

Become a Farm Intern, Learn Sustainable Farming

Learn why you should consider an internship in farming, a few pointers and how to apply.

By Arie McFarlan

Offering a farm internship to people interested in farming can prove beneficial in many ways.

In addition to the ability to pass on knowledge and possibly your farming operation, farms hosting interns enjoy assistance with day-to-day labor.

Farm interns typically assist in planting, harvesting, animal husbandry, farmer's market sales and general upkeep of the farm. Many come with the potential of becoming farm partners or long-term employees.

Most farm interns are expected to perform manual labor as part of their training.

Keep in mind, though, that the interns are on your farm primarily to learn new skills, and to equip themselves with the know how to eventually start their own farming operation or take over an existing one.

Offering an internship will require a commitment on the part of the farmer to spend time teaching his methods, principles and skills.

A Few Pointers for On-farm Interns

Although some farms accept interns as a means to meet their labor needs, others offer internships that are long term and educationally oriented.

Ask your potential host farm questions to find out: What would be expected of you The number of hours you must work each week The stipend that will be offered (if any) The length of the internship and what skills you might be able to learn.

Clearly express your preferences. Before accepting an internship, be prepared to evaluate your financial situation and personal needs.

If you have a large amount of debt, an intern's stipend may not be enough to sustain you during your program.

Also, interns typically are placed on farms during the peak production season when personal time and recreation are at a minimum. Many interns feel like their personal lives are "put on hold" during their internships, so be prepared for this aspect of the training.

Not all farms are the same.

Some farms expect interns to integrate into the existing family and staff on the farm, and will treat interns as part of the family.

Others offer groceries and housing, but don't expect the interns to participate in any of the social aspects of the family. If you have a preference, you should ask.

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Asking Questions is Part of Learning

While working as an intern or apprentice, be open to learning new skills. Ask questions.

If you don't understand a task or don't understand why you're doing something, ask.

Most host farm owners have years of experience and have learned through trial and error.

By asking the "Why's" of an operation, you'll gain valuable knowledge that may prevent you from making some of the same mistakes.

Be Respectful

Keep in mind that your host farm has probably invested everything they have in maintaining their farm.

Most farmers have a personal relationship with their animals and want them to be cared for in the best possible manner. Likewise, when growing food crops, care and attention to detail is necessary to insure proper yield and safety in the product.

By learning the proper way to tend to animals and crops, you'll be able to leave your internship with experience and know-how that you would never have gleaned without the hands-on experience.

If your host farm is a place that's appealing to you on a long-term basis, consider approaching your host about extending your internship or coming on as an employee or partner.

Many farmers don't have heirs to pass their farm to, and would appreciate having a young, dedicated employee or partner to work with.

Top A great deal of patience, energy and time will be required to train your interns and prepare them for a future in agriculture.

Choosing an Intern (and a Sample Application)

Choosing an intern should be done with as much care as you would give to hiring an employee. Interns should be screened for aptitude and attitude, and for a match to the assistance you will need on the farm and the skills you can pass along (see screening checklist on this page).

If you will be offering housing, you should clearly discuss the housing arrangement with your intern.

Monthly stipend, meals and any other provisions should be clearly discussed and agreed upon.

Lifestyle issues should be made clear up front. For example, if your facility cannot accommodate a vegetarian or if you do not allow smoking on your farm, convey this information prior to accepting an applicant.

A formal application must be filled out by all potential candidates. An invaluable resource about offering on-farm internships and how to select the best candidates is the New England Small Farm Institute's workbook *Cultivating a New Crop of Farmers – Is On-Farm Mentoring Right for You and Your Farm?*

Here's a sample internship application from Maveric Heritage Ranch Co., which has been offering internships for more than 3 years.

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Legal Issues

All legal aspects of offering internships should be researched by the host farm prior to accepting interns.

For example, some states require additional insurance to cover the farm if there's an accident or a Worker's Compensation policy if the intern works more than a certain number of hours per week.

Your state's department of labor can provide the necessary information. Many states offer an exemption from additional insurance on farm labor.

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Finding an Intern for Your Farm

There are several ways to find interns and apprentices.

Many agriculture colleges allow you to post your position free; many also host career workshops where farmers can meet potential interns. If you're willing to assist an intern in receiving college credit for an internship, include this information in your listing.

Many organizations specialize in bringing experienced farmers and beginning farmers together, and can serve as a valuable resource in setting up your on-farm internship program. Here are some of the best places to find interns and host

farms.

Submit your listings to these organizations to maximize your visibility to potential candidates.

Whether you're a young farmer looking for additional help or future partners, or an older farmer looking to pass on your agriculture legacy, interns and apprentices may be the answer to your needs.

Become an Intern, Learn Sustainable Farming
Why consider an internship in farming—and a few pointers for applicants

Becoming an on-farm intern is the best way to expand your knowledge about sustainable farming practices, gain experience and set yourself up for a future in agriculture.

Internship Opportunity Resources

To post an internship opportunity or to find a farm on which to train, contact the following organizations.

ATTRA

Directory of on-the-job learning opportunities in sustainable and organic agriculture in the United States

WWOOF

Willing Workers on Organic Farms

Occidental, CA; 831-425-3276

An organization that connects interns and farms in several countries

CA Exchange Program

Communicating for Agriculture

Fergus Falls, MN; 800-432-3276

International organization that connects farmers and interns

IFTN

International Farm Transition Network

A program designed to connect beginning and transitioning (retiring) farmers

Land Stewardship Project

Farm Beginnings Training Program

Connects existing farmers in a teaching environment to help beginners establish their operations

Alternative Farming Systems Information Center (AFSIC)

National Agricultural Library

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Beltsville, MD; Request free copy of "Educational and Training Opportunities in Sustainable Agriculture."

Liberal Arts Career Network

Intern Center; Brunswick, ME

Maintains nationwide database of internship and summer job opportunities. Collaborative effort of 25 U.S. colleges and universities.

Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture (MESA)

Oakland, CA

MESA sponsors annual 8-12 month, on-the-farm training programs for global farmers, matching them with U.S. host farms practicing organic and/or sustainable agriculture.

Local Harvest

An online farmer resource that also lists individual farm internship opportunities

TopInternships offer a wide variety of experiences including hands-on animal husbandry, vegetable production, carpentry, marketing, soils, food processing, legalities of food production and more.

Interns can find leads on internship programs, as well as health insurance and assistance with work visas through several agencies.

Other not-for-profit groups offer listing services that connect farmers and interns.

Many colleges work with local farms to create programs that allow the students to receive college credit for their internship.

A person interested in becoming an intern or apprentice should review these organizations and sign up with as many as possible to maximize their chances of locating the farm that offers the program best suited to their needs.

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Yet Another Resource

Land Link and Farm Link programs offer another resource for people interested in getting started in farming.

Over 20 states now offer linking programs that connect existing or retiring farmers with beginning farmers for transitioning the farm to the new farmer in the future.

Some of these arrangements offer an apprenticeship or partnership program whereby the beginner learns how to manage the existing farming business.

Financial arrangements are then made to allow the beginner to purchase the farm when the elder is ready to retire.

Becoming an intern can open up many doors to you by allowing you to learn skills, make connections to people with the same lifestyle and career goals, teach you different cultures and techniques, and provide opportunities to fulfill your dreams in agriculture.

About the Author: Arie McFarlan is owner and operator of the Maveric Heritage Ranch Co. in Dell Rapids, S.D. She raises Mulefoot hogs and Guinea hogs, among other heritage livestock.

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