SANTA CRUZ &GT;&GT; A free peek into organic gardening and farming techniques was a draw for some two dozen visitors to UC Santa Cruz on Sunday afternoon.

The school's Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems' monthly Farm and Garden Tour led visitors from seedling to compost piles, from program apprentices' "tent cabins" to tractor-tilled rows overlooking the ocean, and everything in between.

Visitors explaining why they had come to center docent Trish Hildinger shared interests ranging from veteran farming to Girl Scout project research.

Cindy Smith said during the tour that she and her husband Kim Smith had recently purchased a condominium in Santa Cruz and were curious about their new community's farm. Smith said she was also hoping to glean some tips to help her tomato plants flourish.

"We wanted to come and just see what was here, and it's pretty cool. We'll come back, bring other guests," Smith said. "I'm going to go home and Google cover crops and possibly get better luck with my tomatoes."

Hildinger's explanation of planting a variety of low-maintenance and low-water cover crops, including plants like legumes, vetch and bell beans, captured the interest of several of the tour group members. Cover crops, sometimes called green manure, can be planted in fields and gardens during their off season to help introduce needed nutrients like atmospheric nitrogen to the soil for the coming grown season, as was being done at the UC Santa Cruz garden, Hildinger said.

UC Santa Cruz alum Michelle Jenkins, visiting with girlfriend Nina Francesconi, said she knew of the farm when she went to school there several years ago, but never visited. The couple are looking to move to Santa Cruz and establish their own garden, they said.

"I feel like the sustainability aspect is really interesting, considering the way our food system is going," Jenkins, of San Jose, said. "I would love to grow my own food."

Anna Sarsfield, troop leader for the San Jose Cadet Girl Scout Troop 779, brought two of her senior scouts to the farm as a field trip for their eight-week "journey program." Sarsfield said the farm and garden tour offered an excellent opportunity for her girls to get out and explore.

"They explore a topic and they learn about it and then they learn how to take action on it. It's about the food systems and the food process and where the food comes from," Sarsfield said. "We'll probably go to a farmers market and we'll probably go to local grocery stores."

Girl Scout project partner Rayna Carey, a 9th grade student, said she was impressed by the efficiency of the farm's greenhouses.
"So much of our food is processed now, it's really bad," Rayna said. "I've been going to farmers market since I was little. When we were picking a journey, I was like, this would be cool to learn about."

More information about the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems and its tours is available online at casfs.ucsc.edu.