

Fact Sheet #1 Farming Education



Farming is a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and skills. Farmers are entrepreneurs, business managers, producers, marketers, and so much more. The path to being a farmer is unique to each individual. Farmers and potential farmers are diverse; some are starting a second career, some are fresh out of school or university, and some are new Americans. Very few people in New England today grew up on farms. Here we provide some information to help identify a farm learning path that works for you.

Is Farming for You?

Farming often has a nostalgic allure when we see happy cows grazing or have memories of picking strawberries with our family. The fact is that farming is very hard work. It is physically, intellectually, and emotionally challenging, and rewarding. Not everyone is cut out to be a farmer and there are more career opportunities in food and agriculture besides farming. The New Entry Sustainable Farming Project offers regular free two-hour [Explore Farming workshops](#) to give an honest introduction to farming. The [Mass Department of Agricultural Resources \[MDAR\]](#) offers a five-session evening course called [Exploring the Small Farm Dream](#) to help determine if farming is right for you and the next steps in your farming education. [Contact: Rick Chandler, rchandler@umext.umass.edu.] Self-assessment exercises can facilitate self-reflection and help identify the strengths and weaknesses of you and your project idea. The [Exploring the Small Farm Dream book](#) has self-assessment worksheets, as does [Richard Wiswall's Organic Farmer's Business Handbook](#).

Learning How to Farm

The best way to tell if you would like farming is to try it. Farms often accept volunteers or offer CSA Work-share positions (working in exchange for shares of produce) that provide the opportunity to get a sense of what farming entails. You can offer to volunteer for a farmer you admire. There are many ways to pursue a farming education. Outlined below are some that can be pursued individually, or more often are combined.

Apprentice/Internship

If you are able to commit to full time farming, an [internship or apprenticeship](#) is a great way to build skills and learn about the farming lifestyle. [ATTRA](#), [NOFA/mass](#), and [EMass CRAFT](#) are the best ways to find farm intern and apprentice opportunities.

Incubator Farm

Incubator farms provide an educational and low-cost environment for new farmers to develop their businesses and make mistakes in the first one to three years of farming before investing life savings into a farm project that may not be successful. They usually charge

a small fee for the use of ¼ acre to 1 acre of land that is primed for agricultural production. Farming infrastructure such as buildings, tools, irrigation, and bulk supplies are already present, lowering the up-front investment necessary to start a farm from scratch. New Entry has [incubator farm sites](#) in the Greater Boston area. Others can be found on [this map](#).

	Access to resources (land, equipment, etc.)	Formalized educational component	Social capacity/ community/ networking	Market development and access	Small business development	Payment arrangements
Family Farms	✓		✓	✓	✓	Free
Apprenticeships	✓		✓			Small stipends, sometimes housing and board to apprentice
Farm Incubator	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Trainee pays a small (often subsidized) land rental fee
University	✓	✓	✓		✓	Tuition costs (can be offset with financial aid)
Classes (non-profit, extension)		✓	✓	✓	✓	Class-by-class fees differ
Self-directed learning						Free (internet resources), cost of subscriptions and books

University Farm Training

Colleges and universities have responded to the increased demand for courses relating to food and farming systems. Most community colleges and land grant universities, and many private institutions, offer courses related to these topics. A formal course of study requires time and money, but can offer a quick and thorough introduction to the field. The following colleges and universities offer agricultural training:

- [Bristol Community College](#)
- [Greenfield Community College](#)
- [University of California Santa Cruz](#)
- [University of Vermont](#)
- [Educational Opportunities in Sustainable Agriculture](#)

Farming Classes

Nonprofit organizations, MDAR, and the extension service offer farming education through classes, workshops, and conferences. The Beginning Farmer Network of Mass' [online calendar](#) is a good place to go for current schedules of these events. Some such events include:

- [New Entry Sustainable Farming Project](#) provides multiple training resources for beginning farmers, including its Farm Incubator Program, Field Workshops, Business Planning Classes, and Livestock Field School.
- MDAR offers [Agricultural Business Training Program](#) courses at multiple levels.
- [Community Involved in Sustainable Agriculture \(CISA\)](#) hosts workshops in Western Massachusetts on a variety of topics, including finding and managing a farm crew, and navigating farm labor laws.
- [Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership \(SEMAP\)](#) holds workshops and conferences.
- [NOFA/Mass](#) offers regular training workshops and summer and winter conferences.

Self-directed Learning

All farm education is self-directed since you will need to plow your own path and build an education that works for you. Some important resources for all prospective, beginning, and experienced farmers are outlined below:

- start2farm.gov
- [NE Beginning Farmers](#)
- BFNMass.org
- www.attra.org
- [University of Vermont Extension](#)
- [University of Massachusetts Extension](#)
- [Rodale institute](#)
- [Greenhorns](#)
- [National Young Farmers Coalition](#)
- [Pioneer Valley \(PV\) Grows Network](#)
- [Eastern Mass CRAFT](#)
- [Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training \(C.R.A.F.T.\)](#)
- [Young Farmer Network \(Southeastern MA\)](#)