2020 Beginner Farmer Training Program Update

Your generous support of Future Harvest's Beginner Farmer Training Program (BFTP) has played a crucial role this year, making it possible for us to pivot quickly and support our farmers in new ways, while we and they navigate the many challenges posed by COVID-19. As recent shortages in the industrial food supply chain have exposed, our region's food security is vulnerable and we must now, more than ever, build up a well-trained workforce of new farmers who can produce food right here in the Chesapeake, for the Chesapeake. When farming is done with sustainable, regenerative practices it has the power not just to feed our communities, but also to mitigate climate change, sequestering carbon in the soil and contributing to the clean air and water our communities need to thrive.

The BFTP is playing a major role in training up the next generation of farmers who can heal our soil and ensure our region's food security. We welcomed a class of 80 outstanding new farmer trainees at the beginning of this year (up from 25 in 2016). These new farmers hail from across the region (MD, DC, VA, DE, WV), working in a range of settings (urban, rural, suburban) and with diverse farm models: some are headed into commercial farming while others are starting up mission-oriented non-profit farms aimed at growing fresh food while also serving communities in need.

Below is a photo of our 2020 class, taken at Future Harvest's winter conference, which took place in January 2020.
Training New Farmers in the Age of COVID
When COVID-19 first emerged earlier this year, we were faced with the challenge of finding a way to teach the hands-on craft of farming without the ability to meet in-person in our usual on-farm group settings. Our response was rapid and multifaceted. Here is a summary of major pivots we made in order to support our trainees, while maintaining social distance.

**BFTP Online Curriculum**
We created an online course that provides our trainees 14 sections of in-depth material on core sustainable farming topics, ranging from soil health to farm financial management. Each section is anchored by a video presentation, with accompanying worksheets, supplementary readings, and links to relevant resources. We invested in online course software so that our trainees could easily access all of the lectures and materials in one organized interface, whether on their computers, phones, or tablets. We will continue to add to and refine this online course but have heard very positive feedback from trainees so far.

**Our Field Days Go Virtual!**
In spring, when there were restrictions on gatherings of more than 10 people, our team decided to transition our on-farm field days to an online format. This has required us to think creatively about how to teach hands-on farm skills online and we have since learned much about integrating videos and creating interactive learning opportunities even online. Attendance at our field days has actually increased: as of October, we have had more than 1,200 participants in our Field School events, up from 800 total last year, and we still have several events to go before the year’s end.

Financial support from donors like you have also made it possible for us to offer these online workshops for free or by suggested donation. Like the BFTP generally, which remains completely free, we are committed to removing barriers to access, so that aspiring farmers from all backgrounds can access the workforce development skills they need to become career farmers.

**COVID-Specific Support**
To help our farmers navigate the new unknowns of learning and marketing in the age of COVID, we worked quickly to assemble a range of tools to help. These resources were provided both to our trainees and the general public. We provided several online field day focused specifically on
COVID-related topics, including: Employee Management and Legal Considerations During COVID-19, Strategies for Managing Financial Risk During COVID-19, and a frontlines regional COVID-call. To help consumers new to buying local connect with our farmers, we collaborated with three other regional organizations to create an interactive Find-A-Farmer or Market Map.

We also launched a microgrant program for farmers called Feed the Need, aimed at helping local farmers get food to communities in need, via food banks and other efforts. As an indicator of the BFTP’s long-term impact: 10 of the farmers who received a Feed the Need grant and who are right now getting food out to local communities of need have a close connection to the BFTP, either as current trainees, graduates, or trainers.

**BFTP Book Club**
Since we firmly believe that one of the most valuable aspects of the BFTP is the farmer-to-farmer networking it provides, we created this new monthly book club to help our farmers stay connected and deepen their relationships. We mailed free books to all our trainee participants and we use the time each month to strengthen our understanding of core topics: crop planning, season extension in fall/winter, creating realistic farm budgets, etc. It is also, however, a much needed informal forum for trainees to commiserate, share stories of farming failures, and deepen their relationships. The Book Club also serves as a nice adjunct to the BFTP Facebook group we run year-round, where farmers ask questions and share resources and encouragement.

**Farmer Study Circles**
Over the course of the past two years, we have received requests from a number of BFTP graduates and other farmers at the more advanced end of “beginner”—those who have been farming ~5-7 years—for small cohorts of similarly situated farmers, for collaboration and information sharing on farm vitals like financial recordkeeping and business decision-making. In response, we launched our first year of Farmer Study Circles this year, piloting the program—provided free of charge to farmers—with 4 circles spread out across the region. Each group meets monthly on Zoom and FH staff and an experienced farmer consultant facilitate.
The Baltimore area study circle has 6 farmers, all women, many of whom have gone through the BFTP. Here is a testimonial from one of the farmers, Maya Kosok (pictured at left) who runs Hillen Homestead, a cut flower farm in Baltimore City:

“This season I have had the privilege of participating in one of the pilot Farmer Study Circles. It has been immensely valuable, and is a model I've already recommended to another national farmer support organization I'm a member of. Far too many farm training programs and resources focus only on growing techniques – which are important, but mean nothing without business management.”

Looking Ahead to 2021: Farmer Training in a New Reality

The BFTP has grown in new ways this year—necessity being the mother of invention, we have created new ways of delivering programming to help our farmers through this critical time. As robust as our response has been, however, in the end farming is a hands-on craft and can only be taught fully with at least some aspect of in-person teaching.

For this reason, we have decided to offer our current Level 1 and Level 2 trainees the option of returning for a second year of training in 2021. We have extended this offer to all of our Level 1 trainees, in the hopes that it will be safe for us to provide them with on-farm, hands-on group learning via Field Days next season. For our Level 2 trainees—who are required to complete 200 hours of on-farm training at their designated training farm—we gave them the option of completing their training this year or deferring until 2021. Approximately half of our Level 2 trainees have opted to defer their on-farm training to 2021.

In these unprecedented times, funding support for the BFTP will be more critical than ever. Significant costs and staffing will be required to support the large number of returning trainees in 2021, in addition to new incoming trainees. Demand for the program continues to grow—our applications for the 2021 season opened a short time ago and we already have over 100 applications. In these times of food precarity, we must push forward. We have the team and expertise to do so, but we can only do so with adequate funding. A large USDA grant that has helped fund the program for several years is unfortunately coming to a close this year, making other funding sources absolutely crucial.

With the continued growth and evolution of the BFTP, there is a critical need for continued funding to support key program components like our farm startup mini-grants, which are especially important for low-income and socially disadvantaged trainees, trainer stipends, and scholarships to core programming like our annual conference. We have a strong, well-networked staff at Future Harvest CASA that is capable of leveraging financial support, so it has the greatest impact possible. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you further about our accomplishments this year and future plans. Please contact Executive Director Dena Leibman (dena@futureharvest.org) or BFTP Director Sarah Sohn (sarah@futureharvest.org) with any questions.
2020 Trainee Highlights
This year’s class is full of some truly outstanding new farmers, growing across the region. Many of these trainees are already developing farms with great potential as engines for local workforce development. Here are some brief summaries, highlighting their inspiring work.

Atiya Wells
Atiya is a pediatric nurse and nature educator in Baltimore City. She is the founder of BLISS Meadows, an innovative social justice project at the intersection of environmental, food, and racial justice in Baltimore City. BLISS Meadows creates equitable access to green space with a goal to reconnect Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to land with culturally relevant environmental programming.

Jordan Bethea
Earlier this year, Jordan became the farm manager at BLISS Meadows, started by fellow BFTPer, Atiya Wells. Jordan has a rich love of the Earth working to improve our local food systems so that healthy produce can reach our most underserved communities.

Beth Poggioli
With 20+ years of home gardening experience, Beth came to the BFTP to learn how to transition into commercial cut flower farming. Last year she was a Level 1 trainee and launched her farm, Celadon Hill Farm. She returned this year for Level 2 to deepen her skills through on-farm training at Two Boots Farm. She grows using sustainable practices and sells her cut flowers for wholesale, DIY and market bouquets.

Danielle Peleaz
Danielle is a member of the leadership team for two urban community gardens, including one called Pop Farm. Pop Farm hosts events and gatherings, and grow vegetables, herbs, and flowers for garden members and for the community. Danielle has prior landscaping experience and was trained in the Master Gardener program.
Amanda Pitcher
Amanda is a first generation farmer and owner of Broomes Island Produce Farm where she grows organic vegetables in Southern Maryland. Her goal is to provide healthy, wholesome and accessible food to her community in Calvert County at farmers market and home deliveries, growing in harmony with nature using holistic practices.

Amy Estell
Amy grew up on her family’s dairy farm in Frederick County, MD. She has continued gardening and learning about opportunities in agriculture in the background of other careers. Amy now plans to transition back into farming as a livelihood and hopes to start by expanding and improving her organic cut flower and vegetable production. She is training at Full Cellar Farm this season.

Dana Barnes
Dana is a Level 2 trainee at Whitelock Farm in Baltimore City and is looking to combine her growing love of farming with her food truck business. Dana has also attended a number of food safety trainings provided by Future Harvest and Chesapeake Harvest.

Gerilyn Lackey
Gerilyn comes from a farm family and has 3 years of prior experience working on farms in Baltimore, most recently Great Kids Farm, which works directly with Baltimore public schools. She is refining her business plan and vision for launching her own farm in the near future. She was in the 2019 Level 1 program and returned this year to deepen her understanding of livestock farming at Crooked Fence Farm in Baltimore County via Level 2.

Sam Hanson
Fascinated with creepy crawlies from a young age, Sam has now begun his path towards an alternative protein farm rearing snails and developing techniques for the global escargot industry. Over the past decade Sam has developed skills through robotic battles, managing the Baltimore Farmers’ Market, foraging, and recently through the LEAD Maryland agricultural leadership fellowship.

Tyana Cambridge
Tyana is a Baltimore City resident who has in the past grown vegetables and herbs in her own small hoophouse for personal use, but this year took the jump to learning at a farm level through the BFTP and an AmeriCorps position at Real Food Farm. Tyana was a Level 1 trainee in 2019 and returned this year to complete Level 2 training with The Greener Garden in Baltimore City.
Sabrina Simon
Earlier this year, Sabrina founded Empower Project, an urban permaculture farm started on land leased from the Park Heights Community Health Alliance. Empower Project’s mission is to eliminate food deserts by engaging the community in growing affordable and healthy food while being an example of environmental stewardship in the city.

Katerina Chaconas
Katerina came to the program with prior experience at Frostburg Grows, Real Food Farm, Navdanya Biodiversity and Conservation Farm, and currently works with the Maryland Food Bank Garden, in addition to completing her Level 2 training at Two Boots Farm.

Terican Gross
Terican explores concepts of citizenship and freedom through the lens of the Diaspora experience. She is a builder, embracing an intergenerational framework. Terican is active in her local community while connecting nationally and globally around themes of migration, land and food sovereignty, equitable housing, historical reclamation, environment, and healing traditions.

Pearnell Wilson
Pearnell is a Level 2 trainee matched with Calvert’s Gift Farm in Baltimore County. He has extensive volunteering experience in Baltimore City as well, having worked with The Plantation at Park Heights, an urban farm started by another BFTP graduate. His goal is to start his own farm in the near future.

Hannah Young
Hannah was a Level 1 trainee in 2019 and returned this year to explore agroforestry techniques via Level 2 by training at Forested. Hannah is also a member of the Baltimore Free Farm and a core part of their garden team. She loves learning about permaculture and plants and enjoys the adage, “a weed is any plant you aren’t trying to grow”.

Samantha Brekosky
Samantha is a graphic designer, florist and farmer in Baltimore City. Samantha has worked at several farms, including Wollam Gardens and Two Boots Farm. They are currently in Level 2 and splitting their on-farm training at 2 Baltimore City farms: Whitelock Farm and Hillen Homestead.
Brittany Ness
With a background in nursery and floral design work, Brittany interested in local cut flower production via one of our graduates/trainers, Laura Beth Resnick. Brittany attended a number of classes at Butterbee Farm, where she learned about the BFTP. She has continued her learning this year and has the long-term goal of starting her own cut flower farm. She was a 2019 Level 1 trainee and returned this year at Level 2 to train at Plantmasters.

Nate & Carrie Fox
Nate and Carrie Fox are the Owners/Operators of Riverfox Farm LLC located in Berryville, VA. Nate is a USMC veteran and professional custom carpenter. Carrie's background is in counseling and disability services. In 2019 Nate and Carrie established Riverfox Farm, with emphases on apiculture (beekeeping), conservation of heritage poultry, and cut-flower farming.

Patty Engler
Patty worked for many years for the USDA and has now begun her own farm journey, starting a small flower farm in Baltimore County. Patty was in the Level 1 program in 2019 and returned this year for Level 2, to train at Butterbee Farm with graduate-turned-trainer Laura Beth Resnick.

Johari Barnes
For the past decade, Johari has worked as a higher education administrator and adjunct professor. She is currently pursuing her doctorate while also running her company JohariMade, LLC, where she makes and sells jams, jellies, and other fruit products. Her plan is to start a farm where she can grow the fruits for her jams and grow other produce for local markets.

Charlotte Henderson
Charlotte is a Level 1 graduate and returned this year for Level 2, to train with One Acre Farm in Dickerson, MD, where she also helps manage the farm's 130+ member CSA. She also helped build a partnership between the farm and Adventist HealthCare to offer a subsidized farmers market for the hospital group’s employees.

Nataly Pulecio
Nataly is a Level 1 graduate who returned this year for Level 3, as she launched her cut flower farm, Florencia Farm, located in Southern MD. Nataly is also a Cadastral and Geodesy Engineer!
Jason & Adrienne Granston
Jason and Adrienne, parents of self-directed scholars, encourage self-sufficiency, potential awareness, and generational legacy. They are thinking through and building permaculture systems on their 40 acre farm and forest property on the Eastern Shore of VA. They are focused on soil fertility and inspired by ancient farming methods, alternative conservation strategies, and niche food markets.

Rich Faucher
Rich was a U.S. Marine for over 30 years; serving on active duty, and after retiring, looked for a new calling and found it in farming. He is now pursuing this dream on his VA farm, where he aims to become a full diet farmer, raising livestock and produce to feed the community.

Caitlin Lundquist
Caitlin is the Farm Manager at Whitehall Farm in Clifton, VA. She has been at Whitehall for 2 seasons and grows organic-equivalent vegetables for a CSA and on-site farm store. Prior to this role, Caitlin worked at farmers markets in Northern Virginia and studied sustainable food systems at George Mason University.

Josue Barrera & Gloria Romano-Barrera
Josue and Gloria are the farmers and owners of Glory Fields, a small-scale sustainable farm located on a 5 ½ acre plot in the historic Moyaone Reserve in Accokeek, MD. They are graduates of the Level 1 BFTP and returned in 2020 for Level 3, after a successful first growing season. In 2020, they added unique varieties of cut flowers, while continuing to grow vegetable and herb varieties familiar to Latino markets.

Katie Dunnigan
Katy is the farmer/owner of Pennypacker Lane Flowers, a mini (sub)urban flower farm in Northern Virginia. The farm provides locally and sustainably grown specialty cut flowers for florists, designers and other local flower lovers in VA.

Lydia Woolever
Lydia is a graduate of the Level 1 program and returned this year for Level 3 consulting, as she is now in the second season of running her own farm, Little Fields Floral, a small (but mighty!) flower farm on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, growing cut and native varieties using organic and sustainable practices.