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*Growing Green Farmers*

## **Internships in Sustainable Farming: A Handbook for Farmers**

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### **Introduction -- Farmers as Teachers**

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 characteristic of organic farmers. We also include guidelines and options for living arrangements, information on current labor regulations, advice on recruitment, and some creative ideas for maximizing the educational experience of interns.

There are many ways to set up all the components of an internship. We hope this information will give you useful options for starting or improving your own unique program.

## **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**

Eagerness and enthusiasm can result in 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.

## Designing Your Program

It is highly useful to sit down and consider all the elements listed below, and then spell out your plans in a written description to clarify what you can offer, what your policies and procedures are, your expectations, etc. This description can then be sent to anyone who inquires about your internship. There are many possible ways to do most of these things; the remaining sections of this Handbook offer ideas drawn from the experience of other farmers. Here are some important things to consider and possibly include in your description:

- General description of your farm and philosophy of farming; description of yourself and your family, your lifestyle, types of crops, marketing, other enterprises, climate, locality, etc. Talk about the big picture, about your farm as part of the alternative agriculture movement which is changing our food system and our impact on the environment.
- Number of interns you plan to take; duration of stay. (Do you have any flexibility with these? If you take only one intern and don't have other people on the farm with whom he/she can easily socialize, he/she is likely to feel lonely and disappointed.)
- Living accommodations offered: level of privacy; how "primitive"; domestic chores expected; policy on visitors.
- Food provided: do interns cook for themselves? Cook with you? Do you cook for them? Do you supply all ingredients? How much is homegrown? Accommodation of different diets?
- Wages or cash stipend offered; other bonuses, commissions, payments in kind. Some farmers offer a stipend that increases through the season, reflecting diminished need for training, greater competence, etc. Others offer a final bonus or profit share to those who fulfill their commitments through to season's end.
- Types of work to be done by interns; list of skills to be taught.
- Other learning experiences to be offered: planning sessions, on-farm tours or seminars, access to farm library, visits to other farms, classes, conferences, etc.
- Candid description of difficulty of the work, number of hours expected, days off, types of weather to expect to work in, biting insects to deal with.
- Safety and health concerns; insurance.
- Your expectations regarding their interest in and commitment to the work and the learning experience offered. How much flexibility is there for interns to choose different tasks?
- Plans for feedback on how things are going for everyone involved.
- Something personal about how your family likes to interact socially with interns.
- Recreational and social opportunities on the farm and in the local area.
- Method of applying; timing of visit/interview; questions you would like applicant to answer, either in letter form or on an application form included.

When you send this description of your program to prospective interns, you could include the following request for information:

- Please tell us about yourself, your interests, your long range plans, why you want to work on a farm and what you hope to learn.
- Age and physical condition.
- Special considerations (diet, health).
- Previous related work or other experiences.
- Tell us what you think of our program, our policies, and how you would fit into our farm.
- When would you be available? (Any flexibility?).
- When could you come for a preliminary visit?
- (Optional but recommended) Please provide 2-3 references we can contact regarding your learning style, work style, and character.

## **The Selection, Training, and Evaluation Process**

Clear and honest communication is highly recommended throughout the internship. The following suggested process will need to be tailored to your situation.

**(1) Initial publicity and contact** - There are many ways to publicize your program, locally, regionally, and nationally. Probably the most effective publicity you can get is through a listing in one or more special internship directories. Most such listings are free and they will send you an annual request for an update. Many state organic farming organizations, *including CFSA*, maintain a list or directory of farms that take interns. Often, you can announce your program in the bulletin board of their newsletter. Posters at food coops, colleges, sustainable farming conferences, etc. can also be effective.

You may want to send notices to college career placement offices, especially those with agriculture or environmental studies departments. Some farmers get listed with colleges that encourage or require students to do an internship, such as Antioch College in Ohio, or Sterling College in Vermont, or Warren Wilson College in Asheville, NC. Other colleges will give credit for summer internships, but often the student must find a sympathetic professor to sponsor their internship as an "independent study".

The obvious drawback to taking students is the limited time they are available, unless they are graduating seniors. Some growers take a mix of full-season and summertime interns.

**(2) Information Exchange** - Inquiries about your program are usually brief and are based on someone reading your brief description in one of the above lists. You should respond by sending them your brochure or other detailed description of your farm and internship program, as described in "Designing Your Program" above. Ask them to tell you all about themselves, their interests, and their response to reading the information you have sent them. (See suggested questions above.) Some will not be interested further, and won't write back.

**(3) Follow-up Letter or Application** - Some will return a completed application or send a detailed letter of interest, sometimes with a resume. Sometimes you may have to ask for more information, or may want to call them to learn more about them and get a glimpse of their personality. You should follow up on any references provided.

**(4) Farm Visit** - If you are strongly interested in someone, this is a highly recommended next step. If you decide to waive this requirement for someone thousands of miles away, then at least get references, spend plenty of time on the phone with them or ask them to answer further questions in writing. (Do you have a friend who lives near them who could interview them for you?) If you accept them without a visit, consider doing so under the condition that the first week or two of their workstay will be a probationary period until you are both sure you've made the right decision. Even then, it's much harder to ask someone to leave, than it is to not invite them in the first place, based on a preliminary visit.

You can facilitate their visit by including information in your literature like a map, bus and train service to your area, etc. You might even suggest car pooling with another candidate from their area. Ask what other farms they plan to visit; perhaps you would have useful suggestions for an itinerary.

If they do visit, ask them to spend a couple days with you. Take time to get to know them, do some work with them, and ask if they have any qualms about anything. Is your farm quite different from what they had imagined? Do your work styles and personalities jive? Do they appear healthy? Do they seem overly timid, unmotivated, unable to accept responsibility, or unable to respect you as an authority with knowledge to offer? What are their expectations? Ask again how they feel about your program and policies. Ask what other options and other farms they are looking at. Beware of those who say you're the only one they're interested in. This could indicate immaturity, or a romanticized view of your farm, or low self-esteem.

By conveying your sense of mission, the larger purpose of your farming life, along with the realities of hard work, stress, and low financial return, you can open a conversation that will help to reveal whether applicants have the necessary motivation and commitment.

**(5) Selection and Notification** - Inquiries will continue through winter and spring.

You can keep a number of applicants in a building pool of strong candidates, but at some point you will start losing them if you wait too long to decide. It's also not fair to them to keep them waiting for your decision, if they are receiving invitations from farms that are lower on their list of choices. Stay in touch frequently while you are deciding.

**(6) Arrival, Orientation, Work Agreement** - For those that accept your invitation to work with you, advise them of clothing and other articles to bring, and set a date for their arrival. When they arrive, give them a thorough orientation: where everything is, how things work, chores expected, etc. You may want to give them a day or so to settle into their living quarters and get their bearings, before they start working.

It is highly recommended that an "Internship Agreement" be signed by you and the intern. You may want to ask the intern for input into the wording of the agreement, regarding their goals in the program. This is in effect a contract setting forth what is offered by both parties; an agreement that training and educational services and whatever accommodation, meals, and stipend are offered are knowingly exchanged as adequate compensation for work performed. A general description of the type of work and hours should be included. Though this may seem rather formal and untrusting, it will provide a basis for clear understanding of expectations and responsibilities of both farmer and intern. More specifics can be found in the "Labor Regulations" section below.

**(7) Work Plan** - On farms where many different kinds of work are happening, with many changes from day to day as the season progresses, growers often find it useful to formulate a weekly and/or daily work plan. Interns need thorough guidance on where and when and how each job should happen. On some farms, interns participate in such work planning meetings; this not only ensures that the job will happen when and how you want it, but also enhances their learning experience and gives them a feeling that they have a stake

in the outcome. You may want to create separate categories for tasks on the list, such as planting, weed control, harvesting. Also helpful: Note precise location of crop, tools to be used and other specifics, and whether you would like the intern to work with you or consult with you before tackling the job. Some interns will derive particular satisfaction from checking off jobs that they took responsibility for.

**(8) Communication and Feedback** - Much could be said about the art of clear communication between farmer and intern. Experienced farm hosts usually stress the following major points:

At the beginning of the season, make it clear what you expect in terms of respect for your experience and methods. Convey how important it is for interns to listen carefully, to try to see the task from your perspective, ask any questions necessary, and wait until they have "tried it your way" before they suggest alternatives or start experimenting on their own. Try to convey the overall plan, the "big picture" into which a particular task or crop fits. Give plenty of positive feedback on jobs well done. This opens the door of receptivity to corrections or suggestions for different methods.

Directions and suggestions are much better received before they start a job than after. Be thorough in your training and set-up of a job; if you stop by later and try to make corrections, these will often be taken as criticism and disappointment with their efforts or ideas.

Set up some form of regular, scheduled feedback: a few minutes dedicated to "checking in" on how things are going, at weekly planning meetings or other times; perhaps a monthly evaluation session for both farmer and intern to give feedback in detail; frequent assurance that you really want them to speak up as needed, about any difficulties with how the work is going, the schedule, style and thoroughness in giving directions and training, accommodations and food, social needs, and in general, things turning out differently than they expected.

**(9) Final Evaluation** - Through a verbal and/or written evaluation at the close of the internship, you can determine how well expectations and goals have been met. Suggestions from interns will help you improve your program, and you can help them evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and their future possibilities in farming.

## Living Arrangements

Most interns live on the farm, for several reasons: (1) they can be more available for changes in the work schedule due to weather and markets. (2) Farms often have, or can create without too much trouble, suitable living space that interns can use in lieu of paying rent elsewhere (which makes a low pay a more affordable option). (3) Interns are more integrated into the whole life of the farm, can experience the daily cycles, chores, and skills of rural living, and can spend personal time observing crops and livestock or simply enjoying nature, the elements, and the physical beauty of your farm. Such experiences are important to interns as they consider the desirability and realities of farming as an occupation and way of life.

A wide variety of living spaces have been offered by host farmers, including:

- A room in the farmer's own dwelling, with access to bathroom, kitchen, and other facilities
- A room or apartment in a separate house owned by the farmer
- A renovated space in some other type of building on the farm
- A bunkhouse constructed by the farmer - could include kitchen, toilet, shower

- Simple cabins, with access to facilities in the main farmhouse, or in some other structure set up as a common space with kitchen, etc.
- A comfortable travel trailer or small mobile home
- If the farm operates a CSA, there may be a member willing to house an intern in trade for their produce share.

Housing an intern in your own dwelling could be more of a compromise of your privacy than you feel comfortable with. They may also seek a quieter, private space. Perhaps they will want to invite friends to visit them. Interns' housing needs will vary considerably. For some, a bunkhouse may suffice for a while, but most will prefer or really need more privacy for a full-season workstay. For some, the more "rustic" or isolated, the better. Others will want more comforts or close social interaction. The important question is, what do you have to offer? Make sure an applicant has a clear understanding of what those conditions are, and use your intuition to detect whether they are likely to be uncomfortable.

**Housing Standards** - The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association asks farmers who participate in their Apprenticeship Program to provide:

1. A safe physical environment (sound structure/fire/electrical) that is weatherproof, has adequate ventilation, and is pest proof (some reasonable effort).
2. A natural source of light and a safe source of lighting (including instruction in the safe use of non-electrical lighting).
3. A reasonably clean, private and cleanable space (including both personal and common space like kitchen/bathroom) with a space for personal cleaning and a sanitary bathroom or latrine.
4. Access to potable water and a heated living area (seasonal).

For **Meals Standards**, MOFGA asks farmers to:

1. Clarify eating arrangements - separate or part of farm household? Will cooking and cleanup chores be shared?
2. Provide or compensate for adequate diet for strenuous activity.
3. Provide ample time for regular meals (including prep time).
4. For separate eating arrangements - provide adequate cooking facilities (stove, wash basin, refrigeration).
5. Clarify whether they are willing to provide special dietary needs (e.g., vegetarian meals).

Sharing cooking on a regular or occasional basis with your interns can add a rich dimension to their experience, as well as add diversity to your meals. By learning how to use and create with the products of the farm; they can both develop personal self-reliance and be more helpful in educating your customers in the uses of your produce.

Some host farms also involve interns in food preservation activities such as canning, freezing, pickling, and drying. They learn more skills while you fill your pantry more quickly. You could give them some



preserved food as an extra thank-you when they leave. Consider offering some root-cellar items as a bonus for interns who stay through the whole season.

## Providing a High-Quality Learning Experience

Farmers have a number of creative possibilities from which to choose as they develop the training and educational aspects of their internship program.

**Orientation**—Soon after an intern arrives, give a detailed tour of your place, explaining the living arrangements, chores and responsibilities, system for organizing work, update on current crops, etc. Remind them that you are open to their questions and feedback, and that they should keep you informed if problems arise with either the living arrangements or the work and training.

**Ideas for Training** – Get to know each intern individually: their personality, learning style, work style, special abilities, and any limitations or problems they might have with particular tasks. Here are some ideas and recommendations:

### A. Maximize your field time with interns.

Early in the season, when the work tends to be more complex and the interns are new to everything, spend plenty of time with them—setting up projects, explaining why you do things in a particular way, and noting how each person learns tasks and gravitates to certain types of work.

For a job with a number of sequential steps, some farmers find it useful to demonstrate the whole job first before the intern tries it. Seeing the process all the way to the “finished product” can help an intern understand how all the steps contribute to the desired result. Tasks that you’ve performed hundreds of times may seem deceptively simple. It is useful to remember all that was involved in your own development of methods for the task at hand.

Make a continual effort to adapt to the individual learning style of each person; you will find yourself performing a constant balancing act between giving inadequate training and explanation—resulting in a job poorly done— and being so particular that the intern feels micro-managed or perceives that the farmer thinks they are stupid. Most experienced host farmers recommend thorough prior training, along with plenty of background information, giving the intern a deep understanding of why they are doing it a certain way. A frustrating scenario for both farmer and intern consists of inadequate initial training followed by subsequent “corrections,” often perceived as criticism of the intern’s intelligence or common sense. Prevention is the best medicine.

Farmers need to ask interns to step into the role of learner, accepting farmers as mentors. One farmer’s way of doing things is not always the *right* or *best* way, but it is usually the result of a lot of experimentation and observation. Farmers must ask interns to respect that and see what they can learn from the farmer’s perspective before offering their own suggestions. The farmer also needs to be open and welcome constructive input and feedback; farmers can learn a lot from interns and appreciate new perspectives.

Of course, farmers need to follow through with their part of the bargain, and not allow farm demands to result in frequent short cuts that get the job done but leave the intern confused and poorly instructed.

### B. Diversity vs. Specialization

A regular employee can be asked to do one job repetitively for days on end. Interns expect to be exposed to a wide range of tasks. This will require more of the farmer’s time, but that’s what the bargain is all about. Besides, their broad knowledge of crops and tasks will benefit you as the season progresses; you can give them more responsibility as their understanding of the big picture develops. Another benefit: you will

witness their growing self-esteem and dedication to crops they have tended from planting to harvest. If interns are personally involved in planting a crop (which you perhaps could have planted in less time if they hadn't been involved), they are more likely to have the necessary motivation to spend the long hours required to weed or harvest that crop, and they will be excited to promote its virtues to your customers. Many growers notice an extra surge of motivation from the marketing itself, especially when interns can experience the satisfaction of your customers.

On the other hand, the benefits of specialization should not be overlooked. Taking regular responsibility for a certain crop, animal or task can be a valuable experience. This could also lighten the farmer's load of organizational or record-keeping duties. Some farmers have found the harvest season, with its lower level of complexity for most crops, to be the best time to give interns responsibility for individual crops. These jobs can occasionally be rotated, as well. Two of the farms we surveyed had several tractors designed for different tasks, and asked each intern to specialize in the operation and maintenance of one of those tractors.

#### C. Special Demonstrations

Many host farmers find it useful to set up special training sessions to present a particular task, or operation of a piece of equipment, in a focused way. This applies especially to safety, maintenance, and methods of using tools and equipment, or care of, and safety around, livestock. If you have several interns, group demonstrations can also represent an efficient use of your management time.

#### D. Involvement in Farm Planning

Some interns will appreciate being included in planning meetings. The more they understand about soil variations and amendments, individual crop needs, the expenses involved in farm operation, or what has to be done to meet certification standards, the more likely they are to do the job well, at the right place and time, and with the motivation that comes from feeling included and respected. This inclusion could extend to the farm's interface with the public, such as CSA meetings or distribution organizing.

***Other Opportunities for Teaching the Science of Farming*** - In addition to what can be taught from the work itself, there are other ways to provide training:

#### A. Offer Your Library

If you have a good selection of information materials, make them available to interns. Some farmers make photocopies of particularly relevant materials as handouts.

#### B. Tours of the Farm

Occasional farm tours can be a valuable teaching tool. Dedicating a certain time to a break from work for a purely educational tour can be both an effective teaching method and a way for everyone to get an update on crop conditions. You could encourage interns to keep a notebook on varieties, methods, pests, timing, etc.

#### C. Seminars, Workshops

Some groups of farmers offer seminars/workshops to their interns to study particular topics in-depth, ranging from occasional to weekly or semi-weekly scheduled sessions. New topics can be added to your "curriculum" each year; after a while you could accumulate a file of notes and handouts that makes these sessions relatively easy to do. Your curriculum could include topics such as: basic soil fertility, composting, cover crops, varieties or breeds, insects, weeds, diseases, perennials, water management, farm economics, an in-depth look at a family of crops, etc.

#### D. Special Projects for Advanced Interns

This could include specialization in a particular crop, experimenting with a new crop, participation in a building project, saving seeds, improving your market display, analyzing profitability of crops, repairing equipment, etc. Some farmers are developing a "journey worker" program for second-year interns, increasing their involvement in the management of the farm.

***Beyond the Resources of Your Farm*** - Thanks to the spirit of cooperation and sharing typical in the sustainable farming community, there are a number of possibilities for diversifying your interns' experience beyond the boundaries of your farm:

A. Tours of Other Farms in the Area

You can probably find local farmers or gardeners who would enjoy sharing what they have created. As a trade for their time, your interns could help them out with the task of the day. You could invite beginning gardeners in the area to your own seminars, too. Or arrange with other farmers who host interns to swap visits to each other's farms. In the Hudson Valley and Western Massachusetts, thirteen farms have organized a highly successful rotation of farm tours called CRAFT, Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training. The interns from all the farms go to one farm every other Saturday for a tour and seminar on a special aspect of that farm. The interns have given it rave reviews, and cite the chance to socialize and compare experiences with their peers as a valuable benefit.

B. Conferences, Workshops, Classes

Conferences and workshops can be a valuable resource for broadening interns' learning experience. Classes on topics of interest to interns may be available in local colleges, cooperative extension programs, or other groups and institutions. Farmers could consider developing and helping to teach such classes. The "Sustainable Farming Program" at Central Carolina Community College in Pittsboro, NC is a successful model for such a program. The tuition for these subsidized Continuing Education classes is very reasonable. You might consider helping your interns with expenses involved in attending one or more of these programs, as a bonus to their usual compensation.

## **Dealing with Labor Regulations**

This section will give an overview of the basic information needed by intern host farmers in the Carolinas to navigate through the maze of Federal and State labor laws and regulations, and employers' tax obligations. Of those regulations that are state-administered, there are many similarities from state to state; but due to some significant differences, farmers in other states must obtain specifics from the relevant agencies of their own state government. This is a beginner's guide. You will need to get further advice and instructions from the various agencies. The Cooperative Extension office in some counties has an agent who can help you. Professional help is another option to consider, including accountants, business consultants, farm credit agencies, etc. Obviously, another farmer who takes care of his/her own employment paperwork would be a good person to consult.

Most host farmers who were interviewed for this handbook expressed some degree of anxiety and/or confusion about the relationship between internships and regular employment situations. Many regulations seem ill-matched to the particular structure and function of farm internships. The agencies who administer these regulations are not always sure, when asked, how to interpret them when applied to an internship situation, which is a hybrid of education and employment. There are wide variations from farm to farm in how interns are compensated, the quality of the learning experience, amount of work expected, and what the living conditions are like. Hopefully, farmers' organizations will take the lead in establishing and administering competent programs, thereby making it unnecessary for bureaucracies to step in and over-regulate the relationship of interns and farmers.

The two major concerns are: interpretation of *minimum wage laws*, and when and how to count "*in-kind*" compensation (such as room, board, and farm products) in determining tax withholding, workers compensation premiums, unemployment tax liability, etc. Some answers are included in the following information. ***Please be advised that the following section was written in 2002 and has not been***

**updated. Form numbers, phone numbers, and policies often change, so it is important to stay abreast of current information through mailings and publications from each agency.**

### ***Minimum Wage Laws***

In both North and South Carolina, wage and hour laws for agricultural workers follow the federal standards. Though the current Federal Minimum Wage is \$7.25/hour, small farmers are exempt if they had fewer than 500 "man-days" of hired agricultural labor in any calendar quarter of the preceding calendar year. This would be equivalent to having anything less than 8 full-time workers during your busiest quarter of the year. A man-day is "any day in which any employee performs any agricultural labor for one hour or more."

Minimum wage laws were created to protect workers from unscrupulous employers. Since most farmers who host interns will fall under the exemption described above, it is basically up to the host farmer to determine a compensation package that will be fair and reasonable for both the farmer and the intern. In placing a value on what the farmer provides, several major factors must be considered: quality of housing, if provided; quality of meals or food supplies, if provided; quality of educational experience provided; workers compensation insurance; other services and amenities, such as use of farmer's vehicle for social purposes, training in rural living skills such as food preservation, carpentry, etc. In determining the value of what the intern provides, major factors include: work hours expected, domestic chores expected, and physical demands and pace of the work.

### ***Internship Agreement***

It is highly desirable to write a detailed "Internship Agreement", spelling out all of these terms, conditions, and expectations. This document should be carefully considered and signed by farmer and intern. . It also will serve as a reference for clear understanding of expectations between intern and host farmer. Here is a list of suggested items to include:

- Name and address of farmer;
- Location and type of work;
- Period of the internship; hours expected; days off;
- Training to be provided; skills (both required and taught);
- Farm tours; seminars; inclusion in planning of crops and work, etc.;
- Accommodations; meals; housekeeping, and/or cooking duties;
- Stipend or other types of payment to be made;
- Plan for periodic feedback and final evaluation.

### ***Employment Verification System***

Employers must require each new employee to fill out Form I-9 to document citizenship, legal alien status, or visa status. Employees must show their employer relevant documents, such as passport, birth certificate, or driver's license. The employer must keep Form I-9 on file for at least 3 years. Forms can be obtained from an INS office, or from another employer.

### ***Taxes***

**Federal Taxes** - First, get IRS Publication 51, "Circular A, Agricultural Employer's Tax Guide" and other necessary federal forms, by calling 1-800-TAX-FORM. Also, ask for Form SS-4, "Application for Employer Identification Number (EIN)". You will need to use this number on virtually all federal forms related to employment. (The form is also available at local IRS and Social Security offices.)

**A. FICA - Social Security and Medicare Taxes** - The combined tax rate for these is 15.3% of gross cash wages. (Payments in kind, such as meals and lodging, are not taxed.) Half (7.65%) of this is deducted from employee gross wages, the other half must be paid by the employer. This tax must be paid for any employee earning \$150 or more in cash wages during a calendar year. The employer may offer to pay the employee's half, but then this extra payment must be counted as part of the employee's wage subject to income tax.

**B. Federal Income Tax Withholding** - Farmers are now required to withhold income taxes on employees' wages. New employees must fill out Form W-4 to determine their withholding allowances. The employer keeps this on file, and then uses a chart in Circular A to determine how much tax to withhold. If you pay an employee less than \$155 per week, no tax needs to be withheld, but amounts depend on the number of "personal allowances" claimed on Form W-4. Once again, the value of meals and lodging "furnished as a condition of employment" doesn't count as *cash wages* subject to withholding, though it does count as part of *gross wages* subject to income tax and reporting by you on federal Forms 943 and W-2, and corresponding state forms.

**C. Deposits and Reporting of Taxes** - Employers with small payrolls are required to deposit all of the Social Security, Medicare, and Withheld Income Taxes accumulated during each month, by the 15th of the following month, at a Federal Reserve bank or authorized commercial bank. If you accumulate less than \$1,000 of these taxes in a whole year, you can make one payment with your 943 tax return in January. To make the monthly deposits, you will need to use Form 8109, Federal Tax Deposit Coupon, booklets of which you will receive as needed from the IRS, beginning a few weeks after you receive your EIN. To speed up the process, call the IRS general service number, 1-800-829-1040.

By January 31, you must file Form 943, Employer's Annual Tax Return for Agricultural Employees, to report totals of all wages and taxes for the previous year. By this date you must also send a Form W-2, Wage and Tax Statement, to each employee. The W-2 is a specialized, duplicate form that you must get from the IRS, not by fax or internet. By February 28, you must file a Form W-3 relating to these taxes, along with copies of the W-2's, with the Social Security Administration.

**State Income Tax Withholding** - This involves similar procedures, but with different forms and rules. Obtain forms and instructions from the state Dept. of Revenue: In NC, call 919-733-3991; in SC, call 803-898-5000. In NC, ask for Publication NC-30, which includes Form AS/RP 1, "Application for Withholding Identification Number". You will use that number on state forms. Each employee (intern) must fill out Form NC-4, corresponding to the federal W-4. Accumulated withheld taxes must be sent to the Dept. of Revenue each calendar quarter using Form NC-5 which is also a reporting form that you must send even if no tax was withheld in that quarter. An Annual Reconciliation return, Form NC-3, similar to the Federal 943, must be filed by Feb. 28, along with copies of all W-2 forms.

**Federal Unemployment Tax** - Small farmers, who pay less than \$20,000 in cash wages to farm workers in any calendar quarter, don't have to pay this.

### **Workers Compensation Insurance**

In N.C., a farmer who paid at least \$10,400 in cash wages for farm labor in the preceding calendar year must have workers' compensation insurance or equivalent coverage protecting each agricultural worker employed. A worker who is injured on the job or is disabled by a job-related illness is entitled to payment of the associated cost of medical treatment and cash payments to compensate for loss of wages. An uninsured employer is still liable for these payments. Even if your payroll is below the minimum, it is still highly advisable to have this insurance.

Most farmers find this insurance to be quite expensive; generally, the premiums average 6-8% of payroll, depending on the type of farm work. On top of this, many small, sustainable farms are subject to two types of unfair treatment. First, there is a minimum annual premium of about \$800, depending on the which insurer is used; a farmer paying stipends to a few interns, or employing some seasonal harvest help could thus easily pay an additional 20-50% of their cash "payroll" for this required insurance. Secondly, the rates for each type of farm work are set with an assumed use of agricultural chemicals and dangerous machinery, with no consideration for the much lower risks experienced on most small, sustainable farms.

To locate the best possible rates under these circumstances, it is wise to consult other farmers in the same type of farming, to learn who their insurer is, how much they pay, and what their overall experience has been.

This Handbook, published by the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, is a revision of a similar publication by Doug Jones, commissioned by the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, Inc., published in and copyrighted in 1999, and titled Internships in Sustainable Agriculture: A Handbook for Farmers. Farmers: Visit CFSA at [www.carolinafarmstewards.org](http://www.carolinafarmstewards.org) to post internship opportunities – CFSA membership required.

Prospective Interns: CFSA maintains a list of internship opportunities at [www.carolinafarmstewards.org](http://www.carolinafarmstewards.org), and listings may be viewed without membership. Please apply directly to farms by following the application instructions specified in each posting.