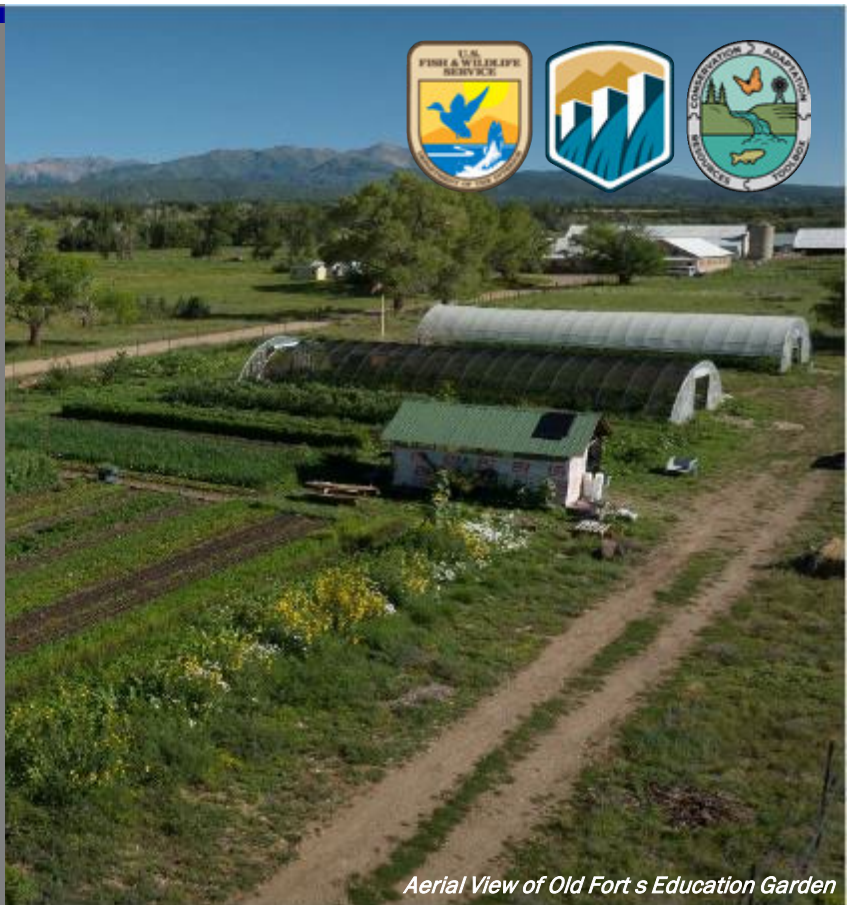
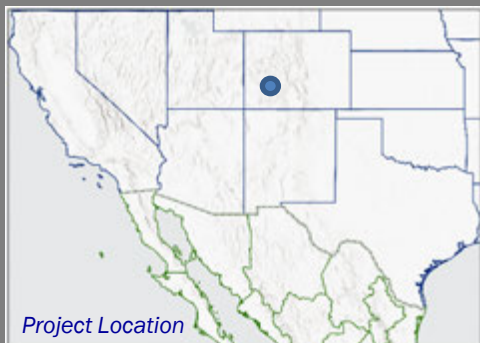


## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

### The Farmer in Training Program: Addressing Agricultural Barriers and Promoting Resilience



The Old Fort at Hesperus, located in Southwestern Colorado, serves as an educational space to inspire and inform the next generation of farmers. Located in an arid high-elevation landscape threatened by climate change, its grounds historically served as an Indigenous boarding school that forced assimilation and erasure of Native culture. These conditions necessitate educational programs that foster resilient agricultural systems and workforces while actively acknowledging history. However, land access and development costs impede many beginning farmers, especially Indigenous farmers, from establishing themselves. In response, the Old Fort created the Farmer in Training (FIT) Program in 2016 to equip beginning farmers with the knowledge and skillset to increase their agricultural competency and cultural awareness.



*Aerial View of Old Fort's Education Garden*

### KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

Limited water availability exacerbated by drought dictates which crops farmers are able to grow, while irregular weather patterns can decimate fields. These conditions heighten the need for resilient agricultural systems in an uncertain future. However, high property prices, costs to develop farm infrastructure, and lack of mentorship impede many young farmers from entering the agricultural sector. These barriers are heightened for communities underserved by the U.S. government. Centuries of historical oppression continue to produce disparities in agricultural ownership, and intergenerational trauma continues to negatively impact Indigenous farmers' connections to land. The Old Fort, having served as a Federal Boarding School, represents a space where this painful history continues to impact people's connection to these grounds.

### PROJECT GOALS

- Promote drought adaptability in curriculum that includes conventional and Indigenous drought adaptation techniques
- Equip beginning farmers with the skills, knowledge, and resources to minimize barriers
- Uphold commitments to reconciliation through land acknowledgement and collaboration with Indigenous partners

## SUPPORTING NEXT-GEN FARMERS

Through an immersive learning experience, FIT participants note feeling confident and capable in their farming future. Additionally, the Incubator Program presents opportunities for participants to further their agricultural journey.



*Farmers in Training Harvesting Broccoli in the Farmer Training Field*

## PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

**Acquiring Technical Knowledge:** Guided by Old Fort staff, FIT participants tend to approximately two acres of specialty crop production. This experience is supplemented with field trips and classes that educate participants on various attributes of farming, from business planning to drought adaptation.

**Land Access and Mentorship:** Designed to mitigate the barrier of land access for beginning farmers, the Old Fort offers a Farmer Incubator Program. Incubating farmers rent one-eighth to one-quarter acre plots of prepped field space. They have the opportunity to develop their growing skills and build connections to mentors and future land access before leasing and working on their own land.

**Highlighting Indigenous Agricultural Knowledge (IAK):** IAK acknowledges the holistic relationship among agriculture, the environment, and human livelihoods and has sustained communities in the Southwest since time immemorial. A dryland plot guided by Talavi Cook and a Four Sisters plot guided by Brandon Francis serve as growing spaces where FIT participants are immersed in knowledge sharing and thoughtful discussion of robust agricultural systems adaptable to an arid and high-elevation environment. Mathew White leads traditional blessing ceremonies that further educate participants on the cultural significance of agriculture.

## Collaborators

- Old Fort at Hesperus

CART Author: Zach Mullen, Fort Lewis College, December 2023.

Photos courtesy of Fort Lewis College  
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Visit CART:



## LESSONS LEARNED

Projects facilitated through Indigenous collaboration additionally showcase the work that goes beyond the fields to foster resiliency. IAK is location-based; however, the principles that guide IAK are prescriptive and can reframe agricultural success. Many current food systems are designed to maximize output, lacking the direct intentions of supporting the land, ensuring a viable source of healthy food for those nearby, and engaging the community in the work. Thoughtful and intentional collaboration expands the metrics of agricultural success to include reciprocity with the land and community. These holistic concepts are interwoven in Indigenous languages, where singular words can convey the interconnectedness of land, food, and culture. At the Old Fort, these languages, primarily Navajo, are spoken during introductions, field discussions, and blessing ceremonies by Indigenous FIT participants and partners. Having been directly persecuted at the site of the Old Fort, the revitalization of Native languages provides another opportunity for Indigenous people to reclaim their connection with these grounds.

## NEXT STEPS

- Expand the number of Indigenous FIT participants by addressing housing and transportation barriers to the program
- Increase Indigenous voices, perspectives, and frequency of collaborative events
- Utilize more land at the Old Fort to develop Indigenous-led growing spaces
- Further efforts in language revitalization through language classes at the Old Fort

For more information on this project, contact Elicia Whittlesey: [ewwhittlesey@fortlewis.edu](mailto:ewwhittlesey@fortlewis.edu)



*Red Amaranth Going to Seed in the Old Fort's Dryland Plot*