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Sign of things to come



This photo of a dying sunflower, taken by Tina Richards of Clinton, is a sign of the fall season that is approaching.

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Farmers and seniors build nutritional bridges

by Bonnie N. Davis

The golden years may be brighter and healthier for 18,000 eligible seniors paired with farmers through the Maine Department of Agriculture's (MDA) nine year old Senior Farm Share Program (SFSP) started to increase nutrition for low-income elderly.

According to Julie Waller, the state's program manager, about 90,000 of Maine's senior citizens meet guidelines for this program, but limited federal funding – through the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) – prevents more participants at this time.

"Maine gets one of the highest amounts of allocations from the USDA," Waller said. "Maine is very unique; seniors work directly with farmers."

"I was on the advisory board from the beginning with Deanne Herman, the former state manager of the program," said Joyce Benson, owner of Village Green Produce since 1974, who still serves on the board. Although not certified, Benson practices organic methods on her 600-acre farm. She sells produce at both the Fairfield and Brewer farmer's markets. "Different states came up with different plans. We have the farm share program pairing seniors and farmers rather than coupons. We got almost 20 percent of the federal money for this demonstration project. It helps stretch seniors' dollars."

Donna Hines, the national USDA representative, initiated the concept of helping low-income senior citizens access fresh produce. According to Waller, each eligible and certified senior over the age of 60

receives a \$50 farm share during the growing season for fresh produce. Dried, processed or packaged items – dried beans, nuts, honey, jams and maple syrup – do not qualify. In turn, MDA, through the funding allocated by the USDA, pays the paired farmer \$50 to cover the cost.

"It's about establishing connections between farmers and seniors. It helps farm-

ers too," said Waller.

Farmers sign up with MDA in January and seniors must sign up in March and April, so farmers know how many seeds to purchase.

"The shares go quickly and we actually prepay farmers for their signed shares. Farmers keep records and the seniors draw down on their balances. Some farmers even deliver to housing sites."

Hines and USDA regional representative, Pam Magnarelli – who oversees all of New England as well as New York – had a whirlwind tour last week with Waller.

"It was an official visit," Waller said. "They try to visit each state every three years. They were very please with the variety. That Wednesday, we visited Underwood Farms in Benton, Field of Greens, B&F Vegetables on the China Road in Winslow and the Fairfield Farmer's Market (FFM) last. I think Joyce has over 100 farm shares at the market."

Benson serves 250 farm share customers, with 120 at the FFM. Although many purchase small amounts each week, others buy bulk quantities for canning or freezing to have year round food security. She said, "One of the USDA people asked me to point out one or two of the people in line who are farm shares - all but one or two were farm shares." "I'm new to the program. I can't wait to get out on the road and visit more farmers and seniors," said Waller. "Donna's my go-to person. She's been involved with the program since the onset. She kept calling it her baby." "I think the visit was great," Benson said. "It gave them a chance to see the seniors and put a real face on the project for them."

FFM runs until late October on Wednesdays from 2 to 6 p.m., and Saturdays from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

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From left, Jane Curtis, Pam Magnarelli and Dale Ferris become fast friends while discussing the benefits of organic foods at the Fairfield Farmer's Market. Photo by Carmen Merry

A slice of life: USDA takes in local flavor

by Carmen Merry

On August 11, one of Maine's finest summer days, Fairfield Farmer's Market (FFM) hosted a representative from Maine's Department of Agriculture (MDA) Senior Farm Share Program (SFSP), two representatives from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as well as a bevy of loyal customers.

"Are you from the FBI," Dale Ferris, a local shopper, asked Pam Magnarelli, the regional USDA official from Boston. The two enjoyed a chuckle as they chatted in front of farmer Joyce Benson's stand of fresh produce and plants, where the line of buyers was a steady flow of color and conversation.

"She's proving that organic food can be reasonably priced," Dale said.

In the ensuing conversation about the SFSP, Dale and her friend, Jane Curtis, discussed how they enjoy Joyce's organically grown vegetables.

"Is your health better?" Pam asked.

"Yes," said Jane, "and the prices are very reasonable."

"Organic food does not have to be higher priced because they are not using chemicals," Dale said.

Pam, along with Donna Hines who hails from the national USDA office in Alexandria, Virginia, came to Maine for several days on an observational visit. Julie Waller, manager of the SFSP for MDA, enjoyed showing the USDA representatives how the program works.

"We've been to four different places today," said Pam, "two farms, one stand, and the farmer's market - and this is the busiest place we've seen today."

"You can see Joyce has quite a following here. I buy two bunches of basil every week and make my own pesto, and I freeze enough for the whole winter - about 10 or 12 pints. A little pesto goes a long way," Susan Varney, a market regular, said.

As Susan ate a sweet treat made by Sue and Lou L'Heureux, others wanted to know how it tasted. She said, "Oh my, it's wonderful, it's outstanding. You want a bite?"

Addressing the rumor that they bake the best whoopee pies in the state, Sue L'Heureux said, "We bake the best everything!"

Indeed, Sue's whoopee pies, other baked goods and breads are popular and delicious items.

Delighted with the visit from the folks of the various agriculture offices, the crowd enjoyed the bounty of organic produce, baked goods, the camaraderie of the locals and the not-so-sweltering weather.

Carmen Merry is a local writer focusing on human interest and slice of life observations. She is currently working on a project about the mental health field.