Teaming Up To Support Local Food Production

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Like a stool relying on environmental, economic and community legs for support, a new program to help Iowans feed themselves as well as the rest of the world has a three-point approach: What do producers need to know? What does the research tell us? Does it all make economic sense?

Answers will come from new hires funded by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Iowa State University Extension and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture: Joe Hannan in the field, researcher Ajay Nair and applied economist Craig Chase.

Together they lead a team to develop local food production, increase opportunities for new farmers and help existing producers diversify.

Joe Hannan: Man of many crops

Hannan is extension horticulture field specialist for central and western Iowa, a position added November 2010. He works directly with commercial growers of fruit and vegetable crops to diagnose problems and offer consultation.

During the past season he has seen a large influx of new growers setting up operations, many of whom are starting Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprises. He worked with five strawberry growers across the state to fine tune their fertility program using foliar sampling.

He’s also looking at the effectiveness of biodegradable plastic mulches to control weeds in tomato crops.

So far, he’s had no shortage of clients—or questions.

“I might touch on 30 different crops in one day, but you can’t know everything. We use a team approach to answer questions and provide service,” he says.

His first client had a tall order: how to expand from a half-acre plot to a two-acre enterprise. Hannan recalled: “We had a lot to talk about—soil fertility, equipment needed to scale up, post-harvest handling, food safety, labor costs, weed control. Next year he plans to expand again because there’s a huge unmet market in the Des Moines area.”

Hannan (’05 horticulture, MS ’11) worked five years at the Muscatine Island Research Farm where he grew melons,
sweet corn, tomatoes and berry crops before accepting this position. At the same time he managed the vineyard at the Southeast Research Farm near Crawfordsville.

Ajay Nair: Ready to launch

Nair is a new assistant professor in horticulture with a focus on sustainable vegetable production. His appointment spans extension, research and teaching. He joined the college in July 2011.

Nair has cast a wide net that extends from his home in northern India where mango and guava are grown to Kerala Agricultural University in southern India, home to rice, coffee and tea plantations. Graduate studies took him to the University of Maine to learn about propagation and greenhouse production, then to Michigan State University where he worked on cover crops, transplant production and crops such as tomato, cucumbers, asparagus, onion and celery.

The common lesson? Diversity helps the soil, which improves production. “It’s all about balance, having a variety of crops in the mix, not just one or two,” Nair says. “Having a diverse portfolio is exactly what they tell you in financial management and it works in agriculture, too.”

He’s interested in cover crops to increase soil fertility, also ways to extend the growing season. He has researched row covers to control cucumber beetles and modify the microclimate for enhanced crop growth. Other research explored how rye and hairy vetch cover crops change plant growth, increase beneficial soil microorganisms and improve nutritional quality of fruit.

Nair has been meeting with vegetable growers to identify production challenges to develop his research and extension program. In fact, he planted his first plots only weeks after moving to Ames. He currently is researching mustard cover crops (a biofumigant that can control some pathogens and nematodes) and season extension of an early winter lettuce crop under high tunnels. He also plans to study biochar, a byproduct of renewable fuel production, in horticulture crops.

Craig Chase: Right person, right time

Chase (’80 MS agricultural economics, ’94 PhD rural sociology) is not new to Iowa State or sustainable systems, but his 27 years of experience in extension and job as interim program leader at the Leopold Center made him a perfect fit for the partnership. Chase is extension’s statewide local food systems specialist and the coordinator of a new Local Food and Farm Program created by the Iowa legislature.

He explains his role like this: “One of the first questions that farmers ask, whether we’re talking about tillage, cover crops or any change, ‘Will I make money?’ My job is to look at the research, look at the production questions and help determine whether a new practice or system has long-term sustainability from an economic viewpoint.”

Farmers who want to “scale up” production for larger markets will need to understand food safety and a “new way to do business.” However, Chase is convinced that change already is taking place in development of “food hubs” where any producer can contribute. Examples include a former school in northeast Iowa, which is an aggregation point for the GROWN Locally farmer network, and an old convenience store in Ogden where four growers distribute produce.

“Nobody is suggesting that we’re going to change the landscape of Iowa, but we will provide opportunities for people to get into agriculture,” he explains.