Over recent years a new cohort of farmers has cropped up in our small state. “New”, “Beginning”, “First-generation”, “Early stage” – these growers have been met by a growing number of training programs to help them get started, improve their production skills, and enhance the viability of their businesses.

This is a group of avid learners who are always on the lookout for training opportunities, both online, and in a hands-on classroom setting. Most demonstrate a strong interest in sustainable production of specialty crops to sell directly to consumers through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmers’ markets, and farm stands.

In response to the training needs of new farmers, UConn Extension launched the Solid Ground Farmer Training Program, featuring classroom trainings, online tutorials, and state-wide events targeting growers who range in experience from 0 – 10 years of farming. Since 2012, UConn Extension has received over $1.1 million through USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Grant Program to develop new farmer trainings and resources.

The UConn Extension team hires and schedules trainers, advertises the program, provides in-person staff support at each training, and steers collaboration with the New CT Farmer Alliance and CT NOFA. Partners set training priorities, help recruit participants, and ensure that trainings are happening across the state so that growers can access this learning opportunity in small group settings. These partners include: Grow Windham, Killingly Agricultural Education Program, Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, Community Farm of Simsbury, Common Ground (New Haven), Green Village Initiative (Bridgeport), Knox (Hartford), and Listo Para Inciar-Urban Agriculture Program, a sister project led by German Cutz, Associate Extension Educator in Fairfield County.

Current and aspiring farmers are welcome to attend as many trainings as they like. Yoko Takemura and Alex Carpenter from Assawaga Farm (Nipmuck for ‘in between’) in Putnam typify clients in the program.
Summer 2018 will be their first year of production. Their farm will feature certified organic Japanese vegetables to be sold in Boston area. After attending six Solid Ground trainings, Yoko explains: “As a new farmer, there are many things you don’t know that you don’t know. So, these programs encourage you to ask new questions you hadn’t previously thought of before and therefore to be better prepared for the season. Since many of the trainers are local, the content of the trainings is more relevant (versus online content) and it’s great that you can follow up with them after the training!”

In its first year (winter 2016-17), the Solid Ground Training Program delivered 28 trainings and events with a cumulative attendance of more than 500 participants. Over 30 trainings are currently scheduled for 2018. All trainings are free and open to growers of all backgrounds. UConn Extension provides translation services for Spanish-speaking attendees. Experienced farmers lead training classes such as Season Extension, Eco-Focused Farming, Post-Harvest Handling, Finding Your Market, and Irrigation for Small Farms. Extension educators and professional consultants deliver trainings on Farm Financial Recordkeeping, Soil Health, Cover Crops, Tractor Safety and Maintenance, Fruit Production, and Pesticide Safety.

“The 4-hour intensive Planting and Growing Cover Crop training with Eero Ruuttila was really great because even though his examples were on large scale farms, there were so many ideas that could be translated into my small-scale farm. I thought 4 hours was long, but I definitely wanted it to be longer,” says Yoko.

The Solid Ground Program also provides one-on-one consultations with specialists in the areas of farm finance, soil health, and vegetable production. These consultations are intended to build on the knowledge and skills acquired through trainings in the classroom.

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Solid Ground Farmer Training E-learning

Did you miss a class? A selection of trainings from the Solid Ground program are available in an e-learning format at newfarms.extension.uconn.edu.

BF 104: Soil Health and Management with Kip Kolesinskas is a three-part course. Participants will learn the basic soil science principles for maintaining healthy soils. Guidance on soil testing and reading soil tests is provided.

BF 105: Fruit Production for Small Scale Farming with Mary Concklin covers site selection and preparation, soil requirements for various fruits, varieties, planting and care, support systems and other key areas.

BF 106: Vegetable Production for Small Scale Farming covers everything from choosing crops to marketing, and pest problems. Trainers are Matthew DeBacco and Jude Boucher. There is a three-part training and PowerPoints available.

The full calendar of trainings is listed on the Solid Ground webpage. Staff includes Jiff Martin, Project Director; Charlotte Ross, Project Coordinator; and Mackenzie White, Program Assistant.