

Farmer Mentoring

Since the first season a hunter-gatherer decided to scatter some seeds next to his camp instead of following the harvest of wild plants, successful farming techniques have been passed along informally from farmer to child, neighbor to neighbor and old-timer to newcomer.

Even now with access to experts, consultants and educators both in print and on-line, farmers still consider other farmers their most credible source of new information.

Southern SARE's Administrative Council has been exploring ways to support farmer-to-farmer learning and is looking at successful program models.

This issue of Common Ground highlights some successful mentoring programs and how they address different challenges. If you would like to let us know about a successful mentoring program that could be used as a model, send an email to groland@southernsare.org

SSAWG Conference
January 19-22, 2006

Louisville, Kentucky

Check www.ssawg.org
for details

Spreading the Grow How

Much of the background information in this story as well as the title came from a story published in [October, 2004](#), by North Carolina A & T State University's School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences newsletter *On the Move*.

While publications receive credit whenever someone uses their work, generous farmers who share secrets of their success often get no more than a "thank you" from their future competitors. Now and then they'll receive a token payment for making a presentation at a conference or field day, but no compensation for time spent answering questions by phone or email, giving advice and encouraging beginning or transitioning farmers.

Still they take time away from their own enterprises to do it. Why? Because farmers are nurturers by nature. And because that's most likely how they learned to farm.

Surveys show that farmers are the most trusted source of information for other farmers, especially when "the farmers who have done it drive up in a new pick up truck," according to Jim Healy who designed the successful Massachusetts Farm Viability Program that has helped save hundreds of farms in that state.

When horticulture extension specialist Keith Baldwin and DeShon Cromartie began designing NCA&T's Extension Farmer-to-Farmer Mentor Program, adequate compensation for the mentors was planned as a major



DeShon Cromartie, Keith Baldwin and mentor farmers Mathew and Suzan Holt of Chatham County, North Carolina.

part of the budget.

"Since our program offers a stipend of \$5,000, farmers feel that being a mentor is worth their time," says program director Cromartie. "It works out to about \$20 an hour for 20 weeks with a minimum of 40 hours mentoring per month. The program is nearing the end of its second season, and none of the farmers have complained about pay."

In fact the program attracts so many applicants that Cromartie now requires potential mentors to submit a proposal in order to weed out all but the most serious farmer educators.

"Currently we have eight mentors located throughout the state," he says. "I'd like to expand it over the entire state with about 15 mentors."

Areas of farm expertise covered by the current mentors range from pastured livestock to organic vegetables to orchards. Each mentor coaches 15-20

Continued from page 1

Spreading the grow how

Common Ground is published by the Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE).

SARE funds projects that develop environmentally sound, economically viable and socially acceptable agricultural methods. SARE is funded by USDA.

The Southern Region SARE Program is administered by the University of Georgia and Fort Valley State University. The Southern Region includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Communications Committee

Lora Lee Schroeder, chair
EPA
Georgia

Jill Auburn
National SARE Director
Washington DC

Sam Combs
Producer
Oklahoma

Leon Crump
Federation of Southern Cooperatives
South Carolina

Claud Evans
Veterinarian and Producer
Oklahoma

Charlie Jackson
Appalachian Sustainable Project
North Carolina

Paul Miller
Jubilee Project
Tennessee

Peggy Sechrist
Producer
Texas

Tom Trantham
Producer
South Carolina

Download or print any project report from the project data base at www.sare.org

For a mailed copy of any project report contact Southern SARE at:

Phone: (770) 412-4787 or

Fax: (770) 412-4789

sueblum@griffin.uga.edu

transitioning from tobacco, although there is the occasional newcomer who inherits farmland or purchases their dream acreage.

The mentor-student relationship often starts when someone calls an extension agent for help. Instead of just supplying an answer based on research, the agent also can refer the caller to a mentor farm. The mentor and student visit each other's farms with the mentor serving as a personal consultant all the way from helping develop a sound business plan through production advice and marketing. The mentor is available by phone or email between farm visits.

"We've been pleased with the early results of the program," says Cromartie. "Many of the new farmers showed a profit in their first season, and the mountain farms, which have their own special challenges, are doing particularly well."

Partnering mentors with extension agents provides a team approach that multiplies the educational resources. Cromartie saw the benefit of this team effort when some of the new farmers wanted to grow strawberries, but none of the mentors had experience in that crop. The extension agent located the latest production information, and the farmer mentor taught himself right along with the students. To further cement the relationship between the mentors and agents, each mentor is also responsible for producing one extension-sponsored, statewide advertised field day each year. They also gather for an orientation prior to each growing season and attend an evaluation meeting afterward.

What makes an outstanding mentor? The ability to motivate people is the most important characteristic, according to Cromartie. "Their styles may range from that of a persistent encourager who builds self confidence to that of a stern taskmaster who teaches appreciating for excellence, but if they can motivate people all the other skills can be learned."

As for developing those other skills, during the first two seasons mentor farmers participated in one-day training sessions. According to Keith Baldwin, as the program matures and specific training needs become evident more sessions will be planned. In an earlier SARE grant (ES00-047) Baldwin and a team from NCA&T and NCSU produced a series to train farmers and agents how to conduct on-farm research and then pass that knowledge along to other farmers. The course was so thorough and rigorous that it was simultaneously offered as a graduate level horticulture class. The user-friendly manual produced for that series is available at www.southernsare.org. A limited number of printed copies is available from the Southern SARE office at (770) 412-4787 by requesting the booklet *Field Guide to On-Farm Research Experiments*.

John O'Sullivan, SARE State Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator at NCA&T, thinks the farmer mentor program has potential as a model for SARE and other funding agencies, particularly because of the long-term relationship that develops between the mentor and the student.

"It has worked well for us," he says. "It allows for a longer presence beyond what would happen in an ordinary demonstration situation. I think that there are lessons to be learned from it, too, almost the need to do a PDP project so that Extension could learn its strengths and some of its challenges."

Between hard times and home

Halfway between Selma and Mississippi, the Taylor Community's location is a metaphor for hard economic times. Fortunately, Taylor also has a place in the heart of three small local churches. They formed The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA) dedicated to rural development opportunities centered around a 44-acre demonstration site for sustainable agriculture and NRCS training.

Among its many investments in the area, TUCCA used a \$10,000 Sustainable Community Grant (CS03-016) to launch a farmer-to-farmer learning program for local students and adults. Andrew Williams, NRCS Alabama Outreach Coordinator, was the project leader. Under the tutelage of Williams and other experienced farmers, the students and adults grew okra, sugar baby watermelons, tomatoes, peppers, arugula, squash and cut flowers such as zinnia and celosia. They also raised and sold about 500 pastured chickens and turkeys per month during the project period.

One lesson learned during the project was that production knowledge alone can't overcome the barriers to economic development. The project goals included a CSA offering locally grown food to the Taylor Community at an affordable price while also marketing crops at an upscale market in Birmingham. While the Birmingham venture has been fairly successful, the CSA has struggled.

Gus Heard-Hughes is the HPI field coordinator for that area and worked with the beginning farmers.

"Once such a grant is over, there is a challenge to make such ventures profitable," he says. "Although the CSA didn't come through, local farmers' markets, a nearby restaurant and direct farm sales have generated steady farm income. Their hope is that the combination of local and non-local sales will bring increased profits while allowing them to provide affordable produce to their own communities."

The training started in the SARE project also gave rise to a new venture for five farm families, according to Heard-Hughes.



In Alabama's Taylor Community agriculture is just one of the rural development ventures sponsored by a coalition of three local churches. Photos by Jerry Dewitt.

"They formed the Star of the Black Belt Farmers Cooperative, growing and marketing organic produce and cut flowers to Pepper Place Market in Birmingham," he said. "It's doing well enough to continue next year."

That success represents a psychological victory that Williams and Heard-Hughes hope will be contagious.

"What's exciting about TUCCA is they are willing to try new things," says Heard-Hughes. "They have served as sort of a testing ground for new enterprises, learning what does and doesn't work and helping pave the way for farmers who are more tentative about trying something different."

When it came to learning those new things, project leaders relied mostly on one-on-one teaching where the personality of the farmer mentor is of major importance.

"I've noticed that farmers generally are careful not to criticize or be dictatorial about what another farmer should do," he says. "The best mentors tend more to share their experiences and ideas, and let the other farmers use them as they like."

As for other teaching methods, some of the beginning farmers attended SSAWG conferences through scholarships, but that kind of experience is still a luxury in a low-income area where the people who would benefit the most can't afford to take time off from their day job or their small farm.

Both Heard-Hughes and Williams view the SARE grant as a catalyst for action beyond the Taylor Community, particularly among the young people, who often move away. Almost 50 students were part of the SARE activity.

Williams who has invested a lifetime of helping fellow rural Alabamians improve their communities is cautious when evaluating impacts and realistic about how much a \$10,000 project can accomplish, especially with young people.

"In the SARE project the students learned some skills and something about work ethics; you might say a seed has been planted in their minds."

Like all farmers he has hope for the crop he planted. Only time will tell how much those seeds will flourish.

For more details see the project data base at www.sare.org and search for CS03-016.

Connecting Small Farmers in Louisiana

Five years ago as director of the Baton Rouge Economic and Agricultural Development Alliance (BREADA), [Andrew Smiley](#) headed up a SARE grant to establish sustainable production methods suitable for Louisiana's tropical climate and to improve information exchange among the state's limited-resource farmers. The project evaluated possible methods of dispensing information, and they discovered that farmers markets were crucial to that communication.

"It was difficult for farmers to invest full days in attending programs for info exchange, so we planned educational programs around markets when they'd be traveling to a central location anyway," he recalls.

At that time the Crescent City Farmers Market in New Orleans supported two busy venues, and the fledgling Red Stick Market in Baton Rouge gave farmers north of New Orleans a vibrant outlet.

"The markets provided excellent forums for information exchange between BREADA and Louisiana

SAWG," he says. "Brief meetings following the market received the highest attendance, and making the rounds during market was a good way for our research partners to distribute information and answer individual questions.

"We also noticed a high level of *informal* exchange among farmers at market, which is something I began encouraging. If a farmer had a question, I'd suggest going to talk to some other specific farmer at the market who may have the answers. We saw farmers coordinating seedling orders and getting delivery at the market, talking shop and sharing technical assistance, and simply taking note of what other farmers were doing successfully."

Post-Katrina the farmers in both cities must regroup, according to Smiley.

"I have spoken with folks at BREADA since the hurricane. The Red Stick Market is continuing and is even gearing up to absorb some of the Crescent City vendors since that market will be closed indefinitely. The general

population of Baton Rouge has increased dramatically because of the influx of evacuees, so there may be a greater customer base, too.

"Richard McCarthy with CCFM is now in Houston and is gearing up for a large scale rebuilding and recovery effort. I am also researching new sales outlets for members of CCFM that are still in production but have no regular farmers' market. Two potential sources could be Red Cross and area food banks, which have expressed some interest in sourcing locally produced fresh food. I'll be sharing that with market folks in Baton Rouge and other areas, who will distribute contact and process information through their network of market vendors. We'll also make that information available through the [Southern SAWG website](#) and regional partners through Southern SAWG."

During the SARE project Smiley discovered that officials and university personnel provided an efficient pipeline for information.

"As they were making farm visits, we'd piggy-back by either tagging along or requesting that they help distribute our info, too," recalls Smiley. "We'd also make ourselves available for state or university sponsored events as presenters. The networks and resources those institutions had were far beyond our own, so we were able to successfully partner with them.

As for what didn't work, assembling farmers for workshops was least successful because even if there wasn't a workshop fee, it cost them too much in wages or farm profit to leave, even for one day.

"We had much better success with individual visits to farms," Smiley concludes. "It wasn't the most efficient way to reach farmers, but it was much more effective for me and other project partners to travel to farms and work one-on-one with folks."

Smiley now lives in Austin, Texas, where he is active in Southern SAWG and works in farm marketing efforts through Sustainable Food Center.

For details about the project search for LS00-115 in the project data base at www.sare.org.



Sustainable techniques such as weed control through solarization were evaluated for use in Louisiana. Then an information network had to be developed so the results could be disseminated to farmers. Louisiana Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator Owusu Bandele at the solarization research plots. Photo by John Mayne.

Immigrants: growing comfort and community

How did Skip Glover learn to farm? “By guess and by golly,” he’s quick to say, which translates into being raised by parents who grew food for the family and who respected authors like Rachel Carson. He continued the tradition when he married. Today Skip and Cookie Glover make their living growing food and flowers without chemicals about 20 minutes west of Atlanta on land that has been farmed by his family since 1823.

“Even when Cookie and I lived in Australia we had a traditional Southern garden to feed our family,” he recalls.

Perhaps because they remember the comfort food from that garden in a strange land, the Glovers have a passion for immigrants who want to farm. As one of Heifer Project International’s Southeast Immigrant Farm Partners, the Glovers host immigrant farmers who work the land for their own use and for crops to sell.

“The first year we had a group of Hmong refugees but transportation was a problem for them,” Skip says. “Now we have families from the local Hispanic population who can make better use of the opportunity.”

Glover Farm supplies the tools, soil amendments, seeds and other items necessary to grow crops and small livestock. The farmers choose their own crops and grow them in their own culturally acceptable ways as long as they don’t use chemicals. When problems arise, the group has to be flexible enough to find solutions, which helps them bond as a community.

For example, this year’s group first voted that each family would work individual plots, but with so many of the men traveling to out-of-town jobs some plots were being neglected. The group then voted to farm cooperatively so that even if someone must be away for a time, the weeding and other chores will get done.

While the project goals center around helping them make money and grow fresh food for themselves, Glover has found that the Latino immigrant families express the most appreciation for the sense of community they get from the farm.

“Recently there was some extra money in their collective till,” he says, “Instead of just dividing it up they voted to spend it on communal events such as a fish fry or a bar-be-cue.”

Their farming experience is also helping immigrant families make friends across the cultural divide, as the Glover Farm is a popular destination for school tours.

“School tours are a growing part of my business,” says Skip. “We have every kind of field trip you can imagine. For over a year we’ve been the outdoor classroom for an organization called Kid Cultivators that provides enrichment programs for home schoolers, teaching them every thing from ecology to math. This year another teacher wants to bring his Spanish language classes out here specifically to mingle with the Latino immigrant families.

“I will turn 66 years old this December and have never thought about retiring, but I’m looking at transitioning into an educational facility for the day I can’t climb onto a tractor.”

The farm is perfectly situated for agritourism and education. As Atlanta sprawls in their direction, Skip and Cookie are farming increasingly closer to the urban edge, bringing them within reach of discerning customers at their farm store, at a city farmers market and through selected restaurants. They also sell through the Farmers Fresh Food Network a partnership venture between farmers and institutional food service providers in Carroll County.

As for mentoring the immigrants who come to his farm, Glover says he learns as much from them as they learn from him.

“So many of them grew food in their home countries,” he says. “They have favorite seed varieties that we have never heard of and, in general, they make use of small livestock more than Americans do.”



Skip Glover demonstrates the thickness of a cover crop residue to farmers and ag educators on a tour sponsored by Georgia’s State Sustainable Ag Coordinators. Photo by Gwen Roland

When the present group of farmers decided to raise chickens, quail and rabbits in addition to planting crops, Glover was surprised to find out they wanted to raise the quail for eggs rather than meat. After doing some market research, he discovered that quail eggs are also prized by many chefs, but there are few suppliers of the delicacy. The fact that the immigrants themselves suggested a potentially very profitable enterprise delights Glover.

“Still learning by guess and by golly,” he chuckles.

For an example of how Glover Family Farm has been used to help demonstrate organic practices to agricultural educators and farmers, search the data base for project ES99-046 at www.sare.org

But is it working? . . . an evaluation enigma

It has been almost 15 years since 14 organizations formed an alliance to give farmers a leading role in making agriculture more sustainable in the South. They named the new alliance the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. Since then, Southern SAWG has been the equivalent of a Big Brother/Big Sister program for a new generation of farmers.

Today SSAWG works with more than 100 organizations in the South. Their primary goal has been to educate farmers and ag professionals, not only in sustainable techniques but also in leadership skills and public policy activism. To achieve that goal they have used every kind of educational approach from personal one-on-one farm visits to annual trade shows for several hundred participants and, most recently, virtual farm tours that reach thousands of viewers on their web site.

Along with disseminating information, SSAWG has helped direct research by advocating broad-based farmer representation on SARE's administrative council, technical committees and the SAN publications council. They also have conducted their own research with grants from SARE and other organizations to determine the best ways to deliver information.

Results from one of those projects--a survey of assistance providers-- has just been published. *Providing Better Assistance for Farmers and Ranchers to Develop Sustainable Enterprises* by Keith Richards and Sarah Leavitt collected information from 30 service organizations throughout the southern region.

Among other topics, interviewees were asked to comment about the effectiveness of their work with farmers. Not surprisingly, most of the responders agreed that one-on-one assistance with farmers is the most effective method of information delivery whether over the phone or in person, but when it came to evaluating *how* effective or valuable their assistance is, the responses were varied.

Of the 27 organizations that work directly with farmers, only seven reported using formal evaluations or scientific surveys to measure success.

Eight of the organizations use financial reports or questionnaires to track the income of farmers they work with. Others track only the number of farms or businesses that use their services or become members, presumably equating increase in membership with satisfied users. The line between cause and effect gets blurrier from there with some of the organizations tracking the number of farmers in the area or the locally-owned businesses associated with agriculture. Some rely on informal anecdotal feedback during farm visits or at annual meetings.

Evaluating the impact of information delivery is often associated with the rate at which farmers adopt more sustainable methods, and that can be a challenge since there are barriers to adoption that are not related to learning. Those barriers may include lack of time, infrastructure and capital. By the time a farmer gets around to implementing a practice it will be difficult to pinpoint the educational sources that contributed to his knowledge base.

Despite the difficulty of precise evaluation there are some common threads that run through most successful mentoring programs--scale, geography and repeated exposure. As for scale, the mentoring farmer can be most helpful to a student whose acreage is at least in the same size range as the mentor's farm, particularly when it comes to working with a business and marketing plan. Geography and repeated exposure are closely related because farm visits are crucial to a mentor relationship, sometimes the main element. If either person has to drive an hour or more, there won't be many visits during the growing season and those visits are vital.



They take photos and notes. They ask questions, kick tires on the Gator and look under leaves for insects that are a pest back home. Farmers and agents list farm visits as their preferred method of learning, but evaluating how much of that new information is implemented over time remains elusive. Photo by Gwen Roland.

"Through the Sustainable Alabama Ag Network we have a program that pays for experienced and new farmers to visit each others farms," says Gus Heard-Hughes, the HPI field representative in that state.

Those visits allow the mentor-student team to monitor progress and talk to each other throughout the season even if there are no other program elements. That repeated exposure is important for inspiration as well as education, according to Anthony Flaccavento of Appalachian Sustainable Development.

"Being accessible makes our program effective," he says. "We are available all the time to the growers by phone; they can call with any question."

The entire 20-page report for *Providing Better Assistance for Farmers and Ranchers to Develop Sustainable Enterprises* is available at www.ssaug.org. For more details go to the project data base at www.sare.org and search for LS04-166.

Which SARE grant program for you?

Southern SARE administers seven grant programs, each with its own priorities and audiences. The process begins with the release of calls for proposals for each of the programs. The SSARE web site www.southernsare.org is the quickest way to receive the calls for proposals as soon as they are released. If you prefer a mailed copy of any of the calls for proposals, contact Paige Patton at (770) 412-4787 or info@southernsare.org

Research and Education Projects (including Planning Grants) generally are conducted by interdisciplinary, multi-institutional, and often, multi-state research teams coordinated by a principal investigator from a non-governmental organization, university or governmental agency. These projects include farmers as participants. Planning Grants do not require preproposals.

2005

March Call for R&E preproposals and Planning Grant proposals released

June R&E Preproposals due, Planning Grant proposals due

August Full R&E proposals requested, Administrative Council announces Planning Grant awards

Nov. Full R&E proposals due

2006

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Graduate Student Awards are intended for full-time graduate students (masters or Ph.D.) enrolled at accredited colleges and universities in the Southern Region. Up to \$10,000 will be awarded to each successful applicant for up to three years of project activities. The funds are paid directly to the university for use on the graduate student's project.

2005

March Call for proposals released
June Proposals due

2006

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Professional Development Program Projects train agricultural information providers in sustainable agriculture techniques and concepts.

2005

March Call for preproposals released

May Preproposals due

November Full proposals due

2006

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Producer Grant Projects are developed, coordinated and conducted by producers or producer organizations. These projects are generally located in one state, often on one farm. There is a \$10,000 limit for funding proposals submitted by an individual producer and a \$15,000-limit on proposals submitted by producer organizations.

2005

August Call for proposals released
November Proposals due

2006

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

On-Farm Research Projects are conducted by agricultural professionals such as extension agents, NRCS and/or NGO personnel who currently work with farmers and ranchers. Cooperators must include at least one producer at all stages of the project. Funded for a maximum of \$15,000 for up to two years of activities.

2005

August Call for 2004 proposals released

November Proposals due

2006

February Administrative Council announces grant awards

Sustainable Community Innovation Projects link sound farm and nonfarm economic development with agricultural and natural resource management. Applicants may be farmers, ranchers, researchers, community organizations, environmentalists, ag and community development professionals, entrepreneurs, governmental and non-governmental organizations. Funded for a project maximum of \$10,000 for up to two years of activities.

2005

July Call for proposals released
September Proposals due
November Administrative Council announces grant awards

Farmer to agent training

In order to help North Carolina farmers meet consumer demand for organic food, Nancy Creamer, director of the [Center for Environmental Farming Systems](#) at NCSU, led a SARE project that designed a comprehensive training series and manual addressing all aspects of organic farming systems.

While it was primarily farmers who were seeking the information, Creamer estimated that for each extension agent who became proficient and comfortable with organic methods, 25 more farmers could be reached each year. But extension agents were stretched for time, travel funds were shrinking each year and many were not motivated to learn alternative farming methods when there was already so much information they had to keep up with in conventional farming.

So the project team strategized to make the series of demonstrations, workshops and tours especially attractive and accessible to agents. A major draw was the four graduate level NCSU credits awarded to agents who completed the course work. To accommodate busy schedules the series was conducted as six, two-day workshops between April and November. A wrap-up meeting was conveniently slated for the annual extension conference.

Practical, hands-on field activities conducted at private farms and at CEFS

assured that the educational goals were taking place in a real-world context. Participants became more comfortable as they listened to successful farmers talking about and demonstrating how organic principles worked on their operations.

That year, 1998, more agents than ever before attended the Carolina Farm Stewardship Sustainable Agriculture Conference. Now, seven years later, Creamer continues to receive positive feedback from the agents who participated and the growers who work with them. Many have continued to attend the annual Sustainable Agriculture Conference and some cooperated in another SARE project (ES00-047) led by Keith Baldwin to develop a manual for participatory on-farm research methods.

“Our training demonstrated that agents are very willing to learn about these biological systems once barriers are removed to them doing so,” Creamer wrote in her final report. “Removing those barriers to learning opened the door to new attitudes and an eagerness



Heirloom vegetables are popular high-value crops for organic growers like Jeff Isbel of South Carolina. Photo by Gwen Roland

to work with organic growers.”

The attractive user-friendly training manual will be available at www.cefs.ncsu.edu later this autumn.

For more information search the database at www.sare.org for ES97-025.