



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **EPC Leadership Class Gets Into The Field on NJ Farms**

*For Immediate Release: October 10, 2024.* The sixth Eastern Produce Council (EPC) Leadership Class had a chance to get into the field and actually do some harvesting during a tour of New Jersey farms on October 8, 2024. As part of the ongoing leadership program, the group visited America's Grow-a-Row and the Clifford E. and Melda C. Snyder Research and Extension Farm at Rutgers University, both located in Pittstown, NJ.

Jess Huber and Tristan Wallack of America's Grow-a-Row explained the mission of the nonprofit operation, which includes 423 acres over four farm locations, in growing and donating fresh produce to feeding organizations across the country. The farm also educates people facing food insecurity by teaching them how to eat healthy.

After a brief overview of the farming operation from Wallack, the group headed out to the fields to harvest fresh corn. In just an hour, the group harvested 5,600 pounds of corn according to Huber. "We also like to talk about the servings," she said. "So the amount of people that we impacted is 22,400 people. During our 16 week harvest season, we have a 24-mile long line of people every day we serve."

The second stop of the day was a visit to the 390-acre Rutgers Snyder Research and Extension Farm. Peter Nitzsche, Morris County Agricultural and Natural Resources Agent, toured the class around the farm in a wagon ride, explaining the research projects under way. Current projects include soil conservation, butternut squash irrigation, strawberry cultivars, solar agrivoltaics, and biodegradable mulch.

Megan Muehlbauer, Hunterdon County Agricultural and Natural Resources Agent explained two of her projects - one involving beach plums and the other of ongoing apple variety trials. The group enjoyed picking some Macoun apples to sample and take home.

Jillian Rudolph with John Vena Inc. mentioned the value of the hands-on experience. "I work in the wholesale distribution side of the business so seeing and pulling the corn off the stalk myself really puts into perspective how much labor, time and energy is required not only to supply supermarkets but other programs to help get people the healthy food they need," she said. "At the Rutgers farm, I found it valuable to realize how all the studies and experiments to find out what does or doesn't work can really lead to problem-solving and discovering solutions for growers for the future."

The day concluded with a leadership seminar from the Rutgers Office of Continuing Professional Education. Patty Reger from PKR Consulting Group spoke to the group about leadership skills to build in 2024 and led them through a hands-on leadership exercise.

“Taking our participants out of the office and into the field gives them new and additional perspectives on the industry as well as their own leadership development,” said Susan McAleavey Sarlund, EPC Executive Director. “These opportunities also allow for all the participants to get to know and learn from each other and grow their network.”

The EPC Leadership Program chooses up-and-coming produce professionals for each Leadership Class, a professional development experience for those with less than 10 years of experience in the industry. Participants selected for this year’s program include: Jackson Brady, Crispy Green; Kate Degan, JOH; James Ferrier, organicgirl; Jessica Huber, America’s Grow-a-Row; Devin Hunt, T.M. Kovacevich; Nick Kraus, MamaMia Produce; David Linthicum, Wakefern Food Corp.; Dustin Manento, Four Seasons Produce; Therese Mauch, Zespri; Chantal McCrossin, F&S Fresh Foods; Jason Morris, Oppy; Cassi Nicodemo, Highline Mushrooms; Ryan O’Neill, Four Seasons Produce; Michael Porcile, JOH; Jillian Rudolph, John Vena Inc.; and Jessica Ziglar, Oppy Transport.

Also participating in the tour were: Vic Savanello, VP, Merchandising & Business Development for S. Katzman Produce Distributors and a former EPC President; Al Murray, EPC Board Member; and Emma Rogerson of the Rutgers Office of Continuing Professional Education.

*PHOTOS:*

**Group Thumbs Up Harvest**

EPC Leadership Class harvests corn at America’s Grow-a-Row.

**Rutgers Wagon**

EPC Leadership Class tours research projects via wagon at the Rutgers Snyder Research and Extension Farm.

**Apple Picking JVI**

Jillian Rudolph of John Vena Inc. shows off a Macoun apple during the EPC Leadership Class apple picking at the Rutgers Snyder Research and Extension Farm.

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