The South West Florida Small Farmer Network: A Participatory and Regional Approach to Diversified Horticultural Production Extension

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The South West Florida Small Farmers Network (SWFSFN) is one of the new farmer-to-farmer networks supported by the UF/IFAS/FAMU Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Program. These working groups have been developed to meet the unique education needs of Florida small farmers. For example, the successful models for sustainable horticultural small farming in Florida and across the nation include highly diversified agroecosystems. The teaching of crop and enterprise diversification provides benefits for sustained production (Gliessman, 2006), marketing (Bandele, 1999), and lowering economic risk (USDA/RMA, 2008). These agroecosystems require increased knowledge of different crops, enterprises, and marketing compared to past single or limited commodity-based operations. This paper describes the approach and activities implemented by the SWFSFN to provide this information, research, and support.

Research on trends in extension education have reported the need for new approaches to different farmer groups, e.g., small farmers (Ingram, 1999), beginning farmers (Trede and Whittaker, 1998), organic farming (Sayre, 2008), and gender (ISU, 2008). The use of farmer-to-farmer education, such as on-farm field days and farm tours, as extension education tools has long been recognized as an excellent approach where researchers and farmers become more aware of practical grower problems. This method is especially relevant to meeting the information needs of diversified farms typical of sustainable agriculture. For example, in the mid 1980s the organization Practical Farmers of Iowa developed farmer-driven and locally-based education programs in partnership with extension that challenged the scientific establishment to produce knowledge that farmers could use to improve the environmental and economic challenges they faced (PFI, 2008). This farmer network approach continues to be developed with recent applications taking advantage of web-based education technologies (SSAWG, 2008). In addition, the efficacy of farmer-to-farmer education has been implemented in international extension projects (US AID, 2008).

The need for the SWFSFN was established primarily by two sources of information. First, the 2006–07 South Central Florida Small Farm and Alternative Enterprise (SCFSFAE) Workshops provided evidence. For example, 95% of surveys have documented a preference by attendees for learning in a farmer-to-farmer, mentoring type situation. Anecdotally, many of these attendees (both beginning and experienced farmers) describe their farming situation as “isolated” from similar farming operations. Second, in May 2007 some of these diversified horticulture models were visited and evaluated by UF/IFAS and FAMU extension faculty on the Small Farms Study Tour in the states of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. The subsequent report identified strengths and weaknesses that could be addressed by extension facilitation of a grower’s network (Bremen et al., 2007).

The extension model used for the SWFSFN is based on the premise that “successful farmer-to-farmer networks assume that each person has valuable knowledge and experience to contribute (CIAS, 1996). To this end, the format of the meetings was designed to achieve the following objectives:

1) a farmer working group based on farmer-driven participation and priorities
2) farmer-to-farmer education by meetings featuring farm tours and networking activities for sharing of information on production and marketing on diversified, small farms
3) a regional farmer network by the rotation of the location of the on-farm meetings in multi-counties
4) opportunity for both beginning and experienced small farmers interested in diversified sustainable agriculture
5) discussion of events/organizations/issues on small farming and local food systems
6) in-formal education by extension agents on farmer-identified topics, using PowerPoint and hands-on activities
7) distribution of UF/IFAS/FAMU Small Farm & Alternative Enterprise Program resources

To this end, the SWFSFN was formed in July 2007. Initially members were solicited from the attendee lists from the 2006–07 SCFSFAE Workshops and the FL attendees of the 2005–07 Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG) Conferences. To date, there have been three meetings at intervals of 2 to 3 months. They have been held at diversified small farms in Hillsborough, Sarasota, and Lee counties. Attendance has increased at each event from word of mouth, i.e., from 20 to 44. The profile of the membership of SWFSFN includes the following:

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1) farming experience varies from 1 to 30 years, including persons at the exploratory level
2) farm size varies from 1 to 60 acres
3) farming operations:
   a. field mixtures of vegetables, fruits, and livestock
   b. greenhouse
   c. hydroponics
4) marketing operations:
   a. on-farm sales
   b. farmers markets
   c. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
   d. direct sales to restaurants
5) backgrounds include agriculture suppliers, food vendors and distributors, farmers’ markets managers, and master gardeners, as well as farmers.

The use of an evaluation survey has documented an 85% level for exceeding expectations and a 90% level for knowledge gained.

The SWFSFN is achieving its objectives and acceptance by regional small producers. It offers a model for extension to meet new program opportunities in the 2007 Farm Bill and the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program, as well as expand extension’s impact in these days of budget and staff reductions.

**Literature Cited**


