Small Farm School gives beginners a one-day crash course in farming

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By

Nearing retirement, Cliff Roberson, 65, decided to take a risk.

The Corvallis surgeon knew the idle life was not for him. Instead, he chose what he calls a challenging-yet-rewarding activity with a continued source of income: farming.

"There's no potential in travel and buying boats and joining a country club," he says. "There's potential here."

Roberson and about 200 others took a one-day crash course on Saturday in small farming. The first annual Small Farm School was put on by Oregon State University Extension Service with the Clackamas County Soil and Water Conservation District, at Clackamas Community College in Oregon City.

Geared for beginners, participants could pick from 24 different workshops in the four sessions. Topics included mushroom cultivation, on-farm veterinary care, organic weed management and farming in the city.

Nick Andrews, small farms extension agent for OSU, says the program arose out of the need to serve small-scale farms, especially with the growing demand for local, sustainably grown food. Participants ranged from those – like Roberson – who own larger plots of land, to urban farmers looking to maximize their backyards.

"Our goal is to increase the diversity of small business and improve the success rate for small farms because it's a really challenging profession," he says. "It's tricky to make a living farming."
Roberson took the morning tractor operation and safety class, which he says will help him when it comes time to buy the expensive equipment for his farm, 15 minutes from home.

Roberson says some of his patients were filbert farmers who got him interested in the crop. He knew nothing about farming but learned filberts can be lucrative.

Roberson bought 30 acres before realizing it would be years before his hazelnut trees would produce a harvest. So he purchased another 120 acres on which he will plant crops to harvest this year.

"Now we're way beyond hobby status," he says. "I'm a total novice."

Kathy Mayfield, 47, one of the tractor class instructors, says farming is more than a profession; it is a way of life.

"I grew up on a farm," she says. "I just couldn't fathom...buying 100 acres and taking all this in. Things that seem so common sense (to me), other people haven't been exposed to."

Roberson says his family is "reluctantly supportive."

"I told my wife, 'Well, I could sit around the house and request more ham sandwiches,' " he says. "So she said, 'No, get out there and farm.'"

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