Training class aims to help aspiring farmers on Delmarva with their dreams

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Applications are due Oct. 15 for the free Beginner Farmer Training Program that helps farmers network, troubleshoot and learn more about their specific areas of agronomy.

Since 2009, the program led by Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture has helped more than 100 farmers and farmers-to-be in the region gain the skills they need to succeed in their agriculture niches, whether that’s self-sufficiency or running a profitable business.

“It was extremely helpful to be able to ask someone questions regularly and to be able to get advice,” said Dean Snyder, of Coops and Crops Farm.

Snyder founded Coops and Crops with his wife Jane Malone in Kennedyville, Maryland several years ago, but was having trouble turning his passion for farming into a profit.
Dean Snyder and Jane Malone, of Coops and Crops farm in Kennedyville, Md., enrolled in Future Harvest’s Beginner Farmer Training Program to learn more about running their small farm.

Through the program, he was matched with local consultant and farmer Lisa Garfield, of Salisbury, Maryland, who helped Coops and Crops chart a planting schedule that provides a steady supply of produce, lay irrigation lines and even determine prices for vegetables at the market.

“You have someone somewhat experienced in what we’re trying to do that you can get feedback and answers from,” Snyder said.

Blossoming from 13 trainees two years ago to 71 this year — thanks in large part to a three-year grant of about $600,000 from USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program — the Beginner Farmer Training Program recently split into three tiers to better fit trainees’ schedules and goals, said Sarah Sohn, director of the program.

“The overarching goal of the expanded program is to equip new farmers across the Chesapeake region with the knowledge and hands-on experience necessary to first start a farm and later, to manage that farm skillfully,” Sohn said.

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Level 1 Beginner Farmers need no prior experience and can hold other jobs while participating in the program, while Level 2 trainees must have at least one year of farming experience and take part in 200-plus hours of on-farm training.

Farmers in the Level 3 program must have three to five seasons of experience either running their own farm or managing someone else’s.

All trainees receive Future Harvest CASA membership for the year, allowing them to attend the organization’s three-day winter conference as well as participate in a winter classroom series, year-round field days and workshops at farms across the region.

For some, the program is about exploring farming for the first time.

“I wasn’t sure what, specifically, I wanted to do,” said Lauren Giordano, of Schoolhouse Farmhouse in Cordova, Maryland. “The program was a nice introduction to everything.”

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A longtime graphic designer from Long Island, New York, Giordano became interested in farming to learn more about how to grow high-quality ingredients for cooking.

Since starting the program, she has collected a small flock of heirloom hens and plans to raise broiler chickens to fill a need she sees for sustainable poultry, too.

“All I didn’t think I would’ve had the confidence to tackle that … if somebody didn’t have my back,” Giordano said. “There really is a community of people and a lot of people that just want to see you do well and succeed.”
Lauren Giordano looks over her tomatoes on her small farm in Cordova, Md. The longtime graphic designer decided to enroll in Future Harvest CASA’s free Beginner Farmer Training Program to learn more about how to grow high-quality ingredients for cooking and now raises heirloom chickens, too. (Photo: Clara Vaughn photo)

For Sue Bromm, of Mardela Springs, Maryland, that sense of community is what made farming worthwhile.

“It was part of my retirement plan to grow our own food, and so it sounded like a really wonderful opportunity to be able to learn,” Bromm said of the Beginner Farmer Training Program.

The self-proclaimed hippie from Ann Arbor, Michigan, always envisioned working the land on her own homestead, but spent most of her life working in retail and restaurant jobs in urban areas instead.

Now, Bromm is getting a second shot at her dream through the Beginner Farmer Training Program.

“I have recommended the program to so many people,” said the Delmarva retiree, who grows fruits, vegetables and herbs for teas and dying wool on her 1-acre farm.

Last year, 110 applicants vied for 71 spots in the Beginner Farmer Training Program, which is open to those in the Chesapeake region, which includes Virginia, Maryland, Washington, D.C., West Virginia, Delaware and Pennsylvania.

Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, so Sohn encourages interested farmers and farmer hopefuls to apply as soon as possible.

The deadline for applications for the 2017 program is Oct. 15. The program is free for participants.

Visit www.futureharvestcasa.org/field-school/beginner-farmer-training-program to learn more about the Beginner Farmer Training Program and to access registration forms.

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