

## Farming's future: Young Davis man enjoys growing, teaching on his small plot of land

By Mimi Schiffman | Special to *The Davis Enterprise* | November 14, 2008



Toby Hastings cuts into a charentais melon near a willow shelter, designed to provide shade on hot summer days, adjacent to his three-quarter-acre Free Spirit Farm. The charantais melon is one of the produce varieties he used to win over the chefs at September's Slow Food Conference. (Mimi Schiffman/Courtesy photo) Out on Putah Creek Road in Solano County, nestled between hundreds of acres of walnut groves, a small organic farm is bearing the fruit of the labor of a single, hard-working individual.

Equipped with a disarming smile and a refreshingly positive attitude, Davis native Toby Hastings has been capturing the attention of folks in town and throughout the Bay Area with his work on Free Spirit Farm, the three-quarter-acre plot he planted last winter at the Center for Land-Based Learning.

Hastings returned to his hometown a year ago with the intention of starting up his own farm. He was fresh from a trip across the country that had introduced him to various methods of organic farming, but it was a visit to friend Peter Rundlett's Moonstone Farms in Rhode Island that set in motion the venture that has been putting food on the table for more than 30 families each week.

'Seeing Peter operating a Community Supported Agriculture program using small-scale techniques and making it work all on his own was a real inspiration,' Hastings says.

Five days a week, Hastings covers the 11 miles between Free Spirit Farm and his house on bike. On the other days he drives, so he can transport the food he has grown to the 30-plus members who subscribe to his CSA box. Arriving at the farm without a car is part of his mission of operating the farm with as little mechanical input as possible. 'All the work on the farm is done strictly by hand,' Hastings says.

Through thoughtful planning and with the assistance of beneficial creatures and insects, Hastings has enjoyed a large yield this year. He planted a wide variety of vegetables, flowers and fruit to create a diverse output and to aid in pest and disease control, a method he calls 'insurance against crop failure.'

It was the sight of his veggies and flowers that hooked CSA member Synda Whitmer. She saw Hastings walk into The Farmer's Kitchen in Davis with some of his food and struck up a conversation. Whitmer was so impressed with her experience with the CSA that she organized a field trip through the GreenMoms Group she co-organizes with Theresa Francis, and brought out 22 children and parents to see the farm this summer.

'It's great for our kids to see a young man working so hard and producing such beautiful food. I think it's a great lesson for our children,' Whitmer says. 'My son talks about going to see Hastings all the time. He really made an impact on them. He might not even realize he makes that kind of impact. I'm much more interested in my son learning that kind of stuff than some of the other stuff he's learning in school.'

The Center for Land-Based Learning enjoys the company of youths on a regular basis throughout the school year. The property functions as an educational station for the Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship and FARMS leadership programs. These engage high school students in habitat restoration and environmentally sound agricultural projects.

In addition to paying a small monthly fee, as a part of his contract with the Center, Hastings works with the youths who visit the property regularly, and provides some food for events that come up throughout the year.

'It's the place where we demonstrate a lot of the things we're trying to teach in our youth education around the state,' says Mary Kimball, executive director of the Center for Land-Based Learning '(Hastings' farm) has been really valuable to us. When we want to incorporate farm experience into the FARMS and SLEWS field days, Hastings is on hand to work with the students and adults.'

With the assistance of the Center for Land Based Learning, Hastings was connected with two well-known San Francisco restaurants that began ordering produce.

Says Hastings of the relationship that has grown between Free Spirit Farm and the chefs and workers at the Slow Club and Serpentine: 'We've become friends beyond business partners. It's been great to see them use the food I grow in their meals and to watch people enjoy it.'

Hastings hopes to deepen this relationship next season and expand it with restaurants in the Sacramento area, potentially planting some of his crops to suit their needs.

Hastings was recently invited to speak on a panel with three other small farmers at the Ecological Farming Conference in Pacific Grove in January. He's enthusiastic about discussing the role small-scale farms can play in connecting people with the food they are eating and ensuring land stewardship.

When asked about his plans for the future, Hastings finds himself conflicted. 'It seems like organic farms end up just wanting to grow and grow. This year has been so successful. I don't know why I would want to change anything.'

Yet Hastings is entertaining the idea of expanding onto adjacent land that may become available next year. He feels it's possible to continue without any help with labor, maintaining the techniques he has used to produce more food. That kind of move will make a lot of families happy next year, since the waiting list for the CSA subscription is growing quite long.

To get on that waiting list, or to contact Toby Hastings, e-mail [freespiritfarm@gmail.com](mailto:freespiritfarm@gmail.com).



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Hastings packs up his CSA customers' boxes with garlic, onions, beans, basil, tomatoes, squash, carrots and melons. People pick up the boxes weekly from a location in Davis. (Mimi Schiffman/Courtesy photo)



Hastings hauls a load of dry beans off the farm to dislodge them from their shells. Dry beans are among the crops that set Hastings apart from many small farmers. They require considerable work to separate from the vine, but store well. (Mimi Schiffman/Courtesy photo)