

Sustaining Farming on the Urban Fringe



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It's Not Just About Growing Crops

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At the conclusion of this semester's 2011 Sustainable Agriculture course, I asked the students the following question, "Based on your 8-weeks of field experiences, learning directly from farmers in their fields, what courses would you recommend to someone preparing to become a successful urban fringe farmer?"

Their answers raise awareness on two issues:

- Farming on the edge of urbanization requires skills that are not confined to growing crops.
- For the public to form sound opinions about how farming should be practiced in NJ for sustainability, meaningful exposure to successful urban fringe farmers and farms is paramount.

Earlier Rutgers NJAES research by Sullivan and Adelaja explored factors leading to success or failure of urban fringe farmers. They analyzed a wide variety of factors impacting urban fringe farm viability, ranging from selling off frontage lots for cash to finance changes, to deer damage, to neighbor conflicts. They determined that urban fringe farmers with higher

levels of education were positively associated with making successful long term profitable adaptations to the challenges of urban fringe farming.

Minimizing the high risk of urban fringe farming involves more than just getting the best crop yields. Additional skills, not necessarily associated with traditional ag curriculum or sustainable agriculture training, lead to a higher likelihood of success. The following table summarizes the list of 60 classes recommended by the twelve students after completing 8 weeks of in-depth discussions directly with farmers on their farms. Grouped by subject matter, the number of times subjects were mentioned is shown as a percent of the total (n=60). The frequency of being mentioned offers us the relative importance this group places on educational areas needed for future success in farming.

Frankly, I think this survey list from students interested in sustainable farming, but without previous exposure to successful NJ urban fringe farms, offers

Courses Recommended for Individuals Preparing for Successful Urban Fringe Farming

Recommendations as a % of Total (n=60)	Courses Recommended
27% (16/60)	Economics, Business, Management, Marketing, Accounting
20% (12/60)	General Science, Nutrition, Resource Management, Statistics
17% (10/60)	Ag Technologies, specific Production Practices
17% (10/60)	Soils, Soil Science, Chemistry, Soil Conservation
12% (7/60)	Pest Management, Pathology, Weed Science, Weed Ecology
8% (5/60)	Plant Sciences

comparable (or even better) insight to what we might expect from professional university discipline experts working today. The list reveals the high importance of training in economics, business skills, and marketing. While farmers realize this, the majority of society, including agricultural scientists, frequently do not. It takes Jersey farmers standing in their fields instructing the group with statements like, *“If you get the economics right, you’ll get sustainability right,”* to make an educational impact.

The list also singles out the importance of soil sciences, chemistry, and weed science. Alternative and organic farmers understand the management time & labor consequences of weed control failures. This group quickly recognized weeds as *the* primary pest problem facing alternative farmers after only 8 weeks in the field.

There is a transformation that comes about through experiential education. This group has an interest in sustainable farming and comes from diverse backgrounds such as marine science, law, and environmental policy, to name a few. On entering the

class, their concept of how sustainable farming should be practiced was typical of non-farming individuals in our society. During the course, they were confronted with the realities of agriculture as it is practiced on the urban fringe. Often what they experienced was at odds with what they had been taught in the classroom or heard from pop culture icons who speak on sustainable farming.

Agriculture is impacted by many non-ag professional decision makers. As these individuals move out into their respective careers, I believe their experiences will allow them to make better judgments about how sustainable farming should be practiced. That’s good for farmers, and good for New Jersey.

In summary, individuals entering farming on our urban fringe must be knowledgeable on many technical topics beyond best yield strategies. Farming for local markets requires complex decision making. Public understanding of these complexities is important to foster farm viability and is best learned through direct communication with farmers in their fields.



Mark Carduner, owner of Silver Decoy Vineyard and Winery in Hightstown, explains vertical trellising, judicious herbicide use, disease and canopy management customized to each varietal. Discussion topics relevant to his urban fringe location included wonderful customer clientele and supportive community, but also bird damage, neighbor communication, herbicide drift precautions, and occasional air quality impacts from proximity to NJ Turnpike.