New Illinois Farmers program on the grow

By Matt Ernst, independent writer

An Illinois program entering its third year is counting new farmers, expanded community gardens and diversification of commodity crop farms among its success stories.

The New Illinois Farmers program, on the Web at www.newillinoisfarmers.org, aims to diversify the state’s farms. “Our goal was to bring more fruit and vegetable farmers to Illinois,” says Mary Hosier, coordinator of the New Illinois Farmers program who is based on the main University of Illinois campus in Urbana.

The program runs one Saturday per month for a year in three different locations: Urbana; Dixon Springs, in southern Illinois; and St. Charles, in the north. “Our target was aspiring farmers, with less than five years growing experience. But we have enrolled participants ranging in age from 21 to 70,” notes Hosier.

The program filled up with 90 class members in its first year and slightly more in 2013-14; Hosier anticipates a full class again this fall. High school and community college agriculture teachers, as well as community garden managers, are among the participants. The program is also being adapted for use by the Illinois Migrant Council, a farm worker organization.

The monthly sessions serve as a kind of farm startup boot camp, with topics covering everything from soils to safety, marketing and management to pest control and Farm to School. The importance of business planning and marketing

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is emphasized, says Hosier, who notes that participants are required to state how and where they will sell their target product in the program application process. Farms from states bordering Illinois, including Kentucky farmers near the Dixon Springs location, may apply.

The three-year program, funded by a NIFA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant, is not intended to be ongoing – but will inform future farmers after the 2014-15 class. “We are producing curriculum and video modules that will be available for future training. That’s all part of the grant,” explains Hosier.

Success stories are already coming, says Hosier. Some farms have used the program to expand existing ideas or add supplemental or retirement income. Community garden projects, like Urbana’s Prosperity Gardens, have benefited. One project expanded a garden that supplies a chef serving off-campus housing at UI.

Another success, says Hosier, is a young college-educated couple from Southern Illinois that aspired to farm full-time. “The husband had taken a job in the coal mines and they had set their goal to have him home farming in three years,” she says. “They went through the program, focused on strawberries, and with 8,000 strawberry plants he is on the farm full-time in a year.”

Illinois ranked seventh in farm vegetable/potato/melon sales and tenth in tree fruit/nut/berry sales, according to the 2012 Ag Census. Illinois is a national leader in pumpkin production and leads in some niche crops, like horseradish. However, produce sales make up less than 1% of Illinois farm sales, with fewer than 2% of Illinois farms selling fruits or vegetables. “Fruit and vegetables can be a good fit for beginning farmers, with generally much less capital required to start than commodity farming,” says Hosier.

**Fruit crop research featured at UK’s First Friday event**

First Friday is a breakfast forum and networking event hosted by the University of Kentucky Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group (SAFSWG), part of the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. First Friday started in 2011 when the SAFSWG wanted to create a space where faculty, staff, local producers, and advocates for creating better food systems could get together to network and exchange ideas. There is always an engaging speaker on interesting topics related to sustainability. A locally sourced breakfast is provided by the group and prepared by Chef Bob Perry, along with his wonderful team of volunteers. The kickoff First Friday of the 2014 school year took place at the University of Kentucky Horticulture Research Farm. Dr. John Strang of the Department of Horticulture presented “Fruits and Matters” and led a tour of the conventional fruit research plots including apples, peaches, blueberries, sour cherries, haskaps, and wine grapes, as well as plots of organic pawpaws and apples. Dr. Strang provided information he has found in research for both backyard and commercial growers during his
tour. He also shared many of the publications that he and his research assistants have put together over the years. Access to these publications can be found at: http://www.uky.edu/hort/documents-list-commercial-fruit-nut and http://www.uky.edu/hort/document-list-home-fruit. Dr. Strang also sends out a monthly newsletter, Fruit Facts, which covers common disease issues growers might be seeing, upcoming program information, as well as research data. If interested in signing up to receive the newsletter, visit: http://www.uky.edu/hort/documents-list-fruit-facts.

The October 2014 First Friday program will take place at The Arboretum, located at 500 Alumni Drive, Lexington. Visit the First Friday Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/UKAgFirstFriday.

Prescription for soil health happens to be a Dunn deal

By Christy Morgan, NRCS

The Caldwell and Lyon County Conservation Districts have the prescription for healthy soil. Anyone who walks into the Caldwell County USDA Service Center will quickly see that soil health truly matters to the conservation district and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) staff. From the moment you walk up to the entrance and throughout the office are living displays, pictures, media screens, and a multitude of fliers to help landowners understand the value of healthy soil.

Just over a year ago, Arthur Dunn, district technician with the Caldwell and Lyon County Conservation Districts, was approved for a USDA Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) to begin a study of the different soil types within the counties. The sandstone soils found in the northern part of each county showed signs of erosion much quicker than the limestone soils found in the southern part of each county. The sloping terrain in the area had been good for pastureland but farmers were quickly converting this marginal land to cropland due to higher rental rates. Dunn saw an opportunity to improve the soil in these challenging areas and by improving the soils, landowners would see an improvement in water holding capacity, increase in organic matter reducing the use of commercial fertilizer, and reduction in amount of herbicide needed for weed control.

The cropland acres in the county were being row cropped with soybeans, then the land was left barren through the winter until corn was planted in the spring. “Seeing green fields during winter months was a motivating factor for me to write the CIG,” Dunn said. Convincing the landowners to keep a cover on the ground year round was going to be a challenge.

Soil health experts all agree that increasing organic matter and moisture retention as well as decreasing the amount of herbicide usage leads to improved yields and reduced input costs, but these benefits don’t happen overnight. Dunn
found four landowners in the varying soil types of the counties willing to set up test plots as part of the CIG. Within the test plots, Dunn has been able to educate landowners on the importance of no-till farming and the value of keeping a live root in the ground year-round.

“We will gather information from these soil test plots over a three-year period, and while we do that we want to make this information available to as many people as possible,” said Dunn. Sharing information is just what he’s done, with signs at each test plot to show the community what is happening, and tours of the plots for interested landowners.

Dunn’s wife, Cindy, and NRCS Natural Resource Planner Mike Andrews, are also part of taking the soil health story on the road, telling what they know to be true about soil health from the studies they have conducted. More than that, they show the results with demonstrations. Landowners come away from one of their workshops with a better understanding of what works and what doesn’t when it comes to cover crops.

As part of the grant, Dunn sends soil samples to Temple, Texas to be tested by USDA’s Agricultural Research Service (ARS). Richard Haney, soil scientist with ARS, developed a new soil test known as the Soil Health Tool. Traditional testing can determine fertilizer needs but it doesn’t account for soil microbes. Microbes in the soil are responsible for breaking down organic matter, making nitrogen available to the crop. Haney’s process replicates some of the natural processes that occur in a field and accounts for microbial activity in addition to measuring ammonium and organic nitrogen. Landowners are benefiting from this testing method with reduced cost of fertilizers added to the field.

The landowners participating in the soil test plots in Caldwell and Lyon Counties are among a rare group of landowners that have access to the Soil Health Tool. The knowledge that comes from this grant study will benefit landowners across the country. For now, Dunn will strive to educate as many landowners as possible in Western Kentucky. Expanding with more test sites is one of his goals.

**About the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) Program**

CIG enables NRCS to work with other public and private entities to accelerate technology transfer and adoption of promising technologies and approaches to address some of the nation’s most pressing natural resource concerns. CIG will benefit agricultural producers by providing more options for environmental enhancement and compliance with federal, state, and local regulations. NRCS administers CIG. Visit the NRCS website at [www.ky.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ky.nrcs.usda.gov) to find out more.
Mountain Ag Week to offer fun, education

By Chuck Stamper, Extension Special Projects Coordinator

The 2014 Mountain Ag Week is right around the corner! The UK College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment will host events the week of September 22-27 at the UK Robinson Center in Jackson.

Two days of educational activities start off the week. Preschool-age students from the surrounding area will be introduced to how interesting pumpkins really are. Stations will be set up for students to rotate through, including pumpkin-tasting recipes and nutritional values. Each student will get to pick their own pumpkin to take home. We are expecting 700-plus students this year.

On Thursday, the Center will host elementary and high school students in environmental education activities. Middle school youth from the area will be at the Robinson Center and high school students will be at Robinson Forest; 500-plus students are expected to attend. To attend these educational events, contact the 4-H agent in your county at the UK Cooperative Extension office.

The week will culminate with the Appalachia Proud Field Day on Saturday, September 27, at the Center. More than 60 exhibitors, demonstrators, researchers, and presenters will be on hand to showcase the college’s work in Appalachia. Educational tours will highlight agriculture research; local craftsmen/women will be demonstrating their work; and Katie the Cow will even be on site! Attendees will also get to hear our KY 4-H Performing Arts Troupe sing before our new Dean, Dr. Nancy Cox, speaks.

Chuck Stamper, Mountain Ag Week Chair, thinks that this year’s event will be one that you do not want to miss! For more information contact your local UK Cooperative Extension county office or visit the Robinson Center’s website at http://www2.ca.uky.edu/rcars/.

Food entrepreneurship to be focus of regional conference

The Food Systems Innovation Center (FSIC) and the MarketReady Producer Training Program team of the University of Kentucky are partnering with the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Louisville Branch to host a regional conference for professionals in the lending, insurance, and related industries. The conference, Food Entrepreneurship for Economic Development (FEED), will be held in Louisville at The Olmsted on October 23. It is anticipated that this event will begin at 8 a.m. and conclude around 2:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time.

There is great potential for economic development through food entrepreneurship, but many professionals in these industries may not really know where to begin when working with aspiring food entrepreneurs. This conference will focus on how professionals in the lending, insurance, and other related industries can work with food entrepreneurs as a means for economic development, and what resources are available to them and their clients.

The conference will feature a diverse group of guest speakers and panelists. Topics will include the state of local food systems, innovative financing in food entrepreneurship, working with food
entrepreneurs as a financial institution, and more. Professionals in the lending, insurance, and other related industries will also learn about various individuals, non-profits, and organizations that can be used as resources. More information on the specific details about this conference and how to register will come soon. To find out more, check the MarketReady Producer Training Program Facebook page and website for updates: http://www.uky.edu/fsic/marketready/. Also, contact Kevin Heidemann at kevin.heidemann@uky.edu.

Conference opportunities in October

The Farmland, Food and Livable Community Conference will be held on October 20-22 at the Hilton Lexington Downtown Hotel. The conference program will address four principal themes: ensuring high quality farmland is available and affordable for agriculture; supporting agricultural viability and a fair and just food system; creating opportunities for the next generation of farmers; and addressing emerging issues for women in agriculture. For more on the conference, visit www.farmland.org. For more information about sponsorship opportunities, contact Susan Sink with the American Farmland Trust at 202-378-1206 or ssink@farmland.org.

On October 31, Kentucky Farm2Campus 2014, a one-day conference in Louisville, will convene stakeholders from Kentucky, the region and around the country to discuss their best ideas, best practices, successes and challenges in bringing local food to campus dining services.

“For In Kentucky and around the country, colleges and universities are reaching for higher sustainability goals by buying locally and regionally produced food,” said Sarah Fritschner, program coordinator of Louisville Metro’s Louisville Farm to Table. “But finding, buying and serving local food isn’t always easy, and this conference will help bridge that gap.”

The conference will take place in the Health Science Hall at Jefferson Community and Technical College in downtown Louisville from 8:15 a.m. to 5 p.m. A continental breakfast of local foods will be provided. Admission to the conference is $10 for students and $45 for adults. Students, administrators, sustainability coordinators, dining service managers, chefs and concerned individuals are invited to come learn and share their experiences.

Topics include easy ways to use local food, finding local food, marketing it to students, introduction to a new tool that helps compare prices, using the Real Food Calculator, dining contractors’ assessment of the present and future of local food, and basic steps in beginning a local food movement on your campus.

Farm2Campus 2014 is sponsored by Louisville Farm to Table, Jefferson Community and Technical Colleges, the University of Louisville, Real Food Challenge and The Berry Center. For registration, go to https://farm2campus2014.splashthat.com/#tickets.

Guidelines for safe home canning

By Debbie Clouthier, Extension Associate

Our gardens, orchards and farmers markets are overflowing with fresh produce! It’s a great time to preserve some of summer’s bounty by home canning locally grown fruits and vegetables. Home canning can save money, provide a sense of accomplishment, and yield wonderful gifts for family and friends. For best results and safe, good-tasting products, be sure to follow USDA recommendations:

• Start with the freshest, best quality fruits and vegetables. Spoilage and loss of vitamins begin right after harvest.
• Wash produce well. Trim as needed.
• To ensure safe home-canned foods, use only
research-based recipes and processing times. The USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning has hundreds of recipes for canning foods from A to Z and is available free of charge at http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications_usda.html.

- High acid foods like fruit, tomatoes with lemon juice added or pickles can be safely canned in a boiling water bath canner following USDA-recommended recipes.
- For low acid foods like green beans, corn and other vegetables, meats, poultry or fish, be sure to use a pressure canner to kill any spores of Clostridium botulinum that might be present — a boiling water bath doesn’t get hot enough to kill the spores. If allowed to grow in canned foods, these bacteria cause botulism, a deadly form of food poisoning.
- Use only Mason-type jars designed for home canning, with self-sealing lids. Mayonnaise and other commercial food jars are more likely to break in the canner. Jars and rings may be reused if in good condition, but the self-sealing lids should be used only once.
- Be sure to process jars for the full length of time specified in the recipe.
- If using a pressure canner, follow the manufacturer’s instructions. For dial gauge pressure canners, have the gauge tested each year for accuracy. Your local Extension office should be able to do this for you.
- After processing, cool jars slowly and test seals after 12-24 hours. Reprocess unsealed jars within 24 hours for the full processing time given in the recipe, or refrigerate and use the contents of unsealed jars within several days.
- Store sealed jars in a cool, dry place. For best quality, use home-canned foods within one year.

Home-can your fresh produce safely, and enjoy the fruits (and vegetables!) of your labor throughout the coming year.

Subscribe!

Thanks for reading, and please contact Miranda at miranda.hileman@uky.edu if you are interested in subscribing to our online newsletter.

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