

RU Ready to Farm: Getting Rooted in the Garden State



Abstract

The Rutgers Beginner Farmer Training Program is addressing the continuing viability of the agriculture industry in New Jersey by providing resources and training for new farmers. The average age of farmers in New Jersey is approaching 60 years old, and many growers do not have a succession plan or a next generation to take over the farm. The goal of our program is to provide the necessary training and networking to increase the chances of success for new farmers. This is accomplished through a three-phase program. Phase 1 includes on-line training, classroom instruction, and field trips to successful small farms. In phase 2, participants plan, grow, and distribute 50 CSA farm shares to customers. In phase 3, our team provides support for participants to secure their own land or work with experienced successful farmers. To date, 86 participants have completed phase 1 of the program. This project has generated \$70,000 back into our program through fees and farm sales. As a result of the program, there are 9 active farmers growing on 80 acres and 8 established farms that have employed program participants. Pre- and post-program surveys and structured interviews indicate that 90% of participants had a significant increase in knowledge and skills because of the program. A Word Press website and Canvas platform were developed to provide educational information and resources.

Background

New Jersey is an exciting place to farm. Its combination of high-quality farmland acres and access to some of the most densely populated and diverse markets in the world make it fertile ground for agricultural innovation. In 2017 New Jersey's farmers produced over a billion dollars in sales on 9,900 farms situated on 735,000 acres of land (USDA, 2017). Yet for all of its advantages, New Jersey still faces many of the same problems that impact the agricultural industry nationwide. Rising land costs and the lack of a skilled next generation of farmers to work the land has contributed to the increasing average age of New Jersey farmers, which now stands at 59 years, notably above the national average of 57.7. The main barriers facing those who want to enter the agriculture business include (1) a lack of reliably thorough education on all aspects of operating a successful farm business and finding available land, (2) the financial obstacles involved in startup costs related to farming, and (3) access to equipment and infrastructure. The Rutgers Cooperative Extension Beginner Farmer Training Program, known as "RU Ready to Farm" is already actively working to address these barriers. Funded through the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant awarded in September 2020, this program has since been developed into a unique and powerful resource for beginner farmers.

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Materials and Methods

17 local farmers served as panelists and lecturers and 6 local farms hosted field tours for experiential learning. Topics included:

Hands on workshops:

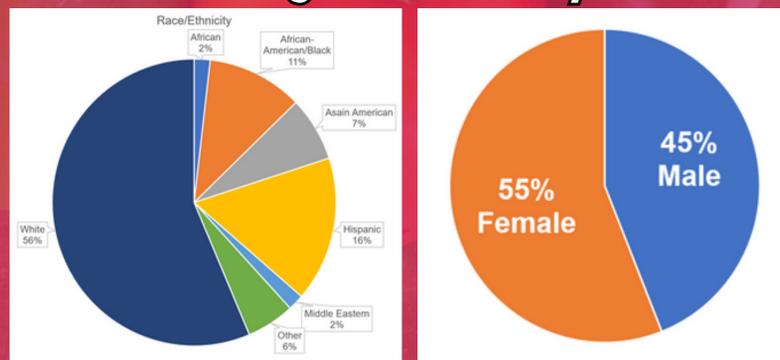
- Tractor safety lecture and demo
- Shipping container conversion to cooler using cool-bot
- Building and installing plumbing for wash station
- Carpentry - building greenhouse benches and shelves
- Irrigation system design and installation
- Installing caterpillar tunnels

Field Day Lectures

- Tree fruit Production
- Weed Identification and Management
- Hazelnut Production

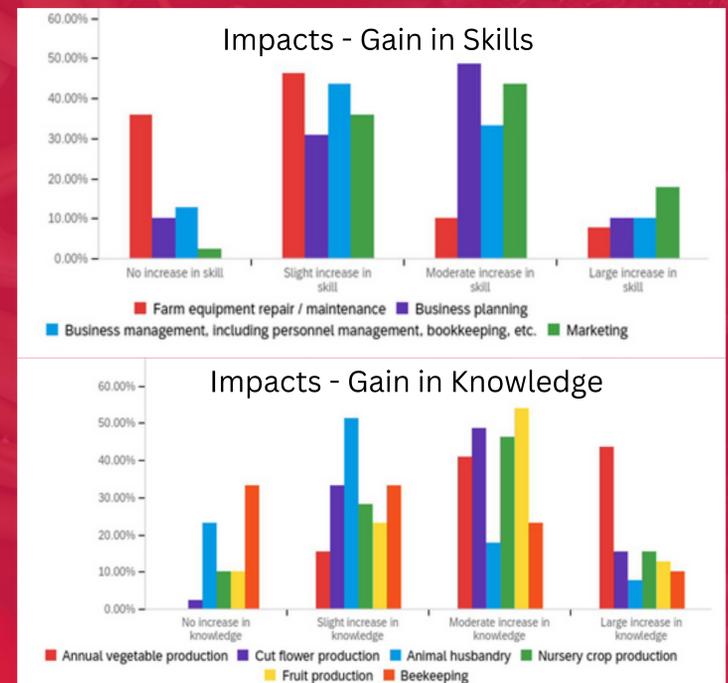


Program Diversity



Program Impacts

- Within the first two years of the program, 86 beginner farmers have completed Phase 1; 12 have completed Phase 2; 2 are enrolled in Phase 3
- 46 Customers and their families received fresh produce through the RU Ready to Farm CSA Training Program with an estimated total weight of 6715 lbs of produce delivered at an estimated total value of \$15,730.
- 8 participants have been placed as workers on local farms through the program
- 9 participants have begun farming on their own, with two of these having purchased land of their own.



Conclusion/Future Direction

The RU Ready to Farm program is actively working to increase land access opportunities and serve as both a community and resource for beginner farmers. In the future, we aim to:

- Expand the reach of the training program through partnerships and additional training sites
- Develop more direct solutions to the land access crisis in New Jersey and work with beginner farmers to find sustainable long-term land access
- Work with farmers and partner organizations to facilitate more cooperative farming and equipment sharing in the state of New Jersey

Acknowledgements

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