



Community

IDEAL Farms

By Amanda Blazzard | Last updated June 7, 2022

Forced to think out of the box, a new kind of classroom has arrived in our progressive community.

Innovative, Discovery based, Educational, and Agricultural Leadership or I.D.E.A.L. Farms is Wasatch High School's hands-on, outdoor classroom. Wasatch is taking students outside and getting their hands dirty in the real world; teaching them the skills they need to thrive in our competitive industries and markets. Not only do they do the physical work, they're learning the business and marketing skills to drive it all forward.

Stepping into teacher and FFA Advisor, Matt Zierenberg's, vision for their class is like finding yourself in a hive humming with productivity. Students are the integral piece to the creation of I.D.E.A.L Farms. On less than an acre of the school's property the students have constructed a little complex of outdoor learning. Adults guide, but it is the kids' elbow grease and innovation pushing it all forward. The space may be small, but the output is impressive.

The I.D.E.A.L. Farms' land is home to: a native plant nursery, a game bird brooding shed and flight pen, a fruit orchard, vegetable grow boxes, an agricultural animal teaching and housing area, and an aquaponics greenhouse. Each of the six areas represents an 'enterprise'; and they each provide scholarships for students. Students may apply and interview for a spot within the program. All students are welcome and invited to join in the classes; however, only those who receive placement are given responsibility for their enterprise for the year and are guaranteed a scholarship provided by the earnings of their venture. Sophomore, Chevelle Lundin, after working a year with the native plants says, "I enjoy this and it's also beneficial for my future! That's perfect!"

Working closely with sponsors and volunteers this outdoor classroom is not only a real-time leaning lab, it is a launch pad for students monetarily. This year's goal is to provide a minimum of ten \$2,000 scholarships to further the education of participating students. Zierenberg acknowledges, "It's ambitious. I think we'll get there; mainly with the trees, the game birds, and the aquaponics." The key is that students are required to be active and stay active in an enterprise.



Spring Creek Conservation owners, Gifford Hickey and Liz Lewis, are instrumental in monetary funding, donations of supplies, and educating students from the ground up on both the nursery and orchard projects at I.D.E.A.L Farms. The orchard should be producing in about three years - watch for apples and cider sells in 2025! Zierenberg enthusiastically shares, "They (Hickey and Lewis) have been helping the kids set all of this up! They are a huge, huge help!" In talking to Gifford and Liz, it is obvious they are invested in the students. They get down and dirty planting and working together. Hickey and Lewis know all the students' names and stories, and they mentor students in both the horticulture and business portions of the projects. They stand behind the motto and passionately teach students, "Conservation is good business." They are key participants in the interview process for student applicants. Additionally, Hickey is forming an advisory board for I.D.E.A.L Farms and will be seeking out and organizing community volunteers on every level of involvement.

Students running the native plant portion of the farm have contracts with our local Division of Wildlife Resources, Wasatch Mountain State Park, and the Forest Service. Mr. Z and Spring Creek Conservation also teach the art of propagation. Students take cuttings from the areas on the forest they are working in, bring them back to the school nursery to establish new plantings, and then return to plant in the restoration site. They currently have a large project underway for the Shoshone Tribe in Idaho. You can purchase native plants for your own conservation and landscaping projects Friday and Saturday afternoons on 600 South near the football field. While you're there visit their demonstration garden where students showcase the use of native plants and trees. This season, they're hoping to surpass last year's native plant sales of \$15,000.

Heavily sponsored by Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, students have raised and released about 2,500 Chukar game birds in the Heber Valley over the past five years. Eggs are incubated in the classroom. Once hatched the chicks go to the brooding shed and the flight pens. The farm's relationship with the Division of Natural Resources makes this project a solid enterprise with a good return.

I.D.E.A.L. Farms' greenhouse is a sight to behold. Students have been hard at work creating, building, and improving their aquaponics system. Fun fact: they actually use trout they raise to fertilize the plants they grow. The plants use the waste of the fish, and the water cleaned by the plants is pumped back to the fish. The whole cycle starts over again. Extra fish propagated in the system are released into our local Midway pond. The greatest thing is that the greens raised in the aquaponic system are purchased by local restaurants. Students co-created an aeration system collaborating with fellow Wasatch High School students involved in the Center for Advanced Professional Studies or CAPS program. Together, the agriculture students worked with engineering students to design a water aeration device; they 3-D printed their invention at the school and use it in their aquaponics system. The innovative design and collaboration is extremely impressive.

The animal housing area provides a place for students to keep up to 20 sheep in preparation for the county fair. There is also a holding pen for animals to be brought in for educational purposes during a teaching day. Not far from the animals are large grow boxes. Student applicants can be awarded two grow boxes for the year. The grow boxes kick out loads of produce to be sold at the local farmer's market. Senior, Liz Sweat, Director of Sales and Marketing, keeps Instagram up to date on all the happenings. Be sure to check out their website and social media, or better yet go visit I.D.E.A.L Farms and talk to a student on site.

Hickey and Lewis founded their company 30 years ago here in the Heber Valley. "We built a business restoring rivers and doing mitigation on open lands in the state of Utah for the Federal and State government. Our business is native trees, shrubs and forbs." They also contract with high-end resorts and golf-courses in native landscape and conservation projects. Their work spans to the Falkland Islands and Chile doing large-scale restoration work through small grants to locals interested in business. This local business, with an international presence, is fostering the same kind of work here with our kids in our very own community. However, they can't do it alone. Whether you're interested in volunteering your time, business or production knowledge, resources, or funds, come take a peek at the infrastructure of the program.

Liz Lewis and Gifford Hickey

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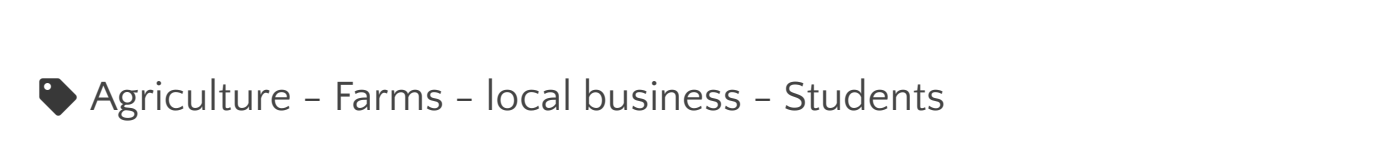
When you buy from I.D.E.A.L Farms 50% of your purchase is a tax-deductible contribution. Revenue raised will go directly to educational scholarships and an endowment fund that will sustainably carry forward the program at I.D.E.A.L. Farms.


For More Information Visit:

ideal-farms.org, and /Wasatch IDEAL Farms



Agriculture - Farms - local business - Students





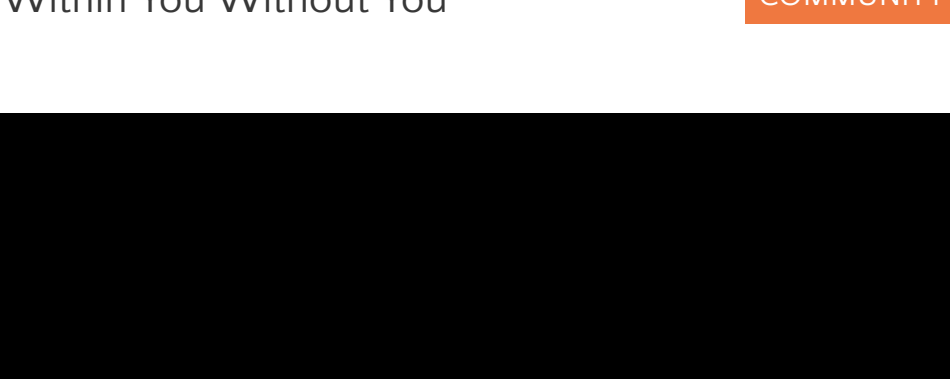
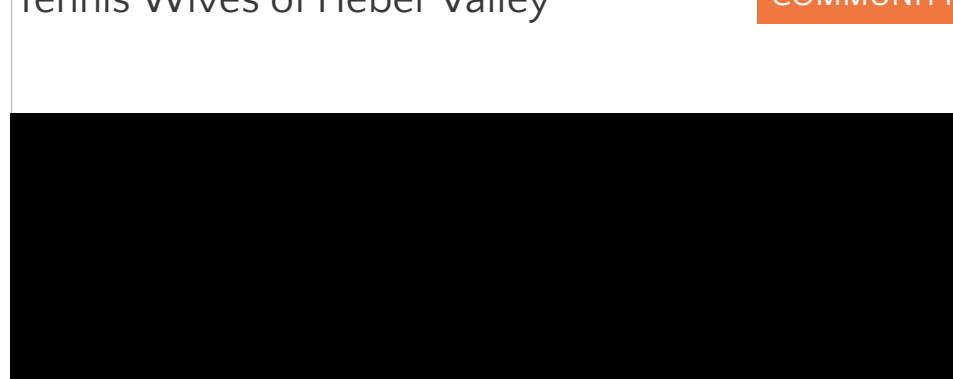
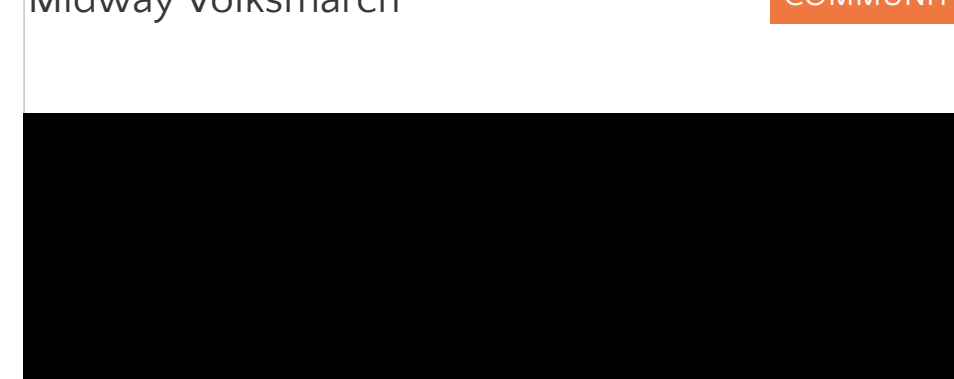
Amanda Blazzard
Amanda's ancestral roots run deep in HV. This single mom of four beautiful, wild, creative souls loves to hike, fish, hunt, and camp. She spends her days as an elementary school teacher and spare moments reading, writing, and doing all things outside. The higher in the mountains, the better!

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