

SEEDS Blossom at Tallgrass Farm

“The future has an ancient heart.” ♡ Italian folk expression

By Rona Roberts | Photos by Andrew Hyslop



“May I have more?” “Me, too!” That’s how 11 young Lexington students responded when their field trip hosts offered homegrown vegetables for lunch on a hot summer day. The trip formed part of the learning agenda for an intensive summer youth training program called SEEDS: Service, Education and Entrepreneurship in Downtown Spaces.

After an hour-long trip from Lexington to Tallgrass Farm in Mercer County, the students bounced off the bus to meet farm owners Lois Mateus and Tim Peters. Knowing young people’s habits well, Lois and Tim welcomed the students directly to lunch: a homegrown, seasonal, sustainable

Kentucky feast of Hidden Zucchini Pizza Pie (see accompanying recipe), fresh green salad, chocolate chip cookies and icy drinks.

In the cool shade of a handsome 200-year-old barn that Lois and Tim rescued from an industrial park in Harrodsburg and rebuilt on the farm, the students cleaned up every bite of the home-cooked food. As they ate, Tim showed them the peg-style construction in the native limestone and timber building.

Living sage plants lined the long, wooden lunch table. Lois told her guests she had grown a sage seedling for each of them to take home. “They will grow and

be just right for seasoning the stuffing for your Thanksgiving dinners,” she said, underscoring the main theme of the day: sharing sage wisdom with valued young people.

Tallgrass Farm and Foundation

Tallgrass Farm’s 1,000 acres serve as a sustainable living laboratory for earth stewardship. An agricultural conservation easement—a legal agreement intended to guarantee continuous conservation by all future owners—preserves the farm’s precious natural resources for the future.

In 2004, with the farm as a platform,



Resources

Tallgrass Farm Foundation: tallgrassfarmfoundation.org

Seedleaf: seedleaf.org

Native Grasses:
fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Documents/nativegrasses.pdf

Dry Stone Masonry: drystone.org



Lois and Tim created the Tallgrass Farm Foundation. The mission of the foundation, which supported the SEEDS field trip, is to offer “facilities and resources for teaching and demonstrating cooking, conservation and good stewardship of natural and agricultural resources.”

Even before the delicious SEEDS lunch ended and the formal tours began, Lois and Tim had surrounded the students with active examples of the values stated in the Tallgrass Farm Foundation mission: Grow great food. Cook and share it. Reuse and recycle.

Similar values shine through, too, in the mission of Seedleaf, the Lexington-based

group that created SEEDS in 2009.

Seedleaf director Ryan Koch, one of five adults who accompanied the students on the field trip, said Seedleaf’s mission is “nourishing communities by growing, cooking, sharing and recycling food.” Ryan said SEEDS “helps a group of young people learn all that we are doing and how they can work with us.” The 2015 SEEDS students include young people born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi as well as the United States.

Nothing is boring

Knowing that Seedleaf, through SEEDS, intends to prepare students for

jobs and entrepreneurship in all aspects of sustainable food production, Tim and Lois drew on their experience with more than 20 similar adventures to pack the after-lunch learning agenda. No one lagged or sagged, even in scorching heat.

First step: the extensive gardens, a series of lovely landscaped beds of vegetables and fruits that curve around the main house as well as a henhouse and movable chicken run—source of the eggs in that popular savory lunch pie. The Tallgrass gardens feature foods Lois and Tim like to include in their meals: leeks, peppers, cilantro (and coriander), dill, basil, corn, tomatoes, berries and figs.

Although most students found some of these plants hard to identify, as Tim and Lois led the group past robust rhubarb plantings, a young man called out, “I know that plant! We have it at home,” and named it. When Tim encouraged an energetic intern to spade up the precious new potatoes at the base of a bushy plant, the students seemed surprised at the yield. “Dang! For real?”



For real, and for good

Across an entire summer, SEEDS students spend time working directly in Seedleaf gardens, professional and community kitchens and compost production areas. Experienced adults guide the young people through hands-on experiences with plants, soil, garden construction, mulch and compost. Students learn and practice knife skills and other essential cooking techniques useful to them and to their families.

Even more important, students gain marketable skills of the sort that have already helped some SEEDS graduates find jobs quickly in food businesses. Chef Ouita Michel, head of the Holly Hill Inn Family of Restaurants, has hired four SEEDS alums and says, “All are great kids.” Two are now in their second year of



work at Smithtown Seafood in Lexington.

During the field trip, Lois and Tim made sure to introduce the SEEDS students to aspects of sustainability and stewardship that include both self-reliance skills and possible future work opportunities. The Tallgrass stone cellar represents both. First, a root cellar makes it possible to eat home-grown food for many months each year, supporting thriftiness and self-reliance. Second, skilled dry stone masons are somewhat in demand in central Kentucky, so the work could lead to good jobs.

In a field trip highlight, Tallgrass employee Antonio Lino Jiminez generously demonstrated his stonecutting technique for the students. Using only a hammer and native limestone gathered from Tallgrass Farm, Antonio showed how to use precise hammer strokes to straighten rock edges, and how to place each stone tactically in a structure for greatest strength and usefulness.

Antonio’s stately sculptures accent the natural beauty of the Tallgrass landscape. Using limestone from Tallgrass, he has restored the farm’s

dry-stack limestone walls.

After a rollicking trip in the back of a pickup truck across creek beds and over a series of signature Tallgrass Farm hills, Tim and Lois showed the students one final handsome feature that Antonio has built: a large limestone-edged fire pit that doubles as a massive compass, with stones indicating true north. As stone sculptures surrounded him and cloud sculptures towered overhead, Tim handed around examples of plants from the surrounding fields, beginning with Big Bluestem, a native warm-season grass he cultivates in Tallgrass fields. (Yes, it is tall.) Tim explained that habitat experts advise restoring native grasses to benefit both wildlife and farming.

Tallgrass Farm also offers important hands-on examples of wise energy use. Among the



many conservation features of the farm, Tim described the importance of the geothermal system that keeps the house comfortable. He pointed out the new solar panels on a guesthouse that reduced monthly electricity bills in the recent bitter winter to under \$30. Both these forms of conservation help individual households; installation and maintenance also offer good entrepreneurship and work opportunities to interested young people.

Starting around a table—as so many good experiences do—the rural and urban faces of Kentucky’s agrarian culture came together at Tallgrass Farm. Generosity met curiosity. Experience met inquisitiveness. Kentuckians whose ancestors grew huge gardens met some of the newest Americans, who are learning to grow, cook, share and recycle food—including those Tallgrass Farm sage plants that will be ready just in time for Thanksgiving.

Rona Roberts, author of Classic Kentucky Meals and host of Savoring Kentucky, writes and speaks about the wonders and pleasures of Kentucky food, farms, and farmers, and about Kentucky’s potentially self-sufficient, resilient local food economy.



Hidden Zucchini Pizza Pie

By Lois Mateus

Kids can find any excuse to avoid vegetables, particularly if they are told that those slices of green zucchini came out of the garden and off giant leafy green plants just a few hours ago. But few can resist the word “pizza.”

The night before I browned and crumbled a half pound of Marksbury’s Zesty Italian Sausage until all the fat was rendered, and placed the meat in the refrigerator overnight.

The next morning I picked a bunch of tender young zucchini, sliced them into thin diagonal slices for a gentle sauté in a tablespoon of olive oil, turning once to slightly brown each side. This took about 3 minutes per side. I then placed the zucchini on paper towels, patting off any oil.

While the zucchini cooled, I set the oven at 375° and rolled out my old reliable piecrust (made the day before and stuck in the fridge) and gingerly fitted it into a well-oiled (I use canola) large tart tin and stuck the tin in the freezer for a few minutes. Meanwhile I beat 6 large farm eggs and assembled 4 cups of shredded mozzarella cheese and sausage alongside the zucchini.

With the crust now very cold but not frozen, I quickly



sprinkled a cup of the cheese over the crust and topped it with the zucchini in a single layer, then the sausage, two more cups of the cheese on top, before pouring the eggs over the entire surface, and finally topping with the last cup of cheese.

Into the oven for 10

minutes before lowering the temperature to 350° (the cold dough at higher temperature helps prevent soggy crusts) and 30 minutes later a nice firm pizza pie emerges. A fail-proof trick for removing the tart from the pan is to quickly set it on a large can. The tart ring will fall off, and

the bottom stay intact to help ease onto a platter and make serving the slices easier.

Asked if they would like a slice of pizza pie, every kid said yes, and a few came back for seconds. No one questioned the zucchini.

