

A Training Series in Organic Farming Systems

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Consumer demand for organically produced food is increasing by more than 20% per year. At the same time many farmers are seeking biologically based methods to farm according to organic standards.

These trends point to the need for the land-grant university system to provide research-based information, applied research, and Extension programming to support organic growers and organic farming enterprises. Generally, organic farmers view the land-grant university system and the cooperative Extension system as unwilling to acknowledge these needs and unresponsive to them. The Extension community answers that the primary reasons for any "perceived" unresponsiveness to demands for information relating to organic production practices and enterprises are a lack of adequate training and the paucity of available research-based, resource materials.

In 1998, grant money provided by the USDA SARE Professional Development Program and the NC Cooperative Extension Service made possible an intensive training in organic farming systems for North Carolina Cooperative Extension agents. More than 50 agents participated in a series of workshops that were offered as "in-service training" and as a graduate-level NC State University course worth 4 credits.

The Organic Unit at the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS), a 100-acre facility dedicated to research and education in organic farming systems, served as a home base for the training activities. These training activities consisted of lectures, "hands-on" demonstrations, discussions, field trips, and class exercises.

Primary topic areas included: organic nutrient management, soil biology/ecology/quality; crop rotation; composting; cover crop management; organic weed, insect, and disease management; conservation tillage; organic greenhouse vegetable production; marketing organic produce; integrating animals into organic crop production systems; delivery systems for disseminating information to organic producers; and social and

community development aspects of sustainable agriculture. Unique features of the workshops were an interdisciplinary team-teaching approach, and an integration of information about interactions among production practices.

This well-received training program will serve as a model for future Extension training. A training manual, slide sets, Extension publications, and an organic farming web site are being created to provide agents with the resource materials they need to conduct county-based educational programming in organic production systems and enterprises.