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**Farm apprentices can apply to CAFF until Dec. 1, business training key to curriculum**

By John Lovett

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**Fast facts**

* Farm Apprenticeship program application closes Dec. 1
* Business and marketing skills instilled in Farm Apprenticeship
* Center for Arkansas Farms and Food works with NWA Food Conservancy and NWA Land Trust

(1,017 words)

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FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — Small farms are an integral part of the food supply chain, providing nutrient-rich foods on a local level and supporting community-based farming, said Mike Popp, professor of agricultural economics and faculty advisor with the Center for Arkansas Farms and Foods.

The Center for Arkansas Farms and Food (CAFF) is taking applications for its Farm Apprenticeship program until Dec. 1. To apply, visit online at <https://caff.uada.edu/apprenticeship-programs>.

The program matches apprentice areas of interest with mentor farms to provide real-world farm experience. The CAFF Farm Apprenticeship program lasts one to two seasons, depending on apprentice interests, and includes a core set of classes with curriculum topics that complement the hands-on learning.

CAFF works closely with the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust and the Northwest Arkansas Food Conservancy to connect new farmers with land resources where they can grow food and help get the food to market in grocery stores and restaurants.

“We’re really trying to create a program where we can both educate and assist budding producers, whether they are young or not so young, to get into business on that smaller scale, and at the same time create healthy foods from local sources,” Popp said.

Popp, who is a researcher with the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, the research arm of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, said a small farm in operation creates economic activity with new jobs and land use.

Heather Friedrich, CAFF program manager, spoke to the other benefits of small farms.

“Small farms are locally important contributions to our national food security,” Friedrich said. “When there are threats to our centralized food system that prevent foods from being shipped across the country, we need local farmers to feed us. But we have to develop those relationships and farmers need to build those skills continuously over time and not only in emergency situations.”

Friedrich identified some of those potential threats to national food security as climate, fuel, labor, and global pandemic.

By supporting small and local producers, people support their local economy and help farmers have viable farm businesses, Friedrich added.

“There are not as many USDA safety nets established for our small, diversified farms, so community relationships are much more important for their long-term success,” Friedrich said. “Plus, you get to eat vegetables and fruit when they've been picked at the height of ripeness, so the flavor is amazing.”

**The business side of farming**

As part of the CAFF Farm Apprenticeship curriculum, instructors guide apprentices through learning basic business planning methods, marketing strategies and financial recordkeeping skills crucial for small-scale farmers, said CAFF business instructor Brooke Anderson.

With people shopping more online, apprentices gain experience with basic business software and communication tools.

“There’s just more of a need for it now. People are selling online. People are doing more of their business online. So being able to use your computer more effectively has become more important,” Anderson said. Along those lines, she said they also talk more about social media and branding.

Popp said they encourage using a variety of market outlets as part of a business plan.

While farmers markets will continue to play a role in getting small farm products to people, the COVID pandemic forced farmers to explore other avenues, Anderson said. One of those includes Community Supported Agriculture programs, also known as CSAs.

“It’s the concept that you can pay ahead for a bulk amount of produce and then you get your produce box delivered every week during the production season,” Anderson said. “So, you’re helping the farmer with those up-front production costs when they’re having to buy fertilizers, compost and all the seeds to get it started. And since they know where their produce is going after it is grown, they have some of that production risk taken out as well.”

Anderson also said CSAs help “create a community” with the small-scale farmers and the customers they are serving.

Another key marketing strategy for small farmers, Anderson said, is getting involved with an aggregator, or “food hub,” like the Northwest Arkansas Food Conservancy, which provides a wholesale market by aggregating produce from many small farmers and marketing the produce to grocery stores and restaurants.

The NWA Food Conservancy and other aggregators, Popp said, allow the farmers to focus on scaling up their farm to decrease costs, reduce their marketing expenses, especially for deliveries and sales, and potentially increase their profit margin.

“You can focus more on growing and producing food as opposed to doing a whole bunch of the marketing and being at the farmers market several times a week,” Popp said. “There are plusses and minuses to each market outlet that you pursue and there are strengths and weaknesses for each outlet that you want to identify as a producer.”

Aggregators also help identify for farmers what produce has the highest demand at certain times of the year to garner the best prices. Anderson said she advises Farm School students and apprentices to keep detailed records of their crops to see which sells best to know what to grow. Aggregators can assist in that regard, Popp said.

“That information flow, through the aggregator by way of accessing the marketing channel, is certainly one of the functions of that middleman,” Popp said.

[Arkansas MarketMaker](https://www.uaex.uada.edu/farm-ranch/economics-marketing/direct-marketing/arkansas-market-maker.aspx) further helps connect producers and marketers, Popp noted. MarketMaker is a searchable food industry database featuring a community of food-related businesses: buyers, farmers/ranchers, fisheries, farmers markets, processors/packers, wineries, restaurants and more, the website states. Arkansas MarketMaker can be accessed at [https://ar.foodmarketmaker.com](https://ar.foodmarketmaker.com/).

“The last thing you want is to produce a whole bunch of produce and have it go somewhere and spoil because there was no demand for it,” Popp said. “A big part of the Center for Arkansas Farms and Foods is to both grow a producer network with links to available land and a marketing outlet network that can allow both consumers and producers access to affordable high-quality food that allows producer to sustainably use local land resources.”

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The Division of Agriculture is one of 20 entities within the University of Arkansas System. It has offices in all 75 counties in Arkansas and faculty on five system campuses.

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