

## Sharing Farm Wisdom: Making the most of your Farm Apprenticeship and Finding Your Farm Feet with Rowena Hopkins, Farmers Markets of Nova Scotia/Jitterbug Sodas

### *Intro*

I (Rowena) grew up in a farm in UK. I went to get a University education to get a 'proper job' at the behest of my family. I completed my degree, got a 'proper job' and promptly went back to farming.

In 2009 after an 'act of god', I left my organic farm in NB to tour around Canada for a 6 month 'voyage of discovery,' which led me WWOOFing from BC to the Maritimes. I felt like I started a farm before really knowing how to farm; so there was an expensive learning curve as I pursued farm-based education.

If I could do it again (starting a farm), I'd like to get some of the mistakes out of the way. I found taking this tour was like going back to school as a mature student.

It is a lot cheaper to learn why another farmer lost 10 acres of carrots (here's a hint: taking on more than you can manage) as opposed to losing them yourself. It's good to discover that farming is a solitary practice, and to be aware that you are a social creature, before purchasing a farm 40 miles from all your friends.

WWoofing = taught me a great deal about the similarities and differences between farming on the prairies, on the gulf islands and back home in Atlantic Canada. I learned about making a living, economics, and being on the other side of farm as an apprentice and learned that there was a continuous thread that connected everyone in this field. Even if people didn't know my previous host, we would often have friends in common. It convinced I was following some predestined path.

Then I met Kate Story, a beef farmer from Dorfin Manitoba. "Rowena" she said, "There aren't 7 Billion people on this planet." "There are a few 100 thousand people" "and a whole lot of sheep"

As I was travelling across Canada meeting farmers, food advocates, community leaders and active citizens, I was meeting a lot of people and very few sheep. So it wasn't surprising that they all knew each other

The fact that you are all here today, identifies you as people and not as sheep

You may not know everyone in organic farming or even in this room. But you will. You will need to and you will want to. The people you meet at future ACORN workshops, farm tours, conferences and on farms will become peers, friends, business partners, lovers, your wives and your husbands the guy you go to for seeds or when your tractor breaks down.

You are here because you have the urge to learn about farming and to learn about it in the best way possible from the people who do it for a living- you are sensibly considering apprenticing and I will discuss the practicalities of this sort of experience.

### *Main Talk*

Pointers for people: (Starting with the bigger picture)

**Everyone you meet is useful.** Maybe not immediately, but they could be one-day. Treat them nice.

ie. (see slide) This is Alyson and Will. I met them out in BC and they kindly hosted me and taught me about their farm. When they moved to New Brunswick, I did my best to return the favour

**Everything you learn is useful** even if not always easily apparent.

**You may never farm for a living** but that's okay. As long as you apply it to whatever else you do.

**You need us** You need our skills, our experiences, resources, connections. Recognize that fact and act accordingly.

**We need your** enthusiasm, ideas, creativity and energy. We recognize that fact and are acting accordingly.

Let these concepts guide your apprenticeship and you will have a fine time.

Every farm is different but everyone should be guaranteed the following:-

Every apprentice should have:

**Enough sleep to be productive and happy** - Your accommodation could be in the farmhouse, a trailer or in a tree fort. But it should be clean, comfortable and quiet

**Enough nourishment to be productive and happy** – discuss your needs (vegetarian/carnivorous) and be realistic of what to expect at the end of a long work day. Farm food is always good but may not always be gourmet! Be prepared to cook some of the time too.

**Have your privacy respected – ask for your needs.** If you need a lock on your door to stop the farm kids dropping in. Ask for one. If you need your accommodation to be away from the farm house - talk about that need upfront.

**Enough learning opportunities to keep your mind stimulated** - Your farm mentor should explain why as well as how, what, where and when. By the end of the day your body will ache and your mind should too.

**Opportunity to connect to family, friends, community**

**Opportunities for growth and leadership** – progressive responsibilities,

**Farm should be willing to open their financial books to you.** Over time it is reasonable to expect to be allowed to take on more responsibilities and to be involved in more decisions. However, it is ultimately your hosts farm and livelihood, so if you ask how to do something and they tell you to do it a certain way, you should do it that way. The chances are there is a reason for it.

In return you (the apprentice) need to guarantee:

**The value the opportunity they are providing you with and to respect that knowledge**

**Respect Knowledge and Time** - that the day before the market is probably not a good time to start a conversation about chicken quotas. Unless you are washing and bagging salad in which case the farmer may appreciate it.

**Ask questions and take responsibility for your own learning (find their farm library!)**

**Make your best effort** – be prepared for occasional overtime, weather, bad days

**Share your knowledge and creativity** – social media-some know lots, some know little, just like anybody else. You can use your expertise to help them, as they help you.

**Respect your host's need for privacy**—even if you get along great, everybody's got to have solo time!

**Only share info about farm and hosts that you would be willing to share to them in person.**

**Make every effort to be happy** – but if you aren't, to talk honestly about that with your host-farm.

**That you will not try to drive the tractor on the first day**

If everyone agrees to abide by these basic necessities for a good apprenticeship, the chances are everyone is going to be happy and get along just fine

Attended my first ACORN Conference in 2006, in Wolfville, NS! It was very intimidating. But I was surprised by how welcoming the organic community was and how willing they were to share both their experience and their wisdom.

I met several people that helped me:

**Brian Yves** said that a worthy goal was to do less work, and earn more money each year.

**Tom Lask** talked about things I didn't understand then (chickling vetch), but I do now. I'm glad I listened. He appreciated having someone to share his passion with.

**Clark Phillips** would share his knowledge with anyone who asked.

At an ACORN Conference in 2005, I met my now dear friend Roxanne Beavers (ACORN's Organic Transition Specialist) who introduced me to her husband Jamey Coughlin. Years later we're now business partners-local food entrepreneurs!

You never know where life is going to take you.

Go forward with mind, heart and eyes open. Get out there and grow your own job.