

## A Down-to-Earth Education

*Young people from around the world are coming to southern Oregon to learn about organic farming*

Medford Sneak Preview  
March, 2010  
by Robert Casserly

**F**irst, the bad news: According to the State of Oregon's latest Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in Oregon is down to 38,553 farms, the lowest it has been in several years, and the average age of Oregon farmers has increased to 57 years. The big corporate farms driving older farmers out of business have been widely shown to damage farm land and the environment, treat animals inhumanely and, in the long run, to take more out of a community than they give back.

Now, the good news: Although Oregon is at a critical juncture for transferring our agricultural land, knowledge, and skills to a new generation of farmers, luckily there are lots of young people ready to get their hands dirty and take on the job. In fact, they are moving here from all over the U.S. and beyond to learn from Oregon's abundance of organic farmers.

According to World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, a nonprofit that helps connect people who want to learn how to farm with farmers who need their help, 66 organic farms in Oregon accept applications from interns. Many of them are located in southern Oregon.

For Teri White, co-owner of Runnymede Farm in Rogue River, the young people who travel great distances to live and work with her are instrumental to the farm's success. "My kids grew up and left home, so opening our home to young people who want to learn how to farm was a way to get some extra hands in here to help. We've had 52 interns in the past five years and for the most part they have all been great. They help us out with pretty much everything — milking the cows, weeding, cleaning, growing vegetables, selling meat and eggs at the farmer's market, whatever needs to get done," said White.



Sansa Collins, manager of **Sanctuary One**, a care farm in the Applegate Valley, said she's had no trouble finding interns who are willing to help with farm chores in exchange for room, board,

and free education. “I’ve been amazed at how far young people are willing to travel at their own expense to learn how to farm. We have recently hosted interns from the Yukon, Quebec, Russia, New York, Massachusetts, and we currently have a young woman from Nebraska working with us,” said Collins.

Chuck Burr, founder of Restoration Farm, a working permaculture farm and farming education center in Ashland, said that southern Oregon is an ideal location for farm internships, as more and more people interested in organic farming are discovering. Restoration Farm’s current intern moved here from Israel. “We’re in a great location in southern Oregon because of the climate, the biodiversity, and the presence of so many small, independent, organic farms run by entrepreneurs. Restoration Farm’s mission is to grow new farmers, so one of the things we do is offer internships where people can learn how to grow organic crops like blueberries, fruit and nut trees, vegetables, and heirloom salad greens,” said Burr.



Although farming internships can be a win-win for local organic farms and wannabe farmers, it can be challenging, too. As Teri White of Runnymede Farm explained, “When an intern is coming from so far away, there’s no way to interview them in person. So you never know what you’re going to get. We’ve had a few who didn’t work out.”

For Sansa Collins of **Sanctuary One**, scheduling has been the main issue. “We get many more applications than we have space and resources to accommodate, so we do our best to juggle schedules so everyone who is interested in working with us gets a chance,” said Collins.

Chuck Burr of Restoration Farm said his biggest challenge with interns has been all the training that goes into interns who only stay for a short time. “It’s better to work with long-term interns because of the time it takes to train a farm worker, but also because it is better for the intern, too,” said Burr. “When an intern works a whole season, from propagation to harvest, they learn a lot more. If they are serious about a career in organic farming, a couple of weeks aren’t going to be enough to really figure out if they are up for the challenge of day-to-day farm work.”