

Making the Most of the Apprenticeship Experience

By Julia Sendor

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Why be an apprentice?

I returned to my home state of North Carolina a year ago, to work as a farm apprentice. Recently, I was trying to explain the job to visitors from England: no, I'm not a traveling Willing Worker on Organic Farms (WWOOFer), and neither am I paid an hourly rate to pick tomatoes all summer. As I struggled to explain the position, I realized that while apprenticeship is a centuries-old tradition for learning a craft, these days it's actually a very rare set-up. Apprenticing is different from almost any other way we could be working. It's one part education, one part intense manual labor; it's a small stipend but a potentially huge investment in a future career. I chose to work as an apprentice because I wanted to immerse myself in a full season where working and learning were intertwined.



Julia helping out with the auger at A Way of Life Farm

On the surface, working as a farm apprentice seems straightforward: you show up to work and to learn. At the end of a season, you've gained a set of new skills to send you on your way. Yet, over the course of the past year, I have realized that truly making the most of the apprenticeship requires its own kind of work, beyond simply the daily tasks. I have seen some apprentices quit altogether, heard of others grumbling their way through the season, and watched others completely flourish. (To clarify: I'm talking about apprentices I've met from all over the state and country, not necessarily from WNC CRAFT farms.) For myself, I have found the work incredibly fulfilling and rewarding -- but I've needed more endurance, creativity, and patience than I expected.

This article is meant to challenge apprentices to think carefully about how they can soak up the most from their experiences. It's also meant for mentor-farmers to gain an insight into the apprentice perspective.

Choosing a farm

Whether you are a farmer or a current apprentice thinking through the process of choosing a farm can help you understand what a potential apprentice might ask or help you choose a farm for another season.

From my own perspective, I had spent six years working part-time or volunteering on farms and growing a garden. I had also worked for a farm advocacy organization in West Virginia and reported on local farms and food for a newspaper. I finally realized that farming combined what I loved to do most and what I cared about most: working outside with plants and animals and learning to raise food in a way that's healthy for people and for the land. I decided that even if I continued working for advocacy organizations or reporting about farms, I would be much more effective if I were farming myself or at least had significant experience working on a farm.

Once I decided to become an apprentice I took the application process very seriously. I made a list of 20 possible farms and actually visited nine of them. Throughout the selection process, I figured out what was most important to me. I am still deciding whether I want to farm full-time.

I ended up worked for A Way of Life Farm in Sunshine, North Carolina, from March through November 2012 and then began working for Woodcrest Farm in Hillsborough, NC where I am currently an apprentice. Here is a list of factors I used to choose these farms, with examples from my own experience.

*** The farm itself -- scale, products, approaches to farming:**

I wanted to work on a scale I could imagine for myself, with a mixture of chemical-free produce and animals. A Way of Life Farm grows roughly two acres of vegetables, has young fruit trees, rotates pigs though the woods, and raises chickens. Woodcrest Farm grows a half-acre of vegetables, operates a small raw-milk dairy with cows and goats, and raises layers, meat birds, pigs, beef cattle, rabbits, and ducks.

A Way of Life Farm also works to incorporate permaculture principles. I wanted to learn how the farmers applied those principles to an income-generating market garden. I was also excited by some special practices and crops at A Way of Life which I hadn't seen anywhere else, such as the deep soil-loosening Keyline plow, cultivation of indigenous microorganisms (IMO) to add to the soil, corn grown for cornmeal, and 15 different varieties of sweet potatoes!

*** Recordkeeping:**

I appreciated A Way of Life's focus on recordkeeping. We documented daily tasks and the time they required in a crop journal, as well as all harvests in a Harvest Log. I thought this kind of recordkeeping would be an ideal way to pay attention to what we were doing, evaluate costs and benefits of different crops, and learn to analyze the information.

*** The farmers:**

Aside from simply wanting to work for friendly people (and all of them have been), I wanted to work for farmers who played an integral part in the daily work. This factor seems to depend a lot on size -- on slightly bigger farms, the farmers spent more time on larger-scale tractor work or administrative jobs. On one farm I visited, the

apprentices had barely any contact with the farmers during the day. While I expected to work by myself often, I still wanted to be able to spend some time working and learning alongside the farmer. I wanted to be able to ask questions and talk about the farm, and also simply to build a relationship. I hoped that one of the fruits of the apprenticeship would be long-term relationships with farmers whom I respected. At A Way of Life Farm, I enjoyed sharing at least one meal a week with the farmers and usually working alongside them each day. At Woodcrest Farm, I enjoy living in the farmhouse with the farmers like a family member.

I also came to realize that I valued the farmers' reasons for farming. I hadn't initially realized how important this was for me. I respect farmers who want to carve out their own world away from the destructiveness of mainstream society, and I also respect farmers who simply want to run a business. However, my own reason for farming is so that my principles of healthy food and good treatment of land can earn me a living and serve as a bridge to the outside world rather than a moat. I think I generally share this vision with both the farms where I've apprenticed. For me, that shared purpose can make even the more draining tasks much more meaningful and rewarding.

*** Market outlets:**

I knew I wanted to learn about a wide range of marketing. Because A Way of Life sells at a farmers market, through their own CSA, a multi-farm CSA, and to restaurants, I found it a perfect place to learn about different types of markets. Woodcrest sells only from the farm -- weekly milk customers, a CSA, and frequent meat and egg pickups. Here, I've learned about building relationships with customers (including the time commitment of stopping in the middle of a task to chat), and how to make your farm a destination that customers enjoy visiting.

*** Community:**

At every farm I visited, I asked the farmers about their connection to the surrounding community. Because I hope that my own farm would build strong ties to the rest of the community, I wanted to see how farmers balanced the long working hours with maintaining those connections. I found that some farmers barely knew anyone who lived around them.

At A Way of Life Farm, I was inspired by how the farmers in the multi-farm CSA held potlucks and work parties along with their business meetings. Woodcrest Farm hosts sewing, blacksmithing, and cheese-making classes, and university students and other local residents volunteer often. One of the Woodcrest farmers is active in county agricultural and economic committees and also helps maintain a nearby incubator farm.

*** Opportunities for after-hours education:**

This could include books, workshops, conferences, tours of other farms, the chance to work on other farms, and the opportunity to create your own project. A Way of Life Farm maintains a library where apprentices can check out farming books, participates in CRAFT tours, and allows apprentices to spend a day working at each of the other farms in the multi-farm CSA. The farmers also set aside a small plot for me to garden on my own.

The Woodcrest farmers let me sign up for a county-wide night class on education. They've encouraged me to attend conferences and workshops and to bring the information back to them. Here, I also have the unusual chance to plan and manage the vegetable CSA and to share the profits. While this role is not what I would generally expect from an internship, many farms do hire farm managers or apprentices with extra responsibilities.

*** Basic details:**

At both of the farms where I've worked, I prioritized housing that was comfortable, a stipend I could afford, and a schedule that seemed reasonable. Take some time to think about whether running water, electricity, and internet are important to you -- especially how you will feel when you are hot and tired after a long day of work. Living off the grid can feel freeing or draining.

On both farms, I appreciated a set work schedule. Some farms end the day whenever the farmer decides that the work is done. While this is a realistic lifestyle for a farm-owner, as an apprentice, I like knowing when the day is going to be over. It's helpful to be able to plan for the evening. And I can still choose to keep working after the day ends, to test whether I have the stamina to work those extra hours. At A Way of Life Farm, I received a week of paid vacation in the middle of the summer. The vacation was refreshing -- and showed that the farmers valued their apprentices' well-being.

Defining your own goals

I discovered that defining very specific goals is more important than I had expected. It's easy to assume, "Well, my goal is just to learn to farm well" and then come away from the season realizing that you worked incredibly hard, yet didn't learn everything you had hoped. It makes sense to treat the education component seriously and intentionally -- that's the true advantage that an apprenticeship holds over hourly wage work.

You and your farmer-mentors should clearly define your goals for the season so that they can work with you to help you learn. I was lucky enough to work for farmers at A Way of Life Farm who emphasized goal-setting and even posted their apprentices' goals on the refrigerator! Take the time to sit down at the beginning of the season and outline your goals. Then check up again halfway through the season. Have you gained the skills and experience you hoped to gain? If not, why not? Will you be able to by the end of the season? Do you need to change or add to your goals?

Some goals to consider include:

The Big Picture -- what does this apprenticeship mean to your life?

Are you planning to run your own farm, feed yourself or family and friends with a homesteading-style garden, work with farmers through advocacy or education -- or just get a taste of what farm work is like and leave your options open?

Big-picture goals can also help clarify the hard skills you want to learn:

Starting seeds, bed preparation, using a tiller, using a seeder, irrigation setups, weed and pest control, approaches to soil fertility, crop rotation, cover crop timing and selection, recordkeeping and business planning, and marketing -- to name a few.

Because an apprentice has so much work and so much new knowledge to absorb already, it's easy to let some key skills slip by the wayside. For example, I hadn't even put much thought into the irrigation system -- until I suddenly realized I needed to make a point of really learning it. At a mid-season review of my list of goals, I brought it up. The farmers let me help when they reconfigured the system and set up the pump in a new spot. It was exciting and empowering -- to understand clearly this system that had been somewhat of a mystery to me all season.

What about your quality of life?

For me, farming is directly related to goals for my own quality of life. Because I told them from the beginning what was important to me, farmers I've worked for have generously taught me and other interns about canning, mead-making, cheese-making, sewing, welding, beekeeping, and even making lip balm. These skills would vary from farmer to farmer, and on some farms it simply wouldn't be possible. However, this kind of after-hours education has made the apprenticeships so much richer. I also chose specific farms because of the strong and supportive community the farmers had built -- so I laid it out from the beginning that I wanted to attend farming potlucks, planning sessions, and community events.

Setting ground rules/expectations with the farmers

I can't overstate: the work can be tiring, hot, cold, and repetitive. Apprentices and farmers work and live in relatively close quarters. Even among the best-hearted people, friction can build. Setting clear understandings and expectations from the start can make sure no one feels let down and keep everything smoother.

Obvious ground rules are compensation, your work schedule, how long you'll stay at the farm, and the type of work you'll be expected to do. Once again, though it seems straightforward, make sure to think about possible complications. For example, can you truly afford the stipend you'll receive? Can you commit 100% to staying through the end of the season? Since finding post-apprenticeship work can be stressful, it might be hard to pass up a job opportunity that starts before your commitment ends. But that leaves the farmers in the lurch. Think about the possibility and how you plan to take care of yourself while honoring your commitment.

Some ground rules to consider:

- Use of farmers' house -- shower, laundry, phone, internet, farming-related books, canning equipment, etc. Are there certain days, or hours of the day, when you can or cannot use them?
- How much food from the farm can you take for yourself? Are meat/eggs more closely rationed? Some farmers (and apprentices) trade their products with other vendors at the market -- is that allowed for apprentices at your farm?
- Visitors -- is there any visiting policy? How do your farmers feel about visitors who want to help out on the farm?

- Sick days or emergencies -- what happens if you get sick or injured, or have a personal emergency? Of course you can't predict all scenarios, but it's a good idea to talk about it beforehand.

Conflict resolution

Fortunately, I have not faced many conflicts. Yet from the conflicts I've witnessed, I do believe in following a few key principles.

- Catch frustrations immediately: when everyone is tired, little concerns can grow messy quickly. A farm is no place for behind-the-back grumbling or passive-aggression. If you have a problem, make a clear decision: can I let this slide, or do I need to talk about it?
- Don't involve extra people: Problems get even messier if you complain to people who aren't directly involved. It puts them in an awkward position and prolongs the conflict rather than addressing it.
- Address the problem thoughtfully: Think carefully about the other point of view before you bring up your concern. If you need to address it, choose a calm and quiet time. As you share your perspective, also describe your understanding of any other point of view. Make sure everyone understands each other's perspective. That's important because sometimes simple miscommunications cause the problem. Either way, remember the common goals that everyone on the farm shares. Treat the other people involved as teammates, not opponents, and address the conflict together.

How the work can work for you

Some apprentices might arrive at a farm with a vision of learning a dozen new fun facts and skills every day. That is not realistic. Here is where the blurry line of work and education can be tricky -- the apprenticeship isn't school, and some days you might just feel like a very sweaty workhorse.

It's important to understand, appreciate, and take advantage of the many ways you are learning. I focused on three: gaining brand-new information and skills, refining those skills through repetition, and learning what I do and don't like to do. Each type of task is a chance to ask yourself: Could I do this for a living, day after day and year after year? If not, could I figure out a way to do it differently?

As the season progresses, it's also useful to imagine the decisions you would make if the farm were yours. Definitely, definitely keep following the farmers' instructions -- but also challenge yourself to think in the same ways they're thinking. Can you predict what the to-do list would be for any given day, and the order of priorities? How would you approach a particular pest problem? What do you think would be the most attractive way to display the products at the market?

Again, I've also found it easy to get caught up in the basic work of transplanting, hoeing, and harvesting that I might unknowingly miss out on other components that keep the farm running. Work with your farmers to make sure you can learn all of the tasks they consider essential: from irrigation set-up, to recordkeeping, timing of starting seeds and transplanting, bed preparation, tractor implements (even if you can't use the tractor), best sources for tools and containers.

While helping work at the farmers markets, I found it useful -- and fun -- to try to invest the same kind of energy as if the farm were my own. While you probably don't

stand to benefit from the actual sales, this is an amazing chance to practice setting up an attractive display, connecting with customers, finding ways to describe products to sell them better, and analyzing market sales.

Having fun

Of course this comes from you, not from any article. But a reminder can be helpful: have fun! Sometimes it seems hard to enjoy yourself when you're soaked in sweat and the rows to hoe look endless. On the other hand, sometimes it's easier when you're soaked in sweat -- and therefore slightly light-headed and giddy. Keeping a light heart helps me remember why I love this work, and why I chose it in the first place. In its way, joking around actually helps me stay focused and serious, by refreshing my energy.

For inspiration, here's a sampling of ways that other workers and I have had a good time:

- Singing: Whenever I had internet access, I would research song lyrics, so that I could sing my favorite songs the whole way through. The songs kept me company while I worked. By the end of the season, I had a repertoire that could last the better part of the morning. If you're lucky, co-workers will join in. I especially like singing songs by category: farming songs, pop star songs from our middle school days, best songs for a first dance at a wedding, Motown.
- Making up our own songs and rhymes: I've had fun making up limericks for other farmers and a song about my farmers' potty-training baby.
- Games: Keeping an ear out for good band names (Earworm and the Maggots, Honkin' Hunks of Meat), making a countdown on the whiteboard for long tasks (digging beds of sweet potatoes), and racing to finish a job, for the prize of a dinner cooked for you by your competitors (the other interns).

Resources for next steps:

Finding employment on another farm: Some posts are for apprentices, others for manager positions

- NC Apprentice Link

<http://www.organicgrowersschool.org/apprentice-link>

- ATTRA's National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service

<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/internships/index.php>

- Carolina Farm Stewardship Association

<http://www.carolinafarmstewards.org/internshipreferralservice/>

- Growfood.org

<http://www.growfood.org>

Regional opportunities for extra education

- Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) offers annual conferences with scholarships available for new and beginning farmers and offers and advertises workshops in North and South Carolina. Their website includes resources for farmers and local food finders. CFSA also hosts annual farm tours -- a great opportunity to visit other farms. <http://www.carolinafarmstewards.org>

- Farmer Incubator and Grower Program (FIG). will provide low-cost land leases for vegetable, cut flower, herb, and pasture-based animal farm ventures as well as a shared equipment pool and mentorship opportunities for beginning farmers. The new FIG Farm is located in the heart of Valle Crucis, on the site of the former Appalachian State University Teaching & Research Farm, on land owned by the Valle Crucis Conference Center.

<http://mavfarms.moonfruit.com/#/fig/4553376074>

- Growing Small Farms: Farming resources compiled by North Carolina Cooperative Extension's Sustainable Agriculture agent, Debbie Roos. Contact Debbie Roos to be added to a list serve for farmers to share information.

<http://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/>

- Organic Growers School: Supports CRAFT and Apprentice Link, and hosts annual food and farming conference.

<http://www.organicgrowersschool.org/>

- Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG): Hosts annual regional conference, with scholarships available. Posts online resources.

<http://www.ssawg.org/>

- Sustainable Agriculture programs at Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton and Central Carolina Community College in Pittsboro: Hands-on programs, which have inspired many farmers in North Carolina.

<http://www.wpcc.edu/news.php?id=11>

www.cccc.edu/sustainableag/

- Breeze Incubator Farm and PLANT Classes: Run by Orange County, NC, the incubator farm in Hillsborough leases land to beginning farmers. The eight-week PLANT workshops series on sustainable agriculture is required for farmers leasing the land, and open to all members of the community.

<http://www.orangecountyfarms.org/PLANTatBreeze.asp>