



Mentorship for new farmers is frequently cited as one of the factors key to their success; however, looking around Nova Scotia, mentorship opportunities seem thin on the ground. What does mentorship look like, what can it do for you, and how can you find a mentor?

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines *mentor* as an experienced and trusted adviser. A mentor is someone with experience that you trust who offers you advice. Presumably, a consultant is also someone you trust who offers you advice, but we don't think of hired consultants as mentors. What OED's definition is missing is that mentorship is something more than just a professional relationship. In fact, the original Mentor in Greek mythology was asked by Odysseus to guide and instruct his son while Odysseus fought in the Trojan War, which implied a father-like relationship. While some formal mentorship programs offer mentors financial compensation for their time and expenses, a true mentor isn't in it for the money.

Mentorship can take many forms

For the very inexperienced, a situation in which the mentor provides free room and board along with learning opportunities in exchange for labour is often an attractive option.

Jordan Marr signed up for a six-month apprenticeship in Nova Scotia after some agriculture courses at the University of British Columbia piqued his interest in farming. "By the end of the apprenticeship I was hooked on the lifestyle," says Marr. Four years later, he's back in BC expecting to earn most of his income from a market garden on leased land.

For those with a higher level of agricultural education or experience, a paying job on a well-run farm is often the preferred way to learn how to run a farm business. People who have already started to farm on their own can still benefit from formal and informal mentorships in the areas of production and business where they feel their own skills are weak.

"Agriculture is like a trade – you can only get so much out of a book and the rest is practical," says Justin Beck, Chair of the Canadian Young Farmers Forum. As a beginning farmer, a little mentoring can go a long way. If you find a mentor who has a successful operation, you can learn from their experience and avoid their mistakes. Beck is currently working for and learning from Peter Peill, owner of Lyndhurst Farms in Canning. "To get the practical, you need to learn from someone who has experience or do it the hard way, on your own," says Beck.

Jen Scott works for the Food Action Committee of the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax and is studying farm mentorship. She recently traveled to New England, US, where there are many mature farm internship programs, particularly for market gardeners. She says it's been the experience of mentor farmers in the US that market garden skills are easy to teach, while cultural and interpersonal skills are much more difficult. However, the mentors have found these soft skills to be equally essential in creating successful new farmers.

For instance, Lauchie MacEachern has been working on Folly River Farms, a dairy farm in Glenholme, for the past several years. He's learning the operation from the inside out under a five-year agreement to purchase the farm when the current owner retires. "The most important thing is to keep the cows in calf," says Henry Eisses, MacEachern's employer/mentor. "If you don't stay on top of things, the breeding falls apart." But MacEachern says the most important thing he's learned from his mentor is how to let things go, that when problems come up, you don't make a big fuss; just deal with them and move on.

Why be a mentor?

Most mentors feel a certain obligation to "pay it forward." They received help from others early on and want to support the next generation of farmers as well. Other mentors feel energized by younger people with new ideas. The fresh perspective can create learning opportunities for the mentors as well as the mentees. A good mentor will be transparent about their farming techniques and operating expenses. If they choose to be overly proprietary about their knowledge they probably shouldn't be in the mentoring business.

Even if there's not a formal program you can access, don't be shy to approach experienced members of the farm community. Most of them are willing to provide advice and assistance. Get to know the farmers in your community by joining your local commodity association or county federation of agriculture. Offer some help in exchange for learning. For example, if you're not sure how to shear sheep, ask an experienced sheep farmer if you can help out in exchange for some pointers. Furthermore, many farmers nearing retirement are interested in training a successor. As Justin Beck remarks, "A lot of farmers are at that age where they're looking for someone to transfer their farm and their knowledge to."

Farmer networks, both formal and informal, are a great way to hone your farm skills. Mentorship is simply a way of participating in a community learning process. So don't be shy in seeking out opportunities!

Finding a mentor in Nova Scotia

If you're thinking about becoming a farmer and you've never worked on a farm before, THINKFARM strongly recommends that you get some practical farm experience on someone else's farm before striking out on your own. If you're just interested in working on a farm for a week or two, consider trying World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) – www.wwoof.ca. A small registration fee will gain you access to listings of participating farms across Canada. You can also WWOOF internationally, but need to register separately for each country/region. You'll receive room and board in exchange for your labour (usually 4-6 hours/day).

If you're ready for a longer-term commitment, there are two programs that operate in Atlantic Canada – the Stewards of Irreplaceable Land (SOIL) Apprenticeship Program and the STEP UP Mentorship Program. SOIL is an independently run program that operates much like WWOOF but apprentices are expected to commit for an entire growing season and expect to receive a richer learning experience than WWOOFers. For more information, visit <http://soilapprenticeships.org/>

The STEP UP Program is administered by the Canadian Farm Business Management Council and is going into its fourth year. Participants commit to working for at least eight weeks on a farm in another province. STEP UP helps mentees with travel costs. Mentors pay mentees a fair wage for their labour and receive \$2,000 from STEP UP for their participation in the program. Both mentors and mentees are required to submit reports to STEP UP. For more information, visit <http://farmcentre.com/Features/TheNewFarmer/Resources/StepUp/>

If you've completed one of these programs or feel you already have some experience but aren't ready to start out on your own, working on a well-run farm can teach you a great deal. There is a shortage of skilled farm workers in Nova Scotia so there are plenty of opportunities for this kind of work. The Career Services office of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College is another great resource. Visit http://nsac.ca/csa/job_listings.asp

If you've already started farming on your own, you may be able to access a business mentor through the Canadian Youth Business Foundation's Ment2B Program. Visit www.cybf.ca to see if you qualify.