

# **Coordinating a Three-ring Circus with Lions and Cubs: Beginning Grower Training Programs at the University of Wisconsin**

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## **Abstract**

New and beginning farmers face a host of challenges as they start and build a farm business. The needs of beginning growers are many and span the gamut of needing access to information, skills, capital, land, and on-going mentorship. The Wisconsin School for Beginning Market Growers was established in 1998, primarily to assist with knowledge acquisition. This intensive, 3-day program exposes participants to what it takes to start and operate a small business growing and selling fresh produce. The school emphasizes organic production practices and direct marketing. The hallmark features of the program include our teaching team of experienced growers serving as primary instructors, a “market-first” approach to guiding participants into exploring their farming plans, a realistic assessment of income potential, work requirements, and lifestyle impacts, an emphasis on practical, how-to information, and a holistic approach to the entire educational endeavor. Due to the popularity and success of the program, the Wisconsin School for Beginning Market Growers model has been replicated to serve people interested in other farm enterprises, including: cut flowers, apples, and grapes. Together, these programs have assisted in the training of nearly a thousand new and beginning farmers. The programs continue to evolve over time but the basic formula can be easily replicated in other areas of the country.

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