

2011 Summer Conference Article for Summer TNF

Diversification: Forging New Paths at the NOFA Summer Conference **By Mindy Harris, NOFA/Mass Publicity Coordinator**

Just as organic farmers try to maximize and enrich their production cycles through diversification, so too are we at NOFA trying to enrich the offerings at our annual conference in an effort to appeal to the ever-growing organic movement with its myriad areas of interest. Specific tracks of workshops are offered to help you schedule your time at the conference with the topics you're most interested in. Registrants can choose to concentrate in one topic area or to sample a wide diversity of topics.

The best way to familiarize oneself with the workshop schedule is to go online and read the descriptions of the 225+ workshops (posted at: <http://www.nofasummerconference.org/workshops.php>). A few highlights are worth mentioning.

NOFA has partnered with the Draft Animal Power Network, to bring you Northeast Animal-Power Field Days (NEAPFD) as part of the 2011 Summer Conference. NEAPFD has been held annually at the World's Fairgrounds in Tunbridge, Vermont since 2007, and this year it will be housed as part of the NOFA Summer Conference for the first time. This new collaboration brings to the conference farmers who are utilizing draft animals for work on their operations.

Most of the animal-power workshops will be held at the University of Massachusetts Research Farm in South Deerfield, MA. The UMass Research Farm features the steep slopes and red cliffs of Mt. Sugarloaf at its back and the mighty Connecticut River at its foot, and sits on some of the most productive soils in the region. More than 30 of the most experienced teamsters from across the Northeast will be convening to share their knowledge and skills and presenting over 40 workshops. David Fisher, who is a longtime NOFA member and NEAPFD participant and owner of Natural Roots Farm in Conway, has joined year's Summer Conference Committee in order to coordinate this group of workshops.

The Permaculture Track covers how the ecological design approaches of permaculture can inform crop selection, homestead design, farm and woodlot management, and community building. This track, which includes presentations from our keynote speaker, Eric Toensmeier, about growing and breeding perennial crops, contains 19 workshops in a diverse variety of categories.

Another track features workshops on increasing the nutrient density of food through soil building. Presenters will cover vegetable crops, dairy production, pasture management, and concepts. The track contains 11 workshops, including a debate among experts in organic soil fertility where the concept of nutrient density will be both presented and challenged.

Keynote speaker, Ignacio Chapela, will present break-out sessions about the global food crisis and a critical portrayal of one of the newest forms of seed alternation, a practice known as synthetic biology. Other workshops on policy and politics will cover immigrant rights in agricultural labor, a legal toolkit for farmers, raw milk, global hunger, and a frank debate on strategy for approaching the 2012 farm bill.

Farmers old and new who are interested in the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model for their farms will have five different workshops to expand their knowledge in the CSA track. Participants can

learn logistics on how to start a CSA or how to bring one that they already operate to a higher level of success. In addition to our new tracks, this year's workshops include topics ranging from livestock to crop management, farm economics, nutrition, food preservation, and alternative energy among many other areas of interest. Workshops are designed for all levels - from commercial farmers to backyard master-gardeners to urban homesteaders.

For those willing to travel during the weekend, this year's conference features 12 workshops and tours of farms and homesteads in the immediate area around Amherst where you can see for yourself the innovative farming practices that some Western Massachusetts growers are using.

The best part of the NOFA Summer Conference can sometimes take place in between the workshops. With over a hundred vendors and exhibitors, live entertainment, healthy organic meals, there is great camaraderie and relationships that are built every year. The pond, in the center of the UMass Amherst campus, becomes the focal gathering point.

Saturday afternoon will bustle with excitement at the NOFA Country Fair. This year a circle of appreciation will follow the children's parade, at 3 pm, and will include a song and dance to recognize NOFA's mission. Take a ride around the pond in a horse-drawn wagon, test your knowledge about organic food, and get your throwing arm warmed for our veggie bowl toss. This year's fair will feature a "So You Think You Can Grow" contest. Conference registrants will vote on the best tasting produce from local farmers this growing season. Saturday afternoon always features lots of activities at the Farmer's and Crafter's Market including animal demonstrations, vendors and games for kids. The Silent Auction, now in its second year, will feature items in the Exhibitor Tent. Participants will be able to bid on great New England regional attractions, great farming and gardening supplies, and restaurant gift certificates. Go home with a treat, and support NOFA in the process.

Children and Teens have lots to keep them busy with exciting hands-on activities and workshops throughout the weekend. Choices include: the 1-2-3 of Bees, Buttermaking, Vermicomposting, Mural-Making, Eco-Art and more! Families can easily find low-cost housing at the conference, camping on-site or in university housing. The NOFA Summer Conference is a great family vacation in the Pioneer Valley.

As always, NOFA offers a broad array of marketing opportunities for businesses through corporate sponsorships, exhibit space and print advertising. An exhibit space inside the main tent is only \$190 for the three days. Discounts are available for income eligible non-profits and farms. An ad in the Program Book can be purchased for businesses that are not looking to be on-site. Conference attendees hold onto their Program Books throughout the year for easy referencing. Finally, the Summer Conference always has a wonderful group of businesses, organizations and non-profits that sponsor the conference. Sponsorships provide the largest amount of marketing visibility, with exhibit space, program advertising and web presence.

As of this print deadline, we want to thank our NOFA Summer Conference sponsors: Whole Foods Market, Stonyfield Farm, Greenfield Farmers Cooperative Exchange, Farm Family, Clements Law Office, Greenleaf Foundation, Franklin Community Cooperative, Vermont Compost, Boston Organics, Groton Wellness, Neighboring Food Coop Association, Bejo Seeds, Chelsea Green Publishing, Northeast Animal-

Power Field Days, River Valley Market, RMA, UMass Amherst, North Country Organics, Harris Seeds and Real Pickles. Please contact Bob Minnocci for more information on exhibits, advertising and sponsorships: bob@nofamass.org or 617-236-4893.

This year, farmers with fewer than 10 years of experience will be able to benefit from Beginning Farmer Scholarships of \$60 that can be used to offset registration costs for the Summer Conference. Scholarship recipients will be expected to give two hours of volunteer service during the conference and complete a post-conference evaluation. For more details about the scholarships and for information on how to apply, please visit www.nofasummerconference.org. If you cannot access the NOFA Summer Conference website, please contact the registration team at (413) 230-7835 to request a paper copy of the guidelines and application. This project has been made available through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant # 2010-49400-21847.

Online registration for the NOFA Summer Conference will be available in May. Please visit our website www.nofasummerconference.org for ongoing updates and information. If you have questions, please also feel free to contact the NOFA/Mass office at 978-355-2853, or contact Ben Grosscup, the Summer Conference Coordinator – ben.groscup@nofamass.org.