to Maryland from Philadelphia, where she ran a construction company. Desiring a change in career, she Googled sustainable agriculture and stumbled onto Future Harvest CASA's website.

"Farming is tricky business to get into — it's not a get rich quick scheme. You really have to love what you do," Lane said. "I didn't really know anything about farming, and I learned everything through the program."

Lane trained at Calvert's Gift Farm in Sparks while establishing Whitelock Community Farm, an urban growing operation in Baltimore's Reservoir Hill.

"The first year we tried growing corn, melons and things that just tasted good. We didn't have much success,

so we started growing things like collard greens, kale and tomatoes that were successful at farmers' markets," Lane said.

Lane bought a farm in Hampstead in the winter of 2012 so she could plant recurrent crops. She grows vegetables like kale, head lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers as well as cut flowers on less than an acre of tillable land.

Williams, 25, said she visited Lane's Whitelock Community Farm and knew she wanted Lane to be her mentor.

"I'm excited. I always wanted to know more about farm life and do the same thing Elisa is doing," Williams said.

Williams said she worked on urban farms around the country before joining the program. She attends class once a week and has learned to develop a strong business plan and how to grow sustainable food.

"I've started my own farm in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore City," Williams said. "I'm growing medicinal herbs and vegetables like mushrooms; blueberry tomatoes; and Ethiopian peppers, which are high in antioxidants."

A few yards away, Two Boots Farm employee and program participant Peter Sparklin, of Catonsville, hung wires in the greenhouse with mentee Rachel Bowers, of Baltimore. The wires will encourage future plantings of tomatoes and cucumbers to grow vertically.

Sparklin, 26, said he joined the program because he wants to manage his own cut flower farm.

"I've worked a couple of seasons on other farms. I know how to prep beds, plant and use farm machinery, but I want to have a farming business of my own," Sparklin said. "The program connects you to a network of people who are actively farming and willing to share their experiences."

Sparklin trains at Butterbee Farm in Pikesville and is also managing a small garden at Whitelock Community Farm.

"I hope this experience will help me make fewer big mistakes. I know that I will make little ones. We're learning lots of practicalities you only get from hands-on experience," Sparklin said.

Bowers, 24, is a garden educator for the Living Classrooms Foundation, a regional nonprofit. She was encouraged to take the course by her roommate, who is a graduate of the program.

"It's been the highlight of my year so far," Bowers said. "Elisa is helping me understand what I'm doing and opening possibilities for my future."

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For more information

Visit www.futureharvestcasa.org/field-school/beginner-farmer-training-program, www.twobootsfarm.com and www.petalrootgarden.com.

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