



By Dean Houghton

# AGE OF THE MENTOR

*Innovative programs link expert farmers with new operators*

**N**iche marketing can be difficult, and it's even more daunting when you're just starting to farm. That's why Fred Hempel was looking for more than just a piece of land when he decided to pursue his dreams and start farming in California.

He wanted to find a situation where he could tap into a source of experience while his plants rooted into the soil. "My partner, Jill, and I were breeding tomatoes, and we had a nursery business," he says. "It was really key for us to find a mentor, because we had never farmed before."

Hempel, who has a doctorate in plant biology, filled out an online form offered by California FarmLink, an organization that tries to find opportunities for beginning farmers. FarmLink found the perfect match, setting him up in the Sunol Ag Park, just a

►**Left:** Fred Hempel (left) had help from a mentor, and in turn has offered Dan Swansey and Caroline Guebels-Swansey a chance to farm.

few miles east of the San Francisco Bay. An organization called Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE) manages this urban-edge farm, and it helped Hempel not only lease the land, but also assisted in writing a business plan and finding a mentor. Peter Rudnick, a leader in growing specialty vegetables, helped Fred and Jill get started, offering advice on everything from weeding to watering. The Hempel farm, called Baia Nichia, now serves top chefs and farmers markets with everything from tasty tomatoes to salad greens.

**New generation.** It's the age of the mentor in agriculture, as a gray-ing farm population in the U.S. and Canada prepares to transition their operations. In the U.S., agriculture is poised for change. Experts say half of all current farmers are likely to retire in the next decade, while the number of entry-level farmers has fallen by 30% since 1987. More than half the farmland in the U.S. is in the hands of farmers age 55 or over. Whether

that land ends up in the hands of a new generation of farmers or simply is absorbed into ever-larger farms will have an effect on the future of rural communities, as well.

Programs are popping up all over to try to make matches between aspiring farmers and retiring farmers, and assist in passing along knowledge as well as land. In Iowa, for example, the Farm On program offers a database that fosters such arrangements. "Young farmers may not have a lot of financial means," says David Baker, a farm transition specialist with Iowa State University's Beginning Farmer Center, "but they have time and energy, and that allows them to build some sweat equity in return for an opportunity to start farming." Many

►**Below left:** Though they may be short of finances, beginning farmers offer their time and energy to build "sweat equity" in return for a chance to farm for a living. ►**Below:** Josh Edge points out that beginning small family farmers may find profit in filling the local food niche.





►**Above:** Cynthia King manages Sustainable Agriculture Education's Sunol AgPark, where tenants grow food for the San Francisco market.

other states offer such matching services. You can visit [farmtransition.org](http://farmtransition.org) for more details. Click on Network Participants at this website for a state-by-state listing of similar programs.

Even the federal government is giving a boost to beginners. Under the CRP Transition Incentives Program, farmers and landowners who are in the process of retiring from agriculture and whose Conservation Reserve Program contract is coming to an end can help someone get started farming. CRP payments will be extended

two years after the contract expires if the land is sold or leased to a beginner who pledges to use sustainable or organic grazing, crop production, or a combination of the two to bring the land back into production.

At the Sunol AgPark, where tenants such as Hempel raise crops ranging from strawberries to edible blossoms, sustainability is an overriding theme. "We provide the infrastructure and management systems that help our farmer-tenants develop profitable businesses," says Cynthia King, the AgPark's farm manager. "We help them develop sustainable farming operations that conserve natural resources and enhance soil fertility."

It also provides local food, a growing niche. "Supporting local farmers today means there will be farms in your community tomorrow," says Josh Edge, coordinator of local food programs for the California-based Community Alliance For Family Farmers.

**G**razing management gets a boost under a mentorship program offered in Alberta. It's called the Sustainable Grazing Mentorship Program, and it matches up respected producers such as Steve Kenyon with farmers and ranchers who are looking to get the most out of their forage, land, and water resources. The producer pays \$100 for 16 hours of mentorship, with



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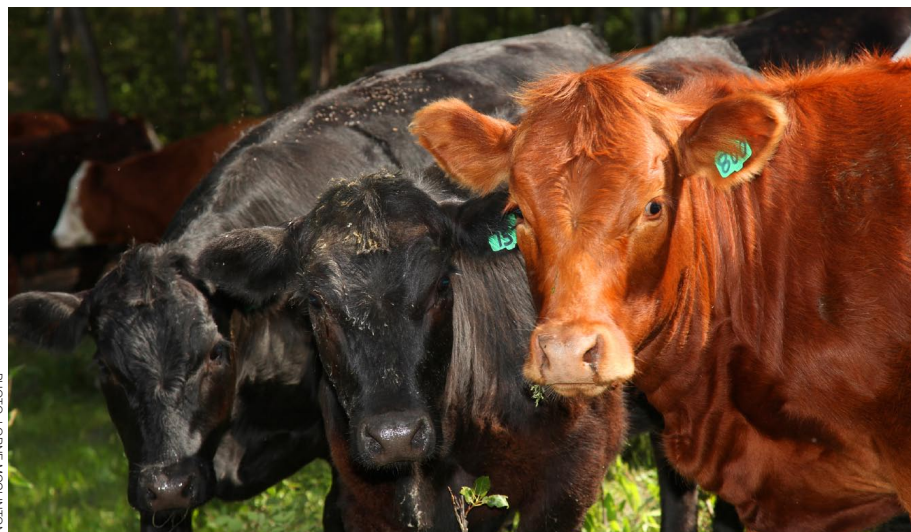


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the balance of the mentor's expenses picked up by Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development through its Growing Forward Initiative.

"I've always had an interest in holistic resource management," Kenyon says. "The more I've become involved with sustainable grazing management, the more it has become a passion for me." He not only runs his own custom grazing operation, but also is a well-known grazing consultant through his writings in North American publications and on his website, [greenerpasturesranching.com](http://greenerpasturesranching.com).

At 37 years of age, Kenyon has learned that it's not just young people who need to be mentored. Whether

he is working with a neighbor, Wayne Dundas, on a plan for winter grazing, or is teaching a course on grazing management, his students often are older than him. "It's something I've learned to overcome," he says. "I have learned that not all beginning farmers are young farmers."

But there are a lot of young people who dream about getting a chance to farm. Fred Hempel is providing some of those same opportunities that he enjoyed a few years ago to a new generation of farmers. Baia Nicchia offers internships for folks who want to get a taste of agriculture, and two of the farm's recent interns, Dan Swansey and Caroline Guebels-Swansey, now

►**Top:** Steve Kenyon (left) shares grazing information with neighbor Wayne Dundas, and often consults with older "beginning farmers."  
►**Above:** In Alberta, the Growing Forward Initiative provides funding that helps match up mentors with farmers who want to improve forages.

have joined the farm as partners. "We wanted land for ourselves so we could pursue farming as a business," Caroline says. With the assistance of some mentoring, Fred, Dan, and Caroline are now farming, though none of them were born on a farm. "Having a mentor is a great way to learn," Fred says. "After a couple of years of mentoring, we had learned most of the basics. And we just keep on learning." ■