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Picking squash, tomatoes, and eggplants: Learning to farm while putting food on the table for needy families

Fauquier Education Farm offers learning for kids, volunteers and aspiring farmers

By Aaron Wright Piedmont Journalism Foundation
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Volunteers pass a newly harvested melon at the Fauquier Education Farm.

Photo by Bill Oakes

Parents and kids may best know the Fauquier Education Farm as a place where young people learn about growing crops on school trips and help package produce for food banks, but the volunteering -- and learning -- extends well beyond children's activities.

The farm is a major source of support for relief organizations, delivering more than 100,000 pounds of food to them each year. But it also does everything from inviting volunteers to help with the harvest and learn about raising crops to teaching aspiring commercial farmers what they need to know to get started.



Some of the summer bounty at the Fauquier Education Farm. The 10-acre farm grew about 100,000 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables for local food banks this summer.

Photo by Bill Oakes

The nonprofit farm spans 10 acres and aims to teach anyone who wants to know more about agriculture through demonstrations, workshops, traditional classroom instruction and hands on learning. The farm hosts about 20 workshops throughout the year, demonstrating techniques for everything from growing crops to making mulch to flower gardening as well as how to cut flowers for a bouquet.

Janelle Sutliff, an educator for a postgraduate special education program called Transitions, said the education farm helps her students stay engaged in their community.

“This tags so many boxes for us, you know?” Sutliff said. “Social skills, we learn about nutrition, we learn how programs like this work and how we can give back to our community.”



Volunteers at the Fauquier Education Farm on a recent harvest day included students from the Transitions program and local families and retirees.

photo by Bill Oakes

Before she brought students to the farm, Sutliff worked as a volunteer, helping the farm harvest crops for the food banks they supply.

The farm started in 2010 as a project of the Fauquier Community Action Committee, which aimed to turn around a struggling community garden with the hope that it could supply fresh fruits and vegetables to local low-income families while also teaching people about farming. It's now supported by fundraisers, grants and other gifts. The land under the farm is owned by Fauquier County and rented by the nonprofit for \$1 per year.



Volunteers harvest tomatoes at the Fauquier Education Farm.

Photo by Bill Oakes

A lot of the heavy lifting at the farm is shouldered by the volunteers who show up every Monday and Thursday to help pick squash, watermelon, cantaloupe, tomatoes, eggplant, and more.

The education farm also hosts a farmer incubation program that leases farmland to aspiring commercial farmers and is partnered with Virginia's Master Gardeners program. The education farm is one of the few programs approved for the mandatory 50 hours of horticultural volunteer service to become a master gardener.

A typical day at the farm starts with Jim Hankins, the executive director, meeting a group of volunteers and going over the tasks ahead. Afterwards, it's three hours of picking produce to load onto trucks.

A goal for Hankins is for the food banks to have the highest quality produce possible.

“I have managed a couple upscale farms that sold at farmers markets, and I want to take to the food banks the same sort of quality that we would have been taking to a really upscale farmers market,” Hankins said.

The farming work is also supposed to be fun, so Hankins focuses on making sure volunteers enjoy their time.

“I’m highly motivated to make sure people want to come back again and work for free, so it’s really important to me that the volunteers have a really positive experience,” Hankins said.

One pair of volunteers earlier this month, a retired married couple named Tim and Alice Cotter, discovered the education farm as they were driving by. Curious to learn more, they stopped in. After volunteering for a year and a half, the Cotters said they enjoy all they learned from the program and meeting new people.



Jim Hankins, executive director of the Fauquier Education Farm, enjoys a slice of watermelon recently harvested from the farm.

Photo by Bill Oakes



Volunteers Alice and Tim Cotter enjoy slices of watermelon after a few hours of picking melons at the Fauquier Education Farm

Photo by Bill Oakes

“It’s just super fun,” Alice Cotter said. “You’re out here in this beautiful place, picking beautiful food, and a lot of fun people. It’s really interesting who you meet when you’re out picking.”

FAUQUIER EDUCATION FARM

Location: 8428 Meetze Road, Warrenton

Website: fauquiereducationfarm.org

UPCOMING EVENTS

5K and Fun Run

Date and time: Saturday, Oct. 7 at 9 a.m.

Course starts at the farm and continues along Stafford Farm Trail

Feast from the Field

Date and time: Saturday, Oct. 7 at 5 p.m.

Annual dinner fundraiser at Moriah Farm

How to volunteer

Volunteers assist with planting, harvesting, tending to crops and delivering to local food banks.

See fauquiereducationfarm.org for details.