

‘A Valuable and Noble Profession With Purpose’

A VFW member from Rhode Island spearheaded a gardening program to assist veterans interested in farming

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Overwhelmed by the pressures at work and the birth of her second child in 2017, Tricia Lourenco Boucher sought a reprieve from her mounting PTSD and anxiety symptoms.

A member of the Air Force Reserve at the time, Boucher turned to the VA for help and, through several treatment options, discovered that the act of gardening outdoors cultivated the most profound sense of catharsis.

“I found getting my hands in the soil and using my body to dig, crawl and haul things around the yard really helped me to process my big feelings,” said Boucher, the senior vice commander for VFW Post 916 in Wakefield, Rhode Island. “Plus, the reward of smelling sweet flowers and eating delicious ripe fruits and vegetables with my little ones made my heart happy.”

These mental health benefits prompted Boucher, who served with the Rhode Island Army National Guard, the Army, and the Air Force Reserve from 2000 to 2011, to shift her career focus.

After earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology while in the Reserve, Boucher returned to the University of Rhode Island (URI) in Kingston to pursue a second bachelor’s degree in 2020, this time in plant science and sustainable crop production.

“The goal was to learn about plants, so that I could connect veterans with gardening so they, too, could heal,” said Boucher, who deployed in 2004 with the Army’s 1st Infantry Division to Tikrit, Iraq. “I started working at the URI agronomy farm, assisting with vegetable crop research and growing vegetables for students to study and for donation to the on-campus free farmers market and local food pantries.”

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Boucher also completed the URI Master Gardeners Training program and became a master gardener program coordinator at URI's Teaching Garden, which provided her with the necessary experience to take a step closer to helping fellow veterans.

When she graduated in 2023, Boucher promptly applied for a Department of Agriculture grant to launch a veteran-friendly program called Boots-2-Bushels through the URI Cooperative Extension in 2024. The program offers comprehensive nine-month market gardening training courses specifically designed for beginning farmers, military veterans and their families.

Boots-2-Bushels provides New England-based veterans and beginning farmers courses in the winter and spring, taught by agricultural experts from across the Northeast. These experts connect participants with knowledge and resources to build a business plan and marketing strategy and develop scientific growing practices, among other things.

Winter courses run from Jan. 21 through March 27, with classes held via Zoom on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6 to 7:30 p.m. In the spring and summer, the courses also offer optional farm tours and workshops across Rhode Island and Maine, expanding on opportunities to learn and build relationships with farmers.

"I am grateful that this program provides an opportunity for veterans to enter the world of agriculture and build relationships with each other and the tight-knit farming community," said Boucher, who serves as program coordinator. "Growing food for our neighbors and stewarding the land is a valuable and noble profession with purpose. It requires grit, determination and skill, which are values deeply embedded in our veterans. I have high hopes that this program will continue to grow and continue to serve as a hub of knowledge and community."

Applications to participate in 2025 classes opened last fall and closed by Dec. 31.

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