

Big Island Weekly

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Farming internships --Growing a green career

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Reports have come out that farming will be the hottest green job for the next decade. Just how can our children tap into this job market?

Here on the Big Island, we have a need for local food sustainability that could be met by the growing crop of potential farmers who have been inspired by their school gardens, where they connect with the source of their food, grow it, harvest it and eat it themselves.

"The young child (in a school garden program) learns about place, culture, ecosystem health, and connects their classroom studies of science, social studies, math or language arts to real hands-on work in this outdoor classroom which truly is a living laboratory," said Nancy Redfeather, Director of the Hawaii Island School Garden Network for the Kohala Center.

"In High School, the 'market farm' and CSA (community supported agriculture) models teach about ecological and sustainable systems of agriculture and also marketing and practical business knowledge," said Redfeather.

Based on a recent study estimating that Hawaii Island would need 95,000 farmers/growers to be food self-sufficient and that we currently only have about 5,300, Redfeather said that there is "certainly room for growth. To create that expansion, the next step is working in Internship Programs with inspiring farmers."

Students across the U.S. are seeking out "cool" green internships at organic and sustainable farms over corporate jobs for a change. Hawaii boasts some of the most unique internship opportunities -- to learn permaculture, aquaponics and other sustainable farming methods. To see what opportunities are still available, visit National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service at <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/internships>.

For instance, the La'Akea Community near Pahoehoe offers a summer internship from June 16-July 14. Their internship program is structured into seven workshops on permaculture and eight on communication, interpersonal and community living skills, in addition to daily participation in permaculture modalities. There is a fee to cover food and lodging, but local students are welcome to just come to the classes and pitch into the work parties at a pro-rated fee. For more info, contact: laakea@permaculture-hawaii.com.

How about a trip to Maui?

Greenleaf, a small permaculture farm in Upcountry Maui, offers 1-2 month internship opportunities, which include training in seed starting, transplanting, vermiculture and composting.

Business/marketing skills are taught as they sell weekly at the Farmers Market as well as to stores and restaurants. They grow a variety of veggies and have over two hundred fruit and nut trees. They can be reached at: gleafs@hawaiiantel.net.

Another route to gain farming skills is through work-exchange programs such as World-Wide Opportunities on



Interns create a vegetable garden at La'akea Community. - Courtesy Photo

Organic Farms (WWOOF), linking volunteers with organic farmers to promote an educational exchange and ecological farming practices. See <http://www.woof.org/> and <http://www.woofhawaii.org/> for opportunities.

For those wanting a formal accredited degree, there are, of course, agriculture programs at UH-Hilo and Hawaii Community College. For a focus on organic farming, "It is also possible to complete a degree partly or entirely through distance learning," recommended John Schinnerer, an ecological designer and member of Know Your Farmers Alliance. "Various colleges and universities (generally private or independent) have highly self-directed undergraduate and graduate programs where the student is the primary designer of their degree, and all manner of outside activities and practical experiences can be made part of the curriculum."

So, where will our new farmers work?

"Of course, once young farmers are trained, and understand marketing and how to run their farm systems, placing them on available land and helping them get started is a must," said Redfeather. "That is where the County and large landowners could definitely be of assistance. Our lands here on Hawai'i Island are underutilized as to their potential."

The Kohala Center recently completed an Agriculture Development Plan to move the Big Island toward food self-sufficiency, currently under review by the county. It highlights opportunities for farmers, business people, and government agencies to help sustainable farming become a reality on the island. It can be viewed at <http://www.KohalaCenter.org>.

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