Growing season

Can a farmer be cultivated in six months? UVM's sustainable farming program takes engineers, financiers and recent college grads through a growing cycle, from sowing seeds to harvesting crops. Story, 4C.
SOUTH BURLINGTON — Marie-Eve Mongeau snipped at a bank of zinnias on a recent morning and gazed at adjacent rows of squash, radicchio, potatoes, chamomile and fennel.

The sun shine and the air was fragrant as Mongeau helped harvest flowers and fresh produce to be sold at a farmer’s market that afternoon. The work was dirtier than the tasks that Mongeau, who has a degree in chemical engineering, performed in her former job at a Boston medical device maker.

No matter. The 31-year-old has no regrets about her decision to abandon office for field earlier this year. “It was time for me to just go and explore a passion of mine,” said Mongeau.

That’s among 18 students enrolled in a full-time University of Vermont course on sustainable farming. Instead of commuting to a cubicle and logging onto a computer, she has spent the summer tending baby lettuce, watching carrot tops sprout and dead-heading flowers to stimulate new growth, in herself as well as the plants, it turned out.

“It really grounds me as an individual,” said Mongeau about farming, “Spending every day outside, rain or shine. It’s wonderful.”

The Farmer Training Program, offered through UVM’s Continuing Education school, was founded in 2011. The full-time, six-month course runs from May when the fields are just greening up to the end of October when frost and cold shut down the soil.

The course is based at the 99-acre University Horticultural Research Center about three miles from the main UVM campus in Burlington. Some students ride bicycles from Burlington, others carpool to the “Hort Farm,” which sits on a wedge of green between University and Speak Street.

With suburban neighborhoods to the east and car dealerships to the west, the farm is an oasis where apple trees, grape vines and vegetable fields hold their own against the screech of traffic and gobble of land development.

Students in the program range in age from their early 20s to their late 40s and come from all over the United States. Some are recent college grads taking the first steps toward a career, others, such as Mongeau, who thinks she might want to work for an organic seed company, are making a career shift.

The program teaches students how to drive a tractor, build a shed and cultivate in the greenhouse before field planting. Students take classes from UVM professors and local farmers. They do regular work-and-learn rotations on nearby farms to see how different farmers tackle different problems.

This year 18 students are cultivating more than three and one-half acres and expect to take in about $15,000 in sales.

“They all get the basics and they all get a chance to decide whether they like it or not,” said Laura Williams, farm coordinator for the program.

The first year, the program taught 12 students who cultivated less than an acre. This year 18 students are cultivating more than three and one-half acres and expect to take in about $15,000 in sales. The food is sold to six kitchens at UVM and to the public Tuesday afternoons at a farmer’s market in front of the Bailey Howe Library on the main UVM campus.

Interest in the program is growing, said Williams, who has a degree in agronomy from the University of California, Santa Cruz and operated her own small-scale veggie farm in Westford for several years.

“I think there’s been a resurgence in the food movement. People are realizing that food doesn’t have to be a hobby. It can be a career.”

One day recently students divvied up tasks: Some hauled melons and plucked tangy arugula, others washed potatoes and set onions to cure. Two students built a shed while a trio arranged bouquets for the farmer’s market.

They cut from rows of Mexican sunflowers with bright orange blossoms and broccoli some with brown, overwintering stalks reaching up to the sun. There were asters, straw flowers, statice and zinnias — a low bushy plant with globe-shaped flower heads in lavender, purple and white.

Many plantings fared well this summer — a bumper cantelope crop left the team searching for a retail outlet that could accommodate several hundred surplus melons. Other crops flopped as the students encountered some of the same disasters that befell home gardeners. Critters — mainly raccoons — ate 90 percent of the corn the students planted.

“They were just one step ahead of us,” Williams said.

The corn massacre was demoralizing but it did not put the farm under or send the students running for crop insurance. Their $6,200 course fees make the operation work, not veggie sales.

“This is kind of a utopia,” Williams acknowledged.
"This is not a real, operating farm. We didn’t need to sell produce to make it run."
In addition to tending crops as a group, students planted their own rows to experiment with vegetables, herbs and flowers of their choosing.
Fiona Luray, a 22-year-old from Idaho, looked over a patch of chamomile surrounded by anise hyssop and valerian root with fellow student Catherine “Cookie” Compton, a 31-year-old New Yorker. The small, aromatic flowers of the chamomile invited longings for a cup of tea, while a whiff of the white valerian root, known as a calming herb, proved overwhelmingly.
Luray graduated in May from the University of Redlands with a degree in religious studies. Compton, who worked in finance for eight years on Wall Street and grew things in her free time—rooftop containers, pots on balconies and little patches of yard. She’s not sure what her next step is but would prefer not to return to finance.
“It’s a little scary to be like oh my god, what will I do next... But it’s exciting more than anything.”
Luray is interested in living and creating a sustainable community someday—perhaps something along the lines of Findhorn Ecovillage in Scotland. By day, the farm program offers ideas in food production and by night Luray is picking up at ideas at the Ten Stones Community co-housing development in Charlotte, where she and several other students found summer housing.
Robinson Yost, 27, has tried political campaign work and completed a stint on an off-shore marine research vessel since graduating from college and growing up outside Pittsburgh. He’s interested in doing graduate work in urban planning and one day applying his new knowledge to small-scale urban gardening and farming.
“It’s just been a really good education for me.” Along with their studies and cultivation, the students learn about marketing the food they grow. This comes through instruction and through listening to people like Williams, who believes in “knowing what you’re growing... Being able to articulate the textures and the flavors that make this product unique.”
Students discuss what they grow in tastings and then compare the sensory experience to the descriptions in the seed catalogs.
Williams demonstrated her own foodie marketing skills in a mouth-watering description of the varieties of potatoes the students grow, including Austrian crescent, russet burbank, red norland and German butterball—a spud so creamy it needs no adornment. “It’s such a nice texture you don’t have to put butter on it,” she said.
Part of the course is estimating yield—seeing just how many ground cherries come out of a fifty-foot bed. Tim Schonholz of Essex Junction planted a bumper crop of ground cherries in his row and was pleased to find that they sold well at the UVM Farmers’ Market. He held up one of the small, round cherries, which grow in their own papery sweaters.
They’re good for jam, sauces or eating raw. “It’s a beautiful golden little fruit with a sort of kiwi flavor,” he said.
Schonholz has worked at plant nurseries, gardening companies and a research farm since he earned a biology degree in 1999. Now in his late 40s, he had accumulated substantial knowledge about growing food before entering the UVM program. He says he’s learned a whole lot more through the Farmer program’s hands-on lessons, many opportunities to see how local farmers run their operations and classroom time.
“Every day you pick up some nugget that you go, I didn’t know that.”
As the program nears completion, and the students start planting winter cover crops over the rows they’ve harvested, Schonholz has decided what he wants to do next.
“I would like to farm. I would love to have three or five acres, very much like this,” he said, looking around the rows of produce at the Hort Farm. “And sell what I grow and enjoy the abundance of what I grow.”
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The Farmer Training Program is operated by the University of Vermont Continuing Education school. It runs from early May to the end of October and offers participants a certificate in sustainable farming. The fee is $6,200 plus an estimated $1,000 for books. Students find and pay for their own housing, as well as their other living expenses. Financial aid is not available and the course is not credit bearing. For more information go to learn.uvm.edu or email learn@uvm.edu

Kristin Sprengle, a student in the University of Vermont Farm Training Program, works melons at the UVM Horticulture Farm in South Burlington. ANDY QUEAU FOR THE FREE PRESS

18 would-be farmers come from across the US

Here’s a look at the Farmer Training Program participants:

» Catherine Compitello, from upstate New York, went to college in rural Ohio, where she worked for an organic vegetable farm. She has worked in New York City for the past eight years in finance on Wall Street. She is especially interested in urban farming and community involvement.

» Maggie Gartner studied movement science, nutrition and health and has worked on farms from North Carolina to Oregon. Her goal is to combine her interests in local food, education and health.

» Craig Golding has been many things, including a commercial photographer/photojournalist based in Los Angeles. He was first exposed to ecological horticulture at UC Santa Cruz while pursuing his undergraduate degree and plans to serve in the Peace Corps after graduating from the Farmer Training Program.

» Since graduating from Hamilton College, Will Govon has been involved in urban revitalization initiatives in Detroit and Buffalo. He hopes to take what he learns at UVM to his grandparents’ farm in New Hampshire.

» Katie Hassemer, after studying fine arts, managed a coffee business for a nonprofit organization in Milwaukee. She plans to return to Milwaukee and work in community education around food and farming.

» Margaret Kane grew up in the cornfields of Illinois and served in an Americorps program in Massachusetts focusing on environmental conservation, restoration and education. She gained her first farming experience while interning on a small organic farm in southwestern Colorado.

» Andrew Kilduff, a recent graduate of Rutgers, studied geophysics with an emphasis on human-environment interactions and cartography, and agroecology. He has worked with commercial nursery operations, botanical gardens, excavation companies and community gardening projects.

» Kristin Kvernland was first exposed to farming when she spent a college semes ter working on a small family-run sheep farm. She recently worked for the International Rescue Committee in San Diego as a youth farming coordinator where she ran garden and farming internship programs for high-school students.

» Fiona Luray is a recent graduate from the University of Redlands in Southern California. Her first farm experiences were living in an eco-spiritual community and running a farm apprenticeship at an Ananda community in Hawaii, and working at Boise Urban Garden School.

» David Mazur, from Ottawa, Ontario, recently developed a not-for-profit general store for a heritage grill that sells locally-made period goods on consignment. His education has a theme of small business development and management with a special focus on sustainable operations.

» Marie Eve Mongeau, born and raised in Quebec, spent the past six years working as a manufacturing engineer for a biomedical device company. She graduated from Purdue University with a degree in chemical engineering.

» Danielle Proude grew up in coastal Maine, graduated from Connecticut College and worked for a nonprofit that supports environmental stewardship within diverse faith communities. She also has promoted renewable energy on a citizen ballot initiative, and welcomed lambs to the world at a local farm.

» David Schmeisser is a development consultant, permaculture practitioner and educator. He has worked as research director for a Kenyan environmental NGO and as a consultant for the United Nations. More recently, he has taught graduate courses in development studies at the University of Cambridge in the UK.

» Tim Schonholtz grew up in San Diego and, as a teenager, helped his father establish an avocado orchard. He studied biology, botany and environmental studies at Sonoma State University and spent summers working on a research farm in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. He has been living in Vermont for the past 15 years.

» Kristin Sprengle has worked as a residential gardener in the suburbs of Philadelphia for the past five years. She has a degree in environmental studies and has completed a permaculture design course.

» Kathleen Tesauro began farming at The Threshold Foundation in Lancaster City, Pa., a nonprofit that teaches life skills to at-risk youth through sustainable agriculture. For the past two years, she has been the administrative coordinator of the 3,500-member CSA program at Lancaster Farm Fresh Cooperative.

» Raina Tripp is a student at New York University, where she is a graduate student in the food systems program. She majored in business and economics at Skidmore. Then attended the New England Culinary Institute, where she spent six years working in kitchens as a pastry chef.

» Robinson Yost studied at Vassar College, focusing on the political science and the history of the Americas. In addition to working as a marine engineer, he has worked on small farms in the Hudson Valley, including Sprout Creek Farm, the Poughkeepsie Project and Growing Heart Farm.

— Courtesy UVM