Creating Community  Christine Welcher, MFAI Garden Manager

Farming is a stressful, yet rewarding career. The weather is always out of your control. Wild critters will find your veggies, even with fences and guard cats. Weeds always perform better than the plants you’re trying to grow. Of course you can try to combat some of it with things like irrigation systems or hoop houses and planting schedules, but ultimately farmers must be flexible. This doesn’t always translate well to traditional bankers when beginning farmers need start-up funds or funds to expand. For this reason, and many others, farmers are tapping into an ancient concept: Community!

Many farms, whether consciously or not, are creating support communities around them which help them get through these swings and challenges. Whether a farmer has a set group of members, such as a CSA, or their regular customers at a farmers’ market, that farmer has a group of people who depend on them for good food and the farmer in turn depends on them for a steady supply of income. This may seem like common sense and can be applied to any business; however, it is especially necessary in farming.

Farmers, while always innovative, are even coming up with new ways to build their support communities. Value-added events like Pizza Nights, Farm to Table Dinners, and Appreciation Nights are ways to not only expand your community, but to invite them onto your farm and help create memories that will last a lifetime. We recently had our first Farm to Table Dinner at Michael Fields and it was wildly successful. The majority of the people who attended were not on our email or donor lists, but were brand new to Michael Fields. Maybe they heard about us in the local paper or grabbed a flyer at our farmers’ market stand, but they followed through, purchased tickets and drove out to our farm on a beautiful Friday evening to share a meal with us! It was such a humbling experience to see the food we seeded, transplanted, watered, and harvested turned into delicious courses beautifully plated and served to a 100 people under a softly lit tent in the middle of our fields.

While I do stress the importance of building this community to my students in our classes and during daily discussions, the dinner sealed the deal. While they were serving plates they recognized people from the markets or the community and could see, first-hand, the benefits of their efforts all season promoting the event, talking to customers and sharing their stories. The best part was the wonderful comments we received from people as they ate our food.

I urge all who read this to not only support your local farmers but really get to KNOW them. These men and women put their hearts and souls into their work in order to bring you those piles of green beans and mountains of tomatoes. They are wonderful, amazing people who care about the earth and about their fellow man and importantly we need them. We need them to be able to access land and resources to continue to do what they do. With droughts in California, many companies are now looking to the Midwest to supply those crops. We need to make sure we have enough new farmers trained and ready to go when these opportunities come our way. If you find you have extra resources to share or time to volunteer or even a few extra bucks to spend at a market please do so. These opportunities and interactions may seem small, but they mean the world to small scale and beginning farmers.

Support your farmer. KNOW your farmer!
**Seeds are essential to human survival**

Farmers may only be approximately 1% of the population, but eaters are nearly 100% of the population. If you go into a grocery store, you will find that most of the food items either started from a seed or ate something that started from a seed; I suppose at the most basic level, all living things are all start as seeds; seeds can be natural, existing in nature and creation or they can be fabricated in laboratories. The seeds that are fabricated are often times genetically modified (GMO), which means that genes are spliced and inserted, constructing genetic combinations that would not naturally be found in nature and creation. Many of us question these fabricated seeds and food that is produced from them. We question these laboratory fabrications so much, that we go to length, to buy food that we know to be natural, grown from seeds in creation, these foods are labeled “Organic” and at this moment, that “Organic” label is the only way to know if your food was grown from natural seeds.

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**Pollinator Habitat Established on Indiana Farm**

Two years ago, in 2013, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute was the recipient of a very substantial gift of land from Betty Refior Phelps of Whitewater, WI. It was a very gracious gesture from a great lady who believed in the work of Michael Fields and had participated, over the years, in several of MFAI’s Whole Farm Workshops. Besides having an interest in seeing the 226 acre farm transitioned to an organic system of farming, Betty also wanted a place for bees to do their work and a few weeks ago on a sunny afternoon on the farm near Amboy, Indiana, a group of Betty’s family and friends dedicated a stone marker in her memory.

This is just a beginning, but there is now a 3.5 acre portion of the farm which has pollinator habitat established for the bees. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) provided EQIP Program funds to help cover the costs of establishing the Pollinator Habitat. Betty and her family were very supportive of this effort and they join Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in celebration of making Betty’s dream a reality. Helping bees do the very necessary work of pollination has been and will continue to be a priority for Michael Fields. Thank you, Betty, for your vision and your generosity.

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**Ramping up “hands-on” training for conservation professionals:**

**SARE Professional Development Grant expands our reach**

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute personnel have long participated in the delivery of professional development training for conservation agency professionals related to cover crop use in Wisconsin cropping systems. Cover crops used alone or in tandem with other conservation practices not only protect the precious soil resource, but also improve its overall health, improve water quality and if managed properly, can enhance the bottom line. Our program seeks to develop cover crop best management practices which help capture these benefits and our outreach activities gets the information into the hands of farmers.

To date, our professional development work has mostly taken the form of formal classroom/ conference trainings or webinars. While that will continue, we are now also taking a hands-on approach, beginning with the well-attended Wisconsin Cover Crops Conference held at the Institute in August and with a new statewide project funded by USDA’s Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, beginning this fall. Under this model, we hold regional trainings on the farms of successful cover crop practitioners’ where participants learn what works best under the varied soil types and climatic conditions of the state, and can apply that knowledge when advising their clients, leveraging our outreach efforts. We are teaming up with the University of Wisconsin-Extension on this effort and as importantly, we are addressing professional development needs in the northern part of the state which has been largely ignored in the past.

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**Agricultural Grant Workshops**

This month, MFAI will once again collaborate with UW Cooperative Extension and other partners to present four agricultural grants workshops around Wisconsin. These highly evaluated workshops teach grantwriting basics, identify and describe numerous federal and state funding opportunities, offer hands-on experience in reviewing grants, and have been instrumental in Wisconsin’s high rate of successful applications to government programs. [Get more info here.]

Excellent as these workshops are, we have found that many people need additional, individual assistance and tips. In 2007, MFAI began offering free Grants Advising services, especially targeting underserved Midwestern farmers. *Our Grants Advisor, Deirdre Birmingham, helps individual producers, associations of farmers, and agricultural, fishery and forestry-related businesses both search for and apply to programs for which they are eligible. Deirdre has gained a large and grateful following, sending out notices on available funding, helping applicants develop thinking points, reviewing applicants, and more.*

Clients grateful for Deirdre’s help include a Minnesota farmer who said, “The grants advising or list of grants popping up is helpful. I did get a Minnesota Dept of Ag grant last year. I saw it pop up in my list...” Keep them coming! This is priceless information. An Air Force and Army veteran wrote, “I feel like I have a one-on-one approach to finding the right grants that are pertinent to me...I’ve saved time, hassle and a lot of leg work by being able to ask questions directly to someone that has a name.” A Mississippi Extension specialist explained how Deirdre’s emailed announcements of open grants gets extended past directly on her list: “Without Grants Advising, I would not be aware of the grants that are available so that I can publicize and pass the information on to farmers and other public service providers. This is a valuable service for me.” An Iowa goat and sheep dairy farmer wrote, “You have helped us enormously, Deirdre. From the beginning draft, you spent countless hours looking at our proposal and winnowing the excess until it was a sleek and compact document. Consistently, you steered us back to the basic instructions to answer the question first and completely. You also corrected the document and made examples so we could understand what was necessary. Thank you Deirdre.”

For more information or to be on the e-list, please contact MFAI’s Grants Advisor, Deirdre Birmingham, at deirdredfield@gmail.com or (608) 219-4279. Also for information about grants resources, visit: [http://www.michaelfields.org/grant-advising-resources](http://www.michaelfields.org/grant-advising-resources).

* Since MFAI began our Grants Advising in 2007, it has been funded at different times by Farm Aid, USDA’s Risk Management Agency, Rural Development Agency and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. In fall of 2014, Wisconsin Farmers Union joined as a project partner, offering financial support for Deirdre’s work with Wisconsin farmers.

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**MFAI’s Whole Farm Workshops**

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute has been helping farmers and gardeners learn new skills and knowledge about sustainable, organic and biodynamic agriculture. The Whole Farm Workshops series will continue in 2016 with topics chosen from surveys of over 300 Midwest farmers.农业 Workshops are designed to help farmers, agricultural educators, conservationists, and others to join MFAI’s staff in Wisconsin to assist farmers in developing natural farming techniques. Workshops will focus on a wide variety of topics and will be held on multiple farms in the state. The workshops are designed to provide hands-on instruction and practical experience in a variety of farming techniques.

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**MFAI’s SW Wisconsin Farmer Innovation Network (SW-WFIN)**

Gary showed four cover crop test fields he planted in early August Following wheat harvest – combinations of grasses (rye and triticale), legumes (crimson clover, Austrian peas, and hairy vetch), and tillage radishes; participants were impressed with the quality of the year’s corn crop that was planted into last year’s cover crops. Gary, MFAI Research Director Jim Stute, and Nicole Trenkamp with Pioneer Cooperative in Lancaster answered numerous questions about cover crops from farmers. Supported by funding from USDA’s North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program and the McKnight Foundation, the SW WFIN group will resume meeting in late fall.

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**Check out our website for winter movie showings, upcoming workshops, research updates, grant resources and other events.**

[www.michaelfields.org](http://www.michaelfields.org)