

# How to become a farmer

(for students)



So you're interested in becoming a farmer? That's great! Farming is an important, rewarding, and challenging career. More and more people who aren't from farming backgrounds want to become farmers. Farming can give us the opportunity:

- to be able to work and spend time outdoors,
- to take care of with animals and other living creatures,
- to see the tangible results of our work,
- to work in a self-directed way (or eventually, to be our own boss),
- to provide healthy food for our communities, and
- to take care of the land, water, and to fight climate change.

Many people, including people who grew up in cities, successfully pursue farming careers. But the "traditional" approach of inheriting a family farm isn't an option for most people, and the path to successful farming isn't as clear as for other kinds of work. How can you explore or pursue a career in farming? Here are some suggestions:

**1. Start by learning more.** There are many kinds of farming; learn as much as you can by reading books, looking online, and watching movies. And don't forget field trips—when it comes to farming, there is no substitute for the hands-on. If you are a student, get your school to bring in farmers as guest speakers, or see if your class can visit a farm. If you have experience growing up on a farm, or gardening or taking care of animals, then you have a head start!

**2. Get some experience.** Spend some time at a farm or community garden that interests you. Some farms hold work bees or take volunteers. If you want add some travel to your farming, think about WWOOFing ([www.woof.ca](http://www.woof.ca)). World Wide Opportunities On Organic Farms lets people volunteer on farms in Canada and around the world in exchange for room, board, and experience (note: you generally have to be over 18 to do this). If you want to make a bigger commitment, there are many summer jobs available on farms in Canada; check out [GoodWork.ca](http://GoodWork.ca). If you are new to farming, you may want to look for small mixed farms that have both crops and animals, to help you decide what kind of farming you are most interested in.

**3. Build your skills.** Many different skills can help you become a successful farmer:

- Farmers need to know about living creatures (including biology, botany, horticulture, and veterinary science).
- They also benefit from knowledge of the trades (including carpentry, welding, mechanical skills, driving tractor and operating heavy equipment).

This is a Local Food Advocate Network publication and project of the National Farmers Union-Ontario. It is made possible by financial assistance from the Government of Ontario, and is supported by the Greenbelt Fund and the National Farmers Foundation.



Possibility grows here.

NATIONAL  
FARMERS  
FOUNDATION

- Business, accounting and financial skills can make a big difference.
- Farmers who sell directly to eaters also need to know something about marketing, communications, and social media.

It helps to know a little bit about a lot of things! Think about trying to develop these skills over time by choosing relevant courses at school, by practicing trades, or by taking other training courses. If you want to build skills while working on a farm, look for farms that are part of the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (or CRAFT; see [craftfarms.ca](http://craftfarms.ca) or [craftsouthwestontario.ca](http://craftsouthwestontario.ca)). Some farmers also pursue a four-year degree at an agricultural college (for example, at the University of Guelph) or an agricultural certificate or diploma (like the 12-month Sustainable Agriculture Co-op offered by Fleming College).

**4. Develop relationships.** Successful farmers don't work alone. They build many kinds of long-term relationships. New farmers often seek out mentors who can help them with guidance and advice. Successful farmers often work as teams, or connect with people who have the skills they lack (like a reliable mechanic). Direct marketing farmers must build a relationship with customers. And every farmer benefits from a good relationship with their neighbours.

**5. Once you are ready, look for a place where you can take part in decision-making,** whether that means partnering with other farmers or starting your own operation. Once you have been involved in farming long enough to develop a strong agricultural skill set, you'll probably want to find a farm where you can take part in long-term planning—including business planning or crop planning. This will give you the perspective you need to be successful in your own business.

**6. Don't be afraid to try innovative ways of doing business.** Some people want to jump right into farming by buying a farm and starting their own business. This can be done, but it can also be very difficult—it requires a lot of skills and lot of money to buy land and equipment. But there are other models to explore, like co-operatives, urban farming, or farm succession (like renting land or taking over a business from an older farmer). We need more young farmers to explore these innovative approaches.

**7. Become part of a community and a movement.** The National Farmers Union (NFU) was created so that farmers could support each other and advocate for the government policies that will ensure sustainable farmers can thrive. We can help with everything from accessing grant money to finding a local mentor to shaping public policy. And we often have subsidies for students or young people to attend our events and gatherings.

Even if you don't become a farmer yourself, spending time on a farm and learning more about our food system is still a worthwhile pursuit. Our society needs more people who understand issues around food, farming, and the land. That knowledge and experience can also help you with a career in related fields like the non-profit sector, education, healthcare, and the environment. That's why we've reached out to professionals in those sectors as part of the NFU-O's Local Food Advocates project.

Visit us at [nfontario.ca](http://nfontario.ca) to find out more. And the next time you eat, think about farming!

## Questions for group discussions in a classroom:

Some questions for you to choose from based on your group, their ages, backgrounds, and interests.

1. How many farmers do you know? Has anyone here grown up or spent time on a farm? Tell us a little bit about it.
2. What do you know about farming already?
  - a. What do you see as the biggest challenges of farming?
  - b. What do you see as the biggest benefits of being a farmer?
3. What kinds of skills does a farmer need to succeed?
  - a. What if you want to be a farmer, but you don't have those skills? What can you do? (E.g., develop your skills, take further training, find partners with complementary skills, consider a different kind of farming, pay consultants or tradespeople who have the skills.)
4. What relationships does a farmer need to succeed? (E.g., A mentor? A business partner? A supportive family or community? A customer base? A good mechanic?)
5. What other resources does a farmer need to succeed? (E.g. Land? Money? Tools? Seeds or livestock? Good weather and a stable global climate?)
6. If you had to grow food right now, where would you do it?
  - a. What do you think makes for good farmland? (E.g. soil types, access to markets, etc.)
  - b. How expensive is farmland in different places?
  - c. Where is the best farmland in Ontario? Is it still going to be available for farming in ten or twenty years?
7. What kinds of businesses or business structures do you know about? What's a co-op, and how is that different from other businesses?
8. What work does the National Farmers Union do for farmers and for eaters?
9. What do you think would be the biggest barrier you would have to overcome to become a farmer? Who could help you to overcome that barrier?
10. What's the next thing that you, personally, could do to pursue a career as a farmer?

For more information visit [www.nfuontario.ca](http://www.nfuontario.ca)

This is a Local Food Advocate Network publication and project of the National Farmers Union-Ontario. It is made possible by financial assistance from the Government of Ontario, and is supported by the Greenbelt Fund and the National Farmers Foundation.



Possibility grows here.

NATIONAL  
FARMERS  
FOUNDATION