

Beginner Farmer Apprenticeship Project Year in Review

The spring of 2021 was a strange time. It wasn't the proverbial spring of the north shore; the snow had melted in April, and I heard of a few hopeful and tenacious gardeners planting onions, which as we all know here usually backfires with a late frost. I was finishing my degree in organic agriculture and starting to work on the Food Chain project more seriously, exploring various projects that had been started by previous staff. Within the context of the collective existential crisis of the pandemic, I was experiencing my own existential questioning; what would I do now that I wasn't in the comfortable bubble of online school? I had decided to study agriculture because that was what I had always felt called to do, there was never anything else for me although I have tried many things to be sure. I wanted to grow food and have my hands in the dirt every day and feed my neighbors, which if you're in the small farm movement, you know that there can't be another motivation to farm because its back-breaking work that doesn't necessarily reward you financially. While I had a great education at the U of M, there wasn't necessarily an easy path for me to become a farmer after graduating; my family had already moved here to the north shore and had bought land that we could afford, which to summarize, is enough space for a small garden and a house and not much else.

That same spring I started to connect with Sarah Mayer, who most of you already know is the farm manager at the Wolf Ridge campus farm. We connected over a shared passion for farming and a shared frustration for all the barriers to become a farmer if you're not inheriting 500 acres from your parents that have grown corn and soybeans on the same land for 5 generations. As I started to visit the wolf ridge farm more often, Sarah and I talked more and more about how we could reduce the barriers to farmers in our small slice of the world. Steadily, our nebulous ideas formed into an apprenticeship concept where we would train new farmers on the Wolf Ridge campus. This idea came from our shared goal to legitimize farming as a real profession, which since the turn of the 20th century, has been declining rapidly as a 'real profession'. Combined with increasing industrialization and the pervasiveness of economies of scale, small family-farms producing direct to consumer food were becoming a historical concept. Inspired and motivated by uplifting the farming profession, we settled on the concept of a farm apprenticeship (we were also deeply inspired by the Abazs family, Shannon Walz, Danni Pieratos and all other involved in forming the Land Access Alliance-Thank you!!), we started to look for a way to pay for it all. Between spring of 2021 and the fall of 2022, we applied for quite a few grants and didn't get any results. During that time, I had several different jobs and a few experimental farm/land leases, but nothing came together in the way that we had hoped. I was starting to drift from the idea, thinking that maybe it wasn't the right time, but just when I was really starting to despair, something came through! SARE awarded us \$35,000 to pilot the apprenticeship program! With some additional funding from a federal grant, we were supported in designing our dream program. Since March of 2023 when Sarah and I got the news, we have been designing the curriculum and program timeline.

With that hefty background story, I am so excited to announce that we are accepting applications for TWO PAID apprentices for the 2024 season. The apprentices will start in Mid-May and stay through September, with room and board provided by Wolf Ridge. We have also

secured, through a generous donation, an online course in market-farming that the apprentices will use throughout the season. We will also host field days on topics like soil health, cover crops, soil microbiology, crop planning and more with guest farmers and ag educators (look for these workshops soon!). Our goal is to train two new farmers and hopefully add to our local producer directory. Most exciting of all, selfishly, is that I will be working on the farm next summer teaching and learning alongside the apprentices, which had been my dream all along. Thank you to Friends of Finland, Wolf Ridge ELC, and the Finland Community for supporting this dream of ours! See you all in the new year.

Warmly,
Lucy Carlson

If you are interested in applying for the apprenticeship, follow this link and create an account in the portal: <https://wolfridge.campbrainstaff.com/>