

Incubator Farm Resources and Funding – A Start-up Guide

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Introduction

Incubator farms are a relatively new player in local food systems, set up to help new and transitioning farmers get off to a successful start. Incubator farms also model use of public land and green space for agriculture, an innovation that benefits local food production, sustainable regional planning, and healthy economic diversification. In spite of differences in size, programming and mission, incubator farms share one thing in common – the need for adequate, secure and sustainable funding and resources. This brief overview covers some of the basics of seeking resources and funding for incubator farms.

Getting Started

- *First things first* – Before seeking resources and funding, create a clear statement of your mission and goals. In the process, bring stakeholders to the table, invite their suggestions, and ask for their support. Be sure to include potential participating farmers whenever possible.
- *Think small and prioritize* – Think of ways to translate your “big picture” vision into smaller, do-able (and less expensive) steps. Build successes on a small scale, and then expand.
- *Learn from others* – Especially, look for local partners who know fundraising and are willing to help.
- *Use a “systems” approach* – Incubator farms are part of local food systems, by their nature complex, varied and constantly changing. Consider creative funding and resource strategies that make sense in your unique local foodshed, and be ready to take advantage of unexpected linkages, opportunities and connections.
- *Think outside the grant* – Relying on grants alone for funding is a little like farming a monoculture without crop rotation; it seems so simple and many people do it, but fundamentally it isn’t sustainable. Grants are one important tool, but make “diversity” your watchword as you seek resources and funding.
- *Map the existing local food system assets in your community* – Consider partnerships with existing businesses that are already embedded within the local food system, along the value chain, such as retailers or value-added businesses that are seeking locally grown items. Share your vision with them. Consider bringing them into your planning process. They will be able to share the existing ‘lay of the land’ in the community and can bring good ideas to the table.

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Create a Resource Plan

- *The basics* – At minimum, a resource plan has the following parts: 1. A reasonable budget goal. 2. An overall resource and funding strategy. 3. A prioritized list of action items to implement the strategy. 4. A person assigned to do or manage each action item. 5. A scheduled time for each task. 6. An ongoing process for reviewing and adapting your plan over time. It should be based on, and reflect the priorities in, your mission statement and goals.
- *Put it down in writing* – A key part of fundraising will be communicating your vision in a clear and compelling way. The more organized and focused you are, the more successful you are likely to be when seeking resources.
- *Frugality equals fundraising* – Keep things as simple as possible, and your budget low. The less you must spend, the less you must raise. This makes financial sense, and sets a great example for farmers.

Focus on results

- *Focus for results (NIFTI)* – Jennifer Hashley of the National Incubator Farm Training Initiative reminds programs that future funding is driven by results. She suggests identifying projects with the greatest potential impact; demonstrating their economic, social and environmental benefits; and being transparent in planning and implementation. With established successes, you can identify sources of additional funding.
- *Maintain your mission* – When seeking grant funding, be cautious of ‘mission creep,’ especially if a project goal is economic self-sufficiency. Continuation funding for existing programs can be challenging to find, and may entice programs to expand to new areas in order to find new outside funding.

Think outside the grant

- *Give non-grant options careful attention* – There are dozens of non-grant options for funding and obtaining resources, and incubator farms, as part of local food systems, have options beyond familiar non-profit strategies.
- *Ask for support* – It seems obvious, but if you don’t let people know what you are doing and invite them to support your cause, you won’t receive many resources or donations. Research and develop personal relationships with potential donors, local organizations that can provide support, and area media, civic groups, and government (Intervale Center calls this ‘*friend-raising.*’). Invite them for visits, and make them aware of your mission, activities and unique impacts.
- *In-kind donations* – Donations offer local businesses a way to support the incubator, enabling them to clear inventory without calling for cash expenditures. Obviously, farm supplies and tools are high on the list of suitable items.
- *Volunteers* – Volunteers provide needed muscle, especially large groups from faith-based organizations, business conferences, civic groups, crop mobs (cropmob.org), and so forth. Individual volunteers and interns can also provide invaluable long term help, with Americorps and similar trained volunteers especially

valuable. Be sure you are able to meet volunteer needs and, of course, be ready to reward them with lots of encouragement and thanks.

- *Charge participant fees* – Participants are usually happy to pay reasonable fees for use of equipment such as tractors, as well as pay tuition for training classes. Keep in mind, it is invaluable for new farmers to understand the true cost of farming, so during their time on, and when they have graduated from, the incubator farm, they incorporate these costs into their planning and their pricing.
- *Take advantage of participant farmer skills* – Encourage farmers to use any special skills to support the incubator, from tractor repair to computer ability. Community workdays are also a good idea, to keep the incubator neat and working smoothly, while building a 'barn-raising' sense of community. Foster leadership of participants when it arises. Consider 'sweat equity' requirements in the land lease, also providing new farmers with an understanding of the true maintenance requirements (and time involved) with all aspects of the incubator farm.
- *Offer community services* – Host events, workshops, and classes for the larger community of farmers and consumers, for a reasonable fee or a donation (or volunteer time).
- *Host a community garden* – Some incubators organize community gardens, a popular and proven way to reach out to the community and make friends, as well as a complimentary approach to increasing local food production. Modest plot fees offer some incubator income, but good will and community support and connections are the big pay offs. In some situations, an 'entrepreneurial' community garden can be designed for market production and sales, or donation to food assistance programs.
- *Traditional fundraising events* – Incubators can host farm dinners, harvest festivals, seasonal seedlings sales, and other events, as well as organize appeals using mail and phone. When considering these events, be realistic from the beginning about the time it will take to plan.

The Marketing Option

- *Explore marketing* – Consider an arrangement for farmers to market through the incubator, with a portion of the proceeds going to incubator support. Some incubators run CSAs (community supported agriculture"marketing), others set up "food hubs" at the incubator or another suitable retail location. These kinds of enterprises can potentially support the program, while providing marketing support and education for incubator participants and other local small farmers.
- *Engage the business community* – If an incubator farm includes direct marketing and sales, for example by setting up a food hub (if one does not already exist in the community), the business community may be able to provide valuable suggestions for managing the commercial part of the enterprise.
- *Consider alternatives to non-profit status* – There is now a continuum between traditional non-profits and profit-making institutions dedicated to the public good, with some well-known groups, such as Goodwill Industries, being something of a hybrid. Incubators with commercial components may want to research for-profit options, including having both non-profit and for-profit parts of the organization, similar to the way some corporations manage their philanthropic giving through a separate non-profit foundation.

The Internet as a Resource Tool

- *A good tool (but not the only one...)* – Fundraising professionals caution that the Internet and social media cannot replace other ways of seeking funding and resources. Diversity in seeking resources remains the prime directive – Web-based approaches should be seen as one tool among many. However, many small farms already have a website or Facebook page, and incubator farms can also benefit from a Web presence. In the process, they can also provide Internet training for participating farmers.
- *Tell your story* – The Internet can help you to tell your story, share your mission, let people know about events, and recruit volunteers. You can even capture donations through a well-designed site. Since it is easy to post pictures and videos, let images do your talking. You don't need a website - you can keep a blog using a site such as Wordpress, or set up a Facebook page.
- *Explore crowd-funding* – “Crowd funding” uses the Web and social media to aggregate small donations to support a cause, a little like the way a food hub pools production from a number of small farmers. Incubator programs are already using this new option, often through such established sites as Kickstarter. Related web-based options such as “crop mobs” and “crowd sourcing” can help with labor and publicity. When considering these opportunities, be realistic from the beginning about the time it will take to run a campaign.
- *Keep your Web presence up to date* – A website, blog, or Facebook page comes with some additional responsibilities. Be sure you have someone who can manage the site regularly and keep information accurate and current. Also, don't neglect outreach to media, and link to any stories about your organization.

Partner Organizations

- *Stand-alone or part of a larger organization?* – Some of the longest established and most successful incubator farms are ‘stand alone’ enterprises, ALBA and Intervale Center being two examples. Many newer incubators have close partnerships or even direct ties with other organizations. These include institutions of higher education, city or county government agencies, regional farmers’ markets, and environmental and open space organizations. This kind of relationship can increase access to resources and funding, since larger, established entities may have experienced staff who specialize in resources, funding and grants.
- *Use public land (or publicly funded land)* – Using public land for farm education and farming has a long and successful history in the US, and establishing the incubator on public land can be very beneficial to the bottom line. This also helps establish precedence and effective policies and procedures for agricultural use of public land. Other land options include land trusts, faith-based groups, individual farmers, educational institutions, and large corporations. Since one of the most daunting financial barriers to new farmers is land access, a rental or lease arrangement for participants may produce additional incubator income while providing a real service to small famers. One drawback for the use of public land may be infrastructure development if the land has no existing relevant farm infrastructure.

Grant Writing Fundamentals

- *Seek help, and review existing grant writing information* – There is a wealth of excellent information already available on grant writing. In addition, as a top priority, look locally for experienced and successful grant writers who are sympathetic to your cause and willing to help.
- *Be ready for lots of choices* – Lists of available grants, particularly from the federal government, are long, extensive and detailed. Be ready to do your homework, starting with the websites listed at the end of this guide. Your objective is to get to know everything you can about donors and granting agencies. What projects are they currently funding? What key words and phrases are they looking for?
- *Read applications carefully* – One key to successful grant applications is addressing the stated goals of the grant. Make sure your application closely fits what the granting organization is looking for.
- *Look beyond agriculture* – Although the USDA funds dozens of potential grants, check other government agencies as well. This is particularly true when your incubator farm addresses other needs, such as community development or job programs for veterans. The same applies to foundation grants.
- *Cultivate relationships* – Establish good relationships with grant organization staff. They can make valuable suggestions on the mechanics of grant writing, and sometimes refer you to other grants and funding opportunities that fit your incubator particularly well.
- *Keep good records* – Even before applying for grants, establish the habit of keeping careful records and evaluating your incubator's effectiveness. By doing so, you'll also be setting an excellent example for the farmers in your program. Grants frequently require detailed records and data-based evaluation.
- *Mind the basics* – Though it is common sense, remember that no matter how great your program and how committed you are, you still have to meet such basic requirements as turning in the grant by its deadline, and completing all required information.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

National Incubator Farm Training Initiative (NIFTI) Resources:

<http://nesfp.org/nifti>

A growing resource-base of information, tools, and all around sharing from incubator farm programs across North America. **For information cited below as 'NIFTI,' check the library resource for even more information over time** - <http://nesfp.org/nifti/library>.

Bringing New Farmers to the Table project website:

<http://www.ncnewfarmers.org>

Includes links to very essential resources and starting points, including NIFTI, ALBA, white paper on NC incubator farms and a New Farmer Toolbox that shares tools and resources on the business of farming.

Guidestar, a non-profit clearing house

<http://www.guidestar.org>

Web-based fundraising:

<http://www.thefundraisingauthority.com/fundraising-basics/fundraising-on-the-internet>

Crowd Funding: Excellent explanation of using crowd funding for incubators:

<http://tiliacenter.wordpress.com/documentation/iiib-beginning-farmer-crowd-funding>

Alternatives to non-profit status:

Fruchterman, Jim. *For Love or Lucre*, in Stanford Social Innovation, Spring 2011

(an on-line copy is available at About.com:)

Joanne Fritz wrote a review here:

<http://nonprofit.about.com/od/socialentrepreneurs/ss/Before-Starting-A-Nonprofit-Consider-Other-Business-Structures.htm>

Community garden portals and support sites:

- NCSU: <http://nccommunitygarden.ncsu.edu/>
- NCCGP: <http://nccommunitygarden.ncsu.edu/cgpartners.html>
- ACGA: <http://www.communitygarden.org>
- Garden Mosaics:
<http://nyc.cce.cornell.edu/UrbanEnvironment/UrbanEcology/GardenMosaics/Pages/GardenMosaics.aspx>
- NCDNR (for projects with an environmental education component):
<http://web.eenorthcarolina.org/core/item/topic.aspx?tid=85010>

Grant Links and Information:

There are dozens of grant programs within the US Department of Agriculture alone, and many more available through other federal, state and local agencies. The following is a partial list, aggregated from NIFTI resources and from CEFS, of sources that may be explored.

Each grant will have a different deadline and filing requirements, though if you have a clear mission and project description you are ahead of the game. A sensible strategy is to take a long view, and plan an application strategy that continues throughout the year, identifying good possibilities early and being ready to apply well before deadline. Use the search terms below, along with your own additions, to track down possibilities.

A selection of search terms for foundation and government grants (provided through NIFTI):

food security, agriculture, environment, economic development, farm, land conservation, health, nutrition, immigrants, veterans, youth, ex-offenders, local food, organic, transitioning farmers, job training, specialty crops, direct marketing, farmers markets

USDA and other government funding programs, a partial list

(provided through NIFTI and CEFS):

CFP - Community Food Projects

BFRDP - Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program

Farm Service Agency (FSA) Loan Programs

FMPP – Farmers’ Market Promotion Program

Local Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)

NRCS (Natural Resource Conservation Service)

 CIG (Conservation Innovation Grants)

 EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program)

 AMA (Agricultural Management)

OASDFR - Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers

ORR/HHS RAPP – Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program

RBEG (Rural Business Enterprise Grants)

Regional IPM Grants

RMA/RME - Risk Management Agency/Regional Risk Management Center

Specialty Crop Block Grants (via state Dept of Agriculture)

SARE – Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (Farmer, R&E, Prof. Devt, Community, Partnership, Sustainable Community Innovation)

USDA Value-Added Producer Grants

Other national and localized programs to research:

Charitable arms of Banks in your local area – check to see if local banks in your area have a charitable arm.

Ben and Jerry's Foundation, National Grassroots Grant Program - <http://www.benandjerrysfoundation.org/>

Cedar Tree Foundation - <http://www.cedartreefound.org/apply.html>

Harry Chapin Foundation - <http://www.harrychapinfoundation.org/>

Community Foundations could be explored, both local and regional.

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Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation - Environment and Health - http://www.cehcf.org/env_health.html
Farm Aid - <http://www.farmaid.org/>
Heifer International - <http://www.heifer.org/>
National Rural Funders Collaborative - <http://nrfc.org/>
New Belgium Brewing - <http://www.newbelgium.com/Community/local-grants.aspx>
Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation - <http://www.noyes.org/>
Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI-USA) – Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund -
<http://www.rafiusa.org/programs/tobacco/tobacco.html>
Solidago Foundation - <http://www.solidago.org/>

Grant 'Portals' (links to different grants)

Federal:

Federal Grants - <http://www.grants.gov>
NIFA Grant Search - <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/funding.cfm>
NAL, Small Farm Funding - http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/small_farm_funding.htm

State (institutional affiliations required – check Universities in your own state for resources, too):

NCSU - http://pivot.cos.com.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/funding_main
NSCU Grant Library - <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/guides/grant/>
UNC - <http://grantsinfo.unc.edu/databases/COS>

Recommended reading

Though it addresses international development rather than farming, there is an excellent description of the grant and fundraising process in North Carolina, and unexpected consequences and challenges, in Rye Barcott's, *It Happened on the Way to War – A Marine's Path to Peace* (2011).

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www.cefs.ncsu.edu; www.ncnewfarmers.org*

BRINGING NEW FARMERS TO THE TABLE:



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