

# Training the Next Generation of Farmers and Ranchers in the Sierra Nevada Foothills

## The Situation

Placer and Nevada counties are home to a diversity of small-scale commercial farms and ranches, 78% of which are less than 50 acres. Foothill production is diverse, including fruits, nuts, vegetables, ornamentals, and many species of livestock. The burgeoning population has created a flourishing local food movement and direct market economy. However, local agriculture faces an uncertain future due to development-driven land prices, an aging producer population, and lack of agricultural infrastructure.

According to the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture data (2009), the average age of a Placer/Nevada farmer is over 56 years. About 2% of farm operators are under 35 years of age, while almost 43% are 60 years or older. 37% of farmers and ranchers in Placer/Nevada have been farming for ten years or less, meeting the USDA definition for beginning farmers and ranchers.

Given the generation gap and the high proportion of beginning producers, training and mentoring farmers and ranchers are critical to the sustainability of local foothill agriculture. Educational approaches need to emphasize experiential learning and include real world perspective from local farmers and ranchers.



Francis Thompson of Twin Brooks Farm at a 2012 Vegetable Production Workshop.

## What we have done

UCCE Placer/Nevada has offered beginning farmer and rancher programming since 2004. Training includes crop production and livestock husbandry, business planning, small-farm economics, risk management, and marketing. Networking and mentoring opportunities that connect beginning farmers and ranchers to more experienced growers are also integrated into the program.

UCCE Placer/Nevada offers about 220 hours of training to farmers and ranchers annually; serving producers from all over California, as well as Placer/Nevada. Annual training courses include:

**Beginning Farming Academy:** 20-hour workshop on marketing, business, & economics for start-up producers.

**Farm Business Planning:** 20-hour training course focusing on the finances and economics of farm businesses and developing operations, risk management, and marketing plans.

**Marketing Academy:** Included 3 workshops: Using nutrition to increase produce sales; Farmers' Market merchandising and customer relations, and Wholesale marketing in 2013.

**California Grazing Academy:** Features extensive hands-on experience with implementing controlled grazing principles with cattle using electric fences.

**Multi-Species Academy:** Participants worked in teams and learned how to implement browsing impact with 100 goats on blackberries at a ranch in Nevada County.

**Integrated Pest Management:** 5 workshops: Practical IPM techniques plus citrus, winegrape, vegetable, & deciduous fruit IPM.

**On-farm Workshops such as:** Soil Management for Vegetable Production, Pruning Citrus, Orchard Pruning, Pasture Irrigation, and Lambing Workshops.

**Direct Farm Marketing Course:** 18-week direct marketing course at Sierra Community College covering all types of direct marketing, basic marketing concepts, & practical market research.



Mentor Farmer Claudia Smith provides advice and practical techniques to beginning farmer Alison Deyo.

## Lessons Learned

Three key elements are responsible for the success of the UCCE farmer and rancher training program.

1. It is reality-based, focused on foothill conditions with local information and examples from the agricultural community.
2. Experienced local producers are an integral part of the training team and programs are predicated on building community among local producers.
3. A collaborative, participatory approach helps develop realistic expectations and skills without damping the enthusiasm of beginning farmers and ranchers. The training is personal, participatory, and hands-on.

Partnerships with producers, the farmers' market association, and the local community college are fundamental to the success and sustainability of UCCE programs. Workshops are developed and delivered by a team of UCCE Farm Advisors, experienced farmers and ranchers, and the manager of the Foothill Farmers' Market Association. Experienced producers share information on their own operations, including marketing and business strategies, and economic analyses.

UCCE's training focuses on marketing and business planning, as those areas are often where skills and knowledge are most limited. On-farm production and husbandry workshops complement training with practical skill-building. Trainings highlight the importance of marketing, producing appropriate products for target markets, emphasizing quality, and selling the story as well as the product. Developing a realistic start-up business plan and understanding the operation of a small agricultural business are critical to success for new producers. Many beginning farmers focus on production and do not view their operations from a business perspective, which may affect their success.

Training is supported by a mentoring program, monthly networking breakfasts, and several listservs which provide information on training and networking opportunities on a weekly basis. The Foothill Farming website <http://ucanr.org/sites/placervevadasmallfarms/> supports the information needs of area farmers and ranchers by providing relevant information for foothill agriculture.



Chris Bierwagen of Donner Trail Fruit explains his operations plan in Farm Business Planning 2012.



Farmers network at an on-farm workshop.



Beginning Farming Academy 2013: Dan Macon of Flying Mule Farm explaining sheep management.

**Cindy Fake**  
Horticulture & Small Farms Advisor  
**Roger Ingram**  
County Director and Farm Advisor  
Placer & Nevada Counties

**University of California**  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

**RMA** This program is funded, in part, by a \$78,005 grant from the USDA Risk Management Agency.