

**The MSU Student Organic Farm and
Year-round Community Supported Agriculture Program
Celebrating an Important 10 year Anniversary**

In April of 1999, 14 years ago, students, staff and faculty as members of a registered student organization called the Michigan Sustainable Agriculture Network (MSAN), came together on campus to discuss how to start a student based organic farm at MSU. Starting in 2001 through 2004, \$320,000 in research and education grants from six sources was invested in the start-up of the MSU Student Organic Farm (SOF). During spring semester 2003 a special topics class in the Horticulture Department finalized a plan for launching a year round community supported agriculture (CSA) program based on selling memberships to faculty, staff, students and community members who would receive weekly distributions of vegetables from the farm. Vegetables are available year round through the use of passive solar greenhouses and cold storage of summer harvested crops. The first distribution to the original 25 memberships was made in May of 2003.

Since that date 10 years ago, students, staff, faculty and community members have consistently and passionately provided fresh vegetables to the members for 48 weeks of the year. The farm continues to grow and now provides vegetables for 70 memberships (designed for a family of four) year-round, 70 memberships during the summer season (20 weeks), for a campus farm stand for 30 weeks, and on a year-round basis to certain dining facilities on campus.

The farm was certified organic for the first time in 2004 by OGM and continues to be inspected and certified each year. We have data to demonstrate that both the quality of the soil at the SOF as measured by soil organic matter and available minerals and the yields obtained from the land have continued to improve. In response to the request of students, the farming program also includes pastured poultry and swine husbandry that help diversify and improve the ecology of the farm. Other projects include honey bees, an edible forest garden and worm composting of campus food scraps to demonstrate the food cycle loop.

Perhaps most importantly, the SOF is a living laboratory and a home away from home for hundreds of students seeking a vision consistent with their values and goals for the future. Many of these students have gone on to start or work at similar farms around the country that value the sacredness of food, the land used to grow it and the people who grow it. Thousands of additional students from MSU, LCC and other schools have come to the SOF to learn from their colleagues how the farm succeeds. Some small fraction of these visitors came back many more times as volunteers or members of the farm crew. In addition we are now entering the fourth year of a unique integrated full time 9-month intensive Organic Farmer Training Program that prepares 16 participants to manage successful year-round diversified organic farms like the SOF. In 2012 we partnered with campus operations and academics to launch the Bailey GREENhouse in the Brody Neighborhood. The Bailey Urban Farm will unfold in the coming year to enhance the experience of passionate freshman students.

Through farming and education programs, the original \$320,000 investment over 4 years is now generating approximately \$320,000 annually that supports seven staff positions and six to ten student employees. The activities are located on a 10 acre parcel at the Horticulture Teaching and Research Center with about 5 acres intensively farmed. In addition the annual Hoophouse Gala Local Food Celebration and Farm Dinner hosted by MSU Residential and Hospitality Services featuring SOF and local food prepared by MSU chefs generates \$15 to \$20,000 annual for scholarships for the next generation of organic farmers.

Please help us celebrate with an attitude of gratitude and consider how you can continue to be or begin to be a part of the SOF community and our food future on campus as well as in communities across Michigan, the US and the world. Help us also to consider why there are not more year-round local organic farms supporting rural and urban economies. Know that the answer in part is because the work requires the intellectual sophistication of ecological/holistic farming practices and the integrity and investment of many people to physically, emotionally and financially support the farmers and the farming activities. Hard work yields big dividends. Our health is worth the effort. Go Green! For the health of it!

John Biernbaum, May 2013 MSU Horticulture and SOF www.msuorganicfarm.org