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EPC Leadership Class tours Rutgers Snyder Research Farm

The third Eastern Produce Council Leadership Class toured the Clifford E. and Melda C. Snyder Research & Extension Farm at Rutgers University located near Pittstown, NJ, on Sept. 15. The 400-acre farm initiates and disseminates research applicable to the production of produce and other crops.

The group began the day with a tour of the farm's various test plots. "The farm provides a variety of valuable research on soil, climate conditions, pest control and crop variety," said Peter Nitzsche, county extension department head. "We have a mixture of projects under way, including research on organic practices and weed control in sustainable organic plots to disease resistance in basil through breeding, to looking at new crop alternatives for our growers."

Participants had the opportunity to get their hands dirty by picking apples and tomatoes from the farm. "The dual-medium learning environment of our program is crucial to our goal of developing leaders," said Susan McAleavey Sarlund, EPC executive director. "It is invaluable for them to gain first-hand experience and knowledge from the field as well as the classroom. The Rutgers farm provided an opportune educational venue."

Megan Muehlbauer with the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station peaked the group's interest by showing hazelnut tree trials currently under way. "Most of the U.S. hazelnut demand is met by overseas suppliers," she said. "There is production in the Northwest U.S. but little to none on the East Coast. Our goal with this trial is to investigate the feasibility of establishing some type of hazelnut industry in New Jersey and the Northeast."

"As a New Jersey grower it was great to get an inside look into the research that goes into farming the Garden State," said Annie Pape, sales and marketing at Frank Donio Inc.

Gabrielle Procacci, director of special projects for Procacci Bros., was encouraged by how through trial and error, Snyder's farmers are continuously adapting and advancing farming practices to provide sustainable, high-quality produce. "I appreciate the time dedicated to researching the cultivation of open field crops," she said. "It was comforting to see a combination of historic practices and new innovations. Seeing the grafted root of the apple tree was remarkable — I've only seen that on plants. Farmers helping farmers to be better farmers is just a beautiful thing!"

In the afternoon, the class participated in an interactive seminar on strategies for coaching and team building given by John Eric Jacobsen, a trainer with the Rutgers office of continuing professional education. Jacobsen pointed out that the single largest factor in an organization's long-term success is its leaders. The class discussed team nourishing and strengthening strategies as well as morale killers.

Procacci noted the seminar provided great insight into leading and coaching a team. "As I grow into my role at Procacci, it is important to develop my leadership skills," she said. "I learned some great practices I plan to use in the future. And, I really enjoyed working with the group and networking with everyone."

Jacobsen's presentation on leadership was invaluable agreed Pape. "He brought information to us

in such a way that it was immediately useful in furthering the leadership and coaching skills so important to the success of a company,” she said. “I left with many insights and ideas to share within my company.”

The EPC Leadership Program chooses up to 20 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 Rich Arduini of FreshPro Food Distributors; Kevin Carroll of Wonderful Citrus; Frank Ciammaruconi of Wakefern Food Corp.; Dylan Dembeck of Minkus Family Farms; Phu Din of FreshPro Food Distributors; Rachel Fabrizio of Four Seasons Produce; Michael Harwood of New York Apple Sales; Andrew Hernandez of LGS Specialty Sales; Brian Kenny of Wakefern Food Corp.; Justin Kerner of Ballard Spahr LLP; Mattie Leid of Hess Brothers Fruit Co.; Michael Paolino of Wakefern Food Corp.; Annie Pape of Frank Donio Inc.; Gabrielle Procacci of Procacci Brothers Sales Corp.; and Kelsey Rose of John Vena Inc.

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