New Crops Project Enters New Phase: Crops In the Field

By Bobby Wenner • New Crops Project Coordinator

As spring is finally starting to peek its head out, we are proud to announce a big addition to our ongoing efforts with the New Crops Project: This coming season, we will be partnering with specialty crop experts at Central Lakes College in Staples to develop a demonstration plot which will showcase a variety of alternative and unique crops that have an unmet consumer demand in Minnesota. Thanks to help from Central Chapter stalwart and specialty crops guru Mel Wiens (left), SFA has been able to connect with experienced growers and secure a plot to continue to spread the reach of the New Crops Project.

For those unfamiliar with New Crops, it is an ongoing, statewide initiative to help connect farmers and consumers through specialty crops which have a unique and unmet demand in Minnesota. Our work started with well-received market research, which has led to continued farmer-to-farmer networking, research and outreach in the area of local specialty foods.
This plot (above) comes as a natural next step for the project as we continue to work to educate farmers and consumers about alternative crops and their values in Minnesota’s food system. The demonstration will feature a variety of small grains and fruits, which are well-suited for Minnesota’s growing environments and have a demand among consumers, to be used for future programming. Crops to be showcased on the plot include spelt, amaranth, teff, sea buckthorn, aronia berries, currants and many more.

Keep a look out in the coming months for additional information about the plot as well as New Crops programming.

For more information about the project, including consumer links and farmer field guides, visit the New Crops homepage and follow the project blog; otherwise, feel free to send me an email at bobby@sfa-mn.org.

Executive Director’s Note

By John Mesko

What’s Next?

What is the next step we need to take as a movement in Sustainable Agriculture?

Agriculturalists everywhere disagree about the manner and methods needed to address the issues of sustainability in food and farming. For some, the key issue is the lack of fairness in the system. Large commodity farmers and large commodity consumers have an unfair advantage in many respects. Because government policy holds so much sway in the debate, the efforts of these entities are geared toward influencing the distribution of public dollars. We are talking ridiculous amounts of money here, so the effort is clearly well founded. But we can do more.

Others who are concerned about the sustainability of agriculture are focused on developing successful new farmers who can step in as our current cast of baby-boom farmers ages out, and moves on. SFA is involved in beginning farmer education and is committed to helping new farmers succeed. But we can do more.

Another focus is on the environment. Certainly, farming has the potential for great environmental impact on the whole, and we should all be concerned about what various practices can do to the environment. SFA is working toward a sustainable environment and...
looking at ways to make environment-conscious farming the standard in the future. But we can do more.

OK, well let's say we get new farmers on the land, and we get them farming the right way environmentally, will they have products and a place to market them? SFA is bringing new crops into the production model for farms all across Minnesota, and is helping to develop markets for them. But we can do more.

The “Rural Renascence” that is underway in some areas of MN is great, but if you are a farmer, you know how isolating farming can be. SFA Chapters throughout the state are building community, creating a place in rural areas for new farmers to land and connect. We are increasing the network of farmers in sustainable agriculture. But we can do more.

What is needed next in sustainable agriculture is a Joel Salatin in every county. I don’t necessarily mean a “Christian-libertarian-environmentalist-capitalist-lunatic-farmer” as Salatin has referred to himself. (though certainly some of those qualities can help the movement). More broadly, we need thousands of innovative, entrepreneurial, articulate, influential, confident, capable stalwarts who can help craft the true message of sustainable agriculture and deliver it both nationally, and locally. SFA has the infrastructure, the mission and the leaders to make good on this calling. If you want to help make this a reality, send me an email. I'm ready for the next step; will you join me?

Cover Crop Fact Sheet Now Available for Download

With our unpredictable weather, soil health is more important than ever for sustainable farmers. At SFA, we are ramping up our commitment to soil health education – it's the bedrock of not only sustainable food production but also environmental stewardship.

Alongside our ongoing GrazeFest series of pasture-based events, SFA's Livestock and Grazing Coordinator Kent Solberg has prepared a Cover Crop Fact Sheet, a one-page guide to the basic tenets of cover cropping, the four main groups of cover crop varieties, and additional resources graziers and farmers should utilize.

The downloadable fact sheet is available on our GrazeFest page. Please feel free to spread the Fact Sheet with friends and neighbors.

New Issue of Farm Transitions Newsletter Online

Our Farm Transitions program with Renewing the Countryside has its own e-newsletter, covering various topics on farm transition, wills and trusts, and estate planning.

Look for a new edition that includes several timely articles about long-term care, including the importance of long-term care insurance. Contributors to this edition of the Farm Transitions newsletter include Renewing the Countryside Executive Director Jan Joannides, University of Minnesota farm transition expert Gary Hachfeld, and RTC staff attorney Robyn Ingber.

Also, watch for upcoming expanded Farm Transitions content including podcasts, a print newsletter, a collaborative Farm Transitions online portal, and more.

To view the latest newsletter and the newsletter archive, visit our Farm Transitions homepage.
SFA GrazeFest Series Pasture Walk Event Set for Aug. 10

By Kent Solberg • SFA Livestock and Grazing Coordinator

Attention dairy and beef producers: A pasture walk and farm tour will be held at 9:30 a.m. Sat., Aug. 10, 2013, at the Gans farm north of Aitkin. We will be looking at Joe's energized fence and watering systems, grazing management, and soil health in relation to pasture management. Watch SFA Connect for more information on the event and registration as the date approaches.

Annual Conference Photo Feature

Photographer Crystal Liepa documented our SFA Annual Conference again in 2013 at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Watch for a new photo each issue of SFA Connect and learn more about Crystal at her website.

SFA Photo Contest Winner: Andrew Wirtz of Melrose

Who doesn't want to win a free T-shirt, let alone a cool SFA one? Here's your chance. Send communications coordinator Jason Walker your photos, and the best each month, chosen by a panel of distinguished judges, gets an SFA T-shirt. What kind of photos are we seeking? Simply anything from your farm, family, garden or kitchen – anything that's related somehow to sustainable agriculture that you'd like to share with SFA members.

Send your photos to jason@sfa-mn.org, and we'll include the winner in SFA Connect. Check out our Facebook page for all the photo submissions.

April's winner: Andrew Wirtz of Melrose sent this photo of their son, Jayden, checking out their hogs.
Take Part in Quick Survey for SFA; T-shirt Up for Grabs

Thanks to all who participated in the recent SFA Stress Survey, a simple, two-question survey. We will use this data to assess the need for stress-related programming at future SFA Farmer-to-Farmer Network events.

We're collecting data with another super-quick survey on the new topic of SFA members' use of mobile technology and how it pertains to SFA. The survey is now available at this link, so please take a few minutes to respond. A random survey-taker will receive an SFA T-shirt. Thanks!

Holistic Management of Goats Workshop Planned in Ashby

An upcoming event in the Fergus Falls area includes SFA members and will be relevant to many. The event:

- **Holistic Management of Goats Workshop** is 10 a.m.-4 p.m. June 15. As part of the M State Sustainable Food Production program's short course series, this day features a hands-on opportunity to learn about incorporating meat and milk goats into a farming operation. Topics: animal selection for a forage-based system; nutrition requirements; planned grazing; fencing; shelters, animal handling. Instructors are Sue Wika and Tom Prieve of Paradox Farm, a forage-based, permaculture farm featuring integrated livestock systems located at 11643 State Highway 78, Ashby, Minn. Cost: $50/person; $75/family. Bring a sack lunch. More information: paradoxhomestead@gmail.com or 218.747.2202.

HECUA Seeking 80-Hour Farm Volunteer

The Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) is seeking an 80-hour farm volunteer position for a period of three weeks sometime between mid-June and mid-August 2013. Undergraduate students interested in exploring sustainable agricultural practices and business models would work for three weeks in exchange for lodging at the farm and some training and context for the hands on day-to-day work. HECUA will provide the learning and reflection tools for the student and will evaluate their contributions. If interested, please email HECUA's Manager of Internships and Community Partnerships at eseru@hecua.org.

Apply for USDA's Farm Service Agency Microloans

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) developed the Microloan (ML) program to better serve the unique financial operating needs of beginning, niche and the smallest of family farm operations by modifying its Operating Loan (OL) application, eligibility and security requirements. The program will offer more flexible access to credit and will serve as an attractive loan alternative for smaller farming operations like specialty crop producers and operators of community supported agriculture (CSA). These smaller farms, including non-traditional farm operations, often face limited financing options. For more information, click here.

SFA Connect is your bi-weekly link to the Sustainable Farming Association

The Sustainable Farming Association is a chapter-based, statewide non-profit organization that supports the development and enhancement of sustainable farming systems through innovation, demonstration, education, and farmer-to-farmer networking. If you, your farm or organization has any upcoming events that you would like posted on the SFA Community Calendar, email info@sfa-mn.org.

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