

Growing New Farmers

Thursday, November 22nd, 2012
Georgian Room, (9:00am – 5:30pm)

Workshop: The Art of Hosting

Speakers: TONY AND FRAN McQUAIL, owners of Meeting Place Organic Farm

Tony and Fran are the owners of Meeting Place Organic Farm which has been organic for over 35 years. They took their first Holistic Management course in 1995 and have been using HM to guide their farm and family since then. They are Holistic Management Certified Educators so that they can share the benefits of HM with other farm families. The McQuails are founding members of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario and have been active in many farm and community organizations.

Executive Summary

Passing along your farming skills to inquisitive aspiring and new farm workers is an age-old tradition for growing the next generation of farmers. Learn about ways to find, interview, and establish a mutually beneficial arrangement on your farm.

Detailed Notes

S-1 Tony and Fran are the owners and operators of Meeting Place Organic Farm in Lucknow for 35 years. And are both certified Holistic Management teachers. Their farm is over 100 acres and they use Belgian work horses and renewal energy where they can.

S-2 Their farm is located 3 hours due west of Toronto. It is 1 ½ hours from an urban centre. They focus a lot of energy on marketing and trying to form a local market, which is challenging.

S-3 This is a picture of Meeting Place Organic Farm. They started it “from the ground up”.

S-4 They started small and then expanded in the areas that were working. It seemed a natural way to do things. They retail directly to the consumer, therefore they are the price setters, not price takers. This is one of the most important aspects to them.

S-5 Main considerations for them when taking on interns are the interns

- motivations
- expectations
- communication

They focus on these things and plan for how to best accommodate these things for their interns.

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S-6 Their first experience with interns was through the Katimavik program. They billeted the katimavik interns for 2-3 weeks. They found they liked the experience. Having the young people on the farm enriched their farm with life.

Since they enjoyed their Katimavik experience they listed their farm with WOOF program. To give information about their farm they linked their farm website to the WOOF website. For many years they had many international folks come and stay with them on the farm. Which they enjoyed since they didn't really have the time to travel, they were able to see the world through the stories and photos of their guests.

The main challenges were that the WOOFers were mainly there for a short period but wanted in-depth hands-on experiences. Another challenge was that this made their farm a very transient place, which has an impact on all the people on the farm – farmers, their children, other volunteers.

Because of this they decided to start focusing on whole season apprentices; which provided a more long term return.

S-8 A good reason to have interns is if you like teaching. But they advise that if your farm is stress for output, it might not be well suited. A focus on production and education is not a happy marriage.

S-9 "Apprentices are not free labour". It requires time, energy and resources to be put into their education. This slide shows a list of costs associated with hosting apprentices. There is "a lot of administration and coordination time" required because of the teaching.

S-10 Figures of "Cash out of pocket costs".

Some costs will not increase with increasing numbers of apprentices.

The figure at the top is what you need to prepare to claim with the workers safety board (in Ontario).

They have chosen not to pay a stipend to their apprentices as some farms do because they are looking for people who are more interested in receiving a good education. Ideally, they would like for the apprentices to pay them the first year, and then if they work out well they would hire them back the second. They haven't tried this model because they don't believe it would be socially acceptable in Ontario at the moment.

The apprentices on their farm are really involved. Everyone participates in all activities on their diversified farm. It really is an immersion experience since things on the farm do not operate on a 9-5 schedule. Apprentices can be called to help out at any hour of the day.

S-11 One important thing to consider is how it will affect your family; because it will have an effect.

The first apprentice they took on lived in their house with them. It was 90% good. But they did find it was a strain on their daughters, and they no longer had the complete privacy they were used to in their home.

Since then they have renovated a barn to make separate housing for the apprentices. Because the apprentices are no longer living in the house with them, they have had to be intentional about having fun / social time with them. One thing they do is to eat most meals together with the apprentices.

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- S-12 Think about expectations;
- What do I/we expect to contribute to the intern?
 - What do I/we expect the intern to contribute?

Other considerations are - the safety of apprentices in particular around equipment and livestock. They need to be made aware of possible dangers. This will take your time.

S-13 Think about your teaching style and what resources you have. You will be constantly demonstrating. You become the model for you to do everything.

You will need to develop a positive teaching style. An apprentice is not an employee. They want to learn a diversity of skills, not specialize in one task like an employee often does.

S-14 Another thing to think about is the unexpected skill sharing that may be asked of you and if you are willing to do this. “Young people these days often don’t have even basic life skills”. For example, you may want to teach them to mend their clothes. Be sure to know your limits when it comes to this. One area especially to consider is whether or not you’re willing to lend out your vehicles for their personal use.

- S-15 What to expect from Apprentices? Some things you may want to clarify before hand are;
- will they be in promotional pictures for your farm?
 - how many hours per week will they work?
 - will they supply their own work clothes? protective gear?
 - the importance of punctuality
 - when they should ask follow up questions

You should also take note that language and culture can be real barriers.

And it is to be expected that some interns will leave early for psychological, physical or other reasons.

There are special considerations when accepting older, more mature apprentices. First it is harder to meet their expectations. For example they often have higher paying opportunities off the farm and this can be a distraction or a de-motivating force. “I feel more secure with someone who is 22 and doesn’t know anything than someone who is 45.” Some advice when taking on older apprentices is to ask for a deposit. You can be stuck in a really tough situation if they leave you when you really need them. Often the motivation for an older person is to try on the farming lifestyle, and often it doesn’t fit.

- S-16 What are the expectations of Apprentices? Some things you should make clear in the interview process are;
- if they want to eat the food you will offer (vegans, vegetarians, etc)
 - your rules about smoking
 - expected work hours, times of day, length of day worked
 - who buys their work clothes
 - the importance of being on time for lunch

- S-17 Decide ahead of time what kind of educational program you will offer and make this clear in the interview process. Some things to consider are;
- how formal it will be
 - how much will be hands-on, how /if you will incorporate an academic component

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- will you give homework assignments
- will there be independent projects

These things should be considered against the pace of your farm. For example if an intern starts in March, there is more time for training. But if they are to start in May, you will already be “in the thick of it” and the time for training is decreased.

Fran and Tony have found that having assignments and independent projects has been advantageous. They have compiled a resource binder from the work of past interns to pass on to new interns, which saves time in not having to explain the same things time and time again.

It is important to note that with the education of interns, some of your time will be used solely to benefit them.

S-18 Teaching interns to do marketing or sales they way you want is important. You will teach them to be the “face of the farm”.

S-19 Recruitment can be a time consuming experience. The most important thing is to get the word out. Connecting with organizations like ACORN or CRAFT can really help with publicity.

S-20 A critical point in recruitment is to make sure that the person doing the internship is really interested, and not just being pushed by their parents.

S-21 They have created a brochure which explains their apprenticeship program, which CRAFT distributes for them. They also have all the information on their website.

S-22 It is good to take the interns out to other farms so they can see what other farmers do and socialize.

S-23 They have been developing their system over many years. Now they are only interested in apprentices who are keen to do something with their education. They are offering farmer training so people can become farmers.

A trial period is very important. Ideally ask the candidate to stay for one week, no fault, trial period before the season starts to feel out the “interpersonal vibe” and do some work together. This is key. If you don’t like working together, this internship will be a failure. At the end of the first week, have a frank discussion.

Checking applicants references is very useful. Ask the reference “Would you hire this person again?” and / or “Is the person who replaced them doing a better or worse job?” Don’t be shy to ask direct questions.

People can make applications from anywhere in the world. Consider whether or not you are willing to do the paper work to help people from overseas secure visas.

S-25 It is important to check in regularly and to have fun together.

S-30 Consider how much it will cost in time and money to feed everyone. Think about who you want to have the responsibility of cooking?

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S-31 Consider the legalities regarding workers on your farm. The Ontario Employment Standards are different for agricultural work than other work. It is important to respect these standards and to communicate them to the interns.

Remember that the interns have a life off the farm as well. They will want internet access and to have visitors to the farm. Think about how you want to deal with this.

S-32 CRA threshold, the limit before you have to pay. This is very important to consider for accidents.

S-33 Set up structure for regular check-ins ahead of time. Will it be weekly? Monthly? Year-end review? Make sure the personal goals of each apprentice are considered and discussed together.

S-36 They have found that having walkie-talkies has been incredibly important to avoid making large mistakes and wasting time. This allows the interns to ask questions at any time without have to walk around the farm to find you. "There are no dumb questions, but there are many dumb things you can do if you don't ask questions".