

Small-Scale Farmers Weather a Challenging Season

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New farmers shared tales of how this year's weather and the demands of growing crops surprised them at a New Entry Sustainable Farming Project (New Entry) open house in Dracut on Aug. 1.

Lively insects and unexpectedly heavy rain have challenged the small-scale growers who participate in World Peas CSA. World Peas CSA is part of New Entry and provides both community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares to subscribers and food for low-income Merrimack Valley residents.

"We've had a lot more rain than we need," said Patrick Gabridge, a farmer, novelist and playwright from Brookline. "The weather's kind of tricky. We had a lot of problems with leaf hoppers. The biggest challenge is probably weed control."

New Entry helps people who could not ordinarily access the money and land to start farms begin doing small-scale agriculture in Massachusetts. The program is a joint partnership of Community Teamwork, Inc. and Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy.

According to the New Entry website, demand for local food is rising, but it is still difficult for small farmers to enter the business. New Entry helps new farmers locate land, marketing assistance, business development, and other resources. New Entry's field skills workshops cover weed management, pest management, poultry processing, meat marketing, winter feeding, and many other topics.

"This program comes with a lot of infrastructure and support for us," Gabridge said.

This support is necessary, since pursuing work as a small-scale farmer requires dedication and is not always profitable.

"One of the major obstacles is commitment," said Kimberley Fitch, Finance and Program Coordinator at New Entry. It's hard for farmers to maintain their motivation during the first few years of back-breaking work they face while learning the trade.

Fitch said 174 farmers have graduated from New Entry's training program. "The output is a detailed, comprehensive business plan," she explained. "They're taking a dream and articulating it."

"Unless you love it, it's impossible," said Nazarin Morovaty, an avid gardener who emigrated from Iran in 1977. She said she has always dreamed of having a farm. Now, she sells her produce to World Peas CSA and two restaurants.

“Everything is a surprise because you don’t think it’s that hard,” Morovaty said.
“Everything has to be done by hand.”

New Entry has worked with refugees and immigrants since 1998 and opened its doors to other potential farmers in 2007. The program’s website says it has worked with farmers from Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, and the Caribbean.

Making small-scale farming financially sustainable is a major challenge. “Most of our farmers have other jobs,” said Fitch. When these jobs are seasonally flexible, farmers can work longer hours during the summer months. Some of the farmers work in factories in the Merrimack Valley area.

Gabridge said he earned \$7,000 from farming a ¼-acre plot last year. He has a goal of doubling his income on his new ½-acre plot this year.

Despite the physical and financial challenges of farming and the unusual weather this summer has brought, Morovaty and Gabridge thoroughly enjoy farming and appreciate the opportunities New Entry provides. Gabridge has been blogging about his experiences on a website called [Pen and Pepper Farm](#).