

## Youth Engaging in Agriculture: Cultivating Successful Small-Scale Enterprises

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‘Youth Engaging in Agriculture’ (YEA) is a new project funded through the USDA-NIFA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) that addresses production and management strategies to enhance the sustainability of small-scale farms through education, hands-on training, and mentoring of young socially-disadvantaged, beginning farmers (Grant # 2011-49400-30901). YEA is creating a model apprenticeship program that connects limited resource, socially-disadvantaged youth with mentor-farmers to provide practical experience in production agriculture on working farms and exposure to entrepreneurship opportunities associated with the production and marketing of locally-grown crops. A Beginning Farmer Recruitment Council and a Producer Advisory Panel will provide guidance for the apprenticeship effort. Staff with the Cooperative Extension Program at NC A&T SU are collaborating with local institutions that recruit and supervise apprentices at three sites, including the Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help (Warsaw, NC), Sandhills Family Heritage Association (Spring Lake, NC), and Operation Spring Plant (Oxford, NC). In year one, apprentices recruited by collaborators work alongside mentors. In year two, apprentices are provided with a plot of land to produce a crop for direct marketing. Apprentices receive assistance from University faculty and community partners in enterprise planning, production, marketing, and developing a “farm plan”. Throughout the apprentice experience, the youth participate in University sponsored workshops and field days that address the development of specialty crop enterprises for local markets. Additionally, university faculty are designing a series of at least four on-line instructional courses that address the needs of beginning farmers. In the third year of the project, participating youth who want to continue farming will be provided with guidance for locating rental farmland and securing operating loans from the USDA or other financial institutions. A second set of apprentices will be recruited in year two and participate in the project for two years. In year one, 31 youth participated in the mentorship program, workshops, and short courses. Twenty-eight apprentices completed the first year program. These socially-disadvantaged youth interested in farming careers reported that YEA helped increase their understanding of topics related to horticultural crop production, sustainable soil and pest management, high tunnel production, planning a new agribusiness, and marketing.