

Highlights of **Extension**

TYING RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



Auerfarm: Growing Opportunities

Article by Stacey Stearns

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The 120-acre 4-H Education Center at Auerfarm is a private, non-profit education center located in Bloomfield. Over 15,000 students and family members participate in year-round 4-H curriculum-based school science programs, animal clubs, and Junior Master Gardening projects annually.

Hartford entrepreneur and retailer Beatrice Fox Auerbach and her husband purchased the farm in 1925. Beatrice took control of the farm and managed it for 40 years when her husband died in 1927. Dairy, poultry, and apples were produced. At its peak, the farm was 230-acres, and honored in 1950 for its innovation and modern practices. The family of Beatrice Fox Auerbach deeded the farm to the Connecticut 4-H Development Fund in 1976.

A volunteer board of directors and staff run the farm's day-to-day operations and educational components. The partnership with UConn Extension brings the research from UConn to real life for visiting groups. Educational programs encourage critical thinking and curiosity through hands-on discovery in science and agriculture. Volunteers from the 4-H

program, Master Gardeners, and the community are a vital component of the farm.

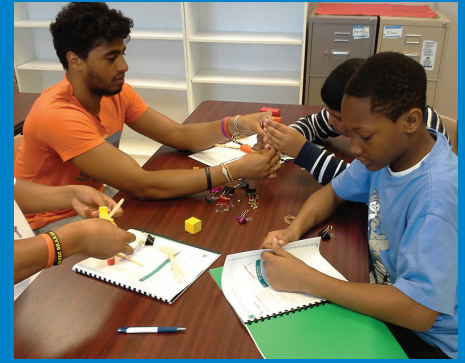
Living Classroom

“We are very passionate about the mission of the organization, which is to connect people, agriculture, and the natural environment through education and recreation,” says Chairman of the Board Bob Lyle. “At Auerfarm we have a wonderful 120-acre outdoor laboratory for learning, and we focus on bringing young people and their families out for fun, hands-on lessons in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).”

“Youth learn about nutrition, food production, plant, and animal life,” Bob continues. “It’s gratifying to observe how participants enthusiastically react and enjoy learning in this kind of living classroom. We offer educational opportunities that many would not otherwise have.”

Through their experiences at Auerfarm, youth connect to their food environment while building a foundation in STEM education. Auerfarm recently finished construction of a new animal barn, and over the course of the year, the farm has many different species including alpacas, sheep, beef cattle, goats, pigs, chickens, and rabbits.

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“The 4-H club at the farm works with the animals to further their understanding of various STEM-based concepts such as nutrition and animal health,” Hartford County 4-H Extension Educator Jen Cushman explains. “In addition, various school-based, summer programs, and birthday parties integrate the animals into their learning experiences. For example, enrichment programs highlight the life-cycle connections between chickens and eggs, baby animals, and the role that alpacas and sheep play in the creation of yarn.”

Science of Gardening

The Master Gardener/Foodshare garden is a quarter acre vegetable garden used as a demonstration site for learning the basics of environmentally responsible vegetable and flower production. Students learn about growing conditions through understanding management of soil, water, insects, and diseases.

Opportunities to watch seasonal progression of plants, as well as observation of birds and wildlife are available in the garden. Master Gardeners work with approximately 300 volunteers throughout the season. Each year, volunteers harvest over 3,600 pounds of fresh produce for distribution to the community kitchens through Foodshare.

An anonymous \$50,000 grant allowed the 4-H Farm to install a 20 x 48 polycarbonate rigid-walled greenhouse, which has space for in-ground and bench-top grow

ing. Classes and demonstrations are held in the greenhouse.

“It’s a sunny and green oasis during the winter months,” Hartford County Master Gardener Coordinator Sarah Bailey mentions. “Spinach and herbs grow throughout the winter, and as the season shifts, more varieties are planted. While heated, we run it as a cold house with minimal non-solar heat in the winter, yet it stays warm enough for several cold-hardy plants.”

The greenhouse expands growing space available, and extends growing seasons, allowing for more educational programs. Master Gardener volunteers are growing more plants for the Foodshare production garden in the greenhouse.

Sarah is the Junior Master Gardener program statewide coordinator, and utilizes the greenhouse to teach students how plants grow, science experiments, and techniques for planting and harvesting. Teachers receive instruction at the greenhouse, and take hands-on curriculum back to their schools. Sarah is also developing a multi-generational Gardening with Families series.

“I look forward to engaging current UConn students in the activities of Auerfarm through internships and service learning to expand the connection between Auerfarm and UConn,” Jen concludes. “By tapping the expertise of UConn Extension specialists, I anticipate enhancing the agricultural production and practices that occur on the farm.”

4-H National Youth Science Day

Each fall, UConn 4-H members in every county across Connecticut participate in 4-H National Youth Science Day (NYSD), which is the world’s largest youth-led science experiment. The hands-on experiment incorporates science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

Motion Commotion, the 2015 experiment, taught 4-H youth members about physics and speed, while addressing the serious public safety threat posed by texting while driving. By tying real life problems and their solutions to STEM, 4-H youth are engaged as problem solvers and gain hands-on experience in STEM, learn life skills needed to succeed today as well as career readiness for the future.

State 4-H Program Leader Maryann Fusco-Rollins and Joy Erickson from UConn’s School of Engineering had collaborated on a science experiment proposal for NYSD making it to the semi-finals. This collaborative experiment, Helping Hands Transforming Lives, challenges young scientists to become biomedical engineers for the day and design an Articulated Hand Prosthetic. It has been featured at 4-H Science Saturdays and will be featured at the Adventures in STEM workshop in November 2016. UConn Engineering students are mentors at Adventures in STEM.