Coming Full Circle
written May 2013
by Suzy Konecky

“It all comes full circle when you realize how small and tight the community is” says Christa Georgeson, referring to the myriad connections between small farmers in the Massachusetts. Christa has been one of the Mentees in the NOFA/Mass Beginning Farmer Mentoring Program this year. The Mentoring Program pairs seasoned growers with people who have some farming experience but aren’t yet running their own farms. It is a 12-month commitment between mentor and mentee, supported by NOFA/Mass. By pairing mentees with experienced growers who are not their employers, the program enables aspiring farmers to gain farming experiences, skills, and perspectives that they otherwise wouldn’t get in their day-to-day work.

One of the ways in which Christa has benefitted from the Beginning Farmer Mentoring Program is from the networking that organically grew out of her relationship with her mentor. He introduced her to other farmers and she is appreciative of those relationships.

Christa accepts that there have been some challenges with the Mentorship Program, mainly finding time when both she and her mentor are available to connect. She shares the insight that when working on farm, “there are so many moving parts” and therefore it’s not always easy to make space for something like the mentorship program. Mostly Christa and her mentor Frank Albani have connected over the phone, although she did have the opportunity to visit his farm, the Soule Homestead Education Center.

Christa also shares that she has learned some extremely practical skills, such as irrigation. She admits that different irrigation systems can be very complex, but is grateful that she has gotten to learn about it from such a seasoned farmer. They also had the opportunity to talk about timing of growing different crops. Frank grows a lot of lettuce and perishable greens, for which timing is key.

Julie Weitekamp runs Full Basket Farm and was also a mentee in the Beginning Farmer program this year. This was Julie’s 5th season growing vegetables. Before starting her own operation she was an avid backyard gardener, but had not apprenticed with another farmer. Now she is cultivating 1 acre of vegetables for a CSA program.

Julie decided to participate in the program because she wanted feedback from a more experienced farmer. She was paired with Beth Ingham who has years of experience to share. They visited each others’ farms, “I really appreciated her walking through my fields” says Julie. At the visit to Beth’s farm Julie was impressed with how clean the fields were. She was inspired by the very low weed and pest pressure that Beth faces and this year she is trying out some thick hay mulching in her high tunnel to mimic Beth’s system. In addition to the visits, they corresponded by email and Beth helped Julie with sourcing of various supplies including a new soil mix for starting seeds.
The Beginning Farmer Mentoring Program is a very loose arrangement between the mentor and mentee and is to be directed by the curiosity and initiative of the mentee. All of the pairs have been arranged for 2013, but we will be accepting applications for 2014 starting in the fall, so stay tuned on the NOFA/Mass Beginning Farmer webpage. If you have any questions about the program email Suzy Konecky, Beginning Farmer Coordinator, at suzy@nofamass.org