

Choosing a Farm and a Mentor: Tips for Prospective Apprentices

Farm apprenticeships are literally unique experiences – no two are identical. So many different variables figure in to the quality and richness of your apprenticeship experience – from the farm, to the location, to the dynamic between you, your mentors, and your fellow apprentices. Each of these factors is influenced by things that are highly personal and variable. What might be a wonderful and fulfilling experience for one person may be a disaster for another. This is why finding the right match between you and the farm you ultimately decide to apprentice at is so crucial, and why you need to take the initial selection process so seriously. Here are a few tips that we've learned over the years to help you with that process. Good luck and please don't hesitate to get in touch with us at MOFGA if you need any help.

* What kind of farm do you want to work on? What type of farming do you want to learn? Farms differ very widely in scale and enterprise, so think about what you really want to learn and choose a farm that offers it. If you're not sure yet, it's best to choose a farm with a wide diversity of activities and enterprises to engage you.

*What is the farmer's experience and skill level? How long has he or she been farming? Experience and skill mean a lot, but aren't necessarily the most important characteristics in a mentor. Communication and teaching skills are equally, if not more, important. Many beginner farmers (less than 5 years experience) have a lot to offer apprentices if you are willing to learn alongside them.

*Is the location of the farm important to you? Would you like to be close to a population center? The coast? The mountains? Is it important to have other apprentices on farms nearby? Do you have transportation?

*Is it important to you to have other apprentices on the farm with you, or are you OK with being the sole apprentice?

*Pay close attention to whether the farmer is full-time on the farm during the growing season. If they have an off-farm job, you may be left alone at least some of the time, and this could interfere with your learning process and potentially be frustrating. Think about whether this is OK with you. Ask part-time farmers how much time they spend off the farm during the growing season.

*Check references!! They are often the best way to understand just what life might be like on a particular farm. Ask lots of questions of them.

*Know what kind of learner you are, and make sure that a farmer's teaching and management style is compatible. If you feel the need for structured instruction and supplemental reading, can the farmer (and the work schedule) accommodate that?

*Does the farmer encourage and/or enable apprentices to attend MOFGA's weekly Farm Training Project workshops? For example, is the farmer willing to adapt your work schedule to allow you to attend? Could you borrow one of the farm vehicles if need be? Have past apprentices at the farm attended workshops? If not, why not?

*Do the living arrangements match your lifestyle and privacy needs? Living in the farmer's house can be a wonderful relationship-building experience, but it can also be very challenging to both live and work with someone, and family dynamics are also a consideration.