

Western SARE Farm Internship Handbook

By Maud Powell

It is the responsibility of prospective interns to take all necessary precautions when interviewing for or accepting positions, and any intern is solely responsible for obtaining necessary information concerning host farms, using caution and common sense. It is the responsibility of host farms to be aware of federal and state labor laws related to securing interns or apprentices. NCAT hosts the following information only as a public service, and statements do not imply any recommendation by NCAT, its ATTRA project, or USDA.

Introduction-Why Have Interns?

Farm internships provide quality on-farm opportunities for hopeful future organic farmers. Well-trained interns are in a better position to become successful producers, which helps increase the pool of farmers, especially younger ones.

The number of small farmers in the United States is declining and that population is aging, making attracting young people to sustainable agriculture vital. In 1997, the average age of U.S. farmers was 54.3. The proportion of farmers aged 55 and over has risen from 37% in 1954 to 61% in 1997.

In contrast, the number of people, especially young people, interested in sustainable agriculture is increasing. According to the Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) project, more than 10,000 people searched for internships in Western states on ATTRA's database in 2006. Eleven Oregon farmers surveyed received between fifty and one hundred applications last year.

Organic farmers in southern Oregon's Applegate Valley and elsewhere are increasingly reliant upon interns as a source of help. Most small farmers face major financial obstacles in running economically viable operations. A 1997 U.S. Department of Agriculture report stated that the average farm grossing under \$50,000 a year had a negative cash flow from farm income. Of fifteen small farmers surveyed in Oregon's Applegate Valley, eleven were seeking interns.

There are many compelling social and educational reasons to incorporate internship programs into small farm operations. However, internships entail a great deal of negotiation, patience, energy and time. This handbook is designed to provide helpful hints to improve the quality of your on-farm internship.

Who Should Use this Handbook

This handbook is designed for producers who have decided to use interns or already have an internship program in place and are looking for ways to improve it. The decision to add an internship program to your farm operation should not be taken lightly. **You will also need to look into the legalities of internships in your state or country.** If you are currently considering the question of whether or not to have interns, we highly recommend the publication *Cultivating a New Crop of Farmers: Is On-Farm Mentoring Right for You?* published by the New England Small Farm Institute (NESFI) (www.smallfarms.org/bookstore/order.pdf). This workbook raises all the questions and issues that go into deciding whether or not an internship program is right for your situation.

Where to Find Interns

Most farmers attract their interns through online databases. These databases allow growers to create profiles of their farm operations and describe the details of their particular internship program. The profiles can be edited from season to season to reflect changes in the program. Prospective interns can then search the databases and contact farms they are interested in interning with. The most common databases used are:

- ATTRA, www.attrainternships.ncat.org
- Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF), www.woof.org
- Organic Volunteers, www.organicvolunteers.com

Other farmers hang posters around college campuses, place ads in agricultural publications, or use word-of-mouth to find local intern applicants. If you have a good program, former interns may recommend your farm to their friends who are interested in interning.

Selecting Your Interns

Once prospective interns contact a farm, the grower should have a procedure for screening and selection. This procedure could involve any or all of the following elements:

- a written application;
- a formal interview (see list of sample interview questions on page 3)
- conversations by e-mail, in person, or on the phone;
- checking references;
- an on-site visit, a working visit, and a trial-period.

Many farmers have prospective interns complete an application (see farm Web sites in the ATTRA Internships List for examples). We highly recommend setting specific policies and discussing them with prospective interns to provide more information about your expectations. The list of Key Interview Questions (below) can be used to develop a list of policies. Offering detailed information about your farm operation will allow prospective interns a chance to self-select.

Most farmers insist on a face-to face meeting before making a final selection. If a prospective intern lives too far away to visit beforehand, use all other available means of screening. Some farmers recommend a working visit, in which a prospective intern will visit for an afternoon and work on a project with the farmer.

Once agreement has been reached, it may be best to have the intern sign an on-farm agreement to establish a formal relationship. Many farmers say that agreeing on definite start and end dates helps set a precedent for clear boundaries. If a farmer has any doubts or concerns about a perspective intern, he or she should either opt to offer a short-term trial period or not invite the person. Most farmers agree that it is much better to wait for a better applicant and be short-handed for a few days or weeks, than to select a questionable applicant and face more complications down the road.

Key Interview Questions

1. What kind of physical labor have you done?

Farmers are looking for reliable people who will stay through the long – and sometimes arduous – growing season. Many first-time interns have romantic notions

about farming, which need to be tempered with some grit. The reality is that most young people today have not done a lot of physical labor and are not prepared for the very physical nature of farming.

2. What are your long-term agriculture goals?

Chances are, someone who is really passionate about a future in farming will be more likely to work hard and stay through the entire season than someone who just wants an interesting summer experience.

3. Tell me about your living preferences.

This question will be more or less important depending on the intern's living situation. For example, if interns are expected to live on site and share cooking facilities and meals, eating preferences may be a big issue.

4. Tell me about your working style.

Asking prospective interns about their working style may give farmers important insights into their attitudes about work. This may be a difficult question for some interns to answer, so use some of these follow-up questions to get more information: Do you prefer to work alone or on a team? Do you like a lot of instruction and guidance, or do you prefer to observe and try things on your own? Do you prefer to start and end early or take frequent breaks? What have been your favorite jobs?

The answers to these questions will help indicate whether your working styles are compatible. Compatibility will depend, in part, on your farm situation. For example, a very social person who likes to work in groups is bound to struggle on a geographically isolated farm that has no other interns.

Five Benchmarks of a Successful Farm Internship

While many small farmers are interested in developing a mutually beneficial relationship with young people interested in spending a season working on a farm, internship programs bring with them a range of challenges. Many farmers tell tales of being left in the middle of the summer with no help after an intern decided to move on

with little or no warning. Interns may find the learning experience of farming falling short of their initial expectations.

How can you avoid this? Through experience as interns and as farmers working with interns, and through interviews with fifteen other farmers, we have identified five key benchmarks to a successful farm internship.

1. Communication

Communication is the most significant benchmark. It starts well before the internship begins and is constantly reflected in the relationship between the farmer and intern. We have found that investing a lot of time up-front to set clear expectations of the internship—including everything from sometimes unpredictable long stretches of hard physical labor through the week, to policies about visitors, to when the best time to ask questions is—is paramount. Use your answers to the list of Key Interview Questions (above) to develop policies for your farm. In some cases, because of the dynamic nature of farming, expectations will need to be somewhat ambiguous. For example, some farmers specify a *range* of time spent on farm work per week, as dictated by season and weather. Interns must understand that farm work is not governed by clocking in and clocking out, but by tasks that need to be completed. Any ambiguous guidelines may, of course, need to be revisited at intervals with the interns.

Most experienced farmers have found that checking in with interns on a regular basis, at least once a week, forestalls misunderstandings. Weekly meetings may consist of the farmer laying out a plan for tasks to be performed during the next five to seven days, offering feedback from the previous week, discussing any concerns or frustrations, and addressing questions.

These meetings can be conducted efficiently, but must provide a supportive atmosphere where interns can air any concerns they may have. Fostering open communication in a relaxed meeting environment will provide both interns and farmers to broach topics that may be potentially contentious or complicated.

Once a topic has been raised, it may be appropriate to continue the discussion while working at a farm task, like hoeing or harvesting. Working together will allow time to be silent and reflect on the issue. For example, if an intern expresses frustration at the

number and type of tasks he or she is responsible for, it might be useful to have a discussion about the seasonal ebbs and flows of work on a farm; strategies for pacing yourself while farming; or the ways in which our culture does not value or promote physical work. Although this particular frustration cannot usually be resolved during one meeting, it may be an opportunity to open up a longer discussion that could be an excellent opportunity to educate and inspire other interns.

In other situations, it may be more appropriate or prudent to resolve an issue immediately. For example, if an intern is complaining about a plumbing leak in their living quarters, it is best to come up with a plan of action to immediately address the problem.

2. Diversity

Quality internships give interns a realistic sense of the repetitive nature of many farm tasks, while also providing a diversity of experiences. Giving interns opportunities to perform a variety of farm tasks, including infrastructure development projects, marketing, and distribution, gives them a greater sense of the whole farm operation and also helps train them to be knowledgeable, skilled farm managers.

Diversity in this context refers to creating a range of experiences in responsibilities, tasks, and physical challenges. As an intern becomes more knowledgeable about the farm operation during the course of the season, offering greater levels of responsibility is a great way to build morale and confidence. For example, an experienced intern could be assigned to call local restaurants and grocery stores and take weekly orders of produce, or be in charge of bottom-lining the day's harvest.

We have found that offering a diversity of farm tasks seems to increase the level of satisfaction among interns. Often, there are repetitive tasks that may take many hours or even days to complete. Interns who are serious about farming need to understand that a great deal of difficult, "boring" work goes into the job. It may be useful to acknowledge the fact that the task at hand is a grind, and remind them of other upcoming tasks.

3. Teaching Healthy Habits

Part of training interns is helping them to work hard without causing bodily harm. Interns should be taught to check in with their bodies and switch tasks when they notice acute soreness. It is helpful to spend some time explaining the ergonomics of every new task you teach. If you notice an intern stooped over while hoeing or not bending their knees as they pick up a heavy item, gently correct them. One farmer actually hires a chiropractor early in the season to review basic body mechanics with her interns. Offering a diversity of farm tasks and encouraging correct body positioning will reduce the chance of injury.

4. Context

Providing context allows an intern to understand why they are doing the work and what they are accomplishing. Often, providing context is the key to both motivation and knowledge retention. Interns who understand *why* they are doing something in a particular way will be far more likely to follow directions and grasp the larger significance of the task at hand.

Context can be broken down into three general categories. First, it can refer to how your farm operation fits into the sustainable agriculture movement. The movement seeks to reassert a system of agriculture that ensures the continued existence of the resources it is using, primarily soil and water. It is useful to explain how your farm operation fits into this (or your particular) vision of the greater movement.

Secondly, context can refer to the way a given project fits into your whole farm plan: why you are doing a project on the farm, how it is benefiting the farm, and how it meets the objectives of the farm. Thirdly, context can be task specific: instructing interns on the basic steps necessary to accomplish a task, how those steps are executed, and why those steps are done in the specific way demonstrated. One example is the work of sowing a green manure crop on a farm. Green manure crops provide cover for the soil over the winter, add nutrients to the soil and build organic matter in the soil. In this case, the task-specific context is showing the intern how to use the broadcast seeder, how to prepare the field for seeding, and how to cover the seeds. The farmer would also explain to interns the reasoning behind their methods, which are usually based on efficiency, results, and equipment available.

5. Infrastructure

The infrastructure available must provide for the basic needs of your interns: shelter, warmth, toilet facilities, and the ability to feed oneself. Infrastructure varies greatly from farm to farm. In some cases, interns sleep in tents and share a communal kitchen. In other cases, they may live in a self-contained cabin or yurt, or else may be living in a room in the farmer's house and sharing the main kitchen space. Many different arrangements can and do work. Infrastructure will depend on the needs and comfort level of a particular intern, and what a farmer has available on their land.

Farmers should spend some time in the winter and early spring assessing the condition of intern housing and making necessary adjustments *before* the intern arrives for the season. Make sure a prospective intern sees the accommodation beforehand. Ideally, he or she would spend a night in the living quarters to assess comfort level.

Developing a Farm Policy

Use the answers to these questions to formulate the basis of your on-farm policies. Providing interns with a clear set of guidelines about your farm is essential to creating a high-quality internship.

1. Time Management

What is your weekly schedule? (For each day, include time of rising, breakfast, commencement of first task, educational time, other meals, last task, completion of days' work.) Explain how times and tasks may vary, based on the day of the week (e.g., markets on Tuesdays and Fridays may require late work the previous evening and earlier-than-usual rising to accommodate travel time)? Does the schedule vary based on the season?

2. Meals/Consumables

Do you provide any grocery staples for interns? If so, what and how much of each?

Can an intern eat whatever they want from the farm or take produce only when there is a surplus? Can they share produce with friends or family? Can they preserve farm products? Should they ask before they harvest any produce?

3. Time Off

Do you provide any time off during the season? How much advance notice do you require for an intern's planned trip or break? Must it coincide with slack periods on the farm?

4. Trial Period

Do you have a trial period? If so, for how long? Do you hold a meeting at the end of the trial period to formalize the internship?

5. Meetings

Do you hold regular meetings with your interns? What do your meetings consist of (daily plan; weekly plan; airing interpersonal issues; providing feedback)?

6. Questions and Feedback from Interns

Do you prefer to be asked questions about farming on a need basis? Would you rather be asked questions at specific times (during farm meetings; at the end of the day)? Are you willing to receive constructive criticism from your interns about your farm? Would you prefer that the intern conclude their internship before offering their observations about your farm?

7. Visitors

Can interns invite guests to visit the farm? Are there times or days of the week when they can visit (in the evenings; on weekends)? Do you expect interns' visitors to do any farm work? If you are open to having visitors for more than a day or two, do you have expectations about them participating in farm tasks? What expectations do you have about visitors' behavior while at your farm?

8. Education

What kind of farm education can your interns expect? Do you have a library of farm books and, if so, do your interns have access to it? Do you offer any classes or reading assignments? Will interns have opportunities to visit other farms? Will they have opportunities to participate in any local or regional agriculture workshops or trainings?

9. Alcohol and Drug Policy

Do you review the policy on your farm with all incoming interns? Are the repercussions clear for an intern who violates your policy?

10. Privacy

Are there times of the day or week that you do not want to be disturbed by your interns (e.g., after 9 p.m. or on Sunday mornings), except in the case of emergencies? If you have a family, what times of the day would you like to have alone with them? Are there rooms in your house that an intern can have access to anytime?

11. Financial arrangement

What kind of stipend do you offer? Do you have an agreement with an educational institution to offer college credits? Is there some kind of incentive for staying the whole season? How much is in-kind (including training and education, housing, and food) and how much is spending money for incidentals such as gasoline, toothpaste, etc. Do cash transactions take place at the beginning or the end of the work period? Generally, farm internships are not intended as a source of significant summer earnings.

12. Working with interns

How much do you work alongside interns? Does this vary through the season?

Adding Value to Your Farm Internship: A Checklist

A basic internship offers the opportunity to live and work on a farm for part or all of a season. But you can take certain steps that will increase the value of the intern's experience. Following are some fairly simple ways to create a value-added internship and improve the success of your program.

- Meet weekly with interns to review the past week, plan for the coming week, and discuss any relevant issues.
- Offer interns a small area of land to grow a crop of their own or let them choose a project to work on in their free time.
- Include interns in farm-planning discussions.
- Be aware of agricultural workshops in your area, and give interns the day off to attend.
- Offer reading assignments to interns.
- Make your agriculture library available to interns.
- Discuss your philosophy of farming with interns. Ask them about theirs.
- If you live near other farms that also use interns, consider setting up an internship cooperative so all interns get the benefit of seeing how other farms function.
- If interns have any problem with their housing situation (plumbing, electrical, etc.), make it a priority to fix it.
- Offer interns preserved food or winter-storage produce when their internship concludes.
- Encourage interns to take time off the farm sometimes. Let interns know about any swimming holes or favorite hikes in your area.
- Offer interns a weeklong break at some point in the season. Vegetable producers find that the optimal time for this is in mid-July.
- Give interns opportunities to sell at grower's markets.
- Surprise interns with ice cream on a hot afternoon.

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