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Southeast Michigan Small Farm Needs Assessment

Overview

Throughout the winter of 2018-2019, Marissa Schuh and Jae Gerhart, MSU Extension personnel serving Southeast Michigan, launched a comprehensive assessment to better understand programmatic needs of Southeast Michigan's small farm population[1]. The data gathered expands the work of the MSU Extension 2015-16 Issues Identification process.

Survey data was collected from 75 Southeast Michigan small farmers representing the nine counties of District 11 and 12 and Ingham County. Subsequently, a focus group of 18 farmers added qualitative, topic-specific data to the assessment.

Findings

Demographics

Almost 73% of the respondents were beginning farmers[2], farming on 10 acres or less.

The majority of the respondents produce vegetables (54). Other top types of production identified include meat animals (21), orchard/fruit production (19) and flower production (16).

Photo: MSU Student Organic Farm

Familiarity with MSU Extension

78% of respondents reported having utilized MSU Extension resources at least once.

But they generally desire more **hands-on** training and education in Southeast Michigan (less than a 1.5 hour drive from their farms) on topics applicable to producing **sustainably** and **organically**.

MSU Extension programs have helped small farmers:

- Increase their skills, knowledge, or expertise
- Connect with buyers along the supply chain
- Increase production efficiency

Small farmers desire a resource hub with curated content for small farms.

[1] According to the USDA, a small farmer is classified as annual sales <$250,000.
[2] According to the USDA, a beginning farmer is one that had been farming for 10 years or fewer.

To contact an expert in your area, visit msue.anr.msu.edu/experts or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464)

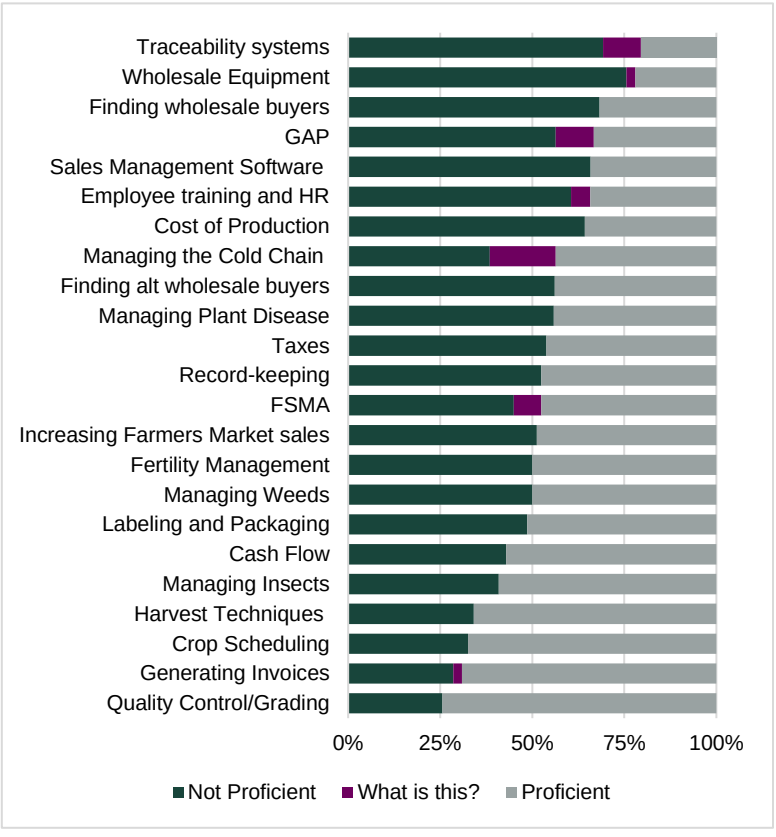
Vegetable Production

Desired Topics for Education

Photo: A.E. Scott Designs

Topic	Percent of Respondents (n=42)
Managing Plant Disease	47.5%
Fertility Management Practices (cover cropping, amendments, crop rotations, nutrient management)	42.4%
Connecting to alternative wholesale buyers (aggregated CSAs, farm-to-table restaurants, food hubs, etc)	39.0%
Managing Weeds	37.3%
Managing Insects	37.3%
Determining sales price based on cost-of-production	37.3%
General requirements of FSMA	35.6%
Harvest systems	35.6%
Record-keeping	28.8%
Creating a Traceability system	27.1%
General criteria for GAP	27.1%
Connecting to wholesale buyers	25.4%

Self-Identified Proficiency Levels



Desired Format for Education

Written publication: topics related to post-harvest handling (managing the cold chain, grading, labeling, food safety)

Class/workshop: topics related to business management (management software, HR, taxes)

On-farm assistance: topics related to production (managing insects, plant disease, weeds)

Photo: Nature and Nurture Farm

Photo: Green Things Farm

Animal Agriculture

Commonly produced animals:

- Poultry (77%)
- Beef Cattle (59%)
- Swine (50%)
- Small ruminants (45%)
- Horses (13%)
- Dairy (9%)
- Eggs (commonly listed in “other”)

Photo: Whitney Farmstead

Photo: Feral Daughters Farm

Desired Topics for Education

Topic	Percent Respondents (n=21)
Pasture management	71.4%
Local processing/slaughterhouse options	66.7%
Direct-to-consumer marketing	61.9%
Licensing and regulation	57.1%
Organic-specific management practices	52.4%
Manure management	52.4%
Connecting to alternative wholesale buyers (CSA's, farm-to-table restaurants, food hubs, etc.)	52.4%
Daily management practices	47.6%
Determining sales price based on cost-of-production	47.6%
Nutrition	47.6%
Herd/flock health	42.9%
State licensing and regulation	42.9%
Connecting to wholesale buyers	38.1%
Sales management software (quickbooks, etc)	33.3%
Transportation	33.3%
Taxes	28.6%
Genetics and selection of animals	23.8%
Managing cash-flow	23.8%
Improving sales at farmers market	19.0%

General Points of Interest

Highlighted in both the online survey and the focus group meeting:

Lack of accessible local processing and slaughterhouse facilities for small farmers.

Concerns about licensing and regulation, of which difficulties with the **consistency of expectations in inspectors.**

Fruit and Orchard Production

22 of the 74 farms surveyed produce fruit or manage an orchard.

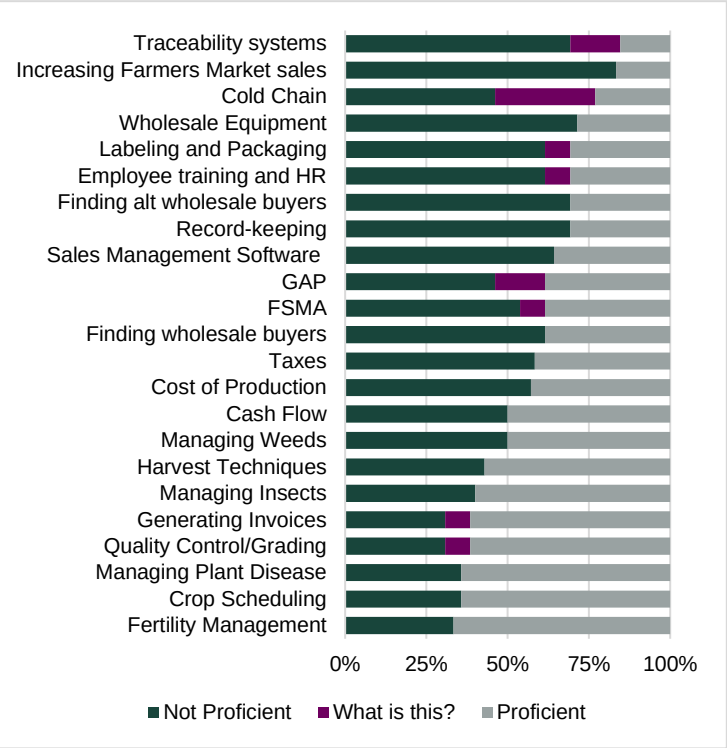
Photo: Plymouth Orchards

- Concentrated in Washtenaw, Oakland, Wayne counties
- Likely to also produce vegetables
- Half identified as beginning farmer, the other half have farmed for more than 10 years

Photo: Plymouth Orchards

Photo: Slow Farm, Ann Arbor

Self-Identified Proficiency Levels



Desired Topics for Education

Topic	**Percent Respondents** (n=14)
Managing Plant Disease	71.4%
Managing Weeds	50.0%
Managing Insects	50.0%
Creating a Traceability system	50.0%
Crop Scheduling (succession planning, estimating harvest windows, days to harvest)	42.9%
Fertility Management Practices: cover cropping, amendments, crop rotations, nutrient management	42.9%
Connecting to alternative wholesale buyers (aggregated CSAs, farm-to-table restaurants, food hubs, etc)	42.9%
Record-keeping	42.9%
Determining sales price based on cost-of-production	42.9%

Floriculture

Of the 13 floriculture respondents, 61.5% had been farming under 10 years.
46% were located in Washtenaw County, producing on ten acres or less
69% had vegetables on the farm.

One in-depth comment from a survey taker:

Give us a true floriculture (not nursery production only) cut flower expert. Respect that that is an extremely lucrative business. Look to Oregon State, Florida State, and many others for modeling.

Photo: Gnome Grown Flowers

Field Crops

Only seven respondents reported having field crops on their operation. This is likely a reflection of the distribution lists used to send out the survey.

- Four were growing on more than 51 acres, with varied number of years of experience
- Areas that field crop growers in the survey wanted to receive information on included cover crops, managing weeds and managing insects.

Communication

Mode of Contact	Summer	Winter
Email	80.6%	87.1%
Text	58.3%	55.7%
In person - visits to farm	45.8%	31.4%
Phone call	38.9%	47.1%
Monthly newsletter	31.9%	35.7%
In person - at Farmers Market	18.1%	8.6%
Through social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)	15.3%	11.4%
Through established listserves	1.4%	1.4%
Don't contact me	0.0%	0.0%
Total Respondents	**72**	**70**

Social Media

Facebook

- Washtenaw County Farmers

Instagram

- @neversinkfarm
- @bearcreekorganicfarm

Conferences attended in the past and will attend again

Other Educational Resources

Books from Chelsea Green Publishing: *The New Organic Grower, The Lean Farm*

YouTube: Curtis Stone

Farmer-to-Farmer podcast

Conference	Percent Respondents
Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference	47.9%
Washtenaw County Local Food Summit	43.8%
Michigan Family Farm Conference (MIFFS)	41.7%
Great Lake Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market Expo (GLEXPO)	27.1%
Upper Midwest Organic Conference (MOSES)	25.0%
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Alliance Conference (OEFFA)	14.6%
ACRES USA[3]	4.2%
MSUE Beginning Farmer Webinar series[3]	2.1%
Michigan Good Food Summit[3]	2.1%
Making it in Michigan[3]	2.1%
Total Responses	**48**

Agritourism

Small farmers engage in a **wide variety** of agritourism activities on their farms, which could provide some difficulty for creating a one-size-fits-all program around the issue.

Of those reporting agritourism activities on their farm, **38% reported concerns about local ordinances and regulation**.

The most popular activities include:

- U-pick (50%)
- School tours (40%)
- Farm Dinners (30%)
- Hay rides (30%)

Photo: Plymouth Orchards

[3] Not included in original question

Food System Design and Collaboration

Participants mentioned multiple times the **desire for increased collaboration** among farmers as well as with other food system stakeholders. This was often presented as a survival technique for overcoming the challenges of small-scale farming. A desire for **opportunities for informal and formal networking and skills sharing** was highlighted. One participant brought forth the fact that competition for small farms is against a larger system, not against each other, but the reality of the present market is that direct-to-consumer sales are saturated. A strong farmer network creates a safety net.

Participants spent a decent part of the conversation discussing the **racial and economic inequities of the food system**. It was identified that there is privilege inherent in who can start farms and who can afford to buy locally-produced food. One participant stated,

I couldn't afford the food I grow if I wasn't growing it.

Concerns over the effects of **climate change** on farming surfaced in the conversation. Specific concerns included more difficult weed management due to rain cycles, increased intensity of droughts and floods, and new pests and diseases.

Participants particularly craved **consumer education** related to **prices and seasonality**. They mentioned that their prices were often higher than typical grocery store prices and wanted consumers to understand the reasons why this was the case.

Policy Ideas

- GAAMPS expanded to include urban farmers
- Shorter turn-around time for USDA loans/grants
- Carbon credits to incentivize climate change mitigation
- Financial incentives to build soil organic matter (similar to the financial incentives for mitigating phosphorus run-off)
- Transparency at farmers markets about growers who resell food
- Update the MDARD website for more user-friendliness

Research Ideas

- Organic solutions for weed management and pest control
- Advanced-level hoop house planting schedules and succession planting
- Economic models beyond the farmers market sales channels
- Carbon sequestration in relation to organic farming/grazing practices

Photo: Melvin Parson – We the People Growers Association and We the People Opportunity Center