Program teaches ag biz—from bees to peas—to city slickers

BY DAVID KOEPPEL

A typical week finds Petula Gay planting seedlings for fresh fruits and vegetables and canning hot peppers and sweet dumpling squash—not exactly the usual activities of higher-education students in the city.

Ms. Gay, 52, is one of 15 certificat candidates in the inaugural class of Farm School NYC, a hands-on program that trains its students in urban agriculture. She hopes to attain her certificate later this year.

In an apprenticeship at the Snug Harbor Heritage Farm on Staten Island and in academic classes including animal husbandry, she learns about beekeeping and raising chickens, skills that she hopes will translate into a career that involves teaching urban farming to low-income women. Ms. Gay lives in the West Sayville section of Staten Island, and for many years has worked as a lactation consultant. She said her focus on nutritional health for women makes for a natural transition to farming.

Farm School NYC sees itself as more than just a training ground for New York City residents like Ms. Gay to grow food. The school’s ambitious agenda is to “build self-reliant communities and inspire positive local action around food access and social, economic- and racial-justice issues.”

It’s been an auspicious first two years, according to the head of the school. “We’ve succeeded beyond our expectations,” said Jacqueline Berger, the executive director of Just Food Inc., the nonprofit founded in 1995 that manages Farm School NYC. “We have more applications than we can accommodate, and we’ve enrolled a diverse group of students. We have a strong, clear vision of Farm School as a regional resource for anyone who wants to learn how to grow food in the city.”

In its submission to the USDA, the school cited the three-year objectives of teaching 3,000 to 3,600 students about sustainable urban agriculture, and to have between 1,600 and 2,400 students preparing, distributing and/or marketing food. Its goal is to have 60 to 120 students “securing income streams related to Farm School skills and training.”

Ms. Berger said that while Farm School NYC has so far enrolled about 200 paying students, the nonprofit also runs a program called City Farms that has offered 2,300 students free agriculture-related workshops.

In its second year, Farm School had 127 applicants for 15 slots in the certificate program and 272 applicants for 171 individual class slots. So far, eight students have graduated.
Farm School teaches city slickers

Continued from Page 13

It’s still unusual for people to think of New York as a potential haven for agriculture. But the city does have more than 1,000 community gardens and about 35 working farms, according to a report last year by the Urban Design Lab at Columbia University’s Earth Institute.

In 2011, Farm School NYC began offering its highly competitive certificate program, which teaches production, preparation, distribution, marketing and advocacy to urban-agriculture students and can be completed in two to five years. It also offers individual classes for the less committed. Tuition is based on household size and annual income, and the cost for a certificate program can range from $420 to $5,670.

The certificate program consists of 15 core courses, advanced coursework in a specialized area, an apprenticeship and 40 hours of volunteer work. Classes are offered by season; this spring includes an introductory class on carpentry and gardening along with opportunities to participate in a variety of farming-related activities.

Three recent certificate graduates were offered temporary jobs building a garden on a barge that houses the offices of World Yacht, a private charter company located at Pier 81 in Manhattan. Later, the school reported to the USDA that two students had taken on farming-related employment, and three had started farming in rural areas.

Farm School NYC has been “extremely successful, with little bumps along the way,” Ms. Berger said, citing several students who dropped out because they lacked commitment. “But even these students who dropped out because they lacked babysitters for sick children. She wants the school to provide affordable child care for students and to offer classes in Spanish.

The biggest challenge, though, is to have graduates find jobs and generate sustainable incomes in their new field.

Opportune time

“There are careers in urban farming. There are not many, and they are not well paid,” said Kubi Ackerman, project manager at the Urban Design Lab. “There is a high demand for agricultural workers, but they are among the most poorly paid and some of the worst jobs in the country.”

Mr. Ackerman said that there is a need for Farm School NYC graduates to do food-justice work, food-access research, nonprofit policy work in the municipal sector and urban rooftop farming.

Susan Chin, executive director of the Design Trust for Public Space in New York, said Farm School NYC has arrived at an opportune time for the urban-farming movement.

Mr. Ackerman sees opportunities for Farm School graduates to create new food hubs—networks that “manage the aggregation, storage, processing, distributing or marketing of locally and regionally produced food,” according to the USDA—and find jobs in composting, a growing industry.

“They’re coming at a good moment because there’s so much interest in urban agriculture,” said Ms. Chin. “It can be a catalyst for revitalizing cities. There’s a need for food hubs, a need for people in the compost industry. Getting folks plugged into these areas can be a bridge for so many grads.”