

# The Farm School

Athol, MA 01331

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The Farm School is founded on trust and faith in the goodness and willingness of people. Situated in rural Massachusetts, they strive to connect people to the land by giving them a broad set of skills that allows them to channel their experience in many different directions. While the Farm School is a production farm, its primary focus is education.

The Farm School consists of three main programs: its youth programs, its Visiting Schools Program including its Summer Program, and its Chicken Coop Middle School. Additionally, The Farm School staff had seen a lot of interest from adults who had worked with the youth programs, not to work with youth but to learn to farm, so the desire and need for an adult program was evident.

The Learn to Farm Program is their year-long apprenticeship program that has been in operation since 2002. It's a hands-on, rigorous year-long residential program, so the Farm School seeks students who are no strangers to physical labor, though they also value strong leadership and creativity. Students in this program help manage 12 acres of mixed organic vegetables, 60 acres of pasture for raising pigs, sheep, beef & dairy cows, and laying hens, 200 acres of woodlots, and two acres of gardens & orchards.



## Program Summary

### Type of Operation

Non-profit farm

### Program Duration

11 months

### Annual Graduates

12-16 apprentices

### Number of Staff

9

### Training Focus

Organic production skills, livestock and land health and management

### Total Annual Cost

\$43,000

### Major Funding Sources

Earned revenue, program tuition, donations

## Apprentice Demographics

Slightly more women than men, mostly recent college graduates with one year experience in agriculture

### Qualities Sought

Leadership, creativity, strong work ethic

### Most Common Outcome

80% of alumni involved in agriculture, 60% actually farming

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## Top Successes

- Problem solving and critical thinking in agricultural context
- Competency in practical skills

## Top Challenges

- Need better recruitment strategies, with larger networking capacity
- Vulnerability in reliance on donations
- Balance between education and production

*What do you wish you'd known before you started?*

A clearer mission statement- the program works well for everyone, but could be more efficient with a mission to draw back upon

*What additional resources would be helpful as you look towards the future?*

Networking for post-training placement

Throughout the Learn to Farm program, students are divided into work groups of about 3-6 students, and are guided through the tasks with daily feedback and instruction. There are three phases the students go through; in the foundation phase, the emphasis is more on learning through demonstration and explicit formal instruction like readings and lectures. The second phase is the practice stage, when students are given more labor and financial responsibility, and the final partner phase emphasizes that the students practice and apply their skills while the staff step back.

The major goal of the program's emphasis on one-on-one instruction is to train students to be critical thinkers by giving them an insight into the Farmer's mind. The curriculum of the Learn to Farm program is very individualized, and most of the learning takes place under mentorship, in-field. The Learn to Farm program students are expected to complete a long skills checklist, covering many different subject areas across the seasons, and is available on their website so potential applicants can preview what might be expected of them. Using this checklist, mentors hold frequent reviews with their students to check and discuss progress. Students will practice a skill several times before they are approved to do it alone.

The Farm School feels confident in their ability to offer a good experience to students, and their ability to build familiarity and confidence throughout all seasons is what makes the Learn to Farm program so unique. The students that have come out of the Learn to Farm program are very diverse, and they have a wide range of skills, but learning to farm is a multi-year process. The Farm School is working to develop stronger networks for post-training placement to help facilitate the continued learning of their alumni who have diverse goals. They see themselves not in competition, but collaboration with the surrounding community. The Farm School does much more than just create farmer, they move people forward in profound and significant ways.

