Twin Cities Metro Growers Network Explores Tools

Our May meeting was out at Big River Farms (mnfoodassociation.org) on a warm spring evening in the beautiful St. Croix River Valley... 30 growers considering tools at the farmer training facilities of the MN Food Association, part of The Food Group. If you are considering growing food for profit, the Big River Farms training program is a great way to get your feet wet without getting in over your head. After a pot luck meal and refreshments (thanks everyone!), we delved into digging tools, pondered planting equipment and tried our hand at whacking weeds with an assortment of hoes. See our web site for handouts from this event and past events – www.sfa-mn.org/twin-cities-growers-network --Karl Hakanson, UM Extension-Hennepin County. Photos Karl H. except where noted.

Michele Manske, Agricultural Educator & Farm Coordinator, Pillsbury United Communities (www.puc-mn.org), started us off with a yoga session for keeping our hardworking muscles limber and ready for a day’s work. Michele runs three urban farm sites in South Minneapolis and one in North Minneapolis. In the winter she operates an indoor hydroponic system in a refurbished freight container. Manske explained that the produce goes to free daily meal programs, a food shelf and a CSA box to the City of Minneapolis’s lead-free housing project. This year produce will be sold to My North Market, Pillsbury United-sponsored grocery store and a CSA at the Indian Health Board.

“Our farms are chemical free and environmentally responsible”, says Manske. “This season we are participating in three research studies with the City of Minneapolis, the MN Department of Ag. and the U of M to look at soil treatments, carbon sequestration, economic opportunities and flowers for pollinators.” She showed some of her favorite hand tools, including a Japanese style digging knife, or Hori Hori. “Big River Farms is so beautiful and peaceful. It was such a fun night to connect with fellow growers and talk tools!” Manske said, adding, “Thank you to the UM Extension for organizing this, I think everyone learned something new that night. Can’t wait for the next event!”

Jake Voit, Property Manager for Big River Farms and professional landscaper, led a discussion on the basic functions and proper use of some common hand tools. Jake showed how a shovel is actually a lever with a blade, and therefore has a correct way to use it effectively and getting the most from the tool with the least amount of effort and wear and tear on your body. He emphasized that choosing the right tool for the job makes big difference. Voit also demonstrated some sharpening techniques and tools, adding that sharp tools are much more effective, easier to use, and safer!

May Lee, Farmer Mentor at Big River Farms and a certified organic farmer and a graduate of Minnesota Food Association’s farmer training program. Along with her daughter, Mhonpaj, she runs her own farming operation, Mhonpaj’s Garden (www.facebook.com/Mhonpajsgarden). May Lee demonstrated both purchased and hand-made hand transplanters, the very cool paper-pot transplanter (paperpot.co) system, and showed her knife sharpening skills as well. Wa Kou Hang (right), second-year farmer at Big River Farms and owner of Twin Cities Green Farm (www.facebook.com/Twin-Cities-Green-Farm), showed two walk-behind seeders, an Earthway (earthway.com) and the more expensive but more accurate Jang Jang JP-1 seeder. He also demonstrated the tilther, and battery drill-powered tiller for light tillage and weeding.

Laura May Mirafuentes, Programs Manager at Big River Farms, led a short tour of the 150 acre property, and provided a brief overview of the programs and services provided by the organization to support small farmers and the local community. The group visited farmers’ fields, the greenhouse, high tunnels, and packing shed, and learned about the education, infrastructure, land, and market opportunities the program offers to primarily immigrants and farmers of color. They also mingled with and learned from current BRF farmers. Photo submitted.
Lara Dreier, from the MN Tool Library (www.mntoolibrary.org), introduced us to the great organization. Members pay a small annual membership fee and, like a book library, can check out a full range of tools, including lawn and garden tools. Lara said that members also have access to a full workshop at each library branch to work on projects that require larger tools that can’t be easily transported, like drill presses, table saws, and lathes. The MN Tool Library has two branches, located in NE Minneapolis and the Midway neighborhood in St. Paul, and welcomes everyone, whether you are a homeowner or renter, a DIY newbie or a professional. Lara said, “It was a pleasure getting to know your group. Thanks for putting together such a great event”.

Natalie Hoidal, our new U of MN Extension Educator in Horticulture and Food Systems (https://extension.umn.edu), was on hand to introduce herself and her new position dedicated to assisting horticulturist around the state. Reflecting on the Growers Network, Hoidal said, “The network event was a great opportunity for farmers and gardeners to learn from each other about all aspects of tools, including selection, maintenance, access, and caring for our most valuable tool - our bodies. Participants were engaged and excited to share their experience and expertise.”

Networkers’ out in the fields at Big River Farms trying out a number of different hoes, including: stirrup, collinear, wire-weeders, and trapezoid types. Long handles and hoes meant to be used in a more upright position reduce bending over and sore backs! Weeding well done.

Beautiful evening at Big River Farms and the St. Croix River Valley. Thanks everyone for making it a success! --Karl