

More Variety through Multi-Farm Cooperative

by Harold Willis

Like new parents who anxiously watch their first child take its first halting steps, Lori Sands and Mary Finke, along with other helpful persons, have spent the past five years forming and overseeing a new multi-farm growers cooperative scattered across six counties in the northwestern corner of Pennsylvania.

The innovative organization called the Northwest Pennsylvania (NWP) Growers Co-op

dedicated to the formation and enhancement of rural and agricultural cooperatives, especially projects that promote environmental stewardship and conservation of resources. It is funded through the USDA's Rural Cooperative Development grant program.

Tanya, who has farmed sustainably herself, has a master's degree in sustainable systems from Slippery Rock University. She had previously worked with a group of growers farther north, in

ated organization. They share the cost of business and pool their products.

"By operating as a larger cooperative, we have an advantage in purchasing liability insurance," explained Mary. "The first two years the northern group was more active, but are not as much now."

A major hurdle that first year was designing the structure and rules for the co-op and completing much paperwork dealing with the legal and financial requirements, such as by-laws and articles of incorporation.

"Tanya Turner's help was invaluable for that," said Mary. Early members Pat Nelson (now the group's Treasurer) and Howard and Linda Mickley have also given steadfast help.



Lori Sands, Sara Runkel and Mary Finke ponder the success of NWP) Growers Co-op.



Pat Nelson, co-op treasurer, displays a wide variety of produce at a Winter Market session.

Growers Co-op began in 2004 as a very modest, loosely organized group of five farmers. They had been vendors at the Slippery Rock Farmers Market in northwestern Butler County and thus became acquainted.

BEGINNINGS

"Some of us wanted to sell to a Slippery Rock restaurant. The restaurant wanted just one delivery per week, by one person, with one invoice," recounted Lori, "and we formed a cooperative just to do that."

First they contacted a local consultant, Tanya Turner, development specialist with Keystone Development Center, a Pennsylvania non-profit corporation

Meadville, Pennsylvania. She organized an arrangement between the Slippery Rock restaurant and the local growers, and things developed from there.

In January 2005 the Slippery Rock growers met with some of the northern growers to form a single cooperative with eight farms, but because of the distance between them, they mostly operate as northern and southern groups (with the dividing line across Mercer County), having separate CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and farmers market activities, yet still belonging to the NWP) Growers Co-op. There are two annual growers meetings and a five-member board that guides policies and activities. It is a farmer-owned and oper-

WINTER MARKET

In 2008, after a few years of participation in local farmers markets and sales to the one restaurant in Slippery Rock, the southern group of the co-op began what they call the Winter Market, running from early November to early May. An original idea, the Winter Market offers customers a weekly choice of available food.

"It is probably the most innovative idea of all," remarked Mary. "It gives people a food choice for the winter, and I think that's exciting," she continued.

The Winter Market customers pay a \$15 fee, which allows them access to the online store on the co-op's website. There they can select and pre-order their

choice of whatever products are available that week. Then on the next Wednesday, the food is distributed at the pick-up site, the Robert A. Macoskey Center for Sustainable Systems Education and Research, on the eastern edge of Slippery Rock University. Typical items available in the winter include frozen meat (beef, pork, chicken), eggs, honey, dried beans, grains (buckwheat, corn meal), raw milk and raw milk cheese, stored vegetables (potatoes, turnips, carrots) and fresh greens (raised in unheated tubular greenhouses called “high tunnels”). Another innovative feature is the “Market Table,” where any product not pre-ordered that a grower has in excess can be sold.

MULTI-FARM CSA

In 2009 the co-op added two more activities. First and most ambitious was the multi-farm CSA. Lori had tried a small CSA operation on her own, supplying fresh vegetables, from 2005 to 2007, but then stopped.

“I realized that the only way to have a substantial amount of product for members was to have a multi-farm CSA . . . and we already had the growers cooperative in place,” she said. “A group of growers, each with his or her own spe-

cialty, can supply a much greater variety of good food.”

Lori and Mary developed the multi-farm CSA concept after reading *Local Harvest: A Multi-Farm GSA Handbook*, by Jill Perry and Scott Sranzblau and published in 2008 under the USDA’s SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education) program. There are not yet many multi-farm CSAs around the United States. One of the first is in Iowa, and in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area there is a large one, although not all of the growers farm naturally.

The NWPA Growers Co-op had 13 farms in its CSA in 2009, with nine in the southern group. They limited the number of customers (subscribers) to 50 that first year, as a trial run for the program.

“It worked,” said Lori, “and in 2010 we plan to double the customers. We have had many inquiries, and we didn’t even advertise in print,” she added. The CSA was promoted on the co-op’s website and was listed on the “farm finder” website at www.localharvest.org. They constantly search for new natural growers who can provide products that are in demand but not currently available, such as more grains. The participating farms pay an annual fee of \$125, which goes for insurance and an accountant, among other expenses.

Rather than all subscribers receiving the same weekly food selection, as in some CSAs, the NWPA Growers Co-op gives all customers a “core” selection of five or six vegetables plus three or four “member’s choice” items from whatever else is available. A wide selection of vegetables is usually available, depending on the season. Deliveries were made on Wednesdays at four locations for 20 weeks, from mid-June to mid-October. The 2009 subscription fees were \$410 for a full share (family-size) and \$240 for a small share (a couple or single person). In addition, subscribers could pay \$65 or \$70 for an egg share (a dozen large or extra-large eggs per week). Since customers received very generous weekly portions in 2009, the subscriber fees will be raised slightly in 2010.

As with the Winter Market, customers can make Internet pre-orders for meats, raw milk and cheese, honey, organic breads and grains. Also, they

can pre-order bulk amounts of tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, beets, corn and cabbage for canning or freezing (those were Lori’s novel ideas).

The 2009 grower roster of the co-op included ten farms producing mixed vegetables; one growing berries, grapes and pears; four providing meats (beef, pork or chicken, plus eggs); one with raw cow’s milk and raw milk cheese; one with goat-milk cheese; one with breads and pastries; and one each with dried beans and corn meal. Two are USDA Certified Organic, and another is a Certified Naturally Grown producer (a non-federal program for small farmers who distribute locally). However, all the growers do use sustainable, non-toxic, natural methods.

Some of the most difficult obstacles the co-op had to solve were finding well-located assembly and delivery sites for the food, as well as transportation to the sites. In 2010 they plan to have growers and customers rotate to provide transportation.

BIG-CITY MARKET

The other new co-op activity added in 2009 was a new farmers market located at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, about three miles east of downtown Pittsburgh and near Carnegie Mellon University. The new market was put together by PASA (Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, a state-wide organization promoting education in sustainable methods), and there were other vendors there besides NWPA Growers Co-op. Nine NWPA farms participated in 2009, paying a fee to rent the space. Since Pittsburgh is about 45 miles south of Slippery Rock, organizing the Phipps market was a big undertaking, but it gives the co-op an introduction into a new large customer base.

BUSY LEADERS

Lori Sands is the co-op’s president (although she prefers the title “coordinator”), a job which, along with vegetable growing and teaching French half-time at a local high school, keeps her very busy. In 2009 she coordinated the CSA and Winter Market, while Mary Finke, the co-op’s secretary, co-



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Howard and Linda Mickley provide mixed vegetables, grain and pork to the co-op's customers.

ordinated the Phipps market, and Pat Nelson coordinated restaurant sales. Typically, coordinating a market activity involves first phoning or e-mailing the growers to find out which products they will have the following week, in what amounts, and at what price per unit they wish to receive. Then Lori decides what goes in each subscriber's allotment, makes sure everything happens on time, and finally keeps track



Ron Donlan and Becky Lubold are new co-op growers of mixed vegetables, especially carrots.

of transactions so as to write checks to each grower every two weeks — a lot of work.

To compensate each coordinator, the co-op holds back what they call PUR (per unit retained), a fee from each sale: 5 percent for co-op expenses and another 10 percent for the coordinator (this will rise to a total of 20 percent in 2010 to provide funds to hire a new coordinator).

From August to December 2009, the co-op had the services of a graduate student intern, Sara Runkel, who was completing her M.S. in sustainable systems at Slippery Rock University. Sara performed 300 hours of work for them, writing three policy and procedure manuals, and helping out wherever needed.

FUTURE PLANS

When asked about their future plans for the NWPA Growers Co-op, Lori and Mary first note how pleased they are that 2009 went so well, with all the new activities they undertook.

"In the future, I would like to expand our customer base, either to the north and west, or to the south," said Lori. "We want to get more people involved in regional food systems, and educate them about the advantages of locally grown food," she added.

Mary said that she would like to increase the co-op's CSA program, since the potential there is great, as well as increasing restaurant sales. "I would like to offer customers all the food they need to sustain themselves, other than things like salt and oil — a one-stop shop."

The NWPA Growers Co-op can be reached at their website, www.nwpagrowers.com. Keystone Development Center's website is www.kdc.coop. The Certified Naturally Grown program is at www.naturallygrown.org.