

Soil Testing, Raising New Farmers, Upcoming Events

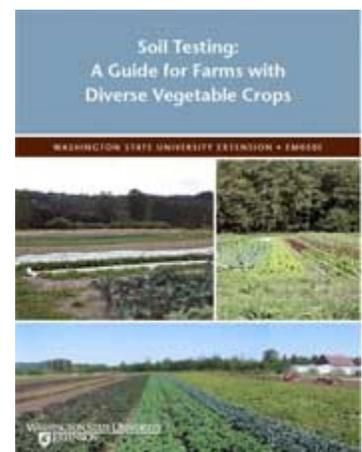
Posted by steven.reynolds | August 16, 2012

Soil Testing Guide for Vegetable Farmers Published by WSU

WSU Extension Publications has just released “Soil Testing: A Guide for Farms with Diverse Vegetable Crops.” The new fact sheet presents a comprehensive, yet affordable, procedure for implementing an annual soil-testing program for farms with diverse vegetable crops. The reader will learn when to sample, where to sample, how to take a sample, and how to use sample results to improve farm management.

“Healthy soils are living, dynamic systems that provide many functions essential to human health and habitation,” writes WSU Extension educator and soil scientist Doug Collins in the new publication. “Soil sampling and analysis can be used not only to sustain plant and animal productivity but also to maintain or enhance air and water quality. Using data from soil sampling and analyses to tailor farm management decisions can also improve both farm profitability and environmental stewardship.”

Soil testing results can indicate nutrient deficiencies or excesses, nutrient-



holding capacity, organic matter content, and soil alkalinity or acidity. Soil analysis can guide farmers and gardeners in making soil amendment and soil management decisions. Making soil sampling an annual event enables farmers to track management practices and make informed decisions about future soil amendment practices.

“Soil Testing” clearly and simply guides readers through the entire process of testing. The process begins with developing a soil-sampling plan, when and how to take soil samples, and how to track and use the data collected.

Collins is leading [a team developing soil-fertility tests](#) for use by organic farmers. He emphasized the importance of assessing particular sites for soil-fertility. “What we’ve found is that you really have to know what is going on with a particular piece of ground. You can’t offer generalized advice about fertility management. That’s why we’re developing these tests,” Collins said.

“Soil Testing” is available as a free PDF download from [WSU Extension Publications](#).

–Brian Charles Clark

WSU Small Farms Program and Viva Farms Helps Aspiring Farmers Step Towards Success



Sarita Schaffer, regional coordinator of WSU’s immigrant farming program, helps aspiring farmers on their path to farm

Farming is changing across the United States, and WSU uses innovative programs such as a partnership with Viva Farms and their Incubator Program to help with the transition. Viva Farms is a farm incubator in Mount Vernon that helps fledgling farmers, many of them immigrants, move from simple aspiration to actual farm ownership. Sarita Schaffer is the director of Viva Farms and a regional coordinator for WSU’s immigrant farming program.

“A lot of people who grew up on farms are not so excited about farming,” says Schaffer. With the average age of farmers in the United States approaching sixty, there are concerns about where the next generation of farm owners and operators will come from. Schaffer finds part of the answer in the immigrant population that works the fields now. “If you were to drive around the farms in Skagit

ownership.

County, you would notice that the majority of people working on farms are of Latino background.” Many of them are excellent candidates for farm ownership.

“Immigrants often have more agricultural experience and, in some cases, a greater love of agriculture. Their aspiration is to be farmers; that’s what their family has always done and they enjoy it.”

There is a wide gulf, however, between aspiration and farm ownership. While many aspiring farmers find an internship, which helps them build skills, it doesn’t bring them any closer to owning or leasing land, acquiring equipment, or gaining a market. Enter Viva Farms, the farm incubator.

Viva Farms was founded in 2009 by GrowFood, an international farm internship program, in partnership with WSU Skagit County Extension. Viva helps farmers become established through a comprehensive program that provides not only education, but also access to land, equipment, and markets. This combination has attracted more aspiring farmers to Viva every year, bringing ten farms under the Viva umbrella in 2012.



Salvador Morales, originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, uses a seeding tool to quickly plant his field at Viva Farms.



Valerie Rose, a farmer at Viva Farms, cleans turnips at a field wash station. Valerie and the other Viva farmers will soon have the advantage of a 7400–square–foot facility for processing, cold

Viva’s curriculum is integrated with WSU’s Cultivating Success program, a small farmer business development program. Farmers coming to Viva Farm are required to complete the Viva curriculum, including the development of a business plan. Specialists also come from the nearby WSU Mount Vernon Northwest Research and Extension Center to teach the farmers about pest monitoring, weed pressure, and other agricultural issues. “WSU is able to provide great Extension resources,” Schaffer observed.

Once farmers have a business plan in place, they can rent land from Viva at a low cost, for up to five years. Many farmers start by renting an acre for the first year, and grow from there. One farmer, Santiago Lozano, originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, started with two acres, and over the next three years, not only rented more land at Viva, but also rented a nearby

storage and distribution.

piece of ground, bringing his farm size up to ten acres.

The incubator also provides access to equipment and critical infrastructure like cold storage and greenhouses, and help with marketing, distribution, and business management. Lozano identified the primary benefit as the on-site availability of equipment, including tractors. He notes that he could rent equipment elsewhere for a similar price, but by renting from Viva, he can avoid travel time and minimum charges. In a business where time is money, he comes out ahead.

While Viva Farms is only three years old, it is continually enhancing its operations to benefit fledgling farmers. It recently signed a lease on 7,400 square feet of warehouse space with ample cold storage and equipment for cleaning and processing fresh fruits and vegetables. The centerpiece of the facility will be a hydrocooler, a piece of equipment that rapidly cools produce, greatly increasing shelf life. Lettuce particularly needs to be cooled rapidly to provide the highest quality to the consumer. "It's pretty rare for someone who is operating a one- to five-acre farm to justify the cost of a hydrocooler," said Schaffer. "If it's shared among 15 to 20 farms in an area, and everyone's using it for a couple hours every day, then it becomes a viable option." The hydrocooler will allow farmers at Viva to compete in wholesale markets.

Viva doesn't have all the equipment farmers might need, but this actually helps the farmers transition to independence. By saving on rental costs for land and heavy machinery, farmers can build a nest egg that can be used to purchase some of their own equipment. When they are ready to leave Viva, they have already made capital investments, and are more likely to succeed.

Land and equipment mean nothing to farmers, though, unless they can sell their harvest—and marketing is the capstone of Viva Farms. Viva launched a farm stand within eyesight of the farm, on a busy stretch of Highway 20 leading to the tourist magnets of the San Juan Islands and Deception Pass. Within a week, the open-air stand was drawing 100-200 customers per day. From the farm stand, shoppers "can look out and see exactly where their produce came from," Schaffer said. "If they're curious, they can mosey into the fields and talk to the farmers. They can meet the folks who are growing their food, and learn why it's important to support new farmers." The farmers also benefit from interaction with the shoppers. "They get immediate feedback on their produce. Do people want something bigger? Do they want something smaller? Do they want different varieties? Are they more interested in organic? Are they more interested in a low price? So it's a great marketing lesson." As with other aspects of the farm, success drives success, and Viva is improving

the stand, installing a larger roof and a cold rack to keep the produce in top condition.

The biggest marketing effort, though, goes to the Community Supported Agriculture program that Viva runs with the nearby Growing Washington organization. The CSA delivers 1,200 boxes of fresh produce to customers in four counties in the Puget Sound region, making it one of the largest CSAs to deliver all-Washington produce. Participating farmers need to plan and plant accordingly, so they can provide 1,200 heads of lettuce, 1200 pints of strawberries, or 1200 of another item at a time. As farmers experience the planning, production, and packaging aspects of the CSA, some have started their own CSAs on the side. They will even sell produce to each other to offer their customers more variety.

This demonstrates another strategy the Viva farmers adopt to succeed in the changing landscape of farming: cooperation. “I think the collaborative model is something that is really effective, particularly for small-scale growers,” said Schaffer. This collaboration allows farmers to bring their produce together and gain larger markets. “We’re seeing a shift from family farms to families of farms,” Schaffer observed. This formula brings the next generation of farmers onto the land and rejuvenates America’s agricultural landscape.

–Bob Hoffmann

WSU Extension Partners Give Beginning Farmers a Boost with Loan Program

Beginning farmers in Skagit County are getting a much-needed boost from a new program brings together Slow Money NW, Viva Farm, North Coast Credit Union, Washington State University Extension and food-minded investors in the region. The project helps new farmers overcome one of the major hurdles producers face: the start-up costs involved in agricultural enterprises.

Slow Money NW’s innovative program, called the Farmer Reserve Fund, is extending credit services to beginning farmers by helping North Coast Credit Union leverage its existing financial resources. The non-profit project made its first loan with NCCU last week to strawberry farmer Santiago Lozano. This week, a second loan was made to vegetable producer Nelida Martinez. The loans allow new farmers to purchase equipment



and supplies and then repay the loan within a year.

Slow Money NW, a project of the non-profit Grow Food, worked to match available funds and financial services in the region with the needs of emerging local food and farm businesses. “We wanted to find a model that kept our overhead down and that also utilized the existing resources in the farming community,” said Japhet Koteen, Slow Money NW’s Project Manager. North Coast Credit Union was the ideal partner since it has plenty of deposits available to lend but did not have many low-risk alternatives.

“This was absolutely perfect for us,” said Terry Belcoe, president of NCCU. “We’ve got all the systems and expertise in place to do the lending. What we lacked was the knowledge of, and connections with, this new market of potential borrowing members. Slow Money NW and Viva Farms had all the pieces that we were lacking.”

New farmer Santiago Lozano (right) holding the paperwork approving his line of credit secured by the Farmer Reserve Fund. Next to Lozano are Grow Food’s executive director, Ethan Schaffer, and NCCU loan officer, Carolina Chavez.



Nelida Martinez is the owner and operator of Pure Nelida Farms. Photo courtesy Amanda Wilson.

Charitable donations from two local investors were used to establish a reserve fund at NCCU in order to reduce risk for the credit union while leveraging its existing deposits. Viva Farms provides an additional layer of due diligence for the fund by screening their student-farmer pool for the best potential financing candidates. The farmers also receive technical and entrepreneurial assistance from WSU Extension’s Cultivating Success program, further insuring their ability to succeed as new farmers.

The Farmer Reserve Fund is a win-win situation for both the credit union that puts its deposits to work in the community and the investors who donated the reserve funds. Each dollar deposited into the fund results in up to five dollars to lend out to beginning farmers.

The farmers also see immediate benefits. “It is very difficult for new growers to access credit,” said Lozano. “I will reserve some of my line of credit to cover any emergencies that come up. The rest I will use to pay my harvest crew before I get paid for sales.”

Martinez said the loan is allowing her to grow her young business. “Thanks to this program, it’s much easier for new farmers like myself to get a loan and keep moving forward. We’re very thankful for the extra help in realizing our dreams.”

Viva Farms is a Skagit County–based program with a mission of launching the next generation of sustainable farmers. The Viva Farms Incubator Program was launched in June 2009 to provide new farmers affordable access to education, training and technical assistance; capital and credit; and land and markets.

–Brian Charles Clark



Upcoming Events

Upcoming Webinar to Introduce New Organic Seed Database

Upcoming Events

Join the Organic Seed Alliance on August 21 for an eOrganic webinar introducing Organic Seed Finder, a new database hosted by the Association of Official

Seed Certifying Agencies.

Beginning this fall, Organic Seed Finder will provide reliable organic seed availability information. The database aims to facilitate the growth and success of the organic seed sector and support farmer, certifier, and handler decisions for better meeting the national organic seed requirement and for serving organic production, which remains one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. food industry.

To register for the webinar, visit <http://www.extension.org/pages/64782>. For more information, contact Cathleen McCluskey at cathleen@seedalliance.org or (360) 472-0247.

Washington Organic Week Set for Sept. 6 – 15

The Governor’s office officially proclaimed September 9–15 as Washington Organic Week – WOW!

WSDA Organic Program is partnering with Tilth Producers of Washington to highlight the great work being done by the state’s organic industry during this week and beyond. The weeklong celebration ends on Sept. 15 with Under the

Harvest Moon, the first annual benefit auction for Tilth Producers, held at the Fremont Abbey Arts Center. This gala event will showcase the abundant bounty of the region's farms, ranches, and orchards. The evening will feature a "good food"-focused silent auction; fabulous live music; locally-sourced hors d'oeuvres; organic beer, wine and cider; and a live auction during dessert to cap the evening off. Robin Leventhal, former owner and executive chef of Crave, Star of Top Chef Season 6, and Slow Food Seattle board member, will be the emcee and auctioneer.

All proceeds go towards ensuring Tilth Producers continues to provide excellent networking and educational opportunities for Washington sustainable and organic farmers and stakeholders. Find out more about WOW, Under the Harvest Moon, and other developing events on the [Tilth Producers of Washington website](#).

Take a Walk

Kirsop Farm is a 20-acre diversified farm located in the city of Tumwater. Now in its 17th year, Kirsop is co-owned and operated by Genine Bradwin and Colin Barricklow. In addition to a 200-member CSA and two weekly farmers markets, they also provide fresh vegetables to local restaurants and stores. Over the last five years, Kirsop Farm has diversified production to include pastured poultry, grains, and mushrooms. Colin and Genine are participating in two WSU on-farm research trials: reduced tillage in organic agriculture, and managing fertility on organic farms. The farm walk will highlight these research trials and the diversified vegetable, grain, and poultry production at Kirsop Farm. Learn more about this and other upcoming Farm Walks on [the Tilth Producers' website](#).

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