



## ORGANIZING A SUCCESSFUL FIRST GATHERING



The main goal of any first gathering is primarily to get everybody in the same room and talking to each other. What it looks like exactly will vary depending on the lay of the land in your community, but the focus should be to provide a forum for farmers to talk about what they might want from a network. Here are a few suggestions –from logistics to discussion topics– to help make your first event successful. Feel free to adapt these ideas to what you think will be the most effective for your particular situation.

### **Gage interest**

- ◆ Talk to farmers or beekeepers in your area about starting a local network. This will be useful to feel out their interests and concerns, and tailor the first event to address these.
- ◆ Talk with the people you know and reach out to new folks as well.

### **Plan the event**

- ◆ What: Could include a discussion, potluck, and/or farm tour. Be sure to make time for mingling.
- ◆ When: It will be impossible to choose a time that will work for everyone, but there are ways to maximize the likelihood that people will be able to make it by considering...
  - ◇ Time of year: early and late in the season as well as the off-season usually work the best.
  - ◇ Day of the week: try to avoid farmers market or CSA pick up days.
  - ◇ Time of day: late afternoon and evening often work well.
- ◆ Where: Choose a spot that is centrally-located and easy for most people to get to. It could be at a community center or library or better yet at a farm. An on-farm location may draw more participants if it's combined with a farm tour. (If you go that route, see [Making the Most of a Potluck and Farm Tour](#) for tips specific to those events.)

### **Get the word out**

- ◆ Advertise in as many different ways as possible, including email, mail, flyers, facebook, phone, in person.
- ◆ Make it personal: The more personal the invite (eg. phone, in person) the better the turn out.
- ◆ Send multiple reminders, including one a day or two before the gathering.
- ◆ Include clear directions so folks know how to get there, where to park, and where to meet.

### **Logistics**

- ◆ If your gathering will be outside, consider whether the host has indoor space in case of inclement weather or set a back-up date.
- ◆ Consider: are there enough tables? Chairs? Hay bales? Or are folks okay sitting on the ground?

### **At the meeting**

- ◆ Ask one or two people to act as “greeters” to make people feel welcome as they arrive.
- ◆ Start by having each person introduce themselves to the group.
- ◆ Pass around a sign-in sheet to collect names, email addresses, phone numbers, etc.
- ◆ Be sure to include social time. In areas where there has been little or no networking, face-to-face social time is critical to building relationships and trust.

- ◇ The social time could be free-form mingling, structured mixing, discussion groups, or some sort of combination. Consider what people would be most comfortable with or enjoy the most.
- ◆ Make time to brainstorm together about a what people want from a network, what activities or projects a network could take on, and what people's concerns are. It's often useful to come with some of your own ideas to get the ball rolling, but the emphasis stay on getting everyone's ideas on the table.
  - ◇ See the [Discussion Prompts](#) for examples of questions that might be helpful.
  - ◇ If there is a large number of people, try breaking into small groups for some of the time. This might help folks who are on the shy side share their ideas.
  - ◇ If it turns out to be a big list, identify priorities by a show of hands or asking people to rank their top three. Also, consider dividing the list into short and long term goals.
- ◆ Based on comments and interest from your fellow farmers, identify some next steps and who can help.
- ◆ Take notes! (Or ask someone to take notes for you)
- ◆ Make sure everyone is on the same page as to what the next steps are, what the goals and likely outcomes are, and who is responsible for what. (Make sure that you take on only what you are able to manage successfully.)

### **Afterward**

- ◆ Stay in touch with the group: collect comments and feedback, share the notes from the gathering.
- ◆ Follow up with folks who are in charge of taking the next steps.
- ◆ Start planning the next one!