

## Becoming a young farmer ...

Most new farmers tend to raise annual plants (these are planted and die each year, like vegetables, herbs or corn), as opposed to perennial plants (that grow for several years).

Growing perennials like grape vines or apple trees requires a bigger commitment of money, time and secure access to land, since crops like apples take several years to grow before you can start to harvest their fruits.

The first step in planning a farm is developing a crop or farm plan. This is often a map or list that describes each field and what will be grown in it, when it will be planted, and when it is expected to be ready to harvest. The crop plan varies based on location, soil type and climate—each field may have different qualities to take into account in order to have a successful harvest. Alternatively, if animals are to be grown, it would include pasture and housing, feed needs (whether grown on the farm or purchased) and expected dates for slaughter.

Some farmers might be inclined to start out farming what they like to eat and are familiar with growing, but then run into difficulties if they haven't adequately addressed:

**Farming works best when the farmer works with the land, climate, equipment, and skill set they already have and researches the regional market to find under-represented**

### Climate

- What will grow here?

### Environment

- What animals and insects will bother my crop?

### Market Demand

- who will buy this crop?

### Competition

- who else is selling this crop?

### Equipment Required

- How will I harvest this crop?

Does this crop need extra nutrients, water, or shelter?

Does harvesting this crop require a special tool? Will I need a truck to take this to market?

### Labor

- Will I need help harvesting this crop?

### Post-harvest storage

- What happens to my crop once it's harvested?

-Does it need to be refrigerated? processed, or protected from weather?

## Tips for starting a new farm

- ✓ Look at what your neighbors are growing
- ✓ Ask your customers/clients what they are interested in eating & purchasing
- ✓ Visit markets near you and see what is missing or low quality
- ✓ Try new varieties/breeds to see what works on your land
- ✓ Stick with what you know—if you're great at herbs, grow herbs!
- ✓ Look at prices, see what is selling well in your region
- ✓ Rescue a 'lost' breed or variety that was once grown in your area. History can tell you a lot!
- ✓ Review the soil survey for your area, look at what crops best suit your soil type

# 1. Growing & Harvesting Crops

## Scheduling harvests

Taking your crops to market on time is a skill farmers develop with experience. If you harvest too late, crops are past their peak; if you harvest too early, you miss the best flavor. Most have you pick the day you want to harvest, and then 'count back' to the planting date to decide on a planting date.

Different plants have different growing behaviors, and some crops may require starting indoors or in a greenhouse if you want them to be available for early season harvest. Other good rely on time schedules to become products...

## Treating Crop Issues

All crops are influenced by weather, pests, and poor management. You can learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the crops you want to produce ahead of time by reading, researching online, consulting with experts, asking other farmers, and tasting.

Be prepared to deal with weather, pest management, weed management, veterinary care, handling, harvest, storage, packaging, and transport to market.

## Storage

Before you begin to harvest, you must analyze your storage needs. Do you have a safe place to put your crops after they have been harvested where they are safe from spoilage? Will you bring your crops directly to market? Do you have enough clean containers, the proper washing equipment, and the right transportation arranged to make sure your products get to market in peak condition?

## Buying seeds

As a farmer, you have a lot of choices in getting your hands on good seeds. Good seed that germinates predictably is a key factor in the success of your farm. Larger growers sometimes use seeds that have been sorted for size or even coated with clay so that they can be more accurate with their planting. Small farmers typically use mechanized planters. You can even use push behind seeders that benefit from coated seeds.

## Pest Management

The farm is an ecosystem, and there are many moving parts to understand, observe understand, observe, investigate, and manipulate.

Finding a pest management approach that works for your farm will take good planning, careful observation and study, and having as many options available as possible.

## **PH**

The pH of the soil is used as a measure of its acidity, which can affect how well plants grow. A good soil pH is important to farmers because pH affects the nutrients available for plant development. Getting your soil tested is the key to successful crop management. Your county office usually accepts samples for testing; contact them to learn more about soil testing services in your region. Research your planting options and soil type before selecting what to plant on your farm by looking in gardening books, online, or in seed catalogs.

## **Greenhouse**

Hoop houses, greenhouses and other protective structures create a warm, controlled environment for baby plants in cold weather. They are used for getting plants started (plant propagation), winter gardening, or year-round growing. They help keep a controlled environment for plants, protecting, for example, tomatoes, from early spring frosts, summer hail, and some diseases, giving the farmer a head start on the season and an earlier crop... not to mention offering a warm dry place for farmers to harvest.

## **Soil**

Soil is made of four basic components: minerals, organic matter, water, and air, plus many microscopic living creatures. There are three kinds of soil textures:

Sand, silt and clay.

Silt and clay soils have small particles that can stop water and air from moving freely. They also have high water holding capacity and hold the plant's nutrients in the soil. Sandy to gravelly soil is lighter and allows water to move freely. Sandy soils contain 70% or more sand by weight and loamy soils possess the desirable qualities of sand and clay without being too loose. To know what types of soil you farm upon, check with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) online soils maps ([websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/](http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/)) or visit your local office.

## **Insurance**

When operating a farm business, you should consider purchasing additional coverage (usually added to your property owner's policy) specific to your business and activities. Most general farm insurance plans cover property damage and personal liability coverage for claims against the farm. This insurance is only available through private insurance brokers and you'll want to shop around as prices vary widely.

## **Supplemental Comprehensive Coverage and/or Product Liability Insurance**

If you have any form of public visitors coming to your farm, you may want to consider increasing your farm's comprehensive personal liability insurance in case someone gets hurt on your property. If you sell products for human consumption,

## 2. Business Skills

For your business to be a long term success, you need to learn basic business management skills. Farmers are small business owners, and should take the effort to learn how to manage their business before getting in too deep.

✓ All farmers need a place to organize and store bills, legal documents and spreadsheets. This can be a small filing cabinet or a dedicated office space, what is important is that you have a safe location to store the documents you need to support your business.

✓ Learn how to keep track of your farm's income and expenses using basic accounting software or ledgers. If you don't have a farm yet, practice tracking your personal finances.

- ✓ Read up on labor laws before hiring any employees, and make sure you are up to date on safety practices.
- ✓ Brush up on your basic organizing skills by drafting a crop schedule, work calendar, or volunteer day flyer.
- ✓ Explore tax documents well before your tax deadline.
- ✓ Ask questions! Your fellow farmers, neighbors, local government leaders, and beginning farmer educators are excited to help you succeed, but you need to take the first step.

Where can you improve your business skills? Many communities offer adult education classes in business through a community center, small business or consulting firms, or Chamber of Commerce. There are also many online resources and courses available to help you develop and improve your business skills for free or low cost (check the resource section at the back of this book to start).

### Farmer Advice: Marketing

Before you get started, make sure you know your market niche (what do I sell, and who do I sell it to?), define your operation's image (what is my mission?), and advertise yourself. Local press and the Internet are great tools to spread word of your new farm. National and regional online farm listings provide a way for potential buyers/eaters/consumers to find you.

- ✓ Advertise your roadside stand in the local paper
- ✓ Take out an ad in the church circular
- ✓ Sponsor an ad at the local diner
- ✓ Put up a roadside sign at your farm
- ✓ Sponsor a local t-ball team
- ✓ Have a Facebook page
- ✓ Keep a Twitter account
- ✓ Use a newsletter to connect with your customers
- ✓ Put your farm into the farmer's market database, etc...