

Studying Sustainable Agriculture

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If you like your produce organic, you're not alone. There's a healthy market for products grown without the aid of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, or insecticides. But how can farmers deliver top-quality food without these tools?

As a student of sustainable agriculture, you'll learn to see agriculture as a partnership with nature. You'll study earth-friendly techniques like crop rotation -- planting different crops in the same field during different growing seasons. The right combination of crops can have all sorts of benefits. For example, crop rotation can increase soil fertility, prevent erosion, limit disease, interrupt pest growth, and, ultimately, result in a larger harvest.

Students of sustainable agriculture learn the concepts and techniques they need to practice and promote farming that is environmentally sound as well as profitable.

Did You Know?

In the United States, only farmers who follow strict USDA guidelines earn the right to label their products "organic."

Are You Ready To...?

- Examine the challenges of ensuring that people worldwide have enough to eat
- Debate the impacts of agricultural policies
- Compare livestock breeds
- Memorize pest anatomy and life cycles

- Read up on irrigation techniques
- Analyze soil and choose nutrients
- Learn how to market organic produce
- Write about the complex relationship between people and nature
- Get your hands dirty in the fields, greenhouses, and labs
- Master the science behind sustainable practices
- Protect and improve water, wildlife habitat, and other natural resources

It Helps To Be...

A passionate environmentalist who's also a mental gymnast: you'll need to think abstractly about science and pragmatically about the business and practice of farming.

College Checklist

- Should you apply directly to the school of agriculture? Are there special admissions requirements?
- Does the program offer a certificate, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree?
- Will you have the chance to specialize in, for example, pest management, environmental stewardship, greenhouse production, or agribusiness?
- How many courses devoted to sustainable agriculture does the school offer? Are sustainable methods and related issues covered in other courses?
- Does the campus include working farms, greenhouses, and nurseries where you can get hands-on practice?
- What are recent grads doing now?

Did You Know?

Some academic programs specialize in garden plants -- such as flowers, trees, and shrubs -- and are known as environmental horticulture.

Course Spotlight

When you take an introductory class in sustainable agriculture, you'll focus on *agroecology*, the science that guides "green" farming practices. You'll compare natural and agricultural ecosystems and study their interactions. And you'll be introduced to sustainable methods for encouraging plant growth and managing pests -- with as few chemicals as possible.

Class activities might include working in the fields, listening to guest speakers, and visiting working farms. In homework assignments and on tests, you'll put what you've learned into practice. You could find yourself proposing green solutions to agricultural problems. You might even grade a real farm on the sustainability of its practices.