



# SFOP Quarterly NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2020

## New Newsletter Helps Keep You Informed

Dear Small Farmers and Ranchers,

Welcome to our new Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) Newsletter. As you know, the coronavirus pandemic is changing the landscape on how we deliver programs and services to you - our valued clients. In the past, you received our six-month planning brochure, which provided you with listings for educational workshops, demonstrations, field days, conferences and other events at various locations across the Commonwealth of Virginia.

While the need to keep social distancing is critical to stopping the spread of the virus, our mission at SFOP is to extend knowledge, training and technical assistance. We know that despite the unprecedented challenges and changes that confront us and our world, our clients still need information. Our SFOP agents are rising to the challenges to help reach our clients in new ways to extend this needed knowledge. The new SFOP newsletter is one way of getting you the information you need. The quarterly newsletter will feature general

farm business news, as well as, timely tips and information on growing, producing and marketing.

As we adhere to the regulations and guidance of the Commonwealth of Virginia and Virginia State University (VSU) regarding the COVID-19 crisis, these changes are temporary, but necessary. As restrictions are eased and we are allowed to have face-to-face programs, we will resume the production of the six-month planning brochure. You may also visit our website at [ext.vsu.edu](http://ext.vsu.edu) and visit our online Small Farm Resource Center at [vasmallfarmers.com](http://vasmallfarmers.com).

We are looking for more ways to serve our clients and we encourage you to continue to reach out to your SFOP agents for assistance via email and phone. We are here for you, and we will get through this together.

Best regards,  
William Crutchfield, SFOP Director



## Responding to the Covid-19 Reality

By Michael Carter, Jr.



This pandemic and its trickle down and trickle up effects will hopefully spur Virginia residents to have greater control of their food supply, creating a security blanket for themselves as well as local farmers.

While Covid-19 created the need for social distancing measures, for some small farmers, other found potential

opportunities to sell or distribute their food knocking on their doors. Many farmers I've spoken with from around the state shared that they received a significant amount of calls from new customers to provide produce to them. The CSA farmers have experienced an uptick in the number of new customers requesting access to their CSAs. Those who are pivoting from restaurants and schools converted their farms to market places, either doing a farmers market on their farm, attending early farmers markets or even virtual farmers markets. Many reaped record sales.

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For the first time, a majority of farmers are in a position where their demand is far exceeding their supply at premium prices. What rural farmers need first, me included, is the now age old issue of access to broadband. With many workshops, support mechanisms, markets/marketing and transactions going virtual, if you don't have stable access to the internet, you are three to five steps behind. In my focus groups in 2018, access to broadband was a major issue. Having moved to a very rural area in the last year, access is critical. And it's not cost, it's quality. I would love to have Netflix and chill in Orange County, but I end up with Netflix and buffering. The broadband infrastructure will be the biggest challenge and threat to empowering farmers and growing markets in rural areas that will ensure they are able to function in this new reality instead of being isolated by it. This is the first part of the digital divide.

The other challenge is the other digital divide. With the average age of the Virginia farmer being 60, many farmers are not willing (or able) to pivot to the new technological needed for transacting business. Our own staff is challenged with this digital divide. Our organization is not as nimble in this respect because of the average age of our agents and lack of younger staff to assist in aiding our more than 43,000 farmers digitally. The SFOP needs a greater influx in funding from the state to be able to hire younger agents to work with and learn from our older agents as well as offer creative ways to reach small farmers in times like these.

Our farmers needed and still need our programming and workshops, just in a digital format. The information that our agents share is invaluable and assisting them to move our programming into digital formats, and add programs directly related to the pandemic, would put us in position of leading and not lagging.

Logistics is definitely needed in addition to communication in terms of potential markets and market needs. With the quarantine and social distancing measures, it became a hazard to travel throughout the state and over state lines in some places. I have some thoughts on logistically solutions, but I need to flush them out more before I share.

Processing and slaughtering is a huge challenge and roadblock for small ruminants. The mobile processing unit that VSU is working on would have been timely, and addresses a great need for our small ruminant ranchers. Beef prices at the slaughterhouses are going down, but farmers are leveraging stock from the winter and are able to sell it at a premium. However, as on hoof price falls, retail price is spiking, and farmers aren't benefitting from a higher wholesale price. And consumers are seeing a need for greater access to local proteins with the news reports of

outbreaks at meat packing plants throughout the country. I'm not sure what can be done to increase processing centers, possibly more inspectors and facilities or grants for facilities in the Southside, Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley. More public private partnerships are needed to make this reality and a streamlining of the regulation and red tape process.

Your question of small farmers working together to provide food for low food access communities is well... long answered. Farmers working together in Virginia is challenging. I'm not convinced there is a strong enough demand for fresh food in low food access communities. Recently as I put more produce from the greenhouse into my stuffed refrigerator, I realized that how most people eat is based on convenience. The reason the produce is falling out of my refrigerator is because of the time needed to prep and prepare the fresh vegetables in meals. Small farmers in the Commonwealth would need assistance in processing of vegetables, i.e. chopping and bagging. Low food access communities, as well as the average consumer, are used to having canned or bagged produce that aides in convenience with little food preparation needed. Our farmers unfortunately have to compete with the ease of opening up a bag of greens, a prewashed container of salad or a can of stringed and cut green beans. Our small farmers could utilize services of vegetable processing, like the Southern Virginia Food Hub, potentially at a discount or in a pseudo cooperative format to assist in aiding low food accessed communities. Access in these communities is more about do they want it (demand) than farmers or agencies delivering produce to and in these communities.

The Market at 25th is a prime example of if you build it or provide it, they still will not come. The roots of this issue is compounded as you know, but the reality is until the demand issue is addressed, and it can be deemed as a profitable experience for farmers, that's when businesses/grocery stores/farmers/farmers markets and other food outlets will invest in fresh produce in those communities.

I like to use the UDC model and platform as an example. UDC placed a community garden/farmers market at a closed down and shuttered housing project, 58th Ave. on the Northeast DC/Prince Georges County border. I went to visit it, and see how it was doing, a few months into its start in late August. The market and grow site, which contained about 4 hoop houses, landscape urban garden was shuttered and closed. And has never opened back up, since 2017, because they couldn't recruit any farmers to come out, because sales were abysmally low. In trying to aid low food access communities, farmers

need a produce insurance policy or buy back that if a significant amount of produce is not sold on site, that it can be taken to another source, either via the state or a public/private partnership that will buy the produce at a fair market price.

A complaint I've heard from farmers at farmers markets is the cost of packaging for every item. They are adding another dollar to every item sold because of the excess packaging. Discounted packaging or sponsored branded

packaging with VDACS and other stakeholders could greatly aide our growers.

Small farmers need to be assured and have our industry buttressed, as we are essential part of the health and food security. Investment in produce, protein, processors, inspectors, gap inspectors, beginner farmer programs/ initiatives, community gardens, logistical efforts and small farm outreach workshops will aide our growers and ranchers during and after this pandemic.

## Local Farmers Adapt Operations During Pandemic

By Susan Cheek



Susan Hill is a great example of a successful farmer, who is able to adapt and overcome. She has been operating Hill Farm Vintage Vegetables in Louisa for ten years. This is her retirement hobby and second career. Her husband, Scott, told her if she retired from teaching he would build her a high

tunnel. He kept that promise, and in 2018, his wife was named Farmer of the Year by the Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) at Virginia State University (VSU). In addition to being an avid gardener, she is also a personal chef for a bedridden patient with multiple sclerosis, who has seen great improvement in her health with a new diet that includes Hill's produce. Hill has added berries to her vegetable operation with direction from VSU Extension specialist Dr. Reza Rafie.

To adapt the challenges of Covid-19 pandemic, she changed many aspects of her farming operation. Usually her CSA is



Susan and Scott Hill, Hill Farm Vintage Vegetables

limited to 10 members, but she extended the number to 15 because of the high demand for locally sourced food from individuals with health issues. There were problems sourcing plants and seeds. Hill resorted to buying them from stores in her area because production was shut down for many companies. It took three to four months to receive orders placed in January, and some were never filled. Tours that are the norm on the farm were cancelled.

She also changed packaging, switching from baskets to bags to reduce produce handling and increase safety. Gloves are used more often when handling deliveries, as well as harvest. These extra safety measures have significantly increased cost. Hill continues using GAP food safe principles to avoid contamination. She said farmers must be ready for quick changes to continue production.

Thomas and Anita Roberson have owned and operated Botanical Bites & Provisions farm in Fredericksburg, VA for six years. This is their second career choice for the retired U.S. Army veterans, who were the SFOP's Farmers of the Year in 2015.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, this year has created many changes for the farm. The Robersons were concerned about the needs of others so they made the choice to reduce flower production and increase food production in order to make large donations to Fauquier Community Food Bank and Thrift Store in Warrington, VA. They increased online sales and limited on-farm sales to appointment only. They are still selling at the farmers market and adhering to the new guidelines by wearing masks and gloves, and having customers point to the items they want to purchase. The CDC safety guidelines limited the opportunity to offer customers samples. They suspended on tours.





Thomas and Anita Roberson, Botanical Bites & Provisions

Even though they have been adhering to social distancing requirement, they are still mentoring via phone and email, and are happy to share information as it comes down the pipe to the new and beginning farmers they mentor. Recently the Robersons gave a webinar to The Black

Church Food Security Network on growing garlic.

Last-minute purchases of seeds and plants have also been a challenge as many items are sold out due to concern over food security and the resurrection of the Victory garden concept. Many have called looking for seeds and starter plants as they are difficult to find and expensive, with subpar quality in many cases. Selling seeds and starter plants might be an opportunity other farmers could consider as an added source of revenue.

Even with the challenges, things are starting to look up. The Robersons were recently contacted by a local restaurant that wanted to purchase all available tomatoes and cucumbers. This shows more people are looking for local food sources as we all need to eat, and these days it is a good idea to know where your food comes from and how it is handled. The newest item added to their operation this year are strawberries, and it has been a great season so far for sweet berries.

## Sweet Potato Variety Trials Underway

By Tracy Porter



I have been planning and coordinating two sweet potato variety trial demonstrations for the past few months with beginning female farmers in Lancaster County and Gloucester County.

Bonnie Norman is in her second growing season as a beginning farmer. Last year she planted three varieties of

hemp on one acre under plastic with drip tape and produced one of the best hemp crops I have seen in my area. This year, Clif Slade will provide her with six varieties of sweet potatoes for her demonstration. Bonnie's demonstration will consist of 12 x 100' rows, with sweet potato slips planted 1' apart in row. We will be doing a side-by-side comparison of the same variety; one planted in a traditional hill with drip tape and one planted in a raised bed using a plastic layer, plastic mulch and drip tape. The purpose of the side-by-side comparison is to allow the beginning farmer to compare the difference in yields between hilled and under plastic and to see whether using plastic mulch is worth the expense versus the labor of weeding the hilled sweet potatoes. This will be the first vegetable crop that Bonnie has grown for wholesale or retail sale.

Catherine Herlong is in her fourth season as a small grower of mixed greens and micro greens. Last year, Catherine put in about one-half acre of hemp and had the typical

problems most farmers in Virginia and North Carolina had with excess water, soil borne disease associated with excess water and lodging from growing from clones, which do not establish a tap root to stabilize the plant. This year, Catherine volunteered to do a sweet potato variety trial for SFOP. This is a great opportunity to compare sweet potatoes grown in two different soil series, with the Lancaster soil being a sandy loam and the Gloucester soil being a heavier, less well-drained soil of marine sediment parent material. Clif Slade will be providing seven varieties for her demonstration, each slip planted 1' apart on 100' rows. Catherine opted not to grow under plastic. She has a unique on-farm enterprise that will contribute to both demonstrations: She brews her own liquid Norwegian Kelp, which can be dripped or foliar applied on all fruits and vegetables. Both demonstrations will use her liquid kelp as a foliar application once a week and tissue samples will be sent to Waypoint Analytics to determine the nutrient analysis of the tissue sample.

I will record the steps and provide to VSU Marketing for their branding so that we can use for a future webinar. If allowed, we will hold a live on-farm demonstration the first week of September where Clif Slade will be the guest presenter and the SFOP potato digger will be demonstrated. If not approved for a live demo, then we will record the dig day and present the entire series (from field prep to harvest) as a webinar.

# Self-Sufficiency Starts with A Little Gardening

By Mojdeh Karimi



We all know the definition of self-sufficiency. The question is how do we put this word into practice. It is not as hard as we think.

The goal of self-sufficiency is being able to support your family and put healthy food on the table. To reach the goal, we need to look around the house or the farm at what we

have that can save us money, since reducing expenses brings us one step closer to independence.

There is one word that we do need to define – freedom. This is a broad word, and it can be misused or misunderstood. Freedom can have different meanings for every individual. Is independence part of freedom? Or is freedom part of the definition of independence? They don't have the same meaning, but they are related.

Most self-employed business owners rely on clients, technology and external infrastructure to help make their businesses successful. A farmer relies largely on nature.

Starting out, farmers may not always earn as much income from selling their produce as they would like, but they can still at least feed their family. Once they become more established, they are on their way to self-sufficiency. Being self-sufficient can be as simple as growing your own food just a few feet away from your house. And if you live close to others who love growing food, you can trade produce and a whole community can help each other to become independent. That's how people used to live many years ago. Of course, it is not complete self-sufficiency, but it can save lives and maintain basic living, especially in emergency circumstances, such as this Covid-19 health crisis.

It is never too late to start gardening. These days there are so many resources available, especially online, to get you started. People generously make their own experience available for others so everybody can save time and money. Sure, self-sufficiency is not complete. We still need to go to stores for some needs but for many essential things, a farmer can be independent.

Think of self-sufficiency as a survival tool, which can help you in a crisis. The point is to feed the family by being self-reliant. Think of it as gaining stability and self-respect. Nature can feed people as long as people interact with nature in a sustainable way. If humans take care of nature, nature will

take care of humans. Nature not only has the power to keep humans healthy, it can uplift the human spirit.

We just have to use our five senses (in some cases, six senses ☺) to discover all the beauty and life, nature has given us.

Self-sufficiency doesn't mean avoiding interactions with other people. In fact, the best way to be self-sufficient is to involve your community in your project. Learn from each other and give emotional support to each other. Humans by nature are social. .

## A few tips:

- Decide what to grow, where, when and how much.
- Pick a spot for your garden, and make sure it gets at least six hours of good sunlight. A simple drawing or picture of the location can help with planning the layout.
- Start small. A small patch of your backyard is sufficient. You just need to be creative and figure out how to use small spaces to maximize yield.
- Involve your family in gardening and make it an enjoyable experience. Good memories can be cultivated in the garden.
- Plant vegetables that you and your family like and can be used in different ways in cooking or salads.
- Talk to your local extension agent, neighbors or friends to learn what grows well in your area.
- Plant vegetables that are easy to grow such as tomatoes, potatoes, cucumbers, squash and kale.
- Get a free soil test from your Cooperative Extension Office. Soil mainly needs three things to be able to grow plants - oxygen, water and nutrients.
- Water your plants regularly. Vegetables don't need a lot of water, but plants need to be watered consistently.
- Maintain the garden daily to control weeds and prevent insects from damaging your vegetables.
- Use a raised bed to help hold in moisture, control weeds and keep nutrients around the plants.
- Plant a variety of vegetables and do it in succession, so you will have vegetables most of the year.

If you run into issues, know that you can reach out to our Small Farm Outreach Agents or Virginia Cooperative Extension specialists for answers to your questions. With a little creativity, your garden can help you get closer to self-sufficiency.





Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program is expanding its educational and outreach efforts with a new mobile education unit that was delivered in April. The custom built unit will be used as a resource for promoting agriculture in grades K-12 and will also be used to provide outreach, training and technical assistance to farmers and producers across the Commonwealth of Virginia. The new trailer has been sent to Michigan to be equipped with interactive displays and will be completed and returned to VSU by early September.



## *In Memory of Barbara A. Booker*



The death of our beloved, Barbara A. Booker, who passed away on May 4, has left a void in the agriculture community.

Booker, 70, was a devoted volunteer with many agricultural organizations, including the Small Farm Outreach Program (SFOP) at Virginia State University (VSU).

In 2016, she was recognized as the SFOP Volunteer of the Year for her contributions to the program.

The Chesterfield resident was not only known for her volunteerism, but also for her devotion to gardening. She was an enthusiastic and successful gardener. After retiring from a career in occupational safety and health, Booker continuously studied agriculture and enjoyed working in her vegetable gardens. She was eager to learn and share her passion with others. Booker

attended almost every agricultural event whether it was workshops, conferences, bus tours or planting gardens for the community.

She graduated from Hampton University with a bachelor's degree in biology and earned a master's degree in biology from the University of Indiana. Booker proudly served in the U. S. Army before being honorably discharged as a captain.

Colleagues at the SFOP described her as a smart, strong, dynamic person who spoke her mind with integrity and respect. She will be remembered for her friendship, smile and positivity. Booker, who regularly contributed to the Chesterfield Food Bank, is also remembered for her generosity and compassion.

The impact she made in our community was deep and won't be forgotten.

Playwright and author Thornton Wilder once said, "The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude. We are grateful that Barbara Booker was a part of our lives, and now lives in our hearts and memories."





**Are you a new farmer or rancher interested in learning about loans to beginning and historically underserved farmers?**

**Are you looking for advice on the dos and don'ts of hemp production?**

**Are you concerned about managing your health and stress level on the farm?**

The Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition provides helpful resources to beginning farmers and ranchers on these and many other timely topics. Here's a list of recent 2020 webinars:

- *Farm Financing Options for Historically Underserved and Beginning Farmers Through the USDA Farm Service Agency*
- *Hemp Panel Webinar*
- *Stress and Safety: Decrease One, Increase the Other*
- *Forest Farming in Virginia*
- *Agritourism Safety in Virginia*

You can access the VBFRC's Webinar Archive at [www.vabeginningfarmer.alce.vt.edu/webinar/Archive](http://www.vabeginningfarmer.alce.vt.edu/webinar/Archive). The site features prerecorded webinars aimed at helping farmers and ranchers establish and sustain viable agricultural operations. If you have suggestions for webinar topics, email the coalition at [vabeginningfarmer@vt.edu](mailto:vabeginningfarmer@vt.edu).



**Where Virginia's small and beginning farmers and ranchers access comprehensive resources to help make their farm businesses profitable and sustainable.**

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