

Best Practices for Farming Multiple Plots

A plain language guide

Produced by New Entry Sustainable Farming Project



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The information in this guide comes from a set of interviews conducted with people farming on rented land all over North America in addition to New Entry Sustainable Farming Project's experience placing farmers on rented land in Massachusetts.

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What is Plain Language?

This guide is presented in a format called Plain Language. Plain Language provides clear, simple, and accessible text for readers in order to reduce misunderstandings, errors, complaints, inquiries, and lack of comprehension. It also helps you to take action on what you learn and gives examples of other people practicing the information. We present this guide in Plain Language in order to make the topic accessible to everyone.

Who should read this guide?

This guide is written for individuals who want to start farming, but who do not have access to a large plot of contiguous land. **Before embarking on a journey into multiple small plot farming, we recommend using New Entry Sustainable Farming Project's guide on *Finding, Assessing, and Securing Farmland*.** That guide covers the broad important topics that are critical to consider for any land-renting farmer, including:

- What type of farmland you are looking for
- How to conduct a farmland site visit
- Soil assessments and water access
- Leasing options
- Negotiating with landowners

This guide covers more specific factors you need to think about when renting multiple parcels of land from other people, including advantages and disadvantages to this type of land tenure and how your farm business can be successful in the long term. This guide also provides examples of other farmers who are successfully farming on multiple small plots.

You may benefit from this guide if you:

- Are interested in farming but do not want to leave your community
- Are interested in learning about how to farm without owning land
- Have an idea of what kind of farm business you would like to start but would like more information on how to access land

This guide will help you answer the following questions:

- Who is farming multiple plots?
- What do you need to farm multiple plots and what do these farms look like?
- What do multiple plot farming agreements look like?
- How can you finance your multiple plot farm?
- What kind of challenges might come up in a multiple plot farming setup?

TABLE of CONTENTS

- 5 What does it mean to farm on multiple plots?**
- 5 Is land ownership the goal?**
- 6 Who farms on multiple small plots?**
- 7 Initial Investments**
 - Supplies
 - Infrastructure
 - Paperwork
- 11 Common Legal Structures**
 - Private Businesses
 - Non Profit Organizations (NPOs)
 - Cooperative Farms, Communal Living Situations and Co-Housing
- 13 Finding Multiple Farmland Plots**
 - Organizational Help for Finding Farmland
 - Reaching Out to Landowners
- 16 Agreements and Negotiations with Landowners**
- 16 Financing**
 - Self-Financing
 - Private Investors
 - Crowd Sourcing
 - Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
 - Grants
 - Loans
- 21 Challenges**
 - Investments – Time and Money
 - Communication and Differing Expectations
 - Aesthetics
 - Suitability
 - Unexpected Ownership Changes
 - Time Management
 - Growth



What does it mean to farm on multiple plots?

Many potential and beginning farmers live in cities or towns where they do not own or have access to large pieces of contiguous land on which to start farms. Because of this, people are beginning to lease many smaller pieces of land on which to farm– or multiple plots. All together these multiple plots can make up enough land to support a farm business. Sometimes these plots are very small, even just a few hundred square feet in someone’s backyard. Other times individual plots can be several acres. Most farmers try to keep these parcels relatively close together – around 1-5 miles apart at a maximum. This is useful when plots are small, because you might be traveling to several sites in one day, and keeping them close to each other is most efficient. Larger, more established farm businesses often have the capacity

to travel a bit further, or have hired employees who have responsibility over different sites. These farms plots are sometimes up to 30 or 40 miles apart.

Farming on multiple pieces of land can be different than farming one big piece of land. This guide will help you understand what this kind of land tenure looks like, and what some of the best practices are for building a successful business by farming multiple plots.

Is land ownership the goal?

The answer to this question is different for every farmer. Some farmers find leasing to be a much better way of running their business. Leasing small plots of land can be a good way to get started and build capital for future land purchase opportunities. Leasing land can offer MA farmers a better profit margin than buying land - even if that

land is under a conservation restriction. For others, land ownership is the biggest goal generally because they would like enough acreage to grow crops for silage for their animals, graze a larger herd, make long term investments like planting orchards, or have enough space for rotating grazing and growing activities. The goal of leasing versus owning land is specific to you and your long-term plans as a farmer.

Who farms on multiple small plots?

People from all walks of life are turning back to the land and starting farms. Farmers are women and men, 25 year olds and 65 year olds alike. They

are people just joining the workforce and those changing careers. New farmers often work part-time jobs off the farm, especially in the first few years of production. Finding farmland close to where a farmer is already working can be very important. Depending on where the farmer lives, this might mean finding multiple smaller plots nearby will be easier than finding one large one nearby. Other reasons a farmer may want to find multiple small plots locally rather than move away to start farming include: their family and/or community are already established in a certain area; they already live close to a good market for their farm business; they enjoy living in a town or city; or they may not be financially ready to move to their own farm. These reasons, among others,

Wally's Urban Market Garden

Now in their 50s, Wally and Gail have been farming for over 20 years. Originally working a single acre, they decided that expanding their acreage in production was a good business move. They bought 20 acres of rural land. For six years they farmed their rural plot in addition to a few small plots within the city where they lived. They began to realize that in their case, it was more profitable for them to grow intensively in the city, and they liked the style of farming that small plots entailed; they preferred hand tools to large tractors. So they sold their 20 acres and committed to urban growing.

Wally and Gail now work 2/3 of an acre spread over 11 plots in and around Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. With no outside jobs, their small farm supports both of them year-round. The couple primarily works the land by hand, using a walk-behind seeder, a few garden tools, and a tiller. Keeping things simple, their farm infrastructure consists of a post harvesting station with rubber

bins and folding tables, a small shed, a walk-in cooler in the garage and an upright cooler at their indoor farm-stand. Wally and Gail farm their multiple small plots on handshake agreements. They compensate their landowners with traditional cash payments, or through the exchange of produce depending on the preference of the landowner. They have often found the landowners with whom they work through word of mouth, either through recommendations from people, or from being approached directly by a landowner who wants to save on maintenance of their property, or who are away for periods of time and want someone to look after it. Their primary markets are farmers markets and restaurants. Because most people hear about Wally and Gail through word of mouth and because their multiple plots are close to their market outlets, they themselves now spend very little time marketing. This allows them to spend the time needed to tend to their 11 farm plots.

are why many farmers look to start farming on multiple parcels, often belonging to other people.

Initial Investments

The initial investments you will make in your farm are flexible and project-dependent. As with any farm, the equipment, infrastructure, and supplies needed will vary immensely between animal production and vegetable or fruit production. However, there are other important considerations for these investments when farming multiple plots, such as the size of the land that you find to farm, what the land is like, and how many different plots you have. These investments also depend on what tools and equipment you might have access to through friends, family, rental companies, or local tool-lending libraries.

Supplies

Tractor with Tilling Implement: Several multiple-plot farmers recommend a BCS 732 walk-behind tractor. Depending on how often you intend to till, it may make sense to rent a tractor or someone's services rather than buying your own (especially in the first year!). For instance, if your plots are under half an acre, or if you intend to make just one pass with the tractor over all the land you intend to plant, renting a tiller for one or two days will make more sense financially than purchasing your own tractor. It is time intensive, but for half an acre or less, a walk-behind tiller should work well. This might even make sense if you have multiple plots under half an acre, as moving a full-size tractor in that small space might be challenging (especially in the suburbs). If you are farming an acre or more in one location, you may want to look to hire someone's services with a larger tractor.

Hand Tools – Every small-scale farmer uses hand tools. This includes some combination of shovels, hoes, rakes, spades, forks, wheelbarrows and buckets. These are often easy to find second-hand, and are important to any small-scale, diversified production. It is important to consider how you will transport these tools between sites, or if you will have different sets at each farm site you work. It is important to think about time efficiency of transporting the tools versus the investment in multiple sets of tools, as well as how you will keep your tools safe from damage or theft.

Soil Amendments – The kind of soil amendments you need depends on the history of the site and how the landowner has cared for the soil. Each of your growing sites will likely be different and will require different types and amounts of soil amendments. If the land owner added amendments and cover crop at the end of the previous season, you may not need to add anything substantial (perhaps just some compost) until the end of your season. Most likely, the land will require compost or fertilizer and potentially some mineral amendments like gypsum or lime.

You should collect soil samples from each of your growing sites and send them out for separate soil tests. Soil tests are inexpensive, yet very important, and can be done through your local agricultural extension office, local farm supply stores or nurseries, or a local university. In Massachusetts farmers can send soil samples to the University of Massachusetts for \$15. Test results usually include the makeup of your soil (including amounts of various minerals, organic matter and acidity levels) and recommendations on things to add to make the soil healthier. You can also choose to receive information on the presence of heavy metals. This is very important to look into when farming near a home, roadway or urban setting. The soil in these areas is more likely to contain

heavy metals than rural farmland.

Vehicle - Some kind of vehicle: a truck, bicycle, car etc., will likely be needed to move you, your equipment and your products from place to place. It is usually necessary to have a vehicle that can carry ample amounts of equipment, and, if you are raising livestock, can pull some kind of trailer to move animals. You may want to consider a vehicle that can provide shelter to harvested crops if you are transporting them in inclement weather. This can mean a camper shell, a hatchback car, or a small trailer, etc. Depending on the time of year and kind of crop, you also need to think about how to keep harvested crops cool during transportation. This might mean coolers, air conditioning, or ice.

Gas/Deisel – Fuel will be necessary for getting you, your equipment and your products from site to site, as well as running your tractor. Gas is a variable cost in your business and it can be a big expense, depending on how much you plan to commute to your farm sites or your marketing locations.

Tent and Tables – A tent may not be absolutely necessary, but is usually important when selling at a farmers market, or farm stand. It can act to shelter the produce (and yourself!) from sun and rain once harvested. A tent can also be useful to erect over your wash site if you don't have a formal structure to protect against both the sun and bird droppings. Likewise, tables are useful especially useful if you intend to sell at a farmers markets and are important for washing and sorting produce and flowers. Consider purchasing collapsible/foldable tents and tables that will fit in your car and are easy for one person to move around.

Infrastructure

Storage Shed – This can be a formally constructed out-building or a small make-shift/portable building to shelter your equipment in bad weather. This will help your tools last longer. Sheds can also be useful for storing crops out of the sun while harvesting or for drying and curing crops like garlic. Depending on the size, storage sheds can be sometimes be used for long-term storage of winter storage crops, as well. If you have multiple plots, you may want to consider separate sheds at each site, housing the tools you will use there. That said, keep in mind how transportable the shed(s) are in case a lease ends or you move to a new site. You can also rely on a vehicle to transport tools back and forth, which will take more time but potentially save money.

Water Infrastructure – Water access can sometimes be a challenging aspect of farming on multiple plots owned by other people. Water can be accessed from a well, from surface water (like a river or a lake), or from city water lines. All of these water sources will work for most types of farming, but they all have costs associated with them, and they vary in cleanliness and sanitation. You might need a water use meter if you are using city water and the landowner wishes the water bills to remain separate. These details will be different depending on the agreement between you and the landlord at each site; agreements can vary from separate meters to a water-for-farm-products trade.

Other water infrastructure that you may need to invest in depending on each site's available equipment includes hoses, irrigation lines, sprinklers, and watering cans.

Greenhouse – Unless you plan to purchase all transplants, or only grow produce that you will direct seed once the weather is warm, you will likely need some kind of greenhouse to start seeds in the early spring. This can be a formal glass or

plastic greenhouse that you construct or purchase from a farm supply store. It might have a wooden or metal frame. This can also be something more temporary that you can build using materials like old windows, or some PVC, rebar and greenhouse plastic. Some small farms use special growing lights to start plants indoors. This uses a lot of electricity and can be very expensive. Greenhouse construction should be part of the initial discussions with landowners. Some landowners may be interested in having a structure on their property. Some may be opposed to any kind of construction at all.

Fencing – Fencing is important for many types of agricultural production. Many livestock farmers now prefer to use movable electric fencing that runs off of small solar panels. This allows the farmer to move pastures, aiding in soil health and potentially lowering feed costs. Fencing can also be important for vegetable and fruit producers – deer fencing will help protect your fields from being wiped out by hungry wildlife. Solar power for these fences is also helpful if there is not electricity access on the field. When farming on multiple plots, consider whether you want movable fencing or more permanent fencing depending on the length of your lease. If using movable fencing, you should also think about whether you want to purchase multiple sets of fencing for each plot or if you want to stagger plantings/production in a way that will allow you to purchase a smaller amount of fencing and transport it from site to site throughout the season.

Wash Station – Some kind of washing facility will be important for vegetable production. This can be as simple as 50-gallon tubs. It can also be systems of sinks, pipes and hoses. Depending on how many sites you farm, how big the sites are, and where the water hook-ups are, you may consider positioning your wash station close to



where you grow crops that will benefit from hydrocooling or periodic spraying once harvested.

Cold Storage – Not all farmers use it, but most find some kind of cold storage (whether a walk-in cooler, an old refrigerator or an ice-packed cooler) important to their operation. For meat production, access to a freezer is necessary. Vegetable farmers that are harvesting and selling produce on the same day they sell may be able to avoid this investment, at least at the start of the business. However, most farmers find that some

Red H Farm

Caiti started Red H Farm on three-quarters of an acre in her parents' field without much planning. Her production started out slow and small. She watered the field using hoses and buckets, washing the produce in a big sink in her parent's mudroom. She used a couple of old windows leaning up against a fence as her "greenhouse" while direct seeding most of her crops and buying in starts when she needed to. Because of the small space, she was able to borrow her uncle's walk-behind tiller. Having set up a CSA, she drove around town and delivered her produce in reused paper bags. Things were a bit disorganized, but Caiti was able to make it work. After her first year, Caiti knew she wanted to begin the process of scaling up. By the end of her first season she had acquired access to a second plot of land – an acre on which to do some row cropping. She knew that between increased acreage and two separate plots, she would need to invest in a bit more infrastructure to make the business run more smoothly and efficiently.

The new plot of land was about 0.5 miles from the main farm location and came ready with a large cold storage unit that Caiti was able to share with the owner of the land, who had his own small potato operation. There was also barn space available at the new site, and together Caiti and her landowner were able to install a wash station consisting of two two-basin sinks and two long tables. Caiti was able to store much of her farm equipment (shovels, hoes, rakes, wheelbarrow, harvest bins, harvest knives, forks, csa boxes, extra irrigation supplies, etc.) in the barn as well. This made the harvesting, washing, packing and storing of produce a streamlined and easy process.

Meanwhile at her parents' property Caiti had installed a refrigerator in the garage. This way produce harvested on site could be temporarily stored at cool temperatures before being transported to the main washing/packing and storage facilities. Also at her parents', Caiti, her father and her brother built

a small 10x10 greenhouse, out of reclaimed windows, corrugated polycarbonate, lumber, and a glass door found at the local recycling center. Caiti put a table inside, and used old pieces of wood and metal shelves for seed starting space. Wanting even a bit more greenhouse space, she has since used wooden pallets, rebar, pvc pipe and greenhouse plastic to build a small temporary hoophouse next to the permanent greenhouse. She uses 72-pack seed starters, 86-pack seed starters, 2.5 and 4 inch pots – as well as anything she can get her hands on, like yogurt containers, to tend her seedlings.

Caiti also knew that using buckets and hoses on what had become 1.5 acres of cropland would be too time consuming. She invested in drip tape, ½ inch drip line, oval hoses, and irrigation line splitters to run irrigation from the well to various parts of her field (particularly out to her melon crops, which are grown using corn-based black plastic mulch and require irrigation lines being laid underneath.) More land also means more soil management. Caiti gets her soil tested and observes plant growth in order to provide the necessary minerals and nutrients to the soil. She is able to get amendments and cover crop seed from a local farm supply company. She uses an old bathtub sitting out in her field to make home brewed compost teas throughout the season. While she continues to use the walk-behind tiller at some points in the season, she is also able to get more large scale tractor work done with the help of people in her community that have bigger equipment.

Having expanded the farmland, Caiti also wanted to expand her markets. She began selling produce not just to CSA customers, but also at two farmers markets. She invested in three folding tables and a large tent, as well as some bins with lids and coolers for transporting produce to market.

Caiti accumulated all of this infrastructure and supplies over the course of three years on the farm as an ongoing process.

kind of cooler is helpful for storing their harvest. Depending on the how many sites you farm, how big the sites are, how far apart they are, and where the electricity hook-ups are, you may consider basing your cold storage on the same site as your wash station to maximize your time efficiency and ensure product quality.

Paperwork

Production Permits and Market Fees – Depending on where you live, your town may require permitting in order to sell the produce you grow from any of your farmland sites. There will also likely be application fees for any farmer's market you apply to sell at. Check with your local Agricultural Commissioner and farmers' market organizations.

Liability Insurance - Liability insurance to cover the farming operation and the products that come out of it is important for any farm business. It will protect both parties should a problem arise. It is customary for the farmer to carry a liability insurance plan and include the landowner as an additional insured. Insurance costs may add up quickly if you have multiple growing sites with multiple landowners, and the cost of the insurance is usually the responsibility of the farmer. Be sure to assess these expenses before signing anything formal.

Common Legal Structures

Farms that use multiple small plots can use the same legal structures as other farms. They can operate as private businesses, cooperative businesses, or non-profit organizations.

Private Businesses

Private farming businesses are owned and operated by an individual or a set of individuals, who grow, market and sell their products in order to make a profit. In a private business farmers often rent the land they farm either through a traditional lease agreement or through some kind of work or product trade. Private farms can take on several legal forms: a **Sole Proprietorship**, **Partnership**, **Limited Liability Corporation (LLC)**, or **Corporation** (which we do not detail here). The filing requirements for each kind of legal entity are different for each state. This information will help you get started, but is not a substitute for professional, legal advice.

Sole Proprietorship – This is the simplest form of ownership if only one person is involved in the business. It does not require special registration. If you have a name for your farm that is different than your own name, you need to file a "Doing Business As" certificate with your town, for a small cost. In this structure, the business and the owner are the same. This means you are individually responsible for business-related obligations and taxes, which you file under a Schedule F on your personal 1040 tax return form. This also means you are liable for any harm caused by your business. If someone sues your business, all of your personal assets can be taken away, in addition to things directly related to your business. For this reason, even if insurance is purchased, sole proprietorships are not generally recommended for businesses with a high risk of liability, such as a farm that sells their goods to the public, has employees, or is open to the public.

Partnership – A General Partnership is legally similar to a sole proprietorship, except that there are two or more people in the business. It is

suggested that partners enter in to an agreement detailing the partnership arrangement, but they do not need to file any paperwork with the state. Each partner pays their share of taxes on their personal tax returns, and each is personally liable for the entire amount of any business obligations.

Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) - In an LLC, your business is separate from your personal holdings, so if there is a problem, only your business is held accountable. You are personally protected from claims against the business. Profits and losses from the business pass through the business to the owner, who then reports them on their personal tax returns. However, the LLC must file an informational tax return with the IRS each year. Forming an LLC requires filing with the state. Though there is a fee to set up an LLC, in addition to a yearly fee to the state, it is a much “safer” form of private business.

Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) - An LLP protects the owners’ personal liability from claims against the business. Each partner is not personally liable for another partner’s malpractice

or other claims. Forming an LLP requires filing with the state and a fee.

Further information about starting a business in Massachusetts can be found at the state’s website: <http://www.mass.gov/portal/business/start-business/>

Non Profit Organizations (NPOs)

Non Profit Organizations operate for charitable purposes. NPOs have gone through federal and states processes to receive tax exempt status. NPOs do not pay taxes like private businesses, can be funded through grants and donations, have a board of directors and often offer some kind of community programming, including things like youth job training, outdoor education or eco-therapy. Non Profit farms can also have business arms, but revenue may not be distributed to members, directors, or officers as profits.

Community Cooperative Farm

With locations in Sheffield, Mt. Washington and New Marlborough, Massachusetts, Community Cooperative Farm produces heirloom vegetables, fruits, grains, wild edibles, eggs and pasture-raised meats by, “honoring the commons through unique relationships with private land owners to use and acquire land.” Community Cooperative Farm explains their unique farming model this way:

“Through cooperation with community members our farm will operate small “Farm Sites” in Sheffield and Mt. Washington. Farms sites are a commitment made by a private land owner to allow our organization to use a portion of their land for agricultural production. The partnership is an agreement to support the creation of a local food culture. In exchange,

participating community members will receive free produce and all the benefits the Farm can offer. Through this unique model of agriculture, based on strong community connections and a sharing of land and labor, the Community Farm Cooperative endeavors to strengthen our community’s ties to the land, support agrarian education and ecological literacy, and carefully steward the land on which we farm and live. We hope to foster a network of ecologically minded farmers and community members working together to create a unique and vibrant food culture.”

More information on their farm can be found at: <http://communitycooperativefarm.wordpress.com/about-2/>

Cooperative Farms, Communal-Living Situations and Co-Housing Opportunities

In agriculture, cooperatives exist in two forms. The first exists when many farms work together as one democratically controlled group to make use of economies of scale. They buy inputs together, combine products and market products as a group. Each farmer in the cooperative owns a share of the overall business. They share the profits that are made and make decisions together. Common examples of larger agricultural cooperatives are Organic Valley and Cabot Creamery.

Cooperatives also exist as singular collaboratively managed farms. Sometimes these farms are part of communal living situations in which many people live in communal housing, and some are involved in operating a farm on the property. The community benefits from the farm by getting free land management. The may also get some of the products from the farm.

In addition, co-housing communities often lease land to farmers – in an effort to preserve open space, there is a growing trend to make housing areas denser. This results in more open land on the property for renting out.

For more details on ownership models:

<http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/research/#ownership>

<http://bfnmass.org/blog/choosing-and-securing-right-legal-entity-your-farm>

Finding multiple farmland plots

People often have very informal ways of seeking out farmland. These include word of mouth, advertisements on Craigslist and social media sites, recommendations on available land from friends and neighbors, fliers at local farm supply stores and postings on farm linking websites. Word of mouth tends to be a popular method for both finding farmland and advertising your farm. Let everyone in your community know your goals, and ask them to please tell all of their friends what you are looking for. Send out emails detailing your ideas and needs and ask people to forward them along to other people who may be interested. Soon, someone is likely to hear of your plans and want to get involved.

It is also useful to explore tools like Google Earth and Web Soil Survey to find potential plots of nearby land without tree cover and with good soils. You can then reach out to land owners with your ideas in mind. More details on how to use these online tools can be found in New Entry's *Finding, Assessing, and Securing Farmland* guide.

Organizational help for finding farmland

In some areas, organizations have created programs that try to link new farmers with available land or retiring farmers. In Massachusetts, the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project has created an outreach program that allows landowners who are interested in having their land farmed to register their land. New farmers can then access this information to find available land in there area: <http://nesfp.org/farmland>. New Entry also reaches out to communities through town agricultural commissions and works to identify land that may be appropriate for farming. New Entry then communicates



Long Life Farm

Laura Davis graduated from New Entry's Farm Business Planning Class in 2012, ready to get her hands dirty farming for her independent business that summer. Trading her car for a pick-up truck, she started her farm business, Long Life Farm. In its first year, she and her husband Don, are supplying 40 families with her organic vegetables, as well as selling at 3 different farmer's markets. She's learned a lot in her first year, including how to be picky when choosing a farmer's market and what varieties of kale are most loved by her customers.

Laura, a resident of Hopkinton, doesn't own farmland. Not wanting to move her family from their long-time residence (Laura and Don have two school-aged daughters), Laura started searching for open land in her neighborhood. Using Google Earth, she pinpointed open fields within a two mile drive from her home and started reaching out to the landowners. Before reaching the end of her list of 15 properties, she found two interested who she could work with. She now leases 2.5 acres from two different landowners. In exchange for using the land and water, she supplies her landlords with a CSA share of vegetables every week. She has a good relationship with both landlords who want her to succeed. Being so close to her fields, the commute isn't normally an issue, unless her daughters are home and don't want

to come with her. Laura does her vegetable washing, storage, CSA pick-up, and seedling growing out of her own house.

In their first year of production Laura and Don invested in around \$10,000 of infrastructure. This included a new BCS walk behind tractor, an electric fence to keep the deer out, a hoop house for their own backyard, and shop lights to start seeds in the basement in March. They are practicing organic farming methods, including using techniques to improve the nutrient density of the soil. In their second year they will apply for organic certification, after wrapping their heads around a crop rotation schedule for their new fields.

They both emphasize that just as important as learning to grow crops is figuring out how to grow your business plan. They attribute much of their success to successful planning and record keeping throughout the season. Skills gained from New Entry's Farm Business Planning gave Laura the basics of how to set up her crop and business plan. With the help of another book, *Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers*, she made all the detailed schedules and projections that she needed to start her farm business off on the right foot.

Written by Becca Weaver

Beth and David - Backyard Farming

Five years ago, Beth and David decided they wanted to start farming in their small Massachusetts town. They weren't sure how it would happen, since they not only lived right in town, but they also didn't own land. They started sharing their dream with friends, family, neighbors, and people they met at the farmers' market. It quickly became clear that not owning land would not be a barrier to their plans. First, their neighbor Sam mentioned how much he'd love to see something growing in his yard – and he had a bit of space, almost $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre! When Beth and David went to Sam's to investigate the soil, sun and water situation, they realized Sam's yard would be perfect for growing tomatoes – a lot of sun! Soon, Beth and David were renting a rototiller and tilling in bags of compost. A woman walking her dog stopped and began chatting about how much she would love the time to put a garden in at her place, several streets over. Soon, Beth and David were making their second backyard visit, and acquiring a new spot for their lettuce and peas. Within just a couple of seasons, Beth and David had found enough backyards – 11 in total – to make up a 2.5

acre farm! Now, they drive between the 11 sites each day, pulling their newly purchased rototiller on a trailer when necessary and harvesting things they'll store in the cold storage back in their garage.

Beth and David both have outside jobs, at least for part of the year so that they retain health insurance – but that doesn't mean the farm isn't a full time job on its own! They put in around 70 hours each week during the height of the season. Because they'd love to expand even more, they are constantly looking for more backyards, keeping their ears open when they are selling at the farmers' market, and getting referrals from friends and neighbors and through their website. Though they would love to own or at least rent a larger piece of land, they have found the backyard method to be quite successful. There have been times when a land owner didn't quite understand what it meant to let them farm on their property. Once someone moved away unexpectedly. In these situations, plots had to shut down, which was frustrating given all of the hard work put in to them. But in general they love their backyard plots.

with land-owners about the growing interest among new farmers to farm small parcels in both rural and suburban communities, and what it means to have someone farming in your backyard in those contexts.

Other organizations and resources in MA that help connect farmers to land include:

- SEMAP (www.semaponline.org)
- Land For Good (www.landforgood.org)
- New England Farmland Finder (www.newenglandfarmlandfinder.org)
- New England Land Link (http://www.smallfarm.org/main/for_new_farmers/new_england_landlink/)

Town agricultural commissions also often have an idea of folks in the community who might be interested in sharing their land. Conservation commissions, open space commissions, or land trusts may know of farmland that is available. Reaching out to these organizations is a viable option to search for small parcels of land.

More detailed information about finding farmland can be found in New Entry's *Finding, Assessing, and Securing Farmland* guide.

Reaching out to Landowners

A useful way to approach potential landowners about leasing their land for agriculture is to remind them of all the benefits you, as a farmer, will bring in trade for use of the land. These benefits can include access to the farm fresh harvest, landscape maintenance, fire prevention through livestock grazing, and infrastructural maintenance. Often, people in suburban areas are eager to take part in the growing movement around local food and healthy food systems. Remind them that making their land available may be a good way to participate in this cultural shift. Donating or trading their backyard for farm products is appealing for a growing number of people.

There can be other benefits to the landowner, as well. With a farmer on their land, they may qualify for an agricultural use tax exemption on their property taxes. In Massachusetts this is often referred to as Chapter 61A, in which A landowner must own at least 5 acres of land and the money from agricultural products on that land must be at least \$500. Find more information at: <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIX/Chapter61A>

Agreements and negotiations with landowners

Like any other business arrangement between two people, when you farm on other people's land it is a good idea to create some kind of a formal agreement. Many backyard farmers seek situations in which there is the opportunity to trade farm products for use of land, rather than form traditional rental agreements. Even in these situations, it is recommended that you have clear communication with your landlord and write down each of your expectations.

The details of land tenure agreements vary from farm to farm. Many are simply handshakes based on trust and established or growing relationships. Others have written documents that detail all the expectations and nuances of the relationship. They also include the record of liability insurance. New farmers can benefit from developing a land-use or operations proposal explaining their plans and processes. This is useful to present to potential landowners in the negotiation phase. This can then be referenced if misunderstandings occur later down the line. Sometimes these agreements involve the traditional exchange of money, although in many cases this fee is nominal. Most often, backyard farmers seek out agreements that are trade-based for products or labor.

New Entry suggests written tenure agreements like a lease, license, or memorandum of understanding as a way of clearly establishing the commitment and relationship between the farm and landowner. Again, this can include payment through trade of goods and services, but always entails formally written documents. For details on elements of a good lease, see **Appendix B**.

Financing

Starting a farm takes initial capital investment, just like starting any new business. For farming, even when you rent land, there is the cost of equipment (like tools and machinery) infrastructure (like irrigation, washing stations, cooler), and growing inputs (seeds, soil amendments). It is important to have some money saved if you are going to start a new business or start on new land. In addition, there are some other sources from which you may be able to find a loan or capital investment. One great

Backyard Cropland Negotiating Points

TERM - Clarify that your use is for an entire season, and that if the property is sold mid-season, that you be allowed to finish out the current season. Specify a start and end date.

RENT/BARTER/UPKEEP - Specify what the landowner wants in return for your use of the land; typically it is cash or a weekly supply of vegetables or keeping the land maintained.

APPEARANCE - Commit to keeping the plot you work neat and weeded.

INSURANCE - Clarify what insurance you have and what it covers, including basic business liability coverage.

CROPS GROWN -Specify that you will maintain a working garden consisting of common vegetables, herbs and flowers, or livestock and that one or many different crops may be growing at one time.

GROWING PRACTICES - Specify your farming practices; what chemicals (if any) you intend to use on the land? Do you use strictly organic practices?

ACCESS - Clarify how you will gain access to the yard.

WORK SCHEDULE -Set agreed upon times when you'll be working in the plot; ask to be granted some latitude with these times. If you do need to work at an unscheduled time, you can offer to do your best to give a half day's advance notice by phone and/or email.

UNDERGROUND CABLES OR PIPES – If you plan to operate a rototiller, have the owner investigate to be sure there is nothing under the ground where you will be maintaining your plot.

WATER USAGE - Specify that you require the use of the landowner's water and describe the type of irrigation setup you will be using. Assure them you will make every effort to use water wisely; if water usage is an issue, you can suggest that they monitor it and offer to pay the difference between their usual bill and any increase that would be attributed to your operation.

EQUIPMENT - Specify that most work will be completed with simple hand tools such as hoes, shovels, scissors, knives, wheel hoes, seeders and other common manually operated garden tools. If you do plan to operate a rototiller, advise the landowner on what that entails and verify that there are no utility lines near where you will be rototilling.

NOT U-PICK – If desired, don't be afraid to ask that the landowner not pick vegetables from the garden because you depend on them for your livelihood. If there is a particular vegetable they would like, you can request that they let you know.

CLOSEDOWN - Agree that at the end of each season you will leave the plot tilled and leveled.

Adapted from www.spinfarming.com. More information about SPIN farming methods can be found at <http://www.spinfarming.com/>



thing about leasing land rather than purchasing land is that overall it requires much less savings. For this reason farming on multiple plots can be a good option for many people starting their career.

Self-Financing

Self-financing often works for new farmers who are shifting careers, or have been able to put money away in anticipation of starting their farm business. This involves having saved enough money to invest in the necessary infrastructure, tools, and supplies to get your farming business off the ground.

Private Investors

It is possible to find private investors in your farm. After carefully formulating a business plan, it may be possible to approach individuals who have the means to invest in a business without expecting a large and rapid return, such as family and friends. Individuals may also be willing to provide a private loan that can be paid back slowly over time. These individuals might invest in a new farm with the guarantee of future farm products or other benefits outlined in an agreement.

Crowd sourcing

Crowd sourcing is the idea of asking for what

Amber - Heritage Poultry

In 2010 Amber decided that she wanted to move forward with her idea of starting a small-scale heritage poultry farm, raising pastured Freedom Ranger chickens on multiple plots in her rural neighborhood. She had found interested landowners, knew what kind of infrastructure she needed, and had selected a breed. Amber knew there would be some upfront costs for building coops, purchasing chicks and feed, and having the first batch processed before she would see sales returns. She knew she needed a good business plan to attract some investment. Because she was not interested in taking out a business loan from a bank, she developed a business investment proposal that caught the eye of just enough private investors. Amber developed a microloan program where people could make an initial investment in the farm, and then be paid back in processed birds charged at wholesale prices. The interest paid back to the investors is the difference between the wholesale and retail prices in the birds they buy. After a couple of years, the business is booming!

you need, whether it is services or money, from a large group of people. You will not necessarily know these people, and will often use the Internet to connect with them. It is often used for startup companies and independent projects. Kickstarter is one online forum where you can list a project you would like to start, or something that you need (like a tractor!), how much money you need to do it (your goal) and why people should support it. You then have one month to meet your goal. People all over the country know about Kickstarter, and they go online to look at projects for which they might like to donate money. Find more details on this tool for financing projects for your farm at <http://www.kickstarter.com/>.

Community Supported Agriculture [CSA]

CSAs are farming models in which the community invests in a farm and farmer at the beginning of the season, sharing in both the risks and

bounty of the farm throughout the season. CSA members pay for a “share” of the farm at the beginning of the season (providing the farmer with necessary capital up front) and then receive a certain amount of products from the farm each week. CSA customers sign up knowing that by investing in the farm they are taking on some of the risks associated with farming – the year may or may not be bountiful. But by investing in the farmer at the beginning of the season, communities ensure that in a tough year, small-scale, diversified farmers still have the capacity to operate.

Grants

Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Programs - To qualify for grants through NRCS, you will need a formal lease with the landowner whose lease term goes for the duration of the practice for which you are receiving a grant. <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial>

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to help farmers plan and implement conservation practices that help improve soil, water, plant, animal and air. One program local growers find very helpful is their Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative. This program assists producers to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner by providing financial and technical assistance in purchasing and installing high tunnel greenhouses.
- Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) - AMA provides financial and technical assistance to help farmers address issues such as water management, water quality, and erosion control using conservation methods. These methods include the construction of irrigation structures, tree planting, crop diversification, and integrated pest management strategies. The program pays up to 75% of the cost of installing conservation practices.

Check the NRCS website for more programs that might help finance improvements to your farm business.

Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF2) – KYF2 is a USDA program working to strengthen the critical connection between farmers and consumers, and support local and region food systems through grants, loans and other means of support. http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=KYF_GRANTS

Loans

Farm Credit System (FCS) - The FCS is a network of federally chartered borrower-owned

lending institutions and related service organizations that specialize in providing credit and related services to farmers (also young and beginning), ranchers, and producers or harvesters of aquatic products. <http://www.fca.gov/FCS-Institutions.htm>

USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) - The FSA provides a variety of farm loan programs, including traditional operating loans, beginning farmer and youth programs. FSA also includes a mediation program for agricultural disputes. Find more information in New Entry's plain language guide to Applying for a Farm Service Agency Loan at www.nesfp.org. Or check out FSA's own resources:

- Farm Loan Program Information, <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=fmlp&topic=landing>
- Loans for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=fmlp&topic=bfl>
- Minority and Women Farmers and Ranchers, <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=fmlp&topic=sdl>

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service - The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service is a great resource for learning more about sustainable agriculture and farming. They provide a lot of online resources. Together with the USDA, they created a publication that lists all of the federal programs for sustainable agriculture, forestry, entrepreneurship, conservation and community development in detail. You can find it at: https://attra.ncat.org/guide/Building_Sustainable.pdf



Challenges

When farming on someone else's land various challenges can arise. Being aware of these difficulties from the beginning can greatly reduce their negative impact on your farming operation.

Investments – time and money

Beginning farmers often find great challenge in the upfront investment required of farming. Without at least a small amount of capital, even if the land is near free, the purchase of seeds, equipment and inputs can feel like a big barrier. Factoring in this kind of initial investment is

important in deciding on your business model. It may be possible to start farming part time and keep another job to build additional capital (and perhaps to provide health care).

Investment – both time and money – can become a tricky issue with regard to lease agreements as well. Many farmers find it difficult to commit the time, money and infrastructure that is necessary for healthy production and proper stewardship without a long-term lease. This is something that you as the farmer can discuss with the landowner. Educate the landowner about the nature of your agricultural practices and how they affect sustainability of natural resources as well as your ability to make a profit. They should understand that the way you work on the land will have a long term impact, and

that some investments you want to make might take several years before they pay off for you. In this way, you may be able to negotiate a longer-term lease. If you do not have secure land tenure, talk to the landowner about investing in some of the farm infrastructure that you can't take with you when you leave. They can charge you over time for the investment that they made in the property as your relationship continues.

Communication and differing expectations

The most common issues arise due to problems with communication leading to differences in expectations between farmers and landowners. Clear and precise communication must come from everyone involved in the agreement. It is important to understand why an individual is interested in having someone farm their land, what they know and do not know about farming, and what they expect to get out of the deal. It can strain the relationship if the landowner would like to see you invest in different things than you feel are necessary. Clarity is important. For this reason, it is highly recommended to write down an agreement that explicitly lays out the terms for the arrangement. Issues that should be discussed and written down include:

- How are you paying the landowner?
- For how long is the contract?
- What are the aesthetic concerns on the part of the landowner?
- How are you obligated to maintain the property and aesthetic condition of the area you are using?
- How does the landowner feel about strangers coming on and off of their land?
- Does the landowner understand you might

be using things like manure and fish emulsions that have unpleasant odors?

- Does the landowner expect you to help with tasks that are not farm related?
- Is there a framework for conflict resolution that may arise in the future?

Without putting it in writing, expectations can shift over the season. People have different ideas of what is fair. Trust becomes a key issue between the farmer and landowner. According to one farmer, "It's great to be trust-based, but (especially if there are more than two parties involved), it seems like people are bound to come up with concerns, or feel like something is unfair when it is such a relaxed agreement." An extension of that trust in the form of a written agreement does a lot to reduce misunderstandings.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics tends to be a bigger issue with landowners than they might even realize at the beginning. Many people are interested in supporting the local food movement, but don't always realize the needs of agriculture. The idyllic agrarian image of a hay field has sometimes become reality in their minds, and the nitty gritty details of farm work, land management and livestock raising may be unclear. As one farmer put it, "The property owner wants their weeds eaten down by cows, so they offer pasture – what they don't expect is the cow to move, moo or go to the bathroom!" Often land owners do not realize how important it is to them that fences remain in good condition, the ground remains clear of debris like old planting pots or piles of weeds, and the storage spaces remain

neatly organized. In working with a land owner, it is important to talk about the details they may not realize are a part of farming. This will help avoid tension down the road. Constant cleanup and tidying takes time directly from active farm work, so understanding what will be expected of you is important in deciding if the relationship is a good fit.

Suitability

Sometimes problems arise when you find a piece of land and an amenable landowner, but the land does not end up being suitable for your production. There may be problems with the soil structure, water retention, or well. Having a discussion at the beginning of the relationship regarding the course of action if the land proves unsuitable is very important. As much as a farmer does not want a landowner to present unexpected demands and expectations, a landowner feeling abandoned by a farmer is equally unfair.

Unexpected Ownership Changes

Issues of land ownership can be complex and challenging. In situations of private ownership things happen like people unexpectedly selling their property, relationships breaking up, people passing away, or people moving. In situations where land is under collective ownership, the multiple perspectives at hand can result in lengthy agreement processes. Foreseeing these challenges and addressing them in your agreements will strengthen your position as a farmer.

Time Management

Recognizing and finding the time needed for various aspects of your farm business is always a challenge. This can be even harder when you are farming multiple plots. You have to decide which plot needs your attention at any given time, and factor in time getting from one plot to the next. Many farmers hold part-time jobs off of the farm in order to have enough cash-flow for projects and growth. But this means time not spent doing the many things a farm requires. According to one farmer, “marketing and money are always challenges.” It is easy to spend time off the farm making a bit of extra money, or all your time on the farm ensuring healthy crops – but don’t forget the importance of time spent marketing and publicizing your business! When crops and livestock demand constant attention, taking time out to market your business can fall by the wayside. But you need the customers to actually purchase your products in the end. Finding this balance is a common struggle for small farmers.

Growth

There are many determinants to growth that can sometimes be challenging. This includes things like finding more capital, finding more land, bringing on interns or hiring employees, and the time needed to plan for growth. Careful business planning and finding ways to attract volunteer help are two useful ways to manage the challenges of growth when it comes to workload.

When talking to land owners it is important to express your long term interest in growth. Some land owners might have enough land on which you can expand as the years go by. Knowing up front if they are willing to let you do that is something you want to confirm and include in

your lease agreement. Otherwise, considering the location of the land you choose and how close it is to other parcels on which you can grow is useful. Farming on multiple parcels is a viable option, but keeping them close together makes things much easier with regards to transporting equipment and harvesting.

Additionally, other aspects of growth should be factored in to your lease agreement. Making sure that your land owner knows your long term intentions and how that might affect your use of their land is important to include in discussions from the beginning. This includes a discussion of the time frame that your landowner is willing to commit to have you on

their land. It is also very important to confirm with your land owner that it is alright for other people – volunteers, interns, etc. – to be on the land. Many landowners might not realize that opening their property to a farm entails a lot of uncertainties, odd hours, and new people.



APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

Aesthetics – the way that things look.

Capital/Capital Investment – the money or assets you have that can be used to help start your business.

Compost Tea – liquid fertilizer made in many different ways, the most simple being steeping compost in water. Compost tea often applied to plant foliage.

Conservation Restriction – A conservation easement on a piece of land protects it from being developed. The landowner can receive a tax incentive for donating the rights for anyone to develop the land. Land with a conservation easement is then worth less to buy, because there is no option for the buyer to develop it.

Corn-Based Black Plastic Mulch- plastic substance laid tightly on the ground with slits cut in it through which warm-weather loving plants like watermelons, melons, peppers and tomatoes grow. The plastic acts to keep the soil warm.

Corrugated Polycarbonate – hard plastic used for greenhouse roofs or walls.

Craigslist – an online forum where you can advertise things for sale, like tools or CSA shares specific to the city or region where you live. There is a section called “Farm + Garden” in the “For Sale” section of the website where you can both advertise and search for things you need. The website is <http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites#US>

Economies of Scale – the idea that a business can obtain cost advantages and operational efficiencies due to size, scale of operation, or output. In other words, buying or selling larger amounts of something can reduce the price of each individual unit, making the overall purchase cheaper.

Google Earth – an online tool that allows you to look at photos of the Earth from satellites. You can zoom down very close to the Earth’s surface to see what different parcels of land look like. For instance, you can use Google Earth to see where there is forest cover and where there is open land.

Handshake Agreement – an informal agreement made between parties. It does not contain a formal, written agreement, but instead is based on trust, or a “handshake.”

Heavy Metals – toxic substances like lead or arsenic that can leach into the soil. There is a higher level of risk of heavy metal contamination at urban sites that were once used for industrial manufacturing or had buildings that were torn down.

High Tunnel – a tall, plastic greenhouse that is often used to help grow things through the colder months. It is essentially a large hoop house. Rather than being used for starting seedlings, you usually grow things directly in the ground in a high tunnel.

Hoop House – plastic tunnel greenhouses used for starting seeds or growing crops. Hoop Houses are more flexible than greenhouses and are easier to raise/lower and vent according to your needs. However, hoop houses are less sturdy structures compared to greenhouses and may not last as long.

Hydrocooling – the process of cooling vegetables or fruit by spraying them with cold water.

Kickstarter – a non-profit organization with an online site where you can create a web page for a project you are working on. It allows people to donate money to your project through the Kickstarter organization so that their donation can be “written off,” on their taxes. This donation allow them to pay less in taxes. The website is: <http://www.kickstarter.com/>

Land Tenure – secure access to and ability to use land via some type of formal agreement or ownership status.

Microloans – small sums of money lent to individuals usually at the start of their small business.

NRCS – The Natural Resource Conservation Service is the branch of the USDA dealing directly with soil surveying and conservation assistance.

Pass – a trip over the field with the tractor implement.

Scaling Up – getting larger, or increasing your production.

Schedule F – the section of the tax form 1040 where you list all of your farm income.

Silage – fermented grass crops like corn or oats, used for animal food.

Social Media – online social networks and communities like Facebook and Twitter where you can connect with a large number of people virtually.

Soil Tests – scientific tests done in a lab that tell you the details of the soil you are working with, like what nutrients are present, how much organic matter is present and what the level of acidity is.

Tax Exemption – being free from having to pay taxes on a particular part of your income.

Tool-Lending Libraries – community resources that carry a number of different tools that can be “checked out” like one would check out books at a regular library.

USDA – The United States Department of Agriculture is the government’s political body that deals with agricultural production and nutrition programming nationally.

Web Soil Survey – an online tool created by NRCS that provides soil data and maps of almost all the counties in the country. The Web Soil Survey can be used to get a general understanding of what kind of soil exists in your area. The website address is: <http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/>

APPENDIX B: Elements in a Good Lease

A clear and detailed lease agreement will help you maintain a good relationship with your landlord and help you to resolve disputes that may come up. Always consult with a lawyer before signing a lease.

A list of the people, companies, or organizations signing the lease. This includes the tenant (this is you, the land user) and the landlord (most often the property owner). These could be individuals, a land trust, a town, an LLC, or a corporation.

Description of the property. A detailed description of the land is good to have on record. This can include maps of the land and entire parcel, current conditions of the property, and existing farm infrastructure (like barns, equipment, farmhouses, etc). Sometimes the farmhouse is in a separate lease.

Term of the lease. This includes how long the lease agreement is good for, when it starts and ends, and if it is renewable.

The amount and type of rent and how and when it will be paid. This will include information on whether it is a cash lease or a crop/livestock share.

Taxes. The lease should specify who pays for the various taxes involved in farming. This will include the property taxes.

Security Deposit. Sometimes you will have to deposit money at the beginning of the lease term as insurance to the landowner that s/he can repair any damage you may cause.

Utilities. The lease should specify who pays for utilities, such as water and electricity.

Entry of the landlord. This includes information about when the landlord has the right to enter the property and for what reasons.

Permitted and prohibited uses on the farm. This can include types of farming operations (animals, vegetables, pasture), types of farming and stewardship practices (like organic), and certain activities like CSA pickup or Farmstand operation that are allowed on the land.

Responsibility for maintenance and repairs. Most often, you will be in charge of routine maintenance such as annual servicing or painting. The landlord is often in charge of major repairs and maintenance such as fixing roofing, water supply systems, or waste treatment systems.

Investments in capital improvements. Capital improvement is building something new on the property. It also includes fixing an existing system on the property that greatly increases the value and the utility of the land. It can be challenging for you to invest in capital improvements if the lease term is not long enough because you may not make money from your investment. The lease can include an agreement on how you will be compensated at the end of the lease if you do make capital improvements.

Liability or other insurance. It is important to include provisions about what type of insurance is required of you and the landlord (such as liability or crop insurance). A lease should also include who is responsible for obtaining the insurance.

Default Provisions. Leases will often include information about what happens if either party does not uphold to the standards laid out in the lease. This can also include a time period for you to solve the situation that you and the landlord believe can be fixed, or alternative mediation steps to resolve a conflict.

Condemnation or Casualty Provisions. This part of the lease will describe what happens to the lease agreement if the property is condemned or something terrible happens, like a fire.

We'd like to hear from you!

For questions, comments, or help with your community's
farmland mapping project, please contact:

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Working with new farmers

to build strong businesses,
expertise in the field, and
a resilient food system.