



Aliya Hall/For the Capital Press

Shelley Bowerman and Dan Schuler run Moondog's Farm. The farm has three priorities: contributing to the conservation of wild habitat, co-existing with habitat while ensuring food production and bringing in the community.

# Networking, internships and education help farmers get started

By ALIYA HALL  
For the Capital Press



Aliya Hall/For the Capital Press

Moondog's farm is on 42 acres northeast of Eugene and Springfield, Ore., nestled next to the Mohawk River. The farm runs as a Community Supporting Agriculture (CSA) model and pursues organic market vegetable and wholesale seed production.

MABEL, Ore. — Like most farmers, Shelley Bowerman and Dan Schuler started small.

An initial passion for food sparked the pair's interest in food production. Bowerman wanted to increase her access to high-quality, local and organic food. Schuler had already begun gardening and growing food. They met in the University of Oregon's Urban Farm Program and realized they had similar interests.

"It snowballs until you find yourself wanting to pursue different niches in the industry; you find yourself as a producer," Schuler said. "You fall in love with the seasonal ebbs and flows of growing food."

As new farmers take root and established farms transfer land within families, there's space for a new generation of farmers, Melissa Fery, an Oregon State University Extension small farms agent, said. While many resources are available for new producers, Fery said educational programs are important to cover the fundamentals.

In the past, the OSU Small Farms Program hosted a farm planning series, "Exploring the Small Farms Dream," and assembled focus groups designed to assess the needs of beginning farmers.

"The idea is to get more information from people who have been farming in recent years," Fery said. "How they got involved, the biggest questions they had starting out, what they needed to learn first, and where they found information. We're looking for gaps and ways we can improve programs."

Bowerman and Schuler both attended the latest focus group held on Feb. 8, as well as gatherings such as the recent OSU Small Farm Conference every year.

They are about to start they're third season at Moondog's Farm, and have a long-term lease on a 42 acres northeast of Eugene and Springfield nestled next to the Mohawk River. The farm runs on a Community Supported Agriculture model and grows organic vegetables and seeds.

The farm has three priorities: contributing to the conservation of wild habitat, co-existing with habitat while ensuring food production and bringing in the community.

The two agree that beyond educational programs, Moondog's Farm couldn't have gotten started without the network of farmers surrounding them.

"We meet people on a regular basis who are market gardeners and it's just them," Schuler said. "They have to be in charge of all the production and marketing. It sounds like a nightmare. One thing I feel really fortunate for is having a community that supports us."

He said they have also leaned on other established farmers, in terms of bulk purchasing and borrowing equipment.

The biggest challenges they've had include breaking into the industry, finding a market and learning the nuances, Schuler said. Bowerman added that the "classic farmer conundrum," when the expenses happen before the income does, is trying as well.

"It's having the faith that

the bit of investment will pay off," she said. "It's something I grapple with for sure, but I have a lot of trust in what we're doing and the people around us."

Bowerman said that everything she learned came from other farmers.

"I mean everything," she elaborated. "Everything I know is from other people."

Cultivating these relationships takes maintenance, Schuler said, and it's important to be active in the farming community. Mentor relationships can become even more valuable down the road.

Finding these mentors through networking is another benefit to attending educational seminars, especially because Oregon has many types of farms from which to learn.

"When you think about educational needs, it's very diverse," Fery, of OSU's Small Farms Program, said. "(Farmers) bring in their own skill set. They're great at one thing, but need help with another."

For that reason, Schuler finds internships or working at farms part-time to be especially valuable.

"You see the progression of their systems and how their overhead works," he said. "When it comes time to build your own systems, you have four to five different models so you're not building from scratch. We draw bits that are applicable to what we do."

# Heirloom corn seed project takes root in southwestern Idaho

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — A group of small- and medium-scale farmers in southwestern Idaho is part of a fledgling project that seeks to grow heirloom corn seed for the local tortilla market.

The project, funded in part by a USDA grant, has so far conducted field trials of 24 heirloom corn cultivars. Heirloom corn, sometimes called "ancient grains," are niche varieties that have been grown for generations or even hundreds of years.

A chef from Diablo & Sons, a Boise restaurant opening in April, has selected the most promising varieties from the trial and about 10 farmers will grow that seed out this year.

The heirloom varieties "were bred for their taste. People love these varieties because they taste good," said Casey O'Leary, who conducted the trial on her Boise farm and is overseeing the project.

The corn will be used to make masa, a traditional type of dough used to make tortillas and other Mexican foods such as tamales.

Diablo owner Dave Krick, who also owns two other local restaurants, said he wants to buy as much of his masa as possible from local farmers.

The heirloom corn project



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Casey O'Leary, center, talks about the heirloom corn seed varieties produced in a field trial at her Boise farm last year during a recent organic conference.

ect will help make that possible, he said.

"We grow a lot of corn for ethanol here, and feed corn and sweet corn, but not specifically corn that was designed for masa," he said.

The trial tested heirloom corn varieties to determine which ones grow well in southern Idaho.

Besides helping a lot of small farmers in the region diversify their operations, the project could lead to other value-added opportunities, such as a producer making and packaging their own tortillas or a new tortilla company, Krick said.

"I think there would be high demand for it," he said.

Nampa, Idaho, farmer Janie Burns is one of the people who plans to grow

out some of the heirloom corn seed this year.

"It's never going to suck up the entire corn production of our area but it's going to diversify the farm base, which will be very healthy," she said. "There will also be an enormous potential for a buyer to say he is going to be offering this unique corn that will set him apart in the marketplace."

Although the only guaranteed customer at the moment for the heirloom corn is Krick, O'Leary believes the project offers local farmers tremendous opportunity.

"I think there are a lot of other markets for that stuff as well," she said. "In two years, there will be more (corn) than we will know what to do with."

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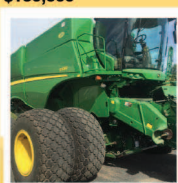
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