

Growing New Farms

The People Inside Food To Bank On

Shonie Schlotzhauer, Sustainable Connections

"I arrived at farming somewhat accidentally," laughs Laura Plaut, the visionary behind Common Threads Farm and Environmental Learning Center on Lummi Island. A lifelong experiential educator, Laura is on a mission to add agricultural skills to her box of tools for "food and energy literacy" education.

"What better way to instill a sense of stewardship in young people than to focus on the places where we all taste, touch, and plug into the environment every day through our consumption of food and energy?" she wonders.

Laura, her partner Charlie, and their three-year-old, Riley, have only been on Lummi for two years, but are making leaps and bounds turning six naked acres into the thriving home, farm, and educational facility that Laura envisions.

Starting with a quarter-acre of freshly plowed ground, Laura plans to eventually cultivate much of the rest, growing good food as well as sustainable energy and engaged youth. In



Simone displays a black and white heirloom soy bean during the Food To Bank On tour of mentor farms.

addition to her weekly Food To Bank On deliveries to the Bellingham Food Bank, she has incorporated the farm as a 501(c)3 educational nonprofit. She's hard at work developing a board of directors and pursuing funding sources for educational programming, and recently hosted a solar energy workshop to install a 2 kw solar system for the farm. Laura has also been an enthusiastic participant in every Food To Bank On training event.

Laura makes no bones about her farming expertise. "It's humbling to realize how little I know about farming, but I'm excited to be on my way to learning more!" Her good attitude about the steep learning curve of her first season in Food To Bank On is persistent. "What a supportive environment this is for learning!" she exclaims. "I appreciate being accountable for good record-keeping, and I love knowing that I'm producing healthy food for hungry people."

A humble attitude, willingness to laugh and learn from mistakes, and a deep appreciation for the farming lifestyle are just a few of the things that Laura has in common with her Food To Bank On mentor farmer Simone Roggers of Paradise Farm.

Simone is a Food To Bank On graduate herself, having joined the program in its very first year in 2003. With the help of Food To Bank On and her own mentor, Brent Harrison of The Growing Garden, she successfully turned her five acres in Ferndale into a productive farm, with one acre in row crops. Paradise is a regular at the Saturday Bellingham Farmers Market with a

wide variety of offerings. Simone's overflowing stand is often staffed by one of her two teenage sons.

As a mentor farmer, Simone is available to answer Laura's questions as they come up throughout the season and to exchange farm visits. In the trenches of her first farming season, Laura remarked on how valuable Simone's perspective and encouragement were. "It's been great to talk to her... I learn a great deal from her positive attitude!" In such a difficult

enterprise as market farming, having someone experienced to call on can make all the difference.

The value of the mentor farmers was especially evident on one August afternoon, when Laura and the other Food To Bank On farmers caravaned around the county, stopping at each of the five mentor farms. Starting at Paradise and ending at Sunseed in Acme, the cross-pollination of ideas, methods, and enthusiasm was richly rewarding. "I got more out of it than I anticipated," commented one new farmer, despite the considerable sacrifice of seven long hours away from their own farms in the height of summer. "I see again and again that there's just no

substitute for face-to-face conversations and on-the-ground experiences with a diversity of farming styles." And as Laura said, "The workshops and mentorship have been great (besides, everyone's so doggone nice!)."

To learn more about Common Threads Farm and Environmental Learning Center, you can contact Laura at 360-927-1590. Paradise Farm can be found at the Bellingham Farmers Market on Saturdays, or contact Simone at 360-383-9123.

For more information about Food To Bank On, to make a donation, or to apply for the 2007 season, call Shonie at 647-6902 or visit www.sustainableconnections.org.



Laura and Riley at Common Threads Farm.

Photos by Shonie Schlotzhauer