

# **Growing Agripreneurs**

BY SHAINA BRONSTEIN

The Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center on Hanley Road in Central Point is home to a new program dedicated to helping beginning farmers. Growing Agripreneurs, which is part of the Farmer Incubator Program launched by the OSU Small Farms Department in collaboration with THRIVE, Rogue Farm Corp and Friends of Family Farmers, provides hands on training to individuals interested in launching their own farming enterprise. Funded through a grant from the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Program, Growing Agripreneurs broke ground this season and hosted its first round of participants in a seven month training course that included classes, farm walks and hands-on learning.

The Farmer Incubator Model was developed out of a need to train the next generation of farmers. With the average age of farmers rising above 57, young farmers are seeking the skills and tools necessary to help them succeed. Where traditionally, knowledge, equipment and land was passed within families from one generation to the next, today's new farmers typically lack these resources. While some potential farmers seek out season-long farm internships to obtain their training, others are limited by their family or financial situations. Growing Agripreneurs addresses this need by requiring participants to work a few hours a week at the program's teaching plot where they receive one-on-one training from the Farm Manager. Classes are kept small to allow for individual attention and discussion of site-specific issues.

Located just outside Jacksonville, the Extension's 1.3-acre plot is organically managed and divided equally into sections for growing annuals, perennials, grain and cover crop. This year's planting included melons, tomatoes, cucumbers, raspberries, hops, artichokes, spring wheat, barley and several cover crops. Participants were involved in the entire process, from site planning and seed starting to cultivation and harvest. In addition to weekly field hours and monthly farm walks, the program offers more in-depth classes on various topics throughout the season, such as irrigation, soil fertility, equipment and pest management. Skill-building sessions are held periodically on topics such as making your own soil mix and installing irrigation. Tours of local farms are also offered to participants throughout the season through Rogue Farm Corp. Its location at the OSU Extension gives the program access to the farm's tools and equipment and also familiarizes participants with the Extension's other support services.

Participants in the program range from individuals who already have land to those who are exploring if a farming venture is right for them. Students are encouraged to begin thinking about their own enterprise and to begin exploring topics specific to their plan. For example, one participant had inherited land and wanted to begin a small growing operation, but had limited prior experience. Another is currently farming commercially, but was looking to expand their knowledge and confidence in order to grow their operation. Other participants include the owner of an urban gardening service and a homesteader. Participating in the program has not only provided these

individuals with an opportunity for hands-on training but also a greater understanding of what it means to successfully manage a sustainable growing operation.

The teaching plot is designed as a small scale model of what an integrated farm might look like. Numerous organic practices and sustainable methods are explored. Strips of cover and grain crops are inter-planted with strips of annuals. Flowers and native plantings are being established to promote pollinators and other beneficial insects. This season, students learned about creating no-mow habitats for beetles as a means of pest management, and are now in the process of recreating this technique at the teaching plot. Because farming practices are location-specific, the program attempts to teach students how to identify what tools they have at their disposal and how to use them effectively for their own situations.

Currently, aside from the produce participants take home, everything harvested from the plot is donated to several local food banks in Jackson County. This season, over 3,000 pounds of produce have been donated already. Next season the program will continue and, hopefully, expand over time. The long-term goal for the teaching plot is to employ a full-time farm manager and to expand acreage to incorporate livestock. Individuals interested in participating in this program next season should request information about the application process from Farm Manager Shaina Bronstein by email at [shaina.bronstein@oregonstate.edu](mailto:shaina.bronstein@oregonstate.edu).

Shaina Bronstein • 541.776.7371  
Farm Manager, Growing Agripreneurs  
[shaina.bronstein@oregonstate.edu](mailto:shaina.bronstein@oregonstate.edu)