

Recommendations from former NOFA-VT Apprentice

Dear Prospective Apprentice,

First of all, I would like to commend all of you for pursuing a farming apprenticeship position through NOFA-VT's Apprentice & Willing Worker Program. Working as an apprentice on an organic farm for seven months in 1999, I can say with confidence that the insights and knowledge that you will gain by farming as an apprentice will be well worth your efforts.

Now that you have applied, you are about to enter phase two of your search – to secure an apprenticeship position on a farm that best suits you. You will have some important decisions to make with so many farms to choose from – it may seem like a daunting task to narrow the list down to just one farm. Drawing on my own experiences, I have come up with a few tips that I hope will make your search more successful and enjoyable.

Your first objective should be to ask yourself what it is that you really want to learn over the course of the season. Before you peruse the list of farm hosts, jot down the goals that are most important to you. Are you interested primarily in learning about vegetable and fruit production? Perennials or dairy? A CSA or wholesale production or a combination? You can modify your list as you see what is available, but it is good to question your own goals first.

Next, think about the setting, which you prefer to work. Are you interested in residing in a less populated region with less of today's modern conveniences or would you prefer to be closer to a town or city?

It is now time to sit down and read through the descriptions of the farms in your NOFA Farm Apprentice Host Directory. Your best bet is to skim through and pick out approximately ten farms that really grab you based on the goals you laid out for yourself. The finer picking and choosing will come next. Looking at your ten farms, I feel that you will make life much easier if you cut these in half by looking at the finer details. Take into consideration location, stipend, and the various expertise areas of the farm host. If a farm lists a wide array of produce but adds that it "specializes in mesclun and greenhouse tomatoes," you can bet that a large part of your duties will be centered around these specialty crops.

Contact your five favorite choices and clarify any details that are yet unclear. What is your initial reaction in speaking with the farmer for the first time? Make a note of this, this is important. Set up an appointment to visit the farm. Your visit will be the single most important thing you do in making your choice. Be sure to be on time for your appointments. Bring a list of questions to ask the farmer. Ask him/her to give you a rundown of apprentice responsibilities and duties. Have the farmer describe a typical day in the life on that particular farm and what your hours of work will be each day. You should be able to visualize a typical day in the life of the farm you are visiting and where you fit in. If you will be living on the farm, where will you live? Will you be cooking your own food or will you be eating with the family? Are there any other chores that will be asked of you regularly? Will you work weekends? Clarify stipend issues. Does the farm offer worker insurance in case of injury?

Make sure to clarify your educational interests and talk about them with the farmer. If you are interested in some form of structured learning on the farm, make this clear and ask what sort of apprentice education the farm will offer.

Have the farmer give you a tour of the farm and apprentice living quarters. Take a good look around. Do the living conditions feel like something you would be comfortable with? It will help to figure out what kinds of living and working conditions would be ideal for you.

I am not sure if you will have access to farm references or not at the time you receive this letter, but I highly recommend asking the farmer for references. Ideally, the farm has worked with apprentices before and will be able to supply you with names and contact information of former apprentices/employees. By contacting references, you will be able to get another point of view in regards to the particular farm and the work environment. The farm will most likely ask you for a list of your references, so it might be a good idea to have one handy when you visit.

With your visit to the farm complete, ask yourself the following questions: Did you get a good feeling overall from the farmer during your visit? Did you click with the farm host? This might be the most important question you ask yourself. You will be spending a lot of time in the coming months with the farmer you choose, so it is most important that you hit it off on a personal level, before considering the other aspects of the farm.

Did it seem that the farmer put a lot of thought into apprenticeships and how they will fit this into farm operations? Was the farmer able to answer your questions completely? Can you imagine yourself living and working in the surrounding area that you visited? You will be

spending a lot of time on the farm that you choose and it is important that you feel good about your potential new home?

After visiting your five candidate farms as I suggest above, you probably have a pretty good idea as to which one best suits you. Do not forget to contact references before making a final decision?

Remember that past apprentices will have insights that you could not possibly have obtained after just one visit.

Once you have chosen your farm (and of course, they will have to choose you too!), it would be wise to type up some sort of agreement with the farmer **before you begin your apprenticeship** about the specifics that you discussed: stipend, insurance, room and board, duties, educational expectations, and your schedule. Although farming is not a 9-5 office job with predictable hours, you should clarify beforehand and in writing, what your daily work hours will be, especially if you will be residing on the farm in question. Farming is hard work and it is important to know that you have private time to rest and process all of the new experiences that you have been having.

I hope that some of these suggestions help you in your search with the farm that best suits you. By carefully considering your many options, you are much more likely to have a rewarding experience as an apprentice and to fulfill your goals!

Good luck!!

Kevin Fuchs
Former NOFA-VT Apprentice
Written in 2000