

## **Growing Nebraska Market Farmers**

The **Community CROPS** of Lincoln, Nebraska received \$98,598 to assist beginning and socially-disadvantaged farmers/vendors in Nebraska to sell their produce at farmers' markets. Funds were used to develop a series of workshops and one-on-one trainings, and a technical assistance program for the farmers.

[Final Report FY09](#)

# FMPP Final Performance Report

12/5/2011  
Community CROPS  
Growing Nebraska Market Farmers  
12-25-G-0957  
Lincoln, Nebraska

## **Project Summary**

The program's goal is to provide training, technical assistance and resources to beginning, immigrant and low-income market farmers/vendors in Nebraska to help them overcome educational, cultural and financial barriers to entry in local farmers' markets.

## **Project Approach**

To provide limited-resource farmers with the best possible training and service, the project was divided in three phases.

In phase 1, Research, CROPS used a local firm to study the interest in starting small farmers market businesses in our area, and then ran a series of pilot workshops.

In phase 2, Marketing & Development, we began preparing for the full workshops, based on information gathered from the survey and pilot workshops. We also marketed the workshops extensively in the community to many new audiences.

Phase 3, Execution, Evaluation and Planning consisted of the full series of eight day-long workshops covering the full range of topics on starting a small, direct-market farm business.

## **Goals and Outcomes Achieved**

***CROPS will conduct a city-wide survey to assess the needs of the community regarding direct-market farming.***

The randomly selected sample of residents answered questions about their interest in growing food for market. Eight percent had an interest, representing 8,106 households in Lincoln. This is a significant number for CROPS to reach with our workshop series on growing and selling at farmers' markets. They also provided information on best media outlets, types of crops to grow and other services they would need to start a direct market business. The data collected was helpful both for planning the workshops, but also for sharing with local business and community leaders about the need for beginning farmer training.

## ***Create and execute a marketing plan for the Growing Farmers Workshop Series***

During December 2010 and January 2011, Community CROPS extensively marketed the Growing Farmers Training Program in our service area. This included an ad that played on commercial and public radio stations, and a television ad that was shown on a wide variety of local cable channels including Latino channels. Newspaper ads were placed in the main Lincoln

paper, as well as in the papers in surrounding communities. The results of this advertising were a definite increase in interest in the program. We had significantly more phone calls to the office, and web site visits increased 28% over the same time period in the previous year. Additional marketing was done through presentations to staff at social service agencies and USDA offices, as well as to potential participants as part of programs targeted to refugee and immigrant populations.

***Community CROPS will conduct eight workshops over four months for 25-30 immigrant, low income, and new farmer/vendors. Curriculum will be developed to best meet the needs of the target population.***

From January – April 2011, the Growing Farmers Winter Workshop Series was held, consisting of eight workshops covering all aspects of starting a direct market business. Topics for the eight workshops were:

- Market trends & opportunities/Goal setting
- Business planning
- Financial planning
- Crop production
- Marketing & promotion
- Presenting business and financial plans
- Harvest & post-harvest handling
- Tools & equipment/Conserving resources

Many of the sessions were held indoors in a classroom, and several also included field trips to local successful farms to provide hands-on training.

Development consisted of both creating documents and presentations specifically for our area, and also utilizing materials from University Extension websites or places like the National Center for Appropriate Technology.

In addition to the Winter Workshops, CROPS provided trainings throughout the summer at various local farms through another funding source, which gave participants a more complete learning experience.

In the post-series evaluation, participants rated the workshop series 4.6 out of 5 points. One participant said that they learned how “to make more money to make a living doing [market farming],” and another said they benefited from “the knowledge I gained in having a farmers market garden and resources that can help me. I thought [the workshop series] gave me a good, broad picture of what all I have to do.” CROPS placed an emphasis on thorough business planning in the workshops, and several participants shared how helpful that was to them. One said that it helped them to “grasp the complexity of this operation...without a solid business plan, we would have virtually nothing.” Another participant said that the workshops helped them “look at the big picture...[the workshops] gave me a lot of things to think about...[they] helped me be able to plan and get organized.”

## **Beneficiaries**

Over the course of the two year project, 38 people attended one or more of the workshops, which is significantly higher than our goal of 30 people.

In addition to participating in the workshops, many farmers also received one-on-one mentoring from CROPS staff. Few farmers exemplify this better than Memphis, a grower from Togo who is in his third year at Sunset Community Farm. Memphis has learned to grow a wide variety of crops efficiently, and his sales record shows it. In his first year, Memphis sold \$1,600 of produce, and this year, he has sold over \$9,300! CROPS staff played a large role in his success, connecting him to markets like Open Harvest, the local coop grocery store, the online Nebraska Food Coop, and buying large quantities of his produce for the CROPS CSA. Memphis's success is a testament to his hard work and dedication, and we believe it also shows the quality of the training that he received.

Our other beneficiaries are vegetable consumers in the Lincoln area. The Community CROPS CSA, which grows and purchases all its produce in the Lincoln area, provided over 17,000 pounds of fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs to 300 Lincoln residents. Many of our vegetables also find their way to at-risk youth in our community through a recent partnership with the foster care agency CEDARS. Finally, many Lincoln residents buy produce from CROPS and the Sunset Community Farmers at the Old Cheney Road Farmers Market.

In addition, CROPS hosts many visitors at Sunset Community Farm, where families can buy products directly from the farmers. An annual free event at the farm brings out hundreds of people to meet the farmers and purchase their products, and numerous small groups also come out to the farm at other times of the year.

## **Lessons Learned**

Community CROPS learned several lessons through this project.

First, we noticed that there is a high demand for quality instruction about specialty crop production. We went far beyond our estimate for workshop attendees, and we believe that with better organization and marketing, our workshops will be even more well attended. The formal, comprehensive winter workshop series has only been in existence for two years and is rapidly growing as more people learn about it.

Second, we realized a need to focus our energies on one-on-one consultations and field walks with participants to help them grow and sell their products. Growing vegetables and direct-marketing them requires a diverse skill set that is hard to teach exclusively in a classroom setting. Our incubator farm allowed us to increase our interaction with our program participants and therefore the quality of education they received. We provided field walks, helped farmers use our stall at the farmers' market, and provided on-going mentoring on how to best market their products.

We also learned a number of important lessons from the workshops, such as the need to have a few extra sessions for immigrants and refugees to help them overcome language and cultural barriers and really understand all the material presented. Also, planning time either during the workshops or even on a weekday between workshops for participants to receive one-on-one training and feedback is very helpful. Small farm businesses are very diverse, which means each participant has unique needs.

Finally, we reaffirm the importance of one-on-one mentoring, as well as land-based training. Our current farm site is limited to six or seven participants per year, which prevents us from reaching as many farmers as we would like. Fortunately, in 2013, we plan to move to Prairie Pines, a site owned by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Foundation and managed by the University. This farm has over 15 acres of hay that we plan to convert to specialty crop production, beginning with four acres in 2013. We anticipate many opportunities for collaboration with University and USDA educators and researchers as we develop this farm into a training farm for budding direct market producers in Nebraska.

In conclusion, the FMPP funding was critical for the success of the project over the last two years. It allowed us to offer a comprehensive training program and one-on-one support to a number of beginning, specialty-crop growers. We look forward to expanding the program in the future, with additional funding, to work toward meeting Secretary Vilsack's goal of 100,000 new farmers.

### **Additional Information**

The primary project partners for this project were the educators who provided training to the beginning farmers. This was a range of people from extension agents to successful direct market farmers, whose expertise was beneficial to the participants. We also worked with a local research company to carry out the phone survey and a local television producer to create the 30 second CROPS Growing Farmers Ad.

The Community CROPS website <http://communitycrops.org/farm> contains many documents on the Growing Farmers Training Program including the syllabus for the classes, registration information, photos of workshops and short farmer training videos.

### **Contact Person**

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