

SAGE is about 'growing the growers'. This means greatly increasing the number of local commercial market gardeners and other farmers in the Eurobodalla region in order to increase local food production and availability, invigorate small business, and create a vibrant local food system.

Our initial step towards achieving this has been through the annual SAGE market gardener intern program. SAGE has educated, trained and mentored one intern each year for the past four years in practical, hands-on farming and marketing knowledge, skills and experience.

Our next step is to set up a student farm where we can train up to six growers a year. We also plan to establish a farm incubator, business start-up initiative to assist new farmers to get established.

We want to train and incubate more farmers; to support, nurture, develop and hatch a new generation of local farmers. This is our vision for achieving that.

Step 1- The SAGE Garden -a community space that demonstrates what people can achieve on a small suburban block by creating diverse and productive gardens. It also provides a space to conduct workshops on all topics related to food production, consumption and sustainability. It also provides an example of what may be achieved on an ordinary 1/4 acre suburban block in matters of self reliance and empowerment through catching and storing water, stand alone energy systems and growing food rather than buying it. It also provides a space in the traditional sense of a community garden for allotment holders to grow their own food in good soil, an opportunity that may not be able to them at their place of residence.

Most importantly though It also provides a space to educate and mentor one person each year in gardening for a market. Each year one intern is trained and mentored in commercial market gardening at the SAGE Garden. The SAGE intern position is a hands-on educational undertaking which gives a novice grower the knowledge and practical skills required to establish and manage a small scale commercial vegetable growing enterprise. The internship is completed under mentorship and with community assistance. With guidance from local farmers, the intern is responsible for planning, propagating, ordering, planting, weeding, feeding, maintaining, harvesting, marketing and preparing for subsequent seasons, as is normal in any market gardening operation.

This step has already been achieved. The SAGE Garden was started in 2009 and to date (mid 2017) SAGE has successfully trained four annual market gardener interns. However, in order to increase supply of local produce many more new local growers are needed.

Step 2- The Student Farm- The next step towards growing more growers is our plan to set up a small student farm to support up to six trainees at a time. To train more farmers SAGE first needs access to more good agricultural land. We envisage at least ten acres of river flats close to Moruya to establish an education and training farm.

The SAGE Student Farm will be a larger scale working market garden all required infrastructure, vehicles and machinery to ensure a viable commercial market farming business. It is to be operated by student gardeners under mentorship and guidance from an experienced practitioner. Living would ideally be “on-campus” as part of the immersion learning process. Students will receive accommodation, education, a weekly stipend plus a bonus at the end of the growing season from the profit earned by the success of the enterprise. We aim for the students to be able to complete a formal qualification through TAFE or other education provider with the farm being the classroom where the practical knowledge is learned.

Produce from the Student Farm will be marketed under the one brand and participants in this program will be involved in finding markets, again under guidance and mentorship. There may be room for additional supplementary enterprises such as a commercial seed raising enterprise that will provide a source of well grown organic seedlings to local market gardening businesses as well as mushroom raising, beekeeping and aquaculture. These extra enterprises may be rented from the “student farm” and run by individuals under a rental agreement with infrastructure provided by the “student farm”. Ideally the site would be in a position to be able to expand into the vision outlined in step 4.

Step 3- SAGE Farm inCUBEator- Graduates from the Student Farm and those from outside the program that may have some experience but are not quite farm-ready may still need various agricultural, technical, practical, financial, logistical and personal support to transition from being trainees to establishing their own viable commercial market garden businesses. The next step in our ‘growing the grower’ vision is a farm incubator, business start-up initiative to support new farmers in making this transition.

Farm incubators assist new farmers with access to land, resources and expertise to assist them to start up their own independent farm enterprises. Assistance may include equipment, tools, machinery, infrastructure; services like irrigation, water and electricity; technical assistance; connection to experts and mentor farmers; and help to find low-cost or free land to lease or purchase.

The SAGE Farm InCUBEator will be two transportable shipping containers, one of which is simple accommodation, the other a ‘farm shed’ that contains all the gear to establish a temporary market garden on leased land. The ‘farm shed’ will contain a small tractor with cultivation implements, hand tools, irrigation line, a small wash and packing station, the power unit for both containers, safe seed storage, trellis material, tarps and row covers, and a tight plan for the first year’s production.

We aim to have a number of Farm InCUBEator units so as to support a number of new farmers at any one time. SAGE will help broker between InCUBEator farmers and land holders; the farmer will pay rent to the land holder from the proceeds of their leased plot. Graduates from the student farm will have access to Farm InCUBEator for a maximum of three growing seasons.

A prototype for the Farm InCUBEator ‘farm shed’ will be developed and fitted out at the SAGE Garden.

SAGE will pursue grants, sponsorship, philanthropy and crowdfunding to fund the establishment of Farm InCUBEator.

Step 4- The 100 acre farm- is envisioned to be an educational institution that runs much along the same lines as the student farm but incorporates sustainable grazing management for livestock, engages with partner farmers in the fields of dairy, aquaculture, abattoir services amongst others. It has increased on campus accommodation, has more class room space and accessibility for external educational institutions and can be used as a research site, for development of innovative agricultural ideas. It's main income stream may be from the farming enterprises contained within it with the admin, maintenance and mentorship roles funded by external sources yet to be considered.