Rural residents attend growers’ school in Fairbanks

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Fairbanks, Alaska— Donavan Kienenberger picked up a blue, three-gallon plastic tub and turned to his students, “OK guys. Let’s do worms.”

Participants in the Alaskan Growers School gathered around the instructor for a class on composting with worms. Each participant used an electric drill to puncture ventilation holes in a tub and added torn newspaper, handfuls of soil and around 10 small red worms — the ingredients of a composting factory.

Eleven participants, from Ketchikan to Fort Yukon, are attending the Alaskan Growers School in Fairbanks for two weeks. The UAF Cooperative Extension Service coordinates the school, which has a goal of teaching Alaska Natives the knowledge and skills to grow enough food for themselves and 10 other families. The school is funded by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program.

Project director Heidi Rader, tribes Extension educator at the Tanana Chiefs Conference, said she hopes the school will help Alaska Natives in remote, rural communities grow food to complement subsistence activities.

“The goal is to introduce people to a variety of skills and maybe even start a business,” she said.

Participants attended classroom sessions last week taught by Extension agents, representatives of state and federal agencies and local experts. Topics ranged from gardening and farm topics, to beekeeping, raising chickens, marketing and starting a small business. This week they are getting practical experience at Calypso Farm and Ecology Center and camping on the grounds. During the practicum, they will see how the farm operates and will milk goats, harvest vegetables and build a compost pile and a hoop house.

The school drew participants from Dillingham, Nikolai, Tetlin, Ruby, Aniak, Fort Yukon, Manokotak, Holy Cross, Ketchikan and North Pole. Some want to learn how to raise enough food for themselves and their extended families. Others are considering selling their produce.

Dale Gimple of Nikolai said he hopes to buy less from the village store, where 10-pound bags of potatoes cost more than $20. He also hopes to provide for a large extended family.
Diane John of Tetlin gardened for the first time last year and raised enough to share with family members and elders. She doubled her garden space this year so she has two raised beds, a greenhouse and a potato patch. She’s learned a lot about gardening from the school, including how to build a better greenhouse and test her soil.

“I like it and think it will help me do better,” she said.

Kienenberger and Rader offered a beginning growers school this spring through various distance delivery methods to evaluate which method works best for rural residents. More than 40 participants from 26 Alaska communities participated in the series of 10 lessons, which were offered by correspondence, teleconference and two online methods through Elluminate Live and the university’s Blackboard system.

Rader expects to offer an advanced class this fall by distance delivery and more classes next year, once the effectiveness of the distance delivery methods is evaluated.

Applicants for the advanced school must have completed the beginner’s school or the online Alaska Master Gardener program. For more information, contact Rader at 452-8251, ext. 3477 or Kienenberger at 452-8251, ext. 3447. More information about the program is located at www.uaf.edu/ces/ags.

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ADDITIONAL CONTACTS: Heidi Rader, Extension tribes educator, at 452-8251, ext. 3477 or via e-mail at hbrader@alaska.edu.

ON THE WEB: http://www.uaf.edu/ces/ags/

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