

Sustainer Series offers insight, community

South Island Farmers Institute wraps up successful extension program

KATE AYERS

SAANICHTON – The South Island Farmers Institute hosted seven sessions over the winter that brought together local producers to address topics of regional concern.

Each session was structured to have a local long-time producer or “sustainer” discuss challenges and successes in his or her operation for 40 minutes and then a subject expert would cover off another 40 minutes on current topics including farm classification, grant applications, insurance and estate planning and farm-use water rates.

“Everybody really stuck around,” says series organizer and institute vice-president Katie Underwood of Peas n’ Carrots Farm in Saanich. Some participants spoke and engaged with fellow local farmers hours after the session had concluded, she adds.

Producer feedback noted networking as one of the main benefits of attending.

“Lots of people [were] just feeling that much more connected to their community,” Underwood says.

“Because we have an aspect of it where it’s connecting or educating our community on topics of regional concern, it really helped people broaden their understanding about what’s going on community-wise as well in terms of things that might impact agriculture.”



South Island Farmers Institute vice-president Katie Underwood is pleased with the reception SIFI’s outreach programming is receiving. FACEBOOK / PEAS N’ CARROTS FARM

City’s Edge Farm founder and Sustainer Series attendee Sol Kinnis appreciated the opportunity to hear from local producers who have farmed on the Island for generations and shared their stories. Producers

discussed how farming and operations have evolved over the years and raised issues that threaten local food production, including infringing urban and rural boundaries.

As a farmer new to the area, meeting with local producers and learning from them has helped Kinnis feel more settled in Central Saanich. She recently moved her main operations from a 0.67-acre parcel in Saanich to a three-acre plot of land near Keating Cross Road. Even with 15 years of farming experience, Kinnis is always eager to learn and experiment to grow her 40-vegetable market garden.

“I pretty much learned how to become a farmer by learning from other farmers,” Kinnis says. In future sessions, she would like to learn more about water management strategies in the area during drought.

Besides the Sustainer Series and the five-day Farmer to Farmer hands-on workshops, field days and conference held in February, SIFI has more events and series planned for the summer and fall.

“We’re really excited to host the Innovation Series this year where we’re encouraging our farmers to continue learning, bring their innovations, what makes their business more innovative and also just fun farming hacks,” Underwood says.

The initial idea for the events is to tour farms or have farmers showcase the tools and practices they’re using to make farming more efficient.

“We really want to nerd out with everybody,” Underwood laughs.



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