

[https://www.newsminer.com/features/sundays/community\\_features/indigenous-roots-calypso-farm-to-build-on-alaska-native-agriculture-trainers/article\\_4f48a188-990a-11ee-9f76-f752c738b924.html](https://www.newsminer.com/features/sundays/community_features/indigenous-roots-calypso-farm-to-build-on-alaska-native-agriculture-trainers/article_4f48a188-990a-11ee-9f76-f752c738b924.html)

## Indigenous roots: Calypso Farm to build on Alaska Native agriculture trainers

Jack Barnwell

Dec 17, 2023

1 of 3



Na'ni'eezh Peter leads a training session on seeding and soil blocking as part of Calypso Farm's Indigenous Agriculture program on June 7, 2023.

Abby Hatfield/Calypso Farm

Calypso Farm and Ecology Center's long tradition of imparting training on others will take on stronger roots by training Indigenous farmers, who will in turn impart the knowledge to others, thanks to a three-year U.S. Department of Agriculture grant worth nearly \$750,000.

Susan Wilsrud, Calypso's farm manager, said the grant was just one of several it's received over the years, and will help continue its Indigenous Agriculture program that it piloted this summer.

"The goal is that these are Alaska Native people, mostly from rural Alaska that are teaching other people from rural Alaska," Wilsrud said. "It's about the integration of agriculture and traditional foods."

The USDA provided its three-year grant as part of a national \$27.9 million National Institute of Food and Agriculture. The USDA considers the funding to be an investment in "the next generation of farmers and ranchers [who] hold the promise for future American agriculture and rural prosperity."

The 2023 pilot project — an extension of Calypso Farm's beginning farmer training program, started with about nine people who learned collaborative techniques, with the goal to train others in rural areas.

"It's been so successful that this next grant we proposed was to completely focus on that," Wilsrud said.

Wilsrud said Calypso will coordinate with tribes and Alaska Native organizations to bring Alaska Native farmers to Fairbanks and send trainers to village communities.

She credits the support and initiative for the concept to Eva Burk, a strong advocate for Alaska Native-led agriculture initiatives from Nenana and Deenaalee Hodgdon, co-executive director of the Smokehouse Collective in Dillingham.

Fairbanks resident Nels Christensen, whose family came from Fort Yukon, was one of those who participated in this year's trainer program. He said one of the largest benefits comes from networking and learning.

"Everybody's on an equal playing field there where we're all bringing in our knowledge of the land and of food systems that are already with our communities," Christensen said. "It's kind of like doing this knowledge exchange."

Knowledge exchanges, he said, range from communities' unique available agriculture resources to types of soil practices.

Christensen said he farms during the summer growing season and works in hydroponics during the off season. He previously interned with the Intertribal Agriculture Council hosted by Calypso Farm in 2022.

Nine instructors now plan workshops and lessons in the winter and lead summer sessions that tackle topics of soils, composting, cultivation methods, planting and greenhouse management. Other workshops focus on animal husbandry, seeds and beekeeping.

“I’d say soil’s probably the biggest thing,” Christensen said. “Within the national agriculture movements, soil microbiology is really becoming more important and very centered in everyone’s mind. So it’s important to help people build soil where they are with the resources that they have.”

Historically, Christensen said communities in the Arctic North had their own versions of communal gardens, on top of hunting, fishing and foraging.

“People did have versions of these gardens that were lined out for harvesting greens and that sort of thing,” Christensen said.

He said a major goal with the Indigenous Agriculture program has been to encourage that growth.

“So we’re kind of trying to adopt that model and also meet people in the middle wherever they want to see their food production for their village go,” Christensen said. “I think there’s a lot of desire to be able to produce fresh greens and have access to berries and these foods that we’ve become accustomed to support the diet that we tend to rely on in the villages.”

Gatgyeda Haayk, another participant of the Calypso Indigenous Agriculture program, agrees with the assessment. A self-described amateur farmer and advocate for community agriculture, Haayk comes from and lives in Metlakatla on Annette Island in Southeast Alaska.

“I applied for the training of trainers because this coming year I’m hoping to do more education work with the community and the community garden and growing your own food and what that could look like,” Haayk said.

Haayk, like Christensen, had participated in a previous Calypso program, and so wanted to expand her knowledge base.

“The trainer program gave me the he skills to help bridge that gap of educating the community and what that could look like as well as great resources for me as a gardener,” Haayk said.

Haayk said the connections she forged with other Indigenous trainers has helped her in growing her community’s own garden and agriculture efforts.

“Being in remote Alaska I’m not connected to other farmers or large growers,” Haayk said. “Being connected with all these various individuals that have, you know, their own little husbandry or farms going and it was just nice to be able to have those conversations of like ‘what works for you.’”

Wilsrud said the USDA grant reinforces the concept that not all agriculture looks the same.

“I’ve been really glad to see that the USDA is willing to broaden their view a little bit of what farming looks like,” Wilsrud said. “One thing that feels a little unique with the villages is these are often community agriculture projects rather than your typical farm enterprise.”

Wilsrud noted the program reflects the needs for food security and sustainability, which becomes a major factor for villages and communities off the road system.

“As the climate changes and more unstable weather creates breaks in our transportation system, that means our grocery store shelves are empty,” Wilsrud said. “These types of projects that bring food production closer to home are really important across the board.”

A large portion of the grant will likely be spent on travel-related costs to bring interested people to Fairbanks, or to send trainers to villages around Alaska.

“It would most likely be one of our instructors who are going,” Wilsrud said. “The other thing in this grant period that we will be able to pay for is if there’s a village trying to get something started.”

Wilsrud said the grant aims to build up its cadre of trainers over a three-year period and build a sustainable network.

“We’re hoping even by the end of this three year grant period because we are dedicated to doing this with or without grant funds,” Wilsrud said. “This is not a program that’s gonna go away when this USDA funding goes, we will keep applying and we will keep searching for funds.”

While Calypso has conducted small-scale training programs over the years, including two funded by 2016 and 2020 grants, Wilsrud said rural and Indigenous training programs have seen a surge in requests.

“They’re telling us we need to be resilient,” Wilsrud said. The most important part, she added, is that the program affords Alaska Native farmers to learn from each other, rather than from a third-party person unfamiliar with customs.

“That’s what the base principles need to be, now this can be done through an indigenous lens rather than just a white lens, which is often imposed on the villages,” Wilsrud said. “It felt like the most important element was that Alaska native people would be in the lead.”

Haayk, from Metlakatla, said the program achieves that goal.

“I think it’s really important to have this kind of program because as I am beginning to reach out within my community in terms of food security or households growing their own food,” Haayk said. “They feel like they need some type of education in order to feel confident in being a successful grower.”

---

Contact reporter Jack Barnwell at 907-459-7587 or [jbarnwell@newsminer.com](mailto:jbarnwell@newsminer.com).

---

**jbarnwell**