

## **Suggestions for Interviewing and Hiring a Paid or Volunteer Farm Apprentice**

Have the potential apprentice work for a few hours with you, either paid or as a volunteer. Notice how they work, how they take direction, talk to them while they work about why they are interested in farming, what their experience is, what your experience is as a farmer, etc.

### **Possible interview questions**

Please tell us about yourself. Why are you interested in farming?

What are your long range plans?

Have you worked on a farm before? Gardened?

What do you hope to learn from this job and apprenticeship?

Are there any health issues that might be a cause for concern? For example, do you get migraines or have you got a bad back?

What hours and days are you wanting to work? Do you have any flexibility?

Have you done work that is outside before? Physically challenging work?

Do you have any special concerns or questions you want to raise?

Are there skills you have that you think will be useful to you this season and as a farmer?

How do you resolve conflicts at work? Can you give a specific example?

Farming and working on a farm isn't a high paying occupation. What is your thinking about what this means for you and your family?

Please give us 2-3 references of people who've worked with you previously.

Be specific about your **expectations of the apprentice**, including:

Production time versus education time: Some time will be spent focused on production, where the push is to get the job done; the apprentice needs to understand that a lot of farming is repetitive, sometimes boring work and that if they want to be a farmer, they need to be able to enjoy and live with this. Some time will be spent that is purely training time, focused on the farmer sharing what they know with the apprentice. Some time will be mixed, for example, where the farmer and apprentice are weeding together, but talking as they weed about what weeds they are pulling, their growth habits, what they indicate about soil health and balance, etc. The farmer decided what time is production, what is training, and more casually, what is both.

Pace and quality of work: Spell out how fast and furious you work and what your expectation will be of the apprentice. Talk about trade-offs for inexperienced workers between quality and quantity, that sometimes you want them to work more slowly and do high quality work, and other times you want them to work fast with less attention to quality, but that in general their goal is to be learn how to work fast and do good quality work at the same time.

“Micro-managing” or setting standards? Some farmers are very specific in such practices as post-harvest handling (“Don’t toss the squash into that bucket, it scratches the skin and

makes them look bad”) or weeding (“You need to get those little weeds right in next to the plants”); others are more casual about exactly how to do specific tasks. Know what your own practices and standards are, communicate them clearly and repeatedly to the apprentice. When interviewing, articulate your standards, for example, say “In general, we have high standards for how we do our work here and will expect you to follow our practices and standards while you are working for us. We have our own ways of doing things and you will need to learn our way of doing things.” Express that they need to do things “your way” before experimenting with new ways or with doing it how they may have learned at another farm.

Work conditions: Be clear that you work in the rain, in 105 degree heat, with headaches, colds, and aching muscles. If a job needs to be done, it gets done. Will you expect the same of them? Talk to them about mosquitoes, chiggers, such things as allergic reactions to tomatoes and how you expect them to deal with this.

Work Plan: Tell them how you set the day’s, week’s, or month’s work. Do you go over the work plan every Monday morning for the week? Do you tell them first thing in the morning what their tasks are for the day? Do they participate in the task-setting process?

Working alone/working with others: Give the apprentice some sense of how much time will be spent working alone, how much with other workers or volunteers, and how much with you.

### **Terms of Employment/Volunteer Supervision**

Wages- hourly, weekly, monthly? Do you have them fill out time-sheets? How often do you pay? If they are being paid by the week or monthly, what are the expected hours? If the work is piling up, should they expect to work more hours for the same amount of money? If the season is slow, should they expect to work fewer hours for the same amount of money? If they are paid hourly, what is the minimum number of hours per week? What is the maximum? How often are they paid?

Hours expected: Be clear with the potential apprentice about what your expectations are about hours. When do they show up for work, how long do they work, what breaks do they get, how long is lunch, is lunch paid? What, if any, is the allowable range for being late- 5 minutes? 15 minutes? Do they need to call you if they are going to be more late than that? What if they are sick? What about any planned vacations they may have? What about holidays?

Farm-crisis-mode: What happens Friday night at 5:00 when the work isn’t done and you have to get ready for market? Will you expect them to stay past their regular working hours? What happens if you are pushing to get crops seeded before the rain, but the apprentice is only supposed to work until 5:00?

Food: Do they get to take farm produce home? Do they get to take firsts? Seconds only? How do you decide what they take and in what quantity?

Room and Board: Do they get room and board as part of their apprenticeship? If yes, show them the space, talk to them about what “board” means.

Privacy and other issues: What expectations do you have of them around friends visiting the apprentice? Can they have parties, drink beer, smoke?

Inclusion in farm/family activities: Will they be welcome at family events? Will you take them to church with you Sunday morning?

### **Checking References**

Call the references and tell them who you are, the position you are considering for the potential employee. Ask the reference what their relationship was/is to the applicant. What was their general experience working with this person? What particular strengths did that person have? Weaknesses? Would they hire or work with that person again? If there were any special concerns that came up, ask about them. Take notes as you talk. Also keep in mind that references, while they don’t necessarily lie, sometimes stretch the truth or avoid difficult areas, so take what they say with a grain of salt.

### **Offering the Apprenticeship to the Person**

Tell them that you want to work with them. Tell them very clearly what the terms of employment will be, the start-date, and the end date. Set a time for them to meet with you to fill out employment forms (W-4s, etc.). We suggest treating the Volunteer Apprentices as seriously as paid positions: develop a working agreement with hours, start-date and end-date.

Tell them that you are applying formally now to the Growing Growers Program to participate in the 2005 Apprenticeship Program. If they haven’t filled out a written application or you haven’t, fill them out and send them in.

Talk with the person about what your options will be if you aren’t chosen to participate as a host farm and apprentice with Growing Growers. Will you hire them anyway?

### **Legal Obligations in Hiring Employees:**

Host farms are expected to hire, supervise, pay, and terminate employees according to applicable state and federal laws. If you need help with any of the legal aspects of being an employer, please talk to the Program Manager.

*Special thanks to “Internships in Sustainable Farming: A Handbook for Farmers” by Doug Jones, Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York*