

Growing Farmers in the Northeast

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As many of the readers of Hānai'ai already know, there is a growing interest in agriculture in Hawai'i, and consequently, an increase in the number of people looking to start farming. Many of these aspiring farmers, however, do not have agricultural backgrounds or experience, and most do not have the knowledge and experience necessary to support a successful farm enterprise. A comprehensive program that would teach aspiring or beginning farmers practical lessons in crop, farm, and business management would go a long way to leverage the current interest and develop more, and more successful farmers.

A number of us in agriculture have recognized the need for, and timeliness of, such a program and have taken steps to fulfill that need. The following programs are in progress or in startup mode: The Center for Agricultural Success on Hawai'i island (Kohala Center), the Moloka'i Native Hawaiian Beginning Farmer Project (UH/CTAHR), the New Farmers Network on Maui (UHMC), and a student farming project on O'ahu (WCC).

This past July, thirteen of us, connected by a desire to develop or strengthen new farmer training, toured model programs in the Northeast U.S. The Northeast happens to have a great number of such programs and, like Hawai'i, a large number of small farms. Represented amongst our group were members of UH CTAHR, the UH Agribusiness Incubator Program, UH Maui College, UH Hilo, Windward Community College, the Center for Agricultural Success, and Kamehameha Schools.

We visited the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project in Lowell, Massachusetts (<http://www.nesfp.org>). This well-organized program is independent, but affiliated with Tufts University. NESFP also heads the National Incubator Farm Training Initiative, which aims to provide technical support with other similar programs across the nation. In their model, participants develop a business plan and then take workshops in various production and business topics on a training farm. Participants with a completed business plan may apply to use one of two incubator farms sites, which offer shared equipment and facilities.

NESFP also runs a very impressive CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) named the "World PEAS Coop" with 400 subscribers, and the current and former participants of NESFP provide approximately 50% of the produce for the CSA, with the remainder coming from other farms in the general area.

On our way to Burlington, Vermont, we stopped by the Farm School (<http://farmschool.org>) in Athol, MA. This inspiring school is a working farm that provides immersive multi-day and summertime experiences for school age students, as well as a formal year-long live-in training program for adults. Students participated in everything from cooking to beekeeping to care of farm animals to harvesting



Visiting the training farm of the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Lowell, Massachusetts.

trees, making their own lumber, and building farm structures! The adult program operated a CSA which funded approximately one-third of the cost of their education. We were kindly invited to stay for dinner with the students but had to leave to get to our next destination.

Our first stop in Vermont (besides the hotel) was at the University of Vermont. We spoke with a Department Chair about their programs then met with managers and students of their student farm club (<http://www.uvm.edu/~cgsref/>) at the farm site. The student farm operates a small CSA that sells on campus. Next to the student farm was a farm run by UVM's Farmer Training Program (<http://learn.uvm.edu/sustainability/farmer-training/>), an intensive full-time 6-month program open to non-students. This program offers a certificate to those who complete it, and involves once-a-week classroom sessions, farmer-mentors, and apprenticeships on host farms. They market their products locally.



University of Vermont Farmer student farm.

Burlington Vermont was our next stop, the Sugar Snap Café—a retail restaurant that utilizes produce and value-added products from the Intervale Center's farmers. We then headed down the road to the Intervale Center (<http://www.intervale.org/>) and learned about their mission of supporting food systems and their various programs, which included the Success on Farms program, a business consulting and business plan development (much like our Agribusiness Incubator Program), the Intervale Food Hub that acts as a distributor for the local farmers, an incubator farm, and an innovative CSA program.

At our visit to the Intervale Farm CSA, we learned that it has (if memory serves) over 600 subscribers in a town of just 40,000. The subscribers come to the farm and are able to “shop” for their designated amount of produce—meaning that they can, to a degree, pick and choose from the available products. In addition, certain high-labor items such as flowers and berries are grown next to the pickup area so subscribers can pick their own. We also visited two farms on the property, one had a u-pick blueberry operation (we got to graze for free!) and another had just two acres producing about \$25,000 per month in sales.



[Adam's Berry Farm](#) at Intervale grows organic blueberries, operating a U-pick operation. Established Intervale farmers serve as mentors for the new incubatee farmers. The Intervale program offers shared equipment rental.

The incubatee farmers of Intervale must present a business plan to the existing tenants, who decide whether to accept new farmers. An average of two new farmers per year is accepted into Intervale and they are provided a subsidized 5-year lease on a small parcel of land. The farmers of Intervale can

rent shared equipment from a farmer-owned company and rent shared facilities such as coolers and greenhouses.

The Intervale Center owns 350 acres within Burlington and is an integral part of the Burlington community, as we saw at their well-attended Summervale event the evening of our visit.

Lesson Learned

All 13 of us agreed that despite any past experience with the topic, we learned a great deal on this tour. Some notable points:

- ▶ Many of us were surprised at how relevant farming in the Northeast is to our own situation in Hawai'i.
- ▶ Most of the farmers we spoke with emphasized the importance of training in business management and marketing.
- ▶ Access to land, shared equipment, and experienced farmers were attractive to potential farm incubatees.
- ▶ All programs had a surprisingly low “throughput,” producing a handful of farmers per year.
- ▶ Most programs provided market access to farmers through a CSA.
- ▶ The CSA concept is much more sophisticated and accepted in the areas we visited compared to Hawai'i, and the communities seemed highly supportive of agriculture.
- ▶ Some programs were linked to local Universities, but even these ran independently.
- ▶ All programs featured organic (versus conventional) farming methods.
- ▶ Most program participants were relatively young.

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More in-depth information about the tour is available at <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/sustainag/workshop/AIP-Beginning-Farmer-Tour-2012.html>.

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