

# Community Farming Business Model

In 2023, thanks to funding from USDA SARE Farmer/Rancher Grant Program, we piloted a participatory community farming project designed to engage the community in the growing of its own food through weekly work sessions and monthly classes. This document is meant to share lessons learned and to propose some viable options for creating new revenue streams for small farmers or land owners by focusing on customer engagement and growing culture and community. As a disclaimer, this model is what we are going to try based on past experience and has not yet been implemented at scale. Many of the ideas presented below have been tested over the last ten years, but this will be our first attempt to make a living from these new offerings. With that said, use this document as you will and follow up with us if you have any questions ([westonlombard@risingappalachia.org](mailto:westonlombard@risingappalachia.org)).



# Rational

Today, more than ever before, people are longing for a sense of connection and a sense of belonging. We long for our lost relationship to the land and to our neighbors and community. People recognize their vulnerability and dependence on an impersonal, unsustainable global market economy and are eager to re-engage in meaningful work, to grow relationships to our place and to each other, and to create lives of value and vitality. The job of the Community Farmer is to provide opportunities for such experiences by removing barriers to participation and creating convenient options for community engagement. Common barriers include: access to land, tools, knowledge/expertise, time, motivation, and a welcoming community. If you can help people to overcome these barriers, we believe that they will pay for this service with energy, money, and enthusiasm.

## Overcoming Barriers to Engagement

People enjoy hard work, they enjoy working together towards a common goal, and like spending time in nature with like-minded people doing necessary and rewarding work. We want to feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, that we are contributing to our community, and that our skills, energy, and thoughts are of value. Our highly specialized or repetitive jobs in the market economy don't always satisfy these needs and there is opportunity for farmers and land stewards to help put the culture back in agriculture by reinvolving the community. There are many ways that this can be accomplished but we believe the most success will be achieved by making engagement as convenient and inclusive as possible. People may want to participate in farming but don't have land, they might want to garden but don't have time to do the daily watering and tending necessary for success, or maybe they don't want to invest in the required tools and infrastructure. Some may just not know where to start and need some guidance. Below is a non-exhaustive list of potential business opportunities that reduce or eliminate these barriers to entry and allow for convenient engagement with agriculture. If done thoughtfully and with attention to the budget, we believe that many of these activities, in addition to growing your customer base, creating community, and providing you with job satisfaction, can also generate a reasonable income.

### Farm tours and educational walks

By providing an opportunity to see a working farm, understand more about a specific production technique, or learn about a topic of interest, you can attract drop-in visitors and build ongoing customer relationships.

#### **Tips:**

- Tours can be 45 minutes to 3 hours long, and may or may not include a meal.
- Advertise at least a month in advance and, if possible, attempt to get farm agencies to share your event information via newsletters or social media. Create and promote on

online event, list on local event calendars, etc. Include information about who the tour is for: kids, adults, families, professionals, etc, and what they might learn and do.

- Ideas include animal engagement tours for families with young kids, educational tours about things like agroforestry, permaculture, or farm layout and design. General farm tours are great also. Plant ID walks are popular, as are forest ecosystem walks, wildlife walks, etc.
- Tours should be practiced and professional. Consider reading tips from the National Association of Interpretive Guides such as: begin on time to respect those that arrive on time but stay within sight for a while to allow others to catch up. Start by welcoming participants and telling them what to expect, where to find bathrooms, how long the tour will be, etc. Next, find a way to tell them what they will learn that is relevant to them. Don't talk while walking but instead stop and wait for the group to arrive then talk. End at a farmstand or market area.
- Provide an opportunity to do something: collect chicken eggs, pet a cow, pull some weeds, short and sweet, but the more helpful it is to you the better. What have you been waiting to do but it takes 20 people 10 minutes to do?
- Collect contact information to send updates about future events
- Price can range from \$10 to \$50/person depending on the length and experience (included meals or tastings), but be sure you are making at least \$50/hr.
- Ideally have 2 staff, someone leading the tour and someone collecting fees, signing people in and then selling goods at the end.
- Publishing a calendar of seasonal tours at the beginning of the year and offering a menu of tours by request are both great ways to book tours. We are using a google calendar app that allows guests to book tours in open time slots year round.



## Workshops and Educational Classes

Workshops, whether led by farm staff or special guests, are a great way to bring new knowledge and skills to the farm and the community. We have hosted everything from mushroom log inoculation to fruit tree pruning workshops with great success. Hands-on classes allow participants a chance to learn practical skills from experts and get experience they don't normally have access to.

### Tips:

- Our workshops are typically 2 to 3 hours long. Any longer and you will have to start thinking about feeding people.
- We usually start with a presentation of some sort, then maybe a tour of an example of the topic, followed by a hands-on component.
- As with tours, it is nice to have at least two staff, one delivering content and one taking care of logistics like checking people in, collecting money, and then helping during the hands-on portion.
- We sometimes ask participants to bring needed tools and sometimes buy extra tools if we plan to do the workshop more than once.
- As with all offerings, it is great to have a plan and especially think through the start and how you will welcome guests and set the tone. We usually do some sort of community building/icebreaker or fun game and then ask people to share about why they have come and what experiences they have with the subject. Sometimes guests will be extremely helpful content providers or experts in the field.
- If producing something like mushroom logs or grafted fruit trees, it is nice to let participants take one home (providing a take-home printout with care instructions is helpful)
- The end of the workshop is a great time to sell more farm products, resell any specialty tools purchased, etc.

## Farm Gatherings/Special Events

Culture is built by celebrating meaningful seasonal happenings and working to make these seasonal happenings a relevant part of people's lives. We do this by hosting gatherings and work parties, such as acorn harvesting and processing parties, tree plantings, garden bed preparation events, apple cider pressing, chestnut roasting, etc. These events can be a great way to mark the changing seasons, celebrate nature's bounty and the success of certain crops, a way to get extra help around the farm, a good way to sell a bunch of products at once, or all of the above.

### Tips:

- The trick is to balance what you provide with what participants provide. If you ask people to pay to attend, bring a potluck dish, and work for you, you might not have as much success as if you provide the food and music and ask them to pay and work.

- I find that people will generally be excited to work hard for about an hour sometimes 2 at one task. The more guidance you can provide the better. The more contact they have with other people during the work the better, the more visible progress is made the better.
- Having group leaders to guide participants and give feedback during the work and providing proper tools and safety equipment is necessary for a successful event.
- Getting people to work on a project is a great way to build customer loyalty and get long term interest in the project. If people help to plant a new orchard they will be invested in its long term success and likely to purchase fruit or nuts when the orchard is producing.
- We like to start with some sort of ceremony that marks the occasion, honors the land, gives thanks to the participants, and sets the tone for the work. Next we demonstrate how to do the work to the whole assembled group and ask for questions. Next we break into teams and send out a team leader with each group that is responsible for managing the work. The first time someone does the task the manager should watch and give precise feedback. Ideally the manager will then rotate to another person or small team and help them get started. After helping each individual or small team once, they should circle back and check people's work and give more feedback if needed. People want to do it right but sometimes need lots of guidance and support.
- Modest achievable goals are best so that everyone has a sense of accomplishment
- After the work and the collecting of tools and supplies, gathering together for a celebration with a fire, food, and/or entertainment is great. Participatory entertainment, like some sort of square dance, drum circle, sing along, etc can be great, but it depends on your crowd and their familiarity with each other.
- My friends make such events into weekend long adventures and offer campsites, live music, and the opportunity to earn money gathering chestnuts.
- As stated earlier the price for the experience needs to reflect the value provided and can range from free to expensive depending on if you feed people or they feed themselves and what all is included. Count on getting value from the labor and the customer building experience as well as the cash income, or provide a great experience with lots of value and charge a reasonable price. Pizza making or cider pressing events can be great income generators that involve the participants, but require the farmer to do most of the prep work, provide the ingredients, ect. It is great to have people help harvest and/or process the ingredients and then participate in making the pizzas or pressing the cider.

## Community Farming Opportunities

By providing an opportunity for people to learn to farm, access land, tools, and needed resources you can help people to experience the farming life that they want at the level they are ready for. Creating the entire range of opportunities needed to meet everyone's needs may not be possible at your farm, but below are some different engagement ideas that can help farmers to recruit volunteer labor, earn income, build community and customer loyalty. The idea is to meet people where they are and provide enough support that they are successful in projects and able to meaningfully contribute to the farm when and how they can. The role of the farm

and farmer is to provide the infrastructure, space, tools, knowledge and support needed. Below are some examples of different arrangements that could be beneficial.

## Farm Membership:

Farm membership is a great way to attract dedicated supporters and participants. What it means and what you offer can vary greatly, but the basic premise is that you charge a monthly or yearly fee that grants customers special access to the farm and its programs. This could look like a traditional CSA wherein members get a weekly basket of produce, or it could look like a CSA plus access to the farm during certain times for recreation, camping, etc. It could mean access to a community garden plot, a herd share, discounts to special events, etc.

We are going to explore membership levels, something like \$50 a year allows one to be a farm member, receive regular newsletters and updates, invitation to our online ordering platform to get first access to limited offerings such as farm fresh eggs, meat, and other hot commodities, the ability to participate in volunteer days, invitations to special events, and the ability for a fee to reserve campsites, book parties, etc.

From the base membership, people can add extras such as a weekly CSA share, a community garden plot, full access to camping, swimming, etc. Members can attend periodic farm to table meals, join herd shares, or buy-in to other livestock projects such as the raising of pigs. In some states farm memberships, if papered properly, may allow for creative workarounds to requirements for commercial processing space, but you should check local and national rules to confirm.

## Volunteer days:

Having regular volunteer days is a great way to get help around the farm, introduce people to new projects, and share skills. Having a published calendar of volunteer days and a mailing list is crucial for success. Consider requiring volunteers to attend a training/orientation event before being able to drop in for any volunteer day. This training should cover general safety protocols, tool use and responsibilities, a tour of the farm, and an overview of the philosophy and goals of the farm, then some work. After attending one of these orientations, volunteers can come to any volunteer day, receive additional instruction about the particular project and then get into it. One could also offer an orientation at the beginning of each volunteer day that is only required for new volunteers (offering this quarterly or monthly might make the most sense). We have not yet tried charging money to attend this orientation/training, but it could be done or it could just be a cost of training good help. Another option is to require all volunteers to purchase a yearly farm membership. This should give them access not only to volunteering but also to attend special events, purchase produce, etc.

Tips:

- Employing a welcoming project manager that is adept at teaching and managing people is important for success.

- The difficulty of the day's task and the skill of the participants will influence the required manager to volunteer ratio, but generally speaking I like a ratio of no more than 1 manager to 10 volunteers.
- It is great if volunteers can take home produce, earn farm credits that can be exchanged for product or special perks, get a meal, or receive some meaningful thank you. This must be balanced with the value that they provide the farm.

## Community Gardening:

If you can provide a protected space (deer fence), access to water, tools, and other resources, then you can rent community garden plots.

If you have time and interest in watering and tending people's plots during the week, you can add value to this experience.

If you are interested in leading work sessions and offering special training, then you can sell a full community gardening experience.

We ran a grant funded community garden program that was incredibly rewarding for all involved, produced a ton of food, and really grew a dedicated community. Since it was grant funded, and since each farm has different overhead, access to different customers, etc, it is really hard to provide budget numbers for what this might cost to run. With that disclaimer, I have provided a description of our program as well as estimates of what I think it might cost to start and run such a program from scratch. Costs are estimated based on prices in rural SE Ohio in 2023.

You can read the full report of our project [here](#) and see photos, presentations and detailed descriptions. To summarize, we invited 10 families to come out to the farm each Sunday from March to October to work together for 3 hour sessions growing our own food. For each session, I would come up with a work plan, prepare tools, gather needed supplies and then meet the group for a short training session and overview of the day's tasks. Most days we would begin with some community building exercise, discussion, or ice-breaker. We would then divide into groups and tackle each task on the to do list. Thankfully we had some experienced gardeners in the group who were able to act as group leaders and ensure that small group work was done properly. Once a month we invited a special guest presenter to teach us more about compost, seed saving, pest management, etc.

We began the whole project from scratch in February and used our first class, when enthusiasm was high, to do the difficult work of building a fence. This took us 3 sessions and people volunteered to come work in between sessions as well. After this we made a group garden menu by deciding what we wanted to grow and creating a planting/harvesting calendar. Next we started seeds in flats, prepared beds by broadforking and spreading compost, and then spent the season tending, harvesting, and enjoying food together. Each session, a team of people would depart the garden early to wash and bag produce and sometimes to cook food for the group. We often began or closed the session with a potluck. Since many of our participants had children, we hired a youth educator to engage the children during work sessions, sometimes

working with us and sometimes exploring the woods beyond the farm. Between weekly sessions we provided needed irrigation and tending. As this ended up being a ton of work during a drought, members volunteered to cover watering shifts during the week. This led us to devise a sliding scale fee idea, wherein participants could work extra hours between sessions to earn income to offset the membership fee. Below is an estimate of costs and an idea of what one could earn with such a program. Easy ways to integrate the sliding scale fee structure, would be to allow people to take shifts at childcare, take on tending responsibilities between classes, donating tools, etc.

### **Profit and Loss Projection for a 6 Month Community Farming Group with 20 Participants**

<b><u>Expenses</u></b>			
<b>Labor</b>			
Administration	recruitment, publicity, weekly communications, organizing guest presenters, organizing materials and resources	2 hours a week x 24 sessions x \$30	\$1,440.00
Project lead	prep and running weekly programs	4 hours a week x 24 sessions x \$30/hr	\$2,880.00
Support	weekly watering, tending, mowing, etc	6 hours a week x 24 sessions x \$15hr	\$2,160.00
Childcare (optional)	engaging children during work sessions	3 hours a week x 24 sessions x \$20hr	\$1,440.00
Earthworks or bed prep	we hired a backhoe to terrace our hillside, could also me used for bed shaping, etc		\$400.00
<b>Total labor</b>			<b>\$7,920.00</b>
<b>Materials/supplies for 1 acre garden</b>			
woven wire fence	approximately 1000ft		\$3,000.00
fence posts	100 posts @ \$10/post		\$1,000.00
compost/soil amendments			\$1,000.00
seeds			\$300.00
irrigation			\$800.00
pots, flats, canning equipment, etc			\$200.00

additional hand tools			\$1,000.00
<b>Total supplies/materials</b>			<b>\$7,300.00</b>
<b>Total cost</b>			<b>\$15,220.00</b>
<b><u>Revenue</u></b>			
Participant Fees	20 participants x \$770/participant*	equals about \$30/per week per person	\$15,400.00
<b>Total Revenue</b>			<b>\$15,400.00</b>
<b>Profit and Loss</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>low profit because of high initial investment</b>	<b>\$180.00</b>
<b>Profit and loss</b>	<b>Years 2 and beyond</b>	<b>Once garden fence, and irrigation are established, tools are already purchased, etc, profitability increases dramatically. The two year profit amount assumes a 10% maintenance/replacement cost for items like fencing and tools.</b>	<b>\$5,760.00</b>

\*\$770 per participant is high for our area, so one could charge less and expect a loss in the first year that would then be made up over subsequent years because of high potential for profit once established. In a more affluent area, this price may be low, so you will have to feel it out. Other ways to play around with the price structure are to adjust the frequency of sessions, the number of participants, the wages paid out, etc.

## Conclusion

Using your farm to grow community and culture is not only a great and needed public service, but also a rewarding and meaningful way to make a living. We hope that some of our ideas inspire you to try different farm engagement and community farming practices. For information on our model and to check out some of our programs visit:

<https://www.risingappalachia.org/growing-community>