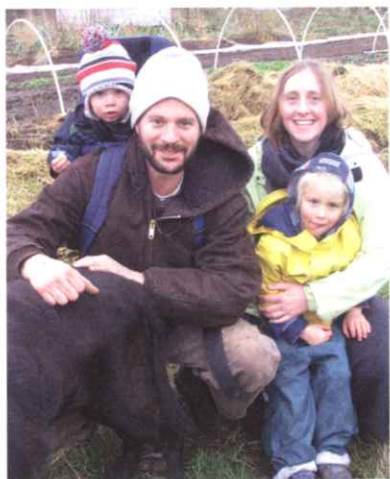


WHATCOM'S EDIBLE COMPOUND INTEREST

Food to Bank On nets positive results

BY TIM NEWCOMB

PHOTOS COURTESY SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIONS



Farming is about more than simply soil and sun. It's also about accounting, land stewardship, customer service and feeding the hungry. In Whatcom County, Sustainable Connections runs a program called Food to Bank On, a mentoring program that works to teach new farmers about the endless intricacies of the business.

Food to Bank On was started in 2003 by the Community Food Co-op's Farm Fund and administered by Sustainable Connections' Food & Farming program as a way to simultaneously help the hungry and protect farmland. Sustainable Connections took over the program in 2005, and it has only grown since. The young farms can participate in the program for three years, gaining the benefits of Sustainable Connections' resources, the mentor relationship, program classes and food bank stipends. Over 20 farms have entered the program since it started.

Eva Agudelo, Food to Bank On director, says that the mission of the program states the goal clearly: "To help beginning farmers build environmentally responsible, socially just and economically viable farms that will supply all members of our community with food into the future by providing contracts with shelters and food banks, mentorship, promotion and business development support."

While the young farms are paid a stipend for sharing their crops with food banks—part of the plan to help get the farmers on their feet—it also teaches the lesson of philanthropy. And that is the lesson that is most valuable, says Tom Thornton, owner of Cloud Mountain Farm outside of Everson and a mentor in the program for the past two years. Thornton, who has been developing new varieties of apples, grapes and ornamentals on his farm for over 30 years, says that learning successful business practices is important, but learning community connections is invaluable.

"The mentees get to see a side of the community not many care to notice and it teaches them a number of things," he says. "Helping people improve their life and giving a contribution to the community is a good thing. Most of the farmers are in their 20s and 30s with a college education and are wanting to do something and this gives them the opportunity to test their mettle in some sense. It is a step in the right direction and I think the program is a very pragmatic approach. I think it has helped the people involved."

Over the years, the program has grown to treat the deliveries to food banks as a farmer would to a restaurant, rather than as a last resort for leftover produce. Farmers are paid market rates to deliver thousands of pounds of food to local shelters and food banks, providing them each with up to \$1,200 worth of local product throughout a growing season.

Restaurants and retail outlets can be amazingly precise on the size, style and look of the

Over the years, the program has grown to treat the deliveries to food banks as a farmer would to a restaurant, rather than as a last resort for leftover produce.

products they buy. The Food to Bank On program allows the farmers to work on their growing techniques without the fear of the product being rejected for an aesthetic reason, giving farmers room to experiment without financial consequences. Not surprisingly, food banks and shelters are happy to be recipients.

Treating food banks as respectfully as restaurant clients also benefits those receiving the produce. "If you go in the back of a grocery store on any day and see the quality (that they are donating) ... I mean, you and I wouldn't even consider eating it really," Thornton says. "The mentality has been, 'if you are going to throw it out, we'll take it.' A whole host of research has been done saying the quality of food eaten affects your ability to function. The food banks have really benefited."

A Thornton mentee, Amy Fontaine, owner of Terra Verde Farms, says that being able to deliver food to her local food bank is "really eye-opening." The Everson-grown food stays in Everson, allowing Fontaine to create important connections within the community.

"We are able to get good food to a wide spectrum of people and that supports our mission," she says. "I enjoy making that delivery to where the food is going. I will definitely continue that."

Bellingham's Lighthouse Mission relies on those donations. "Fresh produce is most of the battle [when creating meals]," says John Euen, food service manager for the mission. "We can never have too many fruits and vegetables. We are very fortunate."

Getting involved to help others was a main goal of Roslyn McNicholl, a mentee and owner of Rabbit Fields Farm. She says that being able to donate her organic vegetables to the Lighthouse Mission and receive the economic benefit of it is a valuable part of the program. Plus, she loves the ability to connect

with other young farmers and share an important educational process.

Fontaine says that the mentor program has been fabulous and has helped her build her farm over the last three years. In her first year, she farmed on a quarter of an acre, then went to half an acre in year two. This past year, her third, she branched out to one and one-half acres, with a diversified organic vegetable crop she sells at the Bellingham Farmer's Market, through a 17-member CSA program and wholesale to various restaurants. "I went from testing the waters to creating a pretty viable business for my family," she says.

As part of the program, the young farmers visit the mentors for potluck workshops, containing "tons of valuable information" on everything from growing crops to developing a business plan to adapting to fit niche markets. The mentor relationships can also be called upon throughout the stressful growing season for advice and help.

But the mentors aren't the only ones doing the teaching. "The conversations are good and give people at different stages in their business development a chance to talk to each other," Thornton says. "I learn as much as they do."

Working alongside the young growers at the farmer's markets—the Wednesday and Saturday Bellingham markets are a mainstay for farmers in Whatcom County—grants even more connections that the young farmers need in order to make it in the tough farm-to-market business. Thornton's pride in his mentees is evident at the market, as he delights in the booths Fontaine and McNicholl have put together—booths full of freshness for the community's well-off and the less fortunate.

And as the program aims to grow each year, it really serves the community along the way. As Thornton says, "People's donation of time is the glue in our community. This program is a community builder."

Now that is sustainable. *eS*

Sustainable Connections

119 North Commercial Street
Bellingham, WA 98225
(360) 647-7093

www.sustainableconnections.org

Tim Newcomb is a newspaper editor and freelance magazine writer living in Lynden.

Sustainable Connections Food & Farming Program Highlights

- **The Chef Farm Tours** bring chefs and retailers into farmers' fields to acquaint them with products first-hand.
- **Farm Tours** and the **Whatcom Farm and Food Finder Map** provide scheduled tours and offer visitors to Whatcom County a chance to visit local farms and educate them on what delicacies they can expect—and exactly where to find them.
- **Trade meetings** happen twice each year, bringing over 70 producers and buyers together, resulting in new farm-to-market relationships.
- **Eat Local** events highlight area restaurants that feature meals prepared with local products.