

# California 'incubator' nurtures young farmers

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**Published Sunday, Aug. 22, 2010**

There are small moments that make farming worthwhile for 26-year-old Toby Hastings – detaching a ripe Sharlyn melon from the vine with just a slight tug, digging for potatoes and finding nests of them huddled together, snapping the stem of a perfect strawberry.

Hastings is in his third season of coaxing life from tidy rows in the middle of an organic walnut orchard in rural Winters. He is simultaneously bucking two trends: the aging of the nation's farmers and the increasingly difficult feat of finding land that can be farmed and starting a business.

Hastings' Free Spirit Farm was born in 2008 when he became the "farmer incubator" – a name borrowed from the term business incubator – of the Center for Land-Based Learning, a nonprofit organization that exposes youths to sustainable agriculture and nature restoration.

The farm has grown into more than 2 acres with three dozen varieties of vegetables, fruits and flowers, which Hastings sells in about 30 farm shares and directly to 25 restaurants in San Francisco, Davis and Sacramento.

"We're committed to helping people connect to nature and this food system," said Craig McNamara. He first started inviting high school students for visits to his walnut farm in 1993 and founded the Center for Land-Based Learning in 2001. "It's critical this next generation get it, or we'll lose it."

McNamara decided he wanted to be a farmer when he was 23. He earned a soil and plant science degree at the University of California, Davis, spent three years renting 100 acres from a Dixon farmer and sold the produce at a vegetable stand next to an old gas station.

In 1980, he took out a \$1.5 million loan to buy 123 acres in Winters, bought another 365 acres six years later, and now produces 500 tons of walnuts every year.

"In today's climate, there's no way to borrow that kind of money, which is why these sorts of opportunities are so important," McNamara said. "The hurdles today are so different; the farmers of tomorrow need a leg up."

There are fewer than a dozen farmer incubators across the country, but that number is expected to increase as established farmers see themselves getting older with few climbing into tractors behind them.

The average farmer today is about 58 years old, up from 39 in 1945, said Steve Schwartz, executive director of California FarmLink, a Sebastapol-based nonprofit that connects retiring farmers with those just entering the fields.

New farmers face the expense of buying equipment and seed, and then wait months or even years before their crops are ready for market. Plus, for every four people who want to start a farm, there is just one piece of land in the FarmLink database, Schwartz said.

The farmer incubator program made sense for the Center for Land-Based Learning, which had an established garden mostly for visiting students but no resources to properly care for it.

Hastings pays about \$80 a month for the land and water, and in exchange, works with some of the 5,000 students who visit each year – helping them pick produce and cook it into a farm meal.

The nonprofit recently applied for a grant through the California Department of Food and Agriculture in hopes of expanding the farmer-training program.

"It almost doesn't feel like work," said Hastings, whose dirt-encrusted and creased hands tell a different story, as does his sun-kissed face tucked beneath a wide-brimmed hat.

One long-established beginning farm program, the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association in Salinas, has been teaching mostly farmworkers about the business of farming since 1985. It leases 150 acres of land to up to 40 people at any given time.

The new farmers rent at subsidized fees and learn how to run a farm in the process, said deputy director Gary Peterson.

"California's agriculture is so incredibly capital intensive and our land values are so high that it is extremely challenging for a beginning farmer to farm without inheriting land," Peterson said.

Tara Smith and her husband, Craig, bought 300 acres in Petaluma a little more than a year ago for \$3.1 million, but then got \$2.3 million back because of an open-space easement. To make the creative financing work, the couple had to carry a mortgage of \$20,000 a month for an entire year.

Almost profitable at this point, Tara Firma Farms is home to chickens, pigs and cows and sells produce by the pound to the public in San Rafael and Mill Valley. The hope is to eventually invest in other beginning farmers, Tara Smith said.

"I'm 50 – I'm too old to be doing this. I'm sore, my hands hurt all the time, I'm filthy dirty, and I have a baby pig sitting on my living room couch," she said. "Our goal is to help feed Petaluma, Marin and Sonoma County, and we can't do it ourselves."

Hastings of Free Spirit Farm grew up among 15 fruit trees in his Davis backyard and studied geology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He grew summer and winter vegetables in a 50-by-10-foot garden there but had no experience in marketing, selling or running a farm.

He planted an acre the first year of Free Spirit Farm, sold 20 shares in a community-supported agriculture program and mostly hawked his goods at farmers markets, which left little time for what he likes best – farming.

He's adjusted his business model so that he now sells 80 percent of what he grows to restaurants like the Grange and L Wine Lounge in Sacramento, the Farmer's Kitchen Cafe and Monticello Bistro in Davis, and Bar Agricole and Luce in San Francisco.

Four days a week, he loads up his dusty Dodge Caravan for deliveries to San Francisco and Sacramento restaurants. Farm-share owners, who pay \$22 a week, pick up boxes of produce in Davis two days a week.

Without cold storage, he harvests the day of each delivery, usually starting before dawn to pluck heirloom tomatoes from their vines and onions from the ground.

"The first year, I knew more about growing plants than selling them," Hastings said. "It's been

8/23/2010

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a steep learning curve."

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