

Seeding Community in Southwest Montana

By Ben Clark, Vilicus Farms

The warming weather and unfolding of spring across Montana finds a lot of farmers busy in their fields and greenhouses, planting seeds to nurture into nutritious crops. This year there are also different seeds being sown-the seeds of community. Young and beginning farmers in the southwest region of Montana are setting up the first chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition here in the state of Montana. The National Young Farmers Coalition is a farmer advocacy organization that specifically focuses on issues that young and beginning farmers face in starting farms, accessing land and capital, and organizing the resources that contribute to a successful farm business. While at a national level the NYFC organizes and lobbies for meaningful policy change, in the local sphere the NYFC regional chapters can serve many needs and purposes. These chapters can help shape local county and state policy, but they also provide a social and business support network, with many farmers contributing resources and skills to the community. While in the early stages of creation, the Southwest Montana National Young Farms Coalition chapter is shaping up to be a community resource to many aspiring and current farm business owners and workers.

While starting a brand new chapter of an organization like NYFC is daunting, the Southwest Montana NYFC chapter is lucky to have some very dedicated people bringing it into reality. Dylan Fishman and Alyssa Stewart, owners and operators of Foxglove Flower Farm in Bozeman, along with Becca Skinner and Ally Engelbrecht are the founding members of the chapter. After canvassing for other individuals and farms potentially motivated to join, the group hosted a zoom call to welcome others interested in creating the chapter and community together. More than 30 or so individuals from many different backgrounds participated and made it clear that there was a desire to form a chapter here in Montana. Since then, there have been several virtual meetings, and the group continues to work through the process of setting up an official chapter of the NYFC in the Southwest of Montana.

Starting a farm or beginning a career working in agriculture can be a particularly challenging journey. Farming is not just hard work, but also a diverse and complex array of skills that must be learned and mastered to make a farm business successful. Farming can be isolating, confusing, and downright disappointing at times, especially in the early stages of one's education and experience. Young farmers have huge challenges like gaining access to land, equipment, and capital in order to begin farming, and then on top of that young farmers are just beginning to learn the nuances and skills that come with the job. It is important that a young or beginning farmer have the backing and support of a kind and generous community to help them through the learning process of running a successful farm enterprise. That's where organizations like the Southwest Montana NYFC can be the most effective. One of the first tools the chapter is putting together is an online "Skill/Tool Sharing Directory" where members can post offerings to the group to help and support each other as needed. Focusing on what young and beginning farmers can offer each other as opposed to competing with each other is a valuable insight that this group of Montana farmers is keen on sharing.

Participating in a chapter of the NYFC is one way a young or beginning farmer can begin to engage with farming not just as a career but also as a greater community to advocate for. Farmers need to make their voices heard more than ever as our food system grows more consolidated and precarious every year. For there to be a future in agriculture there must be a clear path forward for a young or beginning farmer to succeed. That is becoming increasingly difficult as the weight of student debt balloons, and as the real cost of living rapidly outpaces the wage an agricultural worker can reasonably expect from their farm labor. In addition, the small community of those making their living in agriculture can be isolating and highly stressful for an individual, leading many young farmers to experience mental health struggles. Starting a farm is an overwhelming task, and to those engaged with that process it is vital that



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they have the support they need from a healthy community of people who understand the reality of their experiences. The issues facing young farmers are many and diverse, and so must be met with many and diverse solutions- and that is what the NYFC strives to do.

As the chapter continues to develop there is sure to be more that they bring to the farming community in Montana, and we are excited to see the development of the younger farming community here in our state. Young farmers continue to bring innovation and energy to agriculture, with many young farmers choosing to farm organically, and with the health of our shared ecosystems in mind. We support the formation of the Southwest Montana NYFC and look forward to collaboration and engagement in this season and in the coming years. If you are interested in learning more, joining the chapter, or offering support in some way, you can reach out to them on Instagram: MontanaYoungFarmers, or through email montanayoungfarmers@gmail.com



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