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Growing Green Farmers

Internships in Sustainable Farming: A Handbook for Prospective Interns

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The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) is a membership based organization of nearly 1500 farmers, processors, gardeners, businesses, and individuals in North and South Carolina who are committed to creating a sustainable agriculture system through the development and promotion of local and organic farms and distribution systems. In an effort to help find good help for our farmer membership and support educational opportunities for interested students of organic agriculture, CFSA has created an Intern Referral Service that lists farms who are seeking interns to aid in their farming operations. CFSA does not serve as a placement service between farmers and prospective interns. To post an internship opportunity or view listings of available positions, please visit www.carolinafarmstewards.org

In each case, it is the responsibility of prospective interns to contact farmers. Farmers and interns must judge whether a given arrangement suits their mutual needs. It is their joint responsibility to clearly establish mutual expectations and to design the internship to be a safe, pleasant and mutually supportive experience.

Introduction -- Farmers as Teachers

*(This following two sections, *Farmers as Teachers* and *Is an Internship Right for You?*, has been excerpted from CFSA's Handbook for Farmers regarding internships.)*

Farmers who have been developing and practicing the art and science of sustainable agriculture for a number of years are discovering that they possess a valuable commodity that is

increasingly being sought by those who aspire to join their ranks: hard-earned experience and knowledge not easily found elsewhere. The result: the emergence of the modern "farm internship." (Many groups prefer this term over "apprenticeship," which carries a narrow legal definition in many states.)

Experienced farmers with a knack for teaching are designing programs with multiple benefits to both themselves and their interns. Farmers gain not only needed help from enthusiastic worker/learners, but also the pleasure of contributing to the future of sustainable agriculture through passing on their skills and knowledge. Most interns are housed on or near the farm, and thus acquire rural living skills beyond the actual techniques of food production.

A number of host farmers in recent years have been taking their internship programs beyond the "learning by osmosis" of exclusively "on-the-job" training. They are seeking to broaden the learning experience of interns by incorporating more theory and whole-farm planning into the "curriculum" of the internship, as well as more exposure to methods and ideas outside of their particular farm.

Many farmers also seek to improve the organization and operation of their programs, especially their systems for attracting and selecting suitable interns, for clearly communicating expectations and arrangements, for ongoing feedback by all parties involved, and for dealing with labor and tax regulations. For this Handbook we have studied how a number of successful on-farm internship/apprenticeship programs are operated.

We share the results here in the spirit of networking and cooperation. We hope this information will give you useful options for enjoying your own unique internship experience.

Is an Internship Right for You?

Definitions, Rewards, Disappointments

A clear distinction needs to be made between the educational orientation of internships and what is primarily an economic and production orientation of a regular employer/employee arrangement. Employees on farms range from highly skilled managers to migrant farm laborers who are hired only for crop harvest. Employees usually do specialized work in one area of the farm; they often have prior experience; they receive an hourly wage and usually do not live with you. State and federal governments have many regulations and officials assigned to protect workers from exploitation by employers. The relationship between employers and employees is based strictly on the efficiency of the farm worker being commensurate with the pay received.

With interns, on the other hand, farmers assume a much greater obligation to instruct. Interns expect farmers to explain the "whys", not just the "how's." Interns deserve and expect a diversified learning experience through a broad exposure to many different tasks, as well as through frequent discussion of the overall goals, methods, and systems of the farm. They are preparing themselves for a vocation, or at least learning how to grow their own food. Interns usually live on the farm, expect to interact socially with farmers, and may have other learning goals as well, such as learning a variety of rural living skills (food preservation, construction, etc.). In some arrangements interns receive a cash stipend that is not directly related to the number of hours worked. Hopefully, they will share some of the farmer's ideals and aspirations, and a mutually beneficial relationship will prevail, based on the farmer's willingness to teach and the intern's desire to learn.

The potential rewards of hosting interns, as reported by a number of farmers, include: obtaining eager enthusiastic help that is affordable to the small sustainable farming operation whose owners typically receive a very modest profit; the opportunity to contribute to the growth of

sustainable farming by passing on your knowledge and experience to the next generation of food growers; the formation of new friendships and the potential personal fulfillment that can come from inspiring and mentoring budding farmers and gardeners.

As many farmers and interns have discovered, there are potential drawbacks to internships and problems that can arise. Some farmers have dropped their internship programs out of frustration with these problems. Many interns have also been disappointed. While it is important to point out that an internship program is not for everyone, this handbook was written in the hope that a number of these problems could be avoided through the sharing of experiences and ideas of host farmers and former interns. With careful planning and recruitment, clear communication of expectations and feedback, and utilization of proven teaching methods, some very successful internship programs have evolved on farms around the country.

Concerns and Considerations

Along with eagerness and enthusiasm can come a romanticized view of farming, ignorance of the endurance required, or difficulties with transition from an urban to a rural lifestyle. Through your literature and interviews, you must convey a *realistic image* of what the intern candidates are getting themselves into. Let them know that you are not operating a summer camp. As one grower put it: "I stress the negatives: long hours, hot sun, and hard work. I also stress the need for strong commitment and good reasons for wanting to do this type of work. I encourage people to visit other farms, stress the importance of finding the right farmer/apprentice fit. I try to help people screen themselves out."

This is an important point—many a disappointment probably could have been avoided by clearer initial communication of realities and expectations, and by a more thorough interviewing/screening process. The next two sections of this Handbook offer useful ideas to accomplish these goals.

Another consideration: Is an internship really an "affordable" source of help for your operation? How much time, energy, and patience are you willing to devote to novices and their learning process? Are you prepared to train a whole new workforce each year? Are you willing to learn the needs, strong points, and personality of each new person? Can you befriend them and then say good-bye a few months later? Do you like to teach? (In Germany, which has a highly organized apprenticeship system, farmers must first attend classes in how to teach apprentices, before being certified as host farmers.) Very few successful internships happen on larger farms; the farmer can't give the individual attention necessary.

Your program will evolve over time, along with your ability to provide instruction. Experienced host farmers who offer an extensive, in-depth learning experience usually put substantial effort into selecting, from a large pool of applicants, those with great motivation and preferably some prior experience in farming or gardening. Some even specifically recruit interns who are sure they want to make their living in farming. Such an intern will eagerly absorb the farmer's knowledge and methods, and will be dedicated to the tasks at hand and to exploring more efficient ways to grow and market food.

Such an intern is also relatively rare - the "career-track" intern with prior experience, who balances initiative and creativity with a reasonable respect for your experience and authority. Most applicants are in the novice category, but, after all, someone has to offer the initial farming experience which turns a beginner into an aspiring farmer.

Many internship applicants are not considering farming as a possible career. They are looking for a farm where they can learn to grow their own food. Some want to learn about

environmentally responsible food growing and rural living, to enhance what they will have to offer as a teacher, community organizer, health care practitioner, Peace Corps Volunteer, etc. Many of these applicants will be dedicated workers, if their needs, goals, and personalities are well matched to the host farm.

"Needs" and "personality" deserve careful consideration. Do their expectations match what you have to offer, and vice-versa? Do they have a "chip on their shoulder" about authority figures; do they think they "have it all figured out?" Are they crushed by what they perceive as negative feedback? (Are you in the habit of giving positive feedback? Skilled at giving honest feedback?) Are they low on initiative and confidence, requiring you to suggest every move they make? Do they seem to have other friends and interests that will be pulling them away from your farm, or cause them to quit outright in midseason?

Of course the initial farm visit can't offer definitive answers to all such questions. But they are drawn from real experiences of other farmers, and offered here to encourage you to be thorough in your selection process and to help you anticipate how you might deal with such situations if they arise. Very often, an honest, respectful, heart-to-heart talk or evaluation session will improve such difficult situations dramatically. Ideally, such evaluation sessions should be scheduled at intervals throughout the internship.

Some former interns also have their sad stories to tell about farmers who misled them, overworked and undereducated them, threw frequent temper tantrums, gave constant negative feedback, neglected them, spent much time away from the field or the farm, "micromanaged" them, or were simply unrealistic in what they offered or expected from their interns. Our hope in presenting this manual, based on successful internships, is to help farmers assess their own suitability for engaging interns, create the best possible program, and reap the substantial rewards awaiting both farmer and intern.

Recommendations for Prospective Interns

1. Exchange detailed information with farmers through correspondence.
2. The prospective intern should visit the farm prior to making a commitment.
3. Both the farmer and the intern should be explicit about their mutual expectations. It is recommended that a written agreement be drawn up during the preliminary visit of the first days of the internship.
4. Frequent and frank communication between both parties should occur during the internship, checking in about the extent to which expectations are being met.

Important information to solicit about the farm & farmer:

1. General description of the host farm and philosophy of farming; description of the farmers and their family/families; farmers' lifestyle; farm crops, marketing venues, bioregion, and cultural climate.
2. Living arrangements- location, privacy, amount of space.
3. Responsibilities for domestic chores.
4. Numbers of interns hired/accepted per growing season.
5. Responsibilities for food preparation, special diet accommodations.
6. Employment details:
 - a. Candid description of difficulty of work, length of work day, types of weather to expect to work in, works days required on the farm/days off, duration of internship.
 - b. Specific roles that the internships might be assigned to work on (i.e. Farmers' Market)

- c. Types of jobs to be done and how the farmer instructs interns
 - d. Stipend/wages; other bonuses, commissions, payment in kind. Some farms offer a stipend that increases through the season, reflecting greater responsibility taken upon the intern. Others offer a final bonus or profit share to those who fulfill their commitments through the season's end.
 - e. Safety of the conditions and nature of the work; liability insurance—does the farm insurance cover you?
 - f. Transportation arrangements—does the farm work require that you have your own car? Can you borrow one? Do you need a driver's license?
 - g. Policy and practices on training, care and use of farm equipment.
 - h. Farmer's expectations regarding different interests, levels of commitment and learning experience offered. How much flexibility is there for interns to choose different tasks? How willing is the farmer to teach you thoroughly?
7. Plans for feedback between all parties—communication on how things are going for everyone involved.
 8. Recreation and social opportunities on the farm and in the local community. How does the farmer/family like to interact socially with interns?
 9. Other learning experiences to be offered: planning sessions, record keeping, on-farm tours or seminars, access to farm library, visits to other farms, classes, conferences, etc.
 10. Personal issues—how does the farmer feel about your practicing music, religion? How would they feel about various diet preferences, guests, use of free time, privacy?

Important information to communicate to the farmer about you:

1. What do you hope to learn and gain from the internship? What specific crops/markets to you wish to gain experience in? What sort of lifestyle experience are you seeking?
2. How do you plan to use the knowledge and skills that you gain?
3. How do you think that you learn best? (Reading, demonstration, working alongside, with much practice, etc.) Do you like to work independently? How much responsibility do you want?
4. Age and physical condition.
5. Level of prior experience, if any.
6. What are your religious, political, food views/dietary needs?
7. Availability and flexibility for internship. When can you visit? When can you start?
8. Sensitivity to gender stereotyping work assignments.
9. Sensitivity need for privacy for both intern and farmer.
10. What specific needs do you foresee prior to agreeing to be in the farm? (Days off for a family obligation, guests planning to come for a visit, difficulties lifting heavy weights, transportation needs, etc.)
11. Two or three references you can provide for the farmer.

These are just a few recommendations CFSA can suggest to prospective interns who are looking for host farms. Remember that as an intern, you will be juggling at least three roles: student, employee, and “family member.”

CFSA wishes each prospective intern the best of luck. Feel free to contact the office for further assistance.