

Multi-cultural Beginning Farmer-USDA Relationship Building

Tilian Farm Development Center

Nestled among conventional family farms and subdivisions on the northern side of Ann Arbor Charter Township, a small parcel of land has been given a renewed sense of purpose. Tilian Farm Development Center has been helping launch new farm businesses since its inception in 2011. Over fifteen farm businesses have started on this site, with four new members set to start next season.

The name Tilian comes from the Old English root of “to till or to cultivate; to strive; to obtain.” What exactly are people striving for at Tilian Farm Development Center? The National Incubator Farm Training Initiative (NIFTI) defines a farm incubator project as simply “a land-based, multi-grower project that provides training and technical assistance to aspiring and beginning farmers.”

Tilian fits this description well, as Tilian program participants get access to a flexible amount of land, transplant production space, irrigation, technical assistance, and on-farm training. They also share equipment, cold storage space, and receive mentoring and assistance with marketing. In addition, they have access to passive solar hoop houses, temporary structures that facilitate season extension, an increasingly vital aspect of sustainable agriculture in Michigan.

Tilian farmers also have access to each other, as well as other farmers, food businesses, and mentors - a network of local support and relationships that stretch well beyond farm borders.

“What I love most about Tilian is it’s a great community for learning. To learn, to experiment, and to fail, over and over again, but pick yourself up and keep going,” asserts first-year chicken farmer Nicole Ivey. “I think that’s the one thing about Tilian: people are super patient and willing to teach you. There are things you just don’t even think about as a new farmer.”

Once an operational family farm for several generations, the fate of the land seemed to be set for development. But when subdivision plans fell through, the farm was secured by Ann Arbor Charter Township with funding from a farmland conservation millage, Ann Arbor Greenbelt legislation, and the township’s own coffers, with use restrictions that preserved its farmland heritage. Through the care and forethought of Ann Arbor Charter Township, local community members, and a host of supporting organizations Tilian Farm Development Center was born and has been evolving with each new crop of farmers.

The program continues to be stewarded by Ann Arbor Township, but is now under the leadership of Michigan Food & Farming Systems, and is managed by Stefanie T. Stauffer Ph.D., who also grows heirloom produce on-site as part of her management responsibilities. With help from Jennifer Silveri, a MIFFS Council Member and Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) Technician at the Eaton Conservation District, Stefanie was able to begin working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to put conservation plans in place at Tilian. It wasn’t easy. Stefanie relates, “Well, first off, I had never been [to the USDA-FSA/NRCS offices], so I had no idea where it was.” The task at hand was to locate the registration of the farm with the Farm Service Agency, in order to open up the opportunity for Tilian and its producers to qualify to apply for many USDA programs.

This process can be daunting for farmers approaching the system for the first time. It is difficult to know exactly what you need to bring to the meeting and how they should advocate for themselves. Stefanie says, “It’s really good that Jen Silveri was there. To be able to be there with

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a conservation officer like Jen was really helpful because she could give the reasoning behind our requests and we could give them information about what we are doing with the farm.”

“When I got there, Jen was already working with the FSA staff person. They had the maps out trying to locate our farm. They were having trouble finding it, and at first, the staff person was saying, “Oh well, I’ll look it up and get back to you.” But with Jen’s help and the USDA staffer’s positive approach they were finally able to find it.

Once they were able to get the farm number registration process confirmed, they had a head start connecting with National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) staff. “Since NRCS offices are at the same spot, we were able to go over there right after and submit our Conservation Plan request. They offer free services where they come out to your farm, assess things, and tell you how you can be doing conservation practices better. It’s also tied to the MAEAP verification, which we are also working on.”

Stefanie has already begun to share the story of getting the farm number with her current Tilian cohort, and Tilian farmers have attended the NRCS walk-throughs, so they can experience first-hand what it is like to work with the conservationist. Resident farmers will all help put the plan into practice on the farm and Stefanie hopes this opportunity will help them learn more about what to look for when they eventually move their businesses to their own farms. “Chris [The NRCS Conservationist] brought us the logs where we can write down things like our pesticide use and fertilizers. So it is getting the farmers in the habit of doing record-keeping now, even if they don’t need it right now. It’s starting the good habits early.”

Conservation practices are a crucial part of the farm system. Tilian experienced some environmental issues “I know a lot of the farmers are having a lot of questions; we had a lot of flooding this year, so they want to know what we can do? We will definitely have to convert one of the quarter-acres away from production agriculture, so we need to know, what can we do on farm scale, approaching it from a sustainable perspective?” These walk throughs with NRCS will offer the farmers a chance to learn in real-time how to adapt these common problems while preserving and protecting their farmland.

The diverse group of beginning farmers at Tilian is the next generation of growers, and they are willing to face whatever comes their way. As you visit Tilian and talk with its residents, the common phrase, “it takes a village…” comes to mind. It does take a village to raise a farm; eaters, growers, and service providers must work in collaboration with each other and the land to achieve the kind of food system we envision.

Adapted from a story written by Lindsey J. Scalera, lindsey@linsight.net, on behalf of

[MIFFS](#) and the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#)