

FOOD to BANK on

by Brent Cole

Helping new farmers, helping food banks



Mary von Krusenstiern, of Neighborhood Harvest, is looking to develop her CSA and farm stand. She operates three plots within Bellingham and serves local neighborhoods. PHOTO BY CHRIS FULLER

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In its sixth year, the Food to Bank On (FTBO) program provides new farmers (those in business less than three years) with in-depth training and resources, while also helping to supply local charities and food banks with food. The program is sponsored by Sustainable Connections' Food and Farming department, and this year includes a collaboration with WSU Whatcom County Extension's Cultivating Success Agricultural Entrepreneurship class.

The three-year program helps participants "create and refine a business plan, get marketing and promotional assistance and receive feedback as a part of a close-knit peer group with mentor support," according to Sara Southerland, the FTBO Coordinator, in a press release. "Our goal is to help farmers with the community resources they need to be successful from the start."

Laura Ridenour, Sustainable Connections' Food and Farming Manager, added, "This program is unique in that these participants already have their businesses off the ground, but not more than three years. This is the crucial time."

Since the program started in 2003, a total of 32 farmers have participated and 20 of them continue to farm. A 63 percent success rate, it's a stark contrast to some statistics showing a 75 percent fail rate for new businesses in the first three years of

existence.

A call for applications for the program took place in September. According to Ridenour, one of the key factors in the selection process are market pressures. "We've been conscious of accepting participants who are offering diverse products and offering a diverse market." This year, in part to meet a need within Whatcom County, three of the selected farmers raise local beef, pork, chicken or turkeys.

Five new farmers will start the program this year. They include three farms focused on direct selling meats: Leah VanderStoep and Randall Reinders, who will be in their second year of grass-fed beef production; Brandie Lambdin and Bradley Tremper of Sandy Spade Farm (near Concrete); and Scott and Cheryl Perry of Rustic Moon Farm (outside of Bellingham). In addition, Mary von Krusenstiern of



Jeff Ellsworth and Danielle Chevalier, of Highwater Farm in Skagit County, sell their produce to the Food Co-ops in Mount Vernon and Bellingham, and through their farmstand. COURTESY PHOTO



A Heritage Mulefoot mom and baby eating veggies from the garden at Rustic Moon Farm. COURTESY OF CHERYL PERRY/RUSTIC MOON FARM



Recent program graduate Alex Winstead, owner of Cascadia Mushrooms, sells his mushrooms to local businesses as well as at the Bellingham Farmers Market and University District Farmers Market in Seattle (above). COURTESY PHOTO

Neighborhood Harvest Farm (Bellingham) and Ephraim Kurzewski of The Carrot and Stick (Squalicum Valley) will be gearing their development towards CSAs, farm stands and in the case of Kurzewski, a variety of do-it-yourself workshops.

New this year, the program has linked up with WSU Whatcom County Extension's Cultivating Success Agricultural Entrepreneurship class, which provides participants with business-planning workshops, ranging from budgeting and other financial aspects to marketing strategies and even insurance options. Farmers attend classes to work on their business plan and other issues, while delivering food to local organizations and food banks at certain times throughout the month.

"Merging the WSU curriculum with the Food To Bank On project makes sense," said Colleen Burrows, class facilitator and WSU Extension Integrated Pest Management Coordinator, in a press release. "It will allow more farmers to participate and learn from each other. We are looking forward to working with Sustainable Connections for this class."

A key aspect of the program is not only the business classes, but the mentors for farmers, which include 2010 mentors Mike Boxx of Boxx Berry Farm, Brent Harrison of The Growing Garden, Mike Finger of Cedarville Farm and Tom Thornton of Cloud Mountain Farm. The program has added two additional mentors for 2011, Roslyn Mc-

Skagit Food Co-ops as well as their farmstand), and Alex Winstead of Cascadia Mushrooms. Winstead has grown his business to the point he is selling a variety of mushroom to local restaurants and grocers, at the seasonal Bellingham Farmer's Market, and year-round at the University District Farmers Market in Seattle.

the Sean Humphrey House." The facility in Bellingham helps low-income individuals living with HIV/AIDS who also are battling other diseases or disabilities. Mushrooms, especially Shiitake, are known to help people with compromised immune systems, he said. "What a fringe benefit to get these good mushrooms to people who could benefit

directly on local neighborhoods. "As a multi-plot farm, Neighborhood Harvest allows me to share my time between two urban gardens and my leased acre located about 10 minutes outside of town."

She will be delivering between \$40 and \$70 worth of produce per week to the Bellingham Food Bank.

For Rustic Moon Farm co-owner Cheryl Perry, one of the three farms who are focusing on meat in the program, she hopes to learn more about business and marketing so they can successfully run a small farm store, which they hope to open in the spring. All of their meats are raised naturally, using soy free, organic local grains. "What we eat is really important to us and it's great to see it become important to other people as well," Perry said.

von Krusenstiern believes Food to Bank On meets an important need within the community. "The FTBO program is so important to our community right now. With older farmers retiring and new and beginning farmers on the rise, it is important to have the training and support network needed to run a successful agriculture business."

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Nicholl of Rabbit Fields Farm, who is a 2009 FTBO graduate, and Dan Coyne of Half Acre Farm.

Three farmers graduated from FTBO last year, including Michael Long of Alpenhorn Farm (he will be taking over The Growing Garden this year from his mentor Brent Harrison), Jeff Ellsworth and Danielle Chevalier of Highwater Farm in Skagit County (they are selling their vegetables to the Bellingham and

For Winstead, who joined FTBO in 2007, the program not only afforded him the opportunity to grow and develop his business, but it gave him the means to get his mushrooms into the hands of people who can sincerely use them — those with compromised immune systems.

"I joined FTBO to get a better handle on the business plan stuff," he said, adding "I also wanted the opportunity to deliver my mushrooms to

from it — more than just filling bellies."

Exploring the concept of urban farming, Mary von Krusenstiern of Neighborhood Harvest Farm is looking to develop her CSA program as well as a local farm stand. Currently, she farms three plots of land — two within the Columbia and Sunnyland neighborhoods and another 10 minutes outside of town. von Krusenstiern is developing her business to focus