



Cowichan Green Community

Cultivating food, community, and resilience



ISLAND COASTAL ECONOMIC TRUST FINAL REPORT

Cowichan Incubator Seed Farm

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Overview

The Cowichan Incubator Seed Farm has seen immense growth and success through the first two years of start-up. Despite a few delays and setbacks related to acquiring all necessary permits and approvals, we have achieved a huge amount and the groundwork has been laid for the first of its kind Incubator Seed Farm.

The 3.5 acre parcel of unused farmland owned by the Municipality of North Cowichan was secured through a licence of occupation late in the summer of 2015. With the summer drought fully in force this proved too late in the year to begin work on site. The focus then shifted to planning the future of the site. The funding was critical through this period of planning as we established business, cropping and training plans, and produced a site plan. This allowed us to hit the ground running in the spring and summer of 2016 when we cultivated two acres for amending and planting, constructed a deer fence, installed a tool shed, planted an orchard, drilled a well, and set up an irrigation system.

Activities

The following is a list of the activities and timeframes for the project:

Objectives	Activities	Timeframes	Deliverables	Status/Comments
Secure Partners	Set up meeting and engage stakeholders	June 2015	Licence of Occupation	Meetings began in June 2015 and continued through the summer
Engage Apprentices	Advertise and secure farm trainees	July 2015 – ongoing	Educated Participants	Four seed interns joined the project in May 2016 as part of a JCP Provincial Funding
Engage Community	Promote Incubator farm and seed saving education component	July 2015 – ongoing	Promotional Strategy	Promotional plan has been established and implemented. The farm is present on social media and has hosted several public events.
Deliver Workshops	Design and deliver a series of educational opportunities for community	August 2015 - ongoing	Educated participants and community	Various workshops have been offered to the community including seed saving techniques. Additional workshops will be provided in the new portable classroom in 2017
Build Infrastructure	Install Fence, water, amenities, tool shed, greenhouse, etc.	Sept 2015 - Ongoing	Completed farm plan	Installed fence, water, tool shed, drying shed, well, irrigation, install classroom portable

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Grow Food	Plant winter crops in greenhouse, garlic etc.	October 2015 – ongoing	Four season crop plan	Planting began Spring 2016 – food grown was sold at farm stand and used through CGC programs Planting has begun for Spring 2017
Build Soil	Sheet mulching, hugelkultur beds	Oct - ongoing	Proper growing conditions	2 acres cultivated, limed, composted, amended and cover cropped.
Save Seeds	Educate on seed saving, build capacity	Oct/Nov - ongoing	Establishing seed banking and seed sales	Over 100lbs of seed produced and saved. Implementation plan for seed bank established in 2016.
Set up market to sell food	Set up a farm gate and other food delivery	April 2016 – ongoing	Marketing strategy	Farm gate stall built and sales done. Sales through Cow-op and CGC programs. Market plan developed.
Set up Seed Lending Library	Provide seeds for the community to 'borrow'	Nov 2016 - ongoing	Seed Library	Set up in the CGC Storefront has been very successful with community borrowing seeds to grow out and return next session.

Challenges

There were significant barriers in moving the project forward on the timeline initially proposed due to some permitting and approval issues related to the usage of the land. The result was that although the land was secured for use in 2015, we were unable to begin any of the major work until the spring of 2016. Further, some challenges with the property – irrigation and drainage related – limited our capacity in the first year. Fortunately, we have been able to secure more funding and support than initially forecast and the challenges faced have been, or are being, addressed and the farm is moving ahead successfully.

A final building permit was secured April 2017 for the installation of the classroom portable that was donated from the School District 79. The foundation was poured, the portable was moved onto the foundation and we are working on prepping the building with the intention of using the space for education and training and setting up the Seed Bank.

One challenge we face with respect to the site is improving the drainage to extend our growing season. This record-wet October really showed us what things can be like. We are working with North Cowichan to assist with drainage and hope to have additional ditches to the ones built in March 2017.

Our biggest lesson is to never underestimate the time in which permits, approvals, and liabilities can take to be worked out. We were overly optimistic at the rate at which we would be able to move ahead on the installation of the portable. With significant staff changes at the Municipality, we were constantly dealing with re-educating on the project and facing delays as the permitting process was put on hold again and again.

We did have to escalate the issue to the Mayor and did receive some positive movement after those discussions.

Successes

The set-up phase of the project was a huge success as was demonstrated by our grand opening on Oct 22nd, 2016 in which over 100 people were in attendance. The Farm has proved to be a great location and capable of the sort of production and training we plan for ongoing.

The farm is well on its way to being the first of its kind seed production training farm. The 3.5 acre under-utilized and previously agricultural site has been restored from a being a garbage-ridden eyesore to a space contributing positively to our community's food security. Dozens of residents in the Alexander neighbourhood have been consulted, have visited the farm – some regularly – or attended the grand opening, all expressing great positivity towards the project. The adjacent elementary and high schools have also partaken in activities at the farm and there are plans in the works to expand our collaboration with these and other schools in the area. This past year eight participants received job training and are better prepared for entering the agricultural and seed production work force.

Promotion

The CISF has had good uptake on the publicity front. From the over 100 persons in attendance at the grand opening – including the mayors of North Cowichan and Duncan and the Federal MP – to the constant stream of community members stopping by for tours and conversations, the farm was a catalyst for conversation and enquiry in the community. The farm is located on a busy road and is very visible to thousands of passers-by each day, additionally, CGC has a large social media presence that the farm has been regularly featured on, and garnering numerous likes and shares.

Advertisements for the Grand Opening were placed in the Cowichan Valley Citizen, the Valley Voice, and Island Farm and Garden Magazine. Articles have been featured in the Cowichan Valley Citizen, Duncan Free Press, Victoria Times Colonist, the BC Food Security Gateway, the Cowichan Valley Voice, Island Farm & Garden Magazine, BC Country Life Magazine, and an interview was hosted by 89.7 Juice FM.

Partnerships

This project has been a resounding success and demonstration of a partnership between an environmental not-for-profit and a municipal government. Not only has a 3.5 acre under-utilized eyesore in a busy residential area been transformed into a beautiful public space that provides education, food, and resilience to the community, but the partnership between the Cowichan Green Community and the Municipality of North Cowichan has demonstrated that local governments and organisations can partner to effect immense change in communities.

Job Creation

A total of eight interns worked on the farm during 2016/2017. Four interns were working at any given time with some rotation as interns gained employment elsewhere. They assisted the farm supervisor and did much of the work on the ground. The result was a great harvest of seed and a farm set up and ready to train the next generation of seed farmers and provide a key community resource in education and food security.

We keep in contact with graduating interns. We received a reference call for one intern who secured a position at a farm in Ontario. Other interns have gained employment in agriculture-related companies, and one returned to tree planting for the short term but who has expressed interest in returning to employment with CGC.

Employment opportunities are part of the long term sustainability plan for the farm. Since the completion of the first intake of interns, CGC has hired one intern full time, the supervisor has also stayed on to manage the farm, and 2 additional interns are working over the summer.

The plan is to employ an additional 4-6 interns starting in the Spring 2018 once all the infrastructure has been completed. The delay with setting up the classroom portable and installing the drainage was a setback to the farm incubation component.

The Incubator Farm Staff Training Manual has been completed. More details on the curriculum are being finalized and will be completed for the next intake.

Next Steps

The next steps for the Cowichan Incubator Seed Farm will be to complete the infrastructural setup at the farm, address the drainage challenges, and develop our education and training program further. The farm has secured funding to complete these next steps and – thanks in part to our participation and success at SECatalyst – has had the opportunity to refine our social enterprise plan in order to become financially self-sustaining. The positive public response and interest in both the education and seeds offered have been encouraging.

CGC has also received a funding agreement with the Cowichan Valley Regional District to research and set up a farm equipment lending program. This will include purchasing and hosting farm equipment for small scale farmers to borrow. The equipment will be stored at the farm and available for the public to utilize.

As part of that equipment bank, Hatchet & Seed in Victoria in 2018 is donating a Yeomans Keyline Plow (6SB) subsoiler (approximately \$10,000 CAN value); which comes with 3 shanks, 3 coulters and 4-6 replacement shear pins. This plow is to be made available for the public to utilize and is being provided at no cost to CGC.

In addition, the Community Seed Library has been set up and is operating out of CGC's Garden Pantry Store. The feedback has been extremely positive with hundreds of community members learning about the library and dozens of community members taking seed and agreeing to grow out varieties and be a part of the program.

Conclusion

The CISF is a shining example of a social innovative project that has transformed a property into something valuable to our whole community. It has demonstrated that a site deemed unusable for other uses – such as development, or as a park – can still contribute immensely. Further, we are thrilled to see the long-lasting impact of this project as our region gains a Community Seed Bank, increased seed literacy and seed security, and becomes the hub for the next generation of seed farmers.

Website: <http://cowichangreencommunity.org/project/incubator-seed-farm/>

Article: <http://bcfoodsecuritygateway.ca/starts-seed-cowichan-valley-incubates-first-kind-seed-farm/>



Work begins on the site! Mowing, excavating, and ploughing.



The first planting of crops enjoying the sunshine.



Paula tends to pepper plantings.



Article in the Cowichan Valley Citizen about the farm.



The team and local notaries unveil our farm sign at the grand opening.



Winter crops bedding down for the cold weather.



SEEDS!



Water farm...



No rest for the farmers!



Much anticipated arrival of the portable donated by SD79



Finally ... first signs of Spring!