

Attracting and Retaining Employees on Organic Vegetable Farms

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As hired labor has become an integral part of the organic vegetable industry, producers increasingly draw connections between their workers and the long-term sustainability of their farm businesses. Yet conversations with farmers suggest that many are struggling to attract and retain employees. Understanding what employees value and look for in a workplace can help farmers create or strengthen the conditions that not only draw workers to their farms but encourage them to stay over the long term.

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Summary

As hired labor has become an integral part of the organic vegetable industry, producers increasingly draw connections between their workers and the long-term sustainability of their businesses. Yet conversations with farmers suggest that many are struggling to attract and retain employees. Understanding what employees value and look for in a workplace can help farmers create or strengthen the conditions that not only draw workers to their farms but encourage them to stay over the long term.

A Note on Methods and Terminology

This discussion is based on data collected through electronic surveys and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 farm owners and 13 employees working on certified organic vegetable farms primarily located in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. Participants were largely associated with single-ownership farm businesses, and as such, that particular type of ownership model is the main focus for this discussion. I began recruiting participants in the summer of 2019, largely through listservs, farmer-facing organizations, and direct referrals. Our conversations typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with participants receiving compensation for their time. At this point, a majority of participants are racialized as white, and my efforts to ensure that diverse experiences and voices are included remain ongoing.

Throughout this article, I refer to farm owners and primary operators as farmers or producers—knowing that at times, they may also be formal employees of their business. I refer to hired employees as employees or workers, with the understanding that they do not have ownership in the business. That said, I want to mention that a number of these individuals do consider and refer to themselves as farmers.

Introduction

“My employees are 100 percent essential to the sustainability of my farm.” During my conversations with farmers, many echoed this sentiment, shared by a Wisconsin-based producer. Incorporating hired labor allows farmers to expand their operations, reap scale efficiencies, and serve more markets. Employees also bring great value to the farm. In addition to contributing their labor, workers develop specialized knowledge through training and hands-on experience. And, as the industry expands, their roles continue to evolve in complex ways, especially as farms encounter new and changing regulations around food safety and certification audits. However, while the producers I spoke with drew connections between their employees and the long-term success of their farms, several also highlighted the difficulty they face in attracting and retaining workers.

Among the farmers I interviewed, their average employee retention rate from 2017 to 2019 was 54.6 percent. High rates of labor turnover have several implications for farmers, as regularly hiring and training new employees requires money, time, and energy. With a more stabilized farm crew, these costs go down, workflow efficiencies go up, and farmers may be better positioned to reinvest in their operations. As one individual stated, “The longer we do this, we should all be able to make more, work less, and just keep refining systems.”

However, farmers see several factors as impacting employee retention, including the physical demands of the work, limited opportunities for professional development and growth, the seasonality of the industry, and less competitive wages and benefits. Macro-level factors—like agricultural policies, stagnant prices, and rising input costs—further shape the possibilities farmers see as being available to them. While producers have various strategies in place to help them address these challenges, they often feel that their time and resources are limited. A deeper understanding of what employees value and look for in an agricultural labor experience can provide more direction and further focus their efforts over the long term.

As farm employees reflected on their labor experiences, they highlighted an overarching theme: the importance of a professional work environment. Considering that most regard their work in this industry as their profession rather than something they are doing for the time being, they are looking to work for farms that have well-established systems and policies, regular and clear communication, fair wages and benefits, and a healthy workplace culture. Labor management tools, practices, and policies can play a major role in meeting these needs, and ultimately, they can support farmers' efforts to create the conditions necessary to transform farm jobs into longer-term career opportunities.

What Matters to Employees?

Employees highlighted eight factors that they consider highly valuable and that would likely contribute to their retention: organization, communication, clearly defined roles, farm crew composition, opportunities for growth, workplace culture, healthy management, and fair wages and benefits. Below, I explore each of these categories, incorporating both employee feedback and, when appropriate, input gathered during my conversations with farmers.

Organization

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** employee manual, employee onboarding process, standard operating procedures (SOPs), training plan

Organization, documentation, and streamlined systems provide the structure and support that employees feel they need to succeed. A highly organized farm is the product of having various processes and policies not only in place, but in use, to guide employees from the moment they step onto the farm. Beginning with the onboarding and training process and leading up to how daily work is communicated, this organization can help employees transition more easily and efficiently from task to task. Confidence in these systems can also translate to employees feeling more invested in their work. As one individual mentioned, “You’re giving the farm as much as you physically can, so when you get to see the reward, it’s really special.”

Farmers also recognize the value of being organized, and one individual illustrated how a systems breakdown impacted her employees.

Our crew worked so hard starting celery seeds. They were growing the transplants, weeding them by hand, and putting irrigation down. They've been babying them and taking care of these plants. And then for some reason, we as owners and management didn't do a good job planning, and it went up in weeds and we lost the crop. And it happens, but that's one of those situations where they're not able to succeed at their job. And it's not anything that they did—they did everything that they're supposed to do. Then you add to that the frustration of working a 50- or 60-hour week that is physically difficult. Why would you want to stay in a situation like that?

Not only do employees value seeing “that direct correlation between effort and reward,” some also appreciate organization because of how it can set the farm up for success in the years ahead. One manager commented that for her, “The lack of organization is a huge issue. When new people come on the farm, there are no set standards—like this is how it’s done, and this is the standard you have to live up to.” One of her long-term goals for the farm is to develop and implement standard operating procedures (SOPs). “Those are things that could just be set. I wouldn’t have to be there anymore for that to stick.” Another worker put it this way: “For employees, this work is important even if it’s not their livelihood in the same exact way as it is for farm owners.” They want to see the farm succeed, and organization plays a major role in the likelihood of that.

Communication

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** comprehensive farm records document, employee evaluations, informal check-ins, morning crew meetings, outlining weekly/daily work tasks, walkie-talkies, whiteboards

Clear, regular, and respectful communication from farmers is something employees value greatly and that many identified as being tied to a professional work environment. Feeling empowered to ask questions, even when employees may not be considered “new” anymore, is also crucial and helps people build their competencies and feel confident in their work. On the other hand, inconsistent communication can create unnecessary guesswork and leave employees feeling frustrated and anxious. As one individual shared, “Communication breakdowns make it really hard because then I dread going in. Is it going to be a good day or a bad day? And if it’s a bad day, then I’m going to feel like I’m on shaky ground the whole time.”

Employees identified two specific communication practices as especially impactful: morning meetings and an outline of weekly tasks. Often as brief as 5 or 10 minutes, morning check-ins with the full crew can play a crucial role in setting the tone and the expectations for the day. As one manager commented, “We get together in the morning and kind of lay it all out on the table. This is what we’re hoping to do today, and maybe this is our contingency plan if the field is too wet or the weather doesn’t cooperate. And if something goes wrong or unexpected, we all have some of the same thought process so we can work up to the next thing.” Beyond outlining the work plan for the day, this practice of regularly touching base can help build rapport and make it easier for employees to talk with the farmer about any questions or issues that may arise.

While morning meetings can provide an important daily check-in, laying out the week's tasks is also helpful. One farmer communicates weekly priorities to her crew members each Sunday through a shared Google document—a practice she established after her employees requested it. Another producer reflected on how her approach to this has evolved over time:

Employees used to talk about how coming to work felt like being in a pinball game. They never knew where they were going. But now, I have a whiteboard, and on Mondays I lay out everything—here are the field tasks waiting to be done, here are the CSA numbers so on Monday and Tuesday nothing gets done until these things are done, and then it's wholesale. So it's all divided out, and they can see all the numbers. It helps me as a manager so they see just how much there is to be done. And they can look at that board and know that that's going to take them through Wednesday. And then they can look at the field tasks and know that's Thursday and Friday. So they can see the whole scope of what we need to do.

A majority of farm employees I spoke with reiterated that practices like these allow them to prepare for the week ahead, manage their time efficiently, and stay connected to the bigger picture. One shared her experience with receiving the week's tasks on Sunday evenings. “Things feel so open—we know what we're doing and what needs to get done. Everyone is on the same page—nothing is hidden or a surprise.”

An additional tool that may be useful in facilitating ongoing and open communication, and that a few farmers I've spoken with have developed, is a farm record book—essentially, a comprehensive list of weekly tasks and priorities, field and harvest plans, and records. One producer organizes hers by displaying the week's priorities in the front, including seeding, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and other field tasks. The field plan and map are in the back, along with details and dates associated with fertilizing, spraying, weeding, and tilling. Employees commented on the value of a living document like this, seeing it as not only full of useful information, but also as a resource they can access as needed throughout the day.

Clearly Defined Roles

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** position descriptions, training plan, two-way communication

Having a clear understanding of what their job entails helps employees feel more oriented and comfortable in their roles. In addition to thorough training and ongoing communication, employees identified position descriptions as the primary means of achieving this. Typically, these documents capture things like the formal job title, whom the employee reports to and who may report to them, compensation, anticipated work schedule, the expectations and responsibilities of the job, and key knowledge, skills, and abilities attached to the position. Having this as a resource from the very beginning helps to keep expectations clear.

That said, employees emphasized how important it is to ensure position descriptions remain accurate and up to date. Those who had taken on new responsibilities in the past—either because

they were asked to or because they were filling the void of a departing crew member—expressed the frustration they’ve felt when these changes were not reflected in their job titles and associated compensation. Not only does this muddy the waters when it comes to keeping expectations clear, but it can also result in employees feeling taken advantage of. One individual found herself playing the unofficial role of farm manager. “I had to take charge, and thankfully I knew what I was doing. But that was never something that was communicated. And all of that would have been fine, but there was no compensation, no acknowledgement, no gratefulness.” Even if they are eager to assume more responsibility, as is often true, formally acknowledging and documenting this change is something employees associate with a professional work environment. On the other hand, when the approach towards position descriptions is “set it and forget it,” this can undermine employees’ confidence in the farm’s other policies and procedures.

Farm Crew Composition

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** proactive approach to conflict resolution, two-way communication, training plan, working interviews

Farm work is intimate in nature. “You’re working this labor-intensive job, and you’re struggling together and building a common bond.” This sense of community employees build with their peers is something they greatly value. As one individual commented, “Most of the time, your job is who you’re working with—it’s not necessarily the job itself.” As such, employees appreciate when farmers approach their hiring decisions with careful consideration. Adding a “weak” crew member can greatly disrupt the team’s workflow, energy, and overall morale. One employee spoke of the frustration she has felt in these situations. “We’d hire these employees who had no real interest in farming or growing food. I could probably work the same amount as 3 of them on my own. Like that’s the capacity I’m willing to work at, but I can’t do that when I’m babysitting. I need someone who is able to work alongside me.”

Of course, sometimes a person’s primary motivation may be a regular paycheck rather than growing food. In a supportive environment and with an effective approach to training, new employees have an opportunity to learn and succeed regardless of what brought them to the position. The distinction employees made during our conversations focused on new employees whose expectations were not aligned with the demands of the position and who lacked the motivation to work hard as part of a larger team. In response to this issue, employees advocated for farmers to incorporate a working interview as part of the hiring process. “I think that could be really important. Working with someone for a day or even a couple hours can tell you a lot.”

Opportunities for Growth

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** employee evaluations, informal check-ins, mentorship, professional development stipend/support, training plan

As most of the employees I spoke with consider this work their profession, being able to build new skills and assume additional responsibilities is crucial. Even if it seems relatively minor, inviting an employee to take on a new responsibility can translate to feelings of pride, ownership, and accountability. As one worker commented, “I feel like I’m more willing and ambitious and excited when I have more participation in the farm. When I have my own responsibilities, I have that responsibility to myself to make sure I do a good job but also to the owners and to the farm.” As workers earn their employer’s trust, these feelings of investment and loyalty tend to deepen. One individual spoke about the evolution of this process over the course of a season, sharing how rewarding it felt when her employers began to ask for her thoughts or trusted her enough to take the lead in their absence. “Those experiences are really positive.”

For employees who aspire to develop a specialty, manage a crew, or perhaps start their own farm one day, learning as much as they can about the different facets of the operation may be a top priority. In some instances, employees are looking for mentorship. One worker who is currently developing her farm business shared that her employer would occasionally spend an hour on the clock reviewing her farm plan and finances with her. “I’ve been able to learn so many things. It’s invaluable.” Whether it’s mentorship or learning more about one specific task, many workers value having the chance to talk with their employers about their interests and goals. Formal evaluations or informal check-ins can help facilitate this communication, while also providing an opportunity to clarify what may and may not be possible on a particular farm. Sometimes, there are limited opportunities to learn advanced skills, like operating or maintaining equipment. In these instances, employees value transparency and directness from the very beginning.

Opportunities for growth can also take the form of professional development through conferences or training programs. Of the employees I spoke with, a handful mentioned that their employers offset or cover the costs of attending annual farming conferences, while others reflected on how valuable this would be. As one worker shared, “There isn’t a learning stipend, but I wish there were cause there are a lot of things I’d like to focus on learning more about that could actually help me in my job. I think it would be a great investment in me and their own production.” Another employee mentioned that she had just started attending a leadership training program sponsored by her employer and how meaningful the gesture and experience had been so far.

Workplace Culture

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** organization, praise and gratitude, proactive conflict resolution, respectful treatment, set work schedule, two-way communication

Given how demanding and intimate farm labor is, many employees emphasized that a healthy workplace culture can make the difference between staying or leaving. Fostering teamwork and team building, inviting questions and feedback, maintaining and respecting set work hours, and offering praise, encouragement, and gratitude stood out to employees as factors that help build and sustain a positive environment. One manager commented on his efforts related to this last point. “One of the crew members just said, ‘Hey, I really appreciate that you say thank you after

you ask us to do something. Even though it's my job and I'm going to do it whether you say thank you or not, that really makes a difference.”

On the subject of a set work schedule, employees felt this was not only tied to a healthy work-life balance but also to a professional work environment. Employees have lives outside of the farm, and they value working for someone who recognizes and respects that. As one individual commented, “Our boss can see outside of all the work that still needs done and let people have their lives and not make them feel guilty. Like they're letting the farm down.” And many farmers I've spoken with recognize this too, as even with well-functioning systems in place, burnout often remains a real concern. “Our hours, 9:00-5:30 Monday to Friday, is why people come back. If you ask 10 hours of people, it's just grueling. And keeping to this schedule lets people commute and have a life outside of work. Over the years, we've only recognized more and more how important that is.” Some farmers have had this system in place from early on, while for others, their processes have evolved over time. As one farmer shared, “We realized it's more important to have their peak hours than all of their hours, because otherwise they look at this place too much and it's not creating in them any kind of spark.”

Employees also value working for a farmer who sees them as individuals, not just as hired labor. “Our boss really cares about us as people and our physical and mental well-being. And that's a huge, huge thing,” shared one employee. “He can tell when we're suffering or going through something emotionally and can tell when we need a break.” This understanding can be built a number of ways, but employees most often talked about the value of having the farmer join them in the field from time to time. Farmers have commented on this as well and recognize the impact this practice can have. “I feel like it's very important for me to be in the field and be working with them for enough time where they can feel like we're in it too. And that's the only way we get to know people.” For another farmer, working alongside his crew “helps [him] understand what everyone is going through, in terms of the farm work but also in terms of life.”

Healthy interpersonal dynamics play a major role in shaping the farm's culture, and a number of employees spoke about how important proactive conflict management is. For a few, tension due to unresolved conflict was their primary motivation for leaving a previous farm position. “By the end of the season, I was extremely worn out—mainly because there was a lot of tension on the farm between the crew and the owners, and also within the crew,” shared one employee. “It was an emotionally overwhelming experience.”

Healthy Management

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** formal policies, leadership skills, organization, respectful communication, two-way communication, work-life balance

Management style and workplace culture are directly related, and throughout our conversations, many employees emphasized how much influence poor management can have on their mental and emotional health. And while several spoke openly and without hesitation about supportive and respectful employers they've worked for, some also shared their experiences in dealing with unhealthy management styles.

During these conversations, guilt was an emotion that a handful of employees found themselves grappling with at one time or another. One individual spoke about how understaffing on the farm put extra pressure on employees' work schedules. "It's like—there's no time off and no choices. The message is: the farm goes under if you're not here today." This can create an environment where—among other things—employees feel uncomfortable or guilty asking for time off. Another individual, faced with a similar situation, commented that she still requests time off when she needs to, but she feels bad about it. "There is a pressure to be there as much as possible."

Other times, farmers openly discussed how as the farm owner, their work is never done. This is a feeling that most, if not all, farmers identify with, and during our conversations, many commented on the notion that their employees will never work as much as they do. The difference, however, is in how that feeling is used and whether it is vocalized. In one employee's case, she had been working 60 hours a week, 6 or 7 days a week, and serving as the farm's unofficial manager. She had no equity in the farm. When she spoke with the farmer about coming in later than usual the next day in order to catch up on sleep, the farmer's response was: "I wish I could sleep in." This employee felt like she was giving the farm as much as she could, but even then "there was always this guilt" she found herself working through.

If handled professionally, sharing financial details with employees can be a positive and healthy management practice. Doing so may provide employees with a working understanding of the factors driving day-to-day operations, while also connecting them to the bigger picture. However, sometimes speaking openly about the farm's finances can have a negative impact. One employee shared that the farmer they worked for would tend to make comments about how tight finances were each time payroll came around. "So we would have this guilt about being paid, which was really hard. I think the farmer was trying to make us feel like we should be so grateful, but then I would think, 'We're not here out of a favor. This is a job.'"

For employees who have the ability, this type of environment may cause them to leave their position. One person who did step away reflected on their thought process and the difficulty of this decision:

How can you disconnect from the farm and maintain respect for what you do and how you're feeling? And understand that this is a job and ask for what you deserve? Like with any job, if you're not happy, it probably means you shouldn't be doing that anymore. I think it's especially hard in careers where you get so attached, and that's where I was finding myself. I didn't think I would come back because things were already so bad. But I did. And that was all just guilt—I only stayed out of guilt. But I didn't even recognize it until it got bad enough that I couldn't function anymore. You just feel connected to it. Even the food—like, I can't leave right now. I just planted all of this stuff and I can't leave it. So now I don't know how to get over that guilt of having left mid-season, cause I've never done that to someone before. So, do I put my mental health first? Because there's this sense of obligation I feel.

During our conversations, many employees made direct connections between farmers' work-life balance and their approach to management. For many, the farmers they've most enjoyed working for—and may aspire to emulate one day—are those who are not entirely consumed by their work. “The people who really enjoy it and who are excited to teach other people are the best to work for. Farmers that want to share what they're doing, whether or not you plan to stay there.” Employees also see these farmers as being better positioned to manage their stress and cultivate a healthy and energizing workplace culture. And, as some pointed out, when farmers are tuned into their own emotional and mental health, they may be more likely to pay attention to how their employees are feeling.

That said, stress is no doubt part of the package when it comes to farming, and it touches everyone. As one employee commented, “Your workers are going to feel that stress and be stressed with you...because they want the farm to succeed.” Workers who believe in and respect their employers, however, may see themselves as helping to smooth that burden. As one individual commented, “We figure out as a team how to work with each other to help boost up our boss.”

Fair Wages and Benefits

- **Supportive tools, practices, policies:** employee agreement, employee manual, formal policies (pay scale, pay raise, time off), health insurance stipend, holistic farm planning, retirement contribution

While not all agricultural employees have this option, for many of the individuals I spoke with, being in organic vegetable production often involves finding ways to make this career choice work despite lower wages and limited benefits. Though many trust that their employers are paying them what they can afford, lower wages do tend to represent one of the greatest long-term challenges workers face, and the seasonality of the industry further compounds this. As one employee shared, “There's no saving going on. There is no planning for retirement with this kind of job and this kind of wage. We can't really thrive. And I'm going to need to buy a new car soon so that means I have to start cutting back further.” Another reflected on how unsustainable this exchange can sometimes feel. “This is some of the hardest work that is done. Some of the most important work—growing food for people. And I get it. There's not a lot of profit margin in farming unless you've really got it dialed in. But I worked 70-hour work weeks [for] \$11 an hour.”

Many also commented on their work in organic agriculture being contingent or heavily reliant upon a significant other and the financial support and access to benefits they provide. One employee reflected on her situation. “If my partner weren't in the picture, I'd have to be in a \$500-a-month rented apartment, or maybe even lower, where gas and electric would be included cause it wouldn't work otherwise. I am not making a living wage, that's for sure.”

When they are able to secure a better paying position—or one that has a clear path to earning regular raises—employees are more likely to see themselves staying over the long term. As one individual shared, “I don't have anxiety because of work now. When I got my paycheck

yesterday, I wasn't scrambling to deposit it so it was available today, and I wasn't down to \$2 in my account. I can actually pay my bills. I feel better about what I'm doing with my life, and I'm able to take care of myself better." Another said, "I'm really happy with where I am, especially compared to last year, because starting at \$10 and getting \$4 more this year for the same work—it's night and day." Having access to a higher wage and benefits greatly influenced how this employee began to envision her future. "I think it is possible for people to work here for a long time and make a living and be able to save money and grow and save for retirement. And that's a big reason why I don't see myself leaving this farm for a while."

Beyond just their physical labor, employees see their knowledge, experience, and work ethic as contributing value to the farm. Many feel invested in its success and are committed to the work they are doing. "I really care," one employee said. "And I'm going to work hard and strive to go above and beyond. This work is really important to me." That said, employees are looking to work for farms that not only recognize their contributions, but offer them fair compensation and, in turn, the ability to care for themselves and their families. One employee put it simply when she said, "The health of the farm relies on the health of those working on it."

On the topic of benefits, employees expressed strong interest in a health care stipend, an employer-sponsored retirement savings plan, and formal time off. Most employees reported having health insurance, but this access was often tied to a partner or spouse. However, for one employee, securing affordable coverage with her wage of \$13 an hour has not been possible, and she remains uninsured. As a majority of farmers I spoke with do not expect to be able to offer formal health insurance to their employees in the near future, a health care stipend could offer short-term support and allow employees to offset some of these costs. Of the producers I spoke with, a few have formal policies in place. One individual, for instance, offers a \$50 monthly stipend to each of her managers, adding this to their paychecks during the months they work full-time. Meanwhile, employees at another farm have the option of enrolling in a high-deductible health insurance policy with a Health Savings Account (HSA). The farm offers a matching contribution to the HSA of up to 3 percent of employees' earnings and pays 75 percent of employees' premiums. Premiums for family members are not covered by the farm.

When it comes to saving for retirement, employees' competing expenses—rent, student loans, car payments, or basic living costs—make the idea of putting money away for later feel out of reach, if not impossible. However, several did express interest in an employer-sponsored retirement plan. "That almost feels like a luxury to me. I would definitely be interested in it, but it's unfortunately something that a lot of people can't think about because it's not offered." Of the farmers I spoke with, 5 offer some sort of option for their employees, typically in the form of an IRA with up to a 3 percent match. One producer spoke with particular pride about the program he has in place. "After 3 years, you get a retirement plan of 25 percent of your wages. So if you're making \$16 an hour, another \$4 non-taxed goes into a retirement account in your name. Those are things that make people want to stick around because it's a big benefit." Employees echo this. As one person reflected, "As I'm looking longer term at where I'll be landing, it's something I will think about. Maybe my wage is only \$16 an hour, but they're doing a match program and that kind of balances things out."

And finally, employees are very much in favor of working for a farm that has a formal policy around time off. “I think having paid time off is tied to a professional workplace. Even three days—if you have an operation that is running smooth enough, I think you could move people around to allow for that. Especially during the summer here when people need a break. Sometimes it’s 60 hours and you feel like you’re not doing anything but returning to the farm.” And while employees would generally prefer—or need—time off to be paid, a few made comments about being grateful for unpaid time away from the farm. As one individual shared, “I would definitely take time unpaid to get 5 days off. That recoup time is definitely worth it to me.”

Generally speaking, employees see the existence of formal policies as core components of a professional workplace. Transparency in this area can help them envision what a path forward may look like, including what their earning potential is and what benefits they may have access to over time. In the next section, I outline a few labor management tools, policies, and practices that may serve as jumping off points for farmers who are interested in harnessing this information in a targeted way based on the unique situations of their farms.

What Role Can Labor Management Tools, Practices, and Policies Play in Employee Retention?

Employees have emphasized their desire to work for farms that offer a professional work experience. Thoughtfully crafted and applied labor management tools, practices, and policies can greatly contribute to creating this environment. Taken individually, these components serve a variety of functions, from establishing clear expectations and setting standards of work, to laying out a process for feedback and maintaining healthy workplace dynamics. But together, they can support a healthy farm culture while setting employees up for success from the moment they step onto the farm. While there are numerous opportunities in this area, here I explore a small selection of items that employees discussed during our conversations, sharing their feedback as well as concrete examples. Specific examples are included in the Appendix.

Employee Onboarding Process

Employees overwhelmingly value an informative and thoughtful onboarding process, as it can play a key role in setting the tone for their training and overall experience on the farm. On the other hand, a hurried or disorganized approach can leave workers feeling disoriented from the start, making it harder for them to begin their work in earnest. The onboarding process looks different from farm to farm. Some farmers, for instance, meet with individuals at the start of their first day. As one individual shared, “Any new employee coming in, I’ll spend 30 or 45 minutes with them and I’ll talk with them about the culture, our ethics, our philosophy, our work ethic. And we have it written down so people can look at it. So everything from our food safety plan to our mission statement and our job description and what’s expected of them.”

Others, however, struggle to find this time since employees tend to start on different days when the season is already ramping up. One farmer has found an effective and well-received work-

around to this challenge. She holds a pre-season meeting for all employees, returning and new, on a Saturday in early May. Not only does this create an opportunity for workers to meet one another, see the farm, and go over important policies, expectations, and food safety standards, it also helps new employees feel more comfortable and oriented when they arrive on their first day.

In addition to verbal discussions and written documents, displaying information can also support a smooth onboarding process. For instance, one farmer I spoke with took a creative approach to displaying her field map. After having an aerial photo taken of her farm, she mounted an enlarged copy on the wall in the employee common area. Using an erasable marker on the clear overlay, she can record and make updates regarding what is planted in each bed. Plus, it serves as a constant visual reference and point of orientation for new and veteran employees alike. While sharing this example with farm workers, several mentioned they would find something like this valuable, both in terms of facilitating communication and increasing transparency.

Common Onboarding Components

- Introductions and Roles, including Leadership Structure
- Professional Expectations
- Preparedness Sheet, including What to Wear and Bring to Work
- Farm's Vision, Mission Statement, and Core Values
- Review Position Description and Employee Manual, including Rules, Guidelines, and Important Policies
- Formal Processes for Addressing Conflicts and/or Complaints
- Key Procedures, including Handling and Cleaning Produce and Equipment
- Storage and Organization, including Pack-shed and Coolers
- Training Process Overview
- Farm Tour and Field Maps

Training Plan

In an industry as hands-on and specialized as this one, training is a challenging but crucial component, and it has a significant impact on employees' labor experiences. A thoughtful training plan, paired with regular communication and feedback, can ensure that employees know the farm's work standards and expectations. Not only that, it can help them feel valued as they continue to build their competencies. In general, employees spoke of how instrumental the training process is as they begin a new job, but it also meets different needs based on each employee's experiences under their belts. Some are relatively new to farming and are learning things for the first time, while others may have years of experience. As one individual explained, "I appreciate as much training as I can get, because I've worked on a lot of farms and every place does things differently. So I like to know what the standards are and how they want things done."

During our conversations, farmers often mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the time and energy involved with training new employees—especially when turnover rates are high. Despite that ongoing challenge, one farmer articulated his overarching philosophy on the matter. "Our job as employers is to train people effectively. And you're going to spend some time imparting knowledge, and that's ok. You're going to take time to teach and to correct and to have meetings.

This isn't an inefficiency—it's just the cost of doing business. You're always going to do things faster yourself, but you can't do it all by yourself. So the more you do it, the better it is for your employee, the better it is for you, and the job gets done better."

The training process looks different from farm to farm. Many producers adopt a hands-on approach, with learning taking place in the moment. As one individual shared:

I'll demonstrate and then have people do it elbow-to-elbow with me watching. Then I'll leave and come back 15 minutes later to let them get the swing of things. And I try to preface all this by saying that your first goal is to get the basic mechanics down. But our goal on the farm is just this spirit of constant improvement. And so when I come back, no matter what, there are going to be things I say—like hold the knife at a different angle, grab with this hand instead—things like that to improve your mechanics. And you shouldn't take that as you doing a bad job. It's a way for us all to improve.

Being clear about who is expected to provide the training is also crucial. One farmer talked about how crew leaders or managers may play a key role in this process. "We've gotten feedback in the past, when we didn't have a crew leader in place, that people didn't want to be managing others if they weren't being paid for it. So we try to keep it so we just have our crew leader doing most of the training. I mean, it's an open environment—people help each other, but they just don't want to feel like they have to be constantly explaining." Some employees reinforced this, discussing the frustration they've felt at being expected to take on significant training and leadership responsibilities without it being formally reflected in their title, job description, or compensation.

While there would likely be value in developing a formal training manual at some point, employees mostly emphasized the effectiveness of learning-by-doing and the importance of creating "a work environment that allows you to ask questions." Along these lines, several did mention how useful having access to standard operating procedures (SOPs) would be. Farmers could build off of what is already required by the Food Safety and Modernization Act, outlining and providing visuals and step-by-steps for specific tasks, like repotting zucchini starts. These laminated sheets could be posted in appropriate locations, as well as collected in a manual. Some farmers also commented on the effectiveness of SOPs. "They take some time, but once they're done, they're done. So you have this person-to-person, moment-to-moment training, plus these as a constant reference."

And finally, accessibility is another key factor to consider in relation to training. One farmer with employees who speak English as a second (or even third) language shared her experience in this area:

We do hire a professional interpreter so the employee can hear the important information in their own language and can communicate and respond in their own language. Even people who do speak pretty good English, I think it's better that they hear it in their own language so they're not trying to comprehend a concept while translating in their head. We used to just say, 'Ok, you speak pretty good

English. Will you just interpret for me?’ And I didn’t realize when we were asking them to do that just how hard that is. Interpretation is a professional skill, and it’s something you have to learn. So asking someone on the fly to do that—for a little conversation it’s not a big deal, but for a whole training session? No way.

Employee Manual and Position Descriptions

Once they’re developed and in place, employee manuals can be an incredible resource for both farmers and employees. In addition to communicating things like what policies are in place, how the farm is organized, and what the process for feedback looks like, this document allows everyone to work from a shared set of expectations. One farmer whose employee manual is a work in progress reiterated this point. “This is a way to make sure that the ground level is set and is clear for people so that they know what kind of a farm they’re stepping onto from the get-go.”

Ensuring that the manual is as accessible as possible is also important, as a number of employees had not interacted with their farm’s manual outside of the onboarding process. Many also expressed uncertainty about their employer’s specific policies or practices. Making the manual highly accessible—perhaps digitally, for instance—can make it easier for workers to stay connected to this valuable information and have a clear understanding of what they are and are not entitled to as employees.

Just as an employee manual plays a key role in establishing clear expectations, an employee position description can serve as a crucial document to return to as responsibilities change or as questions arise. Beyond outlining job requirements and responsibilities, a position description may document the employee’s starting wage, any potential adjustments to pay or benefits over the season, how many hours the employee can expect to work, and—in the event of negotiation—any additional details regarding the specific work arrangement. As mentioned before, ensuring that position descriptions remain up to date is vital.

Employee Evaluation Process

Employees overwhelmingly value having a designated time to meet with their employer to set and revisit goals, discuss how things are going, and ask questions or share thoughts. Those working on a farm without a formal process in place expressed interest in seeing one established. As one employee commented, “I would love to hear more feedback about what I’m doing, how I could improve, or what could change. That’s something that would be impactful.” Another employee mentioned that conducting reviews might alert farmers to any reemerging themes, like ongoing points of conflict.

Finding the time to implement and follow through on reviews can be challenging for farmers, and if it is a new undertaking, it might also feel unfamiliar or intimidating. A handful of producers I spoke with are developing or already have formal processes in place. Typically, they tend to conduct evaluations in the spring and/or the fall, avoiding the busier months of June, July, and August. They usually meet with employees for 30 to 60 minutes

during the workday, and either schedule this ahead of time or more informally the day of. During evaluations, farmers often highlight what they see as the employee's strengths and contributions, before turning to any areas for growth or improvement. If there are any concerns related to performance, many will formally document that information. On this last point, farmers emphasized the importance of follow-up. As one producer commented, "If we are ever in a situation where we're asking someone to change some specific behavior, then we definitely have to check-in in the middle of summer. We learned the hard way when we didn't do that once."

One farmer who has been conducting evaluations for several seasons shared her approach. She begins by outlining the evaluation process during employee onboarding. Shortly thereafter, as a means of setting expectations and being transparent, she shares a blank copy of the review form with employees. Then, within 45 to 60 days, employees complete their first review. The farmer will fill out the evaluation beforehand and she and the employee will then review it together, creating space for feedback and discussion. Possible pay raises, which are performance-based, are discussed at this time, and employees who plan to return the following year will complete another review towards the end of the season. During our conversation, this farmer emphasized that this approach is still a work in progress. Sometimes reviews take place a month or two after she had hoped, or the fall review actually occurs over the winter or in early spring. But overall, she tries to keep the larger goal in mind—establishing a formal process for employee evaluations, and doing the best she can along the way.

Sample Evaluation Questions

- What skills do you want to develop?
- What challenges do you foresee?
- Are there any medical or other considerations I should know about in order to make this as positive an experience as possible?
- Are there positions of leadership or responsibilities you want to work towards?
- Are there any issues—positive or negative—that I should know about in terms of crew member dynamics?
- What was the worst thing about your job this season? What was the best?
- What tools or practices would make your job better and/or easier?
- What could be improved?

Proactive Conflict Management

Given how intimate and demanding farm work is, conflict is bound to arise. Farmers and employees alike spoke about how challenging it can be—but how crucial it ultimately is—to address issues as promptly as possible. One farmer who has been in the business for several decades commented, "I think the hardest thing for me and for a lot of people is dealing with conflict. When it goes unaddressed, it bottles up until it erupts in a burst of fury or angry words. And that's not productive, so you have to recognize it and deal with it." Even though this work may be uncomfortable, ignoring conflict can have a negative impact on the work environment and the overall farm culture. As a worst-case scenario, it may ultimately be the reason employees leave.

Farmers tend to take different approaches to managing conflict, depending on the specific situation at hand. “With some things, I want to be direct and address in front of other people. For

example, if someone is talking shit in front of the crew, then I want to address that in front of the crew. And I’ll just say, ‘Hey, that’s not a thing that we do, and I’m serious.’” If there are performance-related issues, producers tend to have those conversations one-on-one, sometimes documenting meetings if there is a reoccurring problem.

Employees see regular and respectful communication, clearly defined expectations and responsibilities, and a culture of teamwork rather than competition as a few key factors that may keep conflict at bay. Taking a step back, this is also an area where clear and thoughtful policies, practices, and tools can work together to minimize tension points and set both employees and farmers up for success. When it does arise, however, employees tend to see the farmer as playing a decisive role in recognizing and addressing conflict. Just as employees value having farmers in the field for rapport-building purposes, they also recognize the impact this practice can have on keeping conflict in check. When it comes to conflict between farmer spouses, however, employees do not

feel they have much recourse other than to put their heads down or potentially pursue a different employment opportunity.

Formal Time Off Policy

Employees have expressed a need for time off throughout the season, and farmers recognize the impact establishing a formal policy can have on mitigating employee burnout and boosting overall morale. Of the farmers I spoke with, their policies included:

- Flexibility when unpaid time is needed
- 3 days of paid time off (PTO) for managers

Conflict Management Tips

While there are several tools and techniques to assist farmers and employees alike, here are a few easy to recall tips that can be highly effective.

- Pause before you react
 - Take a few deep breaths
 - Count to 10
 - “I need a minute”
- Use neutral language
 - Stick to “I” statements
 - Be respectful
 - Avoid accusations
- Find the right time and place to talk
- Focus on the behavior, not the individual
- Let the individual speak without interrupting them
- Ask clarifying, open-ended questions

**Source material: Division of Extension’s Becoming the Employer of Choice program*

- 1 week of paid sick leave for employees
- 2 weeks of PTO for managers

The farmer who offers 1 week of paid sick leave built her policy to mirror what Minneapolis and St. Paul city employees receive. “It goes up to 40 hours a year and then it starts over in January and is based on a percentage of how many hours they’ve worked.” While it is currently limited to sick leave, this farmer plans to expand the policy so that it covers paid time off broadly, whether that be for illness, vacation, or rest.

One producer mentioned his goal of instituting a mid-summer, week-long vacation for crew members to rotate through. As he sees it, “By the end of July, I think everybody could use 5 days to do something else. If I want them to stay through October, it can’t just be not getting your bonus. That doesn’t put more fuel in the tank for people who are depleted.” While this would start as unpaid time, the goal would be to eventually turn it into PTO.

If they have one in place, farmers should ensure that their policy is clearly outlined so that employees can confidently follow the steps in place to utilize this benefit. One employee in a leadership role demonstrated how this lack of clarity lead to frustration in her case:

I had the opportunity to take a week-long trip, but I got considerable pushback about not using that PTO during the peak of the season. I ended up being able to take the week off but had to work extra hours the week before and the week after the trip, and it went with the contingency that if anyone ended up testing positive for COVID, I would stay and work instead of taking the week off. That was tough, and while I can understand why it wasn't the best timing, mid-summer we need a break to make it through the season or we burn out.

Concluding Thoughts

Farmers and employees working on organic vegetable farms share a complex and intertwined relationship, one that is full of possibilities but also shaped by a variety of factors. For employees, working on a farm that provides them with a professional and fulfilling labor experience is highly valuable. And for farmers, understanding what matters to employees can help them prioritize and further target their efforts to increase retention and, in turn, build resilience on their farms. More broadly, these efforts speak to a larger goal of ensuring that farming provides a career path that allows both producers and employees to not just get by, but to thrive. My hope is that this research provides those working in the organic vegetable industry with clear and accessible information they can utilize based on their specific needs and interests.

Appendix

Position Description Examples

Pre-Season Onboarding Meeting Agenda Example

Employee Manual Example

Employee Evaluation Example

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) Examples

Position Description Example

Lovefood Farm

Lovefood Farm Field Crew

Lovefood Farm is a certified organic vegetable farm near Stoughton, WI. We grow a wide variety of veggies and herbs which are sold to restaurants, farmers markets, grocery stores and our CSA program in and around Madison, WI. We are looking for great people for our field crew team working from late spring through early fall.

Position Summary:

All members of the Lovefood Farm team love to be outdoors, have great attitudes, play well with others, can work independently, are reliable, in good shape, communicate well and persevere in the face of challenges like weather, mud and sun. This position will involve harvesting, planting, weeding and washing veggies and herbs of all shapes and sizes at our beautiful farm in Stoughton, WI. This position is additionally the jack of all trades on our farm and will be enlisted to complete other field tasks like laying landscape fabric, pounding posts, simple repairs, trellising tomatoes and much much more. See the job duties below and apply via email if interested.

Responsibilities:

1. **Basic Field Work** - All employees share in the primary farm tasks listed below. You will spend the majority of your time together with other employees doing this work:
 - a. Harvest, wash, and pack produce
 - b. Weed and hoe
 - c. Transplant vegetables
 - d. Other maintenance and horticultural tasks as needed
2. **Other Potential Duties** -
 - a. Watering greenhouse plants
 - b. Trellising tomato plants in the field or greenhouse
 - c. Running irrigation
 - d. Assisting with washing and packing veggies and herbs
 - e. General tool maintenance like sharpening, cleaning
 - f. Delivery Driver
3. **Dates and Times of Work**
 - a. These positions can be full or part time with a minimum of 3 days/wk always including Monday, our busiest day.
 - b. Positions will start in April, May and June and continue through the end of September and October.
 - c. Hours are 7:30-4 for both full and part time employees with a 30 min unpaid lunch
 - d. Occasional days off are generally okay with prior approval but be advised that we do work holidays like July 4th, Memorial Day and Labor Day.
4. **Compensation**
 - a. Starting pay is \$12/hr and is based on experience.
 - b. A \$.50 bonus will be awarded per hour worked for each employee that works through their agreed upon time period. For example, agree to work through Sept 31st and as long as you stay, you get a \$.50 bonus for every hour you've worked throughout the season.
5. **Application Process**
 - a. Send a resume and cover letter to farmer@lovefood.farm
 - b. We will review applications and select folks for a one hour phone interview
 - c. We may then schedule an in person interview with a trial work session on the farm. The trial work session is an opportunity for us to evaluate each other while doing real work. It's the most important way we assess applicants. We will pay you for the trial work you do here.
 - d. Based on your interview, trial work day, interviews and references, we will offer or deny employment.

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities:

- Ability to work effectively and maintain deadlines with limited supervision
- Critical thinking and decision making skills; able to make effective decisions under uncertain/variable conditions
- Basic math skills including arithmetic; ability to perform and interpret basic calculations related to count, weight, time, rate, and distance
- Verbal and written communication skills; ability to follow instructions and to clearly express ideas in a concise and professional manner
- Highly effective collaborative skills; must perform comfortably in group settings
- Strong work ethic with history of good attendance
- Ability to lift/carry up to 50 pounds, occasionally lift up to 100 pounds with assistance
- Must be able to perform physical work in a variety of positions and at various heights including bending, stooping, reaching and twisting of arms and body movement
- Tolerate working in a variety of temperatures & environmental conditions

Position Description: Greenhouse Manager

Reports to:

Farm Manager (Kyle)

Position Summary:

The Greenhouse Manager is a new role at Raleigh's Hillside Farm! The Greenhouse Manager is responsible for basic day-to-day oversight of our greenhouse and greenhouse plants. This entails ensuring that greenhouse production is running efficiently and productively to achieve great results; maintaining records; leading employees on greenhouse production when support is needed; and all other needed tasks that arise for our greenhouse production. This list is not comprehensive, and we will add to it as the season evolves and/or new needs arise.

Greenhouse work and its time commitment will vary by season. Your remaining hours each week will go towards general crew member tasks. These tasks are outlined below.

Position Responsibilities:

Ultimately, the job of the greenhouse manager is to ensure our greenhouse seeding is up to date with our seeding chart and that greenhouse plants are well cared for. This includes:

- Working with farm manager to determine the best time to complete the weekly seeding list
- Managing any farm employees who help with completing weekly seeding list
- Documenting all seeding dates in our greenhouse log
- Working with farm manager to ensure all crops are in an appropriate place for germination
- Checking on germinating crops daily and moving off germination tables when appropriate
- Checking greenhouse plants both in the morning and after lunch, and watering as needed
- Moving and rearranging flats (from one greenhouse to the other, or to the cold frame)
- Rolling up greenhouse side walls and uncovering cold frame every morning
- Keeping the greenhouse clean and organized
- Preparing basement for summer germination
- Notifying farm managers of limited inventory of greenhouse supplies

Outside of your greenhouse work, your additional responsibilities include:

- Sanitizing agreed upon surfaces at the start of each work day
- Helping to ensure compost, garbage and recycling are emptied at least biweekly
- Washing CSA crates
- Packing CSA boxes weekly and helping pack shed manager with other essential CSA day tasks
- Other general field work:
 - Harvesting, washing and packing produce
 - Weeding and hoeing
 - Transplanting
 - Laying landscape fabric
 - Trellising tomato plants
 - Running irrigation
 - Other maintenance and horticultural tasks as needed

Position Description Example
Happy Hollow Farm

Job Title: Happy Hollow Farm Wash/Pack Shed Manager

Reports To: FarmHer LIZ

Manages: Coordination of all aspects related to the washing, packing & distributing of crops at HHF. Lead/manage co-workers that are working in the wash/pack shed. Coordination & cooperation with Field Production & Greenhouse Managers.

Season: Year Round; Days and Hours vary depending on time of year. 2 paid weeks of vacation per year (during off season; mid- December thru end of February).

Position Summary:

The Field Production Coordinator is responsible for basic day-to-day oversight of Field Production responsibilities. This entails ensuring that field production is running efficiently and productively to achieve best results in the crop production & overall soil health of the farm; maintaining records and collecting data for both day to day use and big picture organic certification; leading & coordinating harvest crews, planting crews, crop maintenance & other crop production related tasks; coordination with co-workers at Happy Hollow Farm and between the farm and the outside community; and all other needed tasks that arise.

Responsibilities:

I. TRAIN AND LEAD CO-WORKERS

- a. Ensure that all production related staff are:
 - i. Demonstrating safe operation and proper care for all equipment
 - ii. Working as a team with positive engagement
 - iii. Informed sufficiently and timely with all forms of necessary communication
 - iv. Ensuring proper harvesting & post harvest handling of crops

II. RECORD KEEPING / DATA

- a. Works both independently and with team to ensure that proper and accurate records are being kept with regards to all field related activities
 - i. Certification (USDA Organic, ROP)
 - ii. Productivity of vegetable crops over time
 - iii. Productivity of labor hours on different Field Production jobs over time

III. PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

- a. Leads day-to-day operations within Field Production in coordination with FarmHer LIZ
- b. "Gets results" from co-workers, by making the right decisions for maximum efficiency and productivity
 - i. Leading by example
 - ii. Planning ahead so that co-workers are moving efficiently from task to task
 - iii. Organized, efficient & productive work leads to enjoyable & satisfied experiences by co-workers
- c. Ensures the days tasks are planned out & ready to go prior to the start of each day

- d. Oversees & coordinates crop watering schedules, cultivating schedules, pest control schedules & transplanting schedules
- e. Coordinates with FarmHer LIZ & Greenhouse Manager so that Field Production stays on schedule week to week
- f. Coordinates with FarmHer LIZ & Pack Shed Manager all harvest & post-harvest handling of crops on a weekly basis

Additional Duties and Responsibilities:

- This job description is not designed to cover or contain a comprehensive listing of activities, duties or responsibilities. Duties, responsibilities and activities may change at any time with or without notice
- Attendance and leading of sales at the weekly Columbia Farmers Market during various times throughout the season
- Various construction & maintenance of high tunnels, caterpillar tunnels, low tunnels & other structures on the farm
- Various construction & maintenance of irrigation equipment both for use in the field & high tunnels
- Overall working knowledge of all HHF farm equipment & the regular required maintenance & upkeep

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities:

- Must be able to empower co-workers to succeed in their daily work at HHF
- Must be able to multitask with ease and proficiency
- Demonstrate a record of progressive accomplishment and successful supervisory and interaction management skills
- Knowledge or experience with the production of organic vegetables
- Knowledge of USDA Organic regulations, Food Safety, Bio-security, and applicable State and Local regulations
- Ability to work effectively and maintain deadlines with limited supervision
- Critical thinking and decision making skills; able to make effective decisions under uncertain/variable conditions
- Basic math skills including arithmetic; ability to perform and interpret basic calculations related to count, weight, time, rate, and distance
- Verbal and written communication skills; ability to follow instructions and to clearly express ideas in a concise and professional manner
- Highly effective collaborative skills; must perform comfortably in group settings
- Strong work ethic with history of good attendance
- Ability to lift/carry up to 50 pounds, occasionally lift up to 100 pounds with assistance, ability to safely & effectively operate & maintain in good condition, all HHF farm equipment
- Must be able to perform physical work in a variety of positions and at various heights including bending, stooping, reaching and twisting of arms and body movement
- Tolerate working in a variety of temperatures & environmental conditions

Pre-Season Onboarding Meeting Agenda Example
Park Ridge Organics

Pre-season Meeting Agenda
Park Ridge Organics
May 5th, 2020
10am-11am
Zoom

- 1. Introduction to the farm each other!**
 - Name, where you live, day/days you will be working at the farm
 - How are you holding up?
 - Worker Shares: When will you start working?
 - Days off: the sooner we know the better
 - Review Worker Manual
 - New for 2020: Time tracking via Google Form
- 2. COVID-19 and the 2020 Farming Season**
 - Changes on the Farm: share distribution, farm market, wholesale, farm store
 - Review Park Ridge Organics COVID-19 Farm Guidelines for Safe Operations
 - Open and honest communication has never been more important!
- 3. Food Safety**
 - Importance of continued Food Safety on the Farm amidst the pandemic
 - Food Safety Plan (updated 2020)
 - Manager Becky- reminders to the crew
- 4. What is ahead for 2020 (POSITIVE SIDE of THINGS)**
 - SOLD OUT SHARES at 411 shares per week!
 - Value Added Producer Grant: The Farm Store at Park Ridge Organics expansion project
 - Find out in July
 - Can't come soon enough
 - All returning crew, super skills
 - CHICKENS!

*During non-COVID years, this meeting would last two hours and would include a tour of the farm. There would also be snacks! Employees are normally encouraged to bring members of their families as well.

Blue Moon Community Farm LLC 2020 Employee Manual

NOTE: COVID-related policies are not addressed in this manual. These are evolving and will be distributed and explained as they are created and revised.

Welcome and Purpose

Welcome to our small but mighty Blue Moon crew! This manual was written to help you understand how the farm operates. Please read it carefully and discuss any questions you have with us. We look forward to a long, enriching, and positive work experience with everyone. However, this manual is not an employment contract and does not guarantee employment for any amount of time or on any specific terms. You are employed “at will”. We are proud to have you join us.

History and Philosophy of the Farm

Blue Moon began in 2004 on 1.5 acres and served 20 CSA members in that first year. Over the past 16 years, the farm has grown slowly and with intention: to stay small, to optimize our systems, and to improve efficiencies every year. Currently at 6.5 acres in production, we are committed to growing the highest quality vegetables for our local community, and to providing meaningful work for ourselves and those who join us each season. We are known for the quality and cleanliness of our products, as well as our commitment to the core values of CSA: shared appreciation and stewardship of the land, partnership in the bounty and the risk of the farming season, and honest pricing to reflect our efforts.

We demand a lot of ourselves to meet these goals, and demand the same from those who join us in work. Efficient and thoughtful production earns our living, and allows us to pay you the best wage that we can. Productivity and creativity are rewarded, and are essential for anyone aspiring to a career in farming.

Inclement Weather

Excessive rain, high winds, extreme temperatures and other inclement weather patterns often occur over the course of the farming season. Our work does not stop, and in fact gains extra diligence and monitoring during these times.

If lightning is active nearby, work will move to the barn. If a tornado warning is in place, employees will seek shelter in the basement of the farmhouse until the threat or warning has passed.

In the cases of extreme temperatures, we will discuss altering our work schedule and/or our activities to avoid extra stress on ourselves and the crops.

Appropriate Workwear

All employees are expected to wear footwear and workwear that allows him/her to work comfortably and protects from injury. Long pants and full-coverage footwear are strongly recommended for both personal and food safety concerns. Good quality rain gear is essential for working comfortably in inclement weather.

Full Season employees receive a gear stipend at the start of the season to augment their gear as needed to assure they are prepared. With this incentive, we expect you to be ready for the season with appropriate gear in place.

Part-time and short season employees (and worker shares) are welcome to use our collection of “Community Gear” in the barn.

Payroll

Employees are paid every 2 weeks, with payday on a Friday. Employees are encouraged to enroll in Direct Deposit. If not, checks will be placed in the employee’s slot by 4:30pm on Friday.

Timesheets

Your timesheet must be maintained on a daily basis. Timesheets are kept in the barn on a clipboard.. The owner will collect them on Monday of a pay week. Timesheets should be complete at that time to avoid delays in payroll.

Days and Hours of Work

Our start time is determined by the time of year, and will be between 7:30 and 9:00 am. Regardless of when you arrive, you must be ready to work at the start time. It is up to you to determine how much time you need at the farm to prepare yourself for work and plan accordingly.

The start of each day is a critical time for the crew to gather. Important instructions, overviews, and details are often shared during this time. Arriving late repeatedly is disruptive to everyone and may result in disciplinary action.

Our work ends at 4:30. We'll make efforts to allow time for tools and supplies to be put away and cleaned. Occasionally our work may be time sensitive enough to require extra time at the end of the day. Employees are strongly encouraged to take part in these efforts (which we try to keep at a minimum) but are not required.

Both tardiness at the start of the day and extra time spent to complete a task at the end of the day should be reflected in your timesheet.

We do not pay overtime at Blue Moon, as allowed by state and federal law for agricultural work.

Days Off

Full-season employees of the farm are given a number of days of Paid Time Off (PTO). These are undifferentiated sick/vacation/misc days off. Short season employees are not given PTO due to the very seasonal nature of those positions.

Farming does not stop for summer holidays, and Memorial Day, July 4, and Labor Day are work days. Most years, we work a long morning on Memorial Day and Labor Day (until 1 or 1:30) and pay employees the remaining hours to total a full day's pay.

Employees must discuss any significant vacation or time off requests for the season at the time of hire (if known). For planned absences of more than 2 days, 1 month's notice is strongly encouraged. If an employee is sick or otherwise cannot work, he/she must alert the farm at least 1 hour before the start of work.

Our weekly schedule includes some days that are more flexible than others. Mondays and Thursdays are generally good days for scheduling appointments if workday time is needed, or for scheduling a day off.

Benefits

All employees of the farm are offered 2nds and extras of farm produce throughout the season. All employees are covered for work related injuries by our Workers Compensation policy.

Full-season employees are also given some or all of the following: Farm meat credit, Gear stipend, health care stipend, paid time off, registration to off-season workshops, conferences,

and farming events. Benefits will be described as part of any offer of employment and will be finalized at the time of hire.

We are part of several farm networks that offer field days and gatherings during the farm season. We try to alert employees when these opportunities arise, and make every effort to allow workday time to attend. While attendance is not paid time, any fees for these events will be paid by the farm.

Employment Policies

Employees may have other employment or work on their own farming operations so long as the outside employment does not: (1) Interfere with the employee's performance of job duties or hours of work and (2) Increase the potential for the transfer of disease or microbes to the farm.

No Tolerance or Harassment

The farm strives to provide a work environment free from tensions from matters that do not relate to the Farm's operation. The farm strongly disapproves of any form of harassment including but not limited to ethnic, racial, or sexual harassment. Actions or remarks involving ethnic or religious animosity, or conduct of a sexual nature will not be tolerated.

Employees have the responsibility to bring any form of harassment to the attention of the owner or manager. All reports will be kept confidential. The farm will investigate the report promptly and in as confidential a manner as possible. If the farm determines that an employee engaged in harassment, disciplinary action will be taken. Harassment may be a legal issue and the processes in this manual are not a substitute for the legal process to which every individual is entitled.

Alcohol and Drug

To provide all employees with a safe, healthy, secure workplace, all employees are expected to work in an unimpaired, alert physical and mental condition. To help meet this goal, the farm prohibits the use or possession of illegal drugs and alcoholic beverages on farm property during work hours. If an employee arrives to work under the influence of drugs/alcohol, he/she may not be permitted to work.

Safety

At all times, employees must be conscious of fellow employees and farm guests and move about the farm with an eye toward their own safety and that of others.

Employees will be trained in and require to use appropriate protection when operating equipment, applying biological controls, and performing other hazardous farm tasks. Employees are forbidden from operating equipment in which they have not yet been trained.

Employees are to report any broken or damaged tools/equipment that may pose a safety hazard. Employees are also asked to report the need for more safety equipment as needed.

Injuries

Vegetable farming is physically demanding work. We expect all employees joining our crew to be in good physical condition. That said, aches and pains are part of the game as we acclimate to the demands of the season. We expect you to take care of your body, and stretch sore muscles before, after, and with brief breaks during the work day. We also expect you report any injuries, in order to assess care/treatment options, address Workers Compensation needs, make accommodations as we are able.

Smoking

Because of potential disease transmission, smoking is prohibited everywhere on the farm. If employees smoke off the farm, they must thoroughly wash their hands before beginning or returning to work.

Cell Phones

Cell phones either for online, text, or telephone purposes, is not permitted during work hours except during the lunch break and as permitted by the owner or manager. The farm manager will carry a cell phone at his/her discretion as needed for farm work purposes.

Employees may carry a cell phone in the case of an emergency with the permission of the owner or manager.

Employees are encouraged to give the farm's cell phone number (608-446-6962) to family, partners, and/or emergency contacts so that he/she can be reached in an emergency.

Housekeeping

Please help keep the farm clean and tidy. Place trash and discarded items in appropriate places, be proactive in creating receptacles where they are needed, or finding homes for things that need them. Observe checklists in the pack shed and greenhouse to leave things in order when an activity is complete.

Supervision

The farm is managed by the owner and the farm manager. The immediate supervisor for all employees is the farm manager. Your relationship with your supervisor is an important one. You may expect your supervisor to provide you with the right tools and equipment and to teach you to properly perform your tasks. Your supervisor oversees the flow of your activities on the farm. In return, your supervisor will expect you to work efficiently, to follow their instructions, and to work to the best of your ability.

As a small farm, we strive to keep all employees up to speed on the big picture of our day, our week, our month... The owner and manager work together to identify work priorities and log these weekly on our Weekly Work Plan clipboard. Other employees are welcome to review these notes and ask questions about items on the list. Employees are also welcome, on their own time, to join in our weekly field walks following work hours. These typically happen on Mondays.

Discipline Procedure

The first step in any disciplinary issue will be a discussion with the owner, manager, and employee to troubleshoot the issue and attempt to resolve it. If further action is needed, specific actions will be documented and signed by all parties. If prescribed action does not occur, further action or termination may be necessary.

Some violations are so egregious that immediate termination may result.

Termination

Employees resigning are asked to submit a minimum of 2 weeks notice to the farm owner. Before delivering your final paycheck, the farm must receive any property in the employee's possession, including keys, tools, equipment, etc.

2020 Employee Manual Acknowledgement

I have received a copy of the 2020 Blue Moon Community Farm Employee Manual, and have familiarized myself with its contents.

I understand that this manual is not an employment contract.

Name (printed):

Signature:

Date:

PrairieErth Farm Employee Review Template

Employee Review - {Employee Name} {Date}					
Quality of Work		Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Improvement	Comments
Works to full potential	Applies knowledge and skills to the full extent of one’s abilities. Strives to apply themselves fully to all manner of tasks independent of the nature of the task.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Consistency	Effort is unwavering or unchanged independent of outside circumstances. Attention to detail is high regardless of the nature of work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Technical Skills	Has a firm grasp of how to best execute tasks quickly, efficiently, and how to do them well. Attention to detail and finer points of a particular task are not overlooked and tasks are carried out completely and thoroughly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Independent Work	Employee can be relied upon to perform tasks by oneself without the assistance or guidance from another. Has an ability to problem solve and make decisions necessary in order to keep the ball moving forward.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Takes Initiative	Steps up to problem solve and coordinate action plans without needing to be prompted to do so. Is always thinking about what the task ahead is and what next steps involve. Sees a need and fills a need.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Interpersonal Skills		Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Improvement	
Group Work	Employee is able to coordinate with fellow employees on how to best tackle bigger projects that require many hands. Willingness to cooperate and contribute full efforts to maximize efficiency and facilitate tasks being completed as easy as possible for all parties involved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Attitude	Maintains a positive attitude despite fluctuating or extenuating circumstances.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Communication Skills	Is able to effectively convey information when necessary to management or those working alongside or under them. Asks questions when directives are unclear. Reports back all concerns or observations that might be pertinent when necessary. Is able to provide said information in a productive way. Is concise and direct in communicating task directives.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Reliability		Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Improvement	
Dependability	Can be relied upon consistently. Offers themselves up and can be counted upon to accomplish collective goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Attendance	Consistently follows the schedule as laid out at the start of the week.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Punctuality	Shows up to work on time and returns from all scheduled breaks promptly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Summary				

Loon Organics SOP: Cleaning and Sanitizing a Brush Washer

Materials:

- Green scrub brush for food contact surfaces
- Red scrub brush for non-food contact surfaces
- Dawn dish soap
- Red bucket to mix soapy water
- Water
- Hose with sprayer nozzle
- Metal scraper
- Sanitizer in spray bottle or hose-end sprayer

Procedure:

1. Unplug brush washer
2. Wash hands
3. Use scraper to remove any soil collected in pan beneath brush washer and dispose of in trash or compost.
4. Remove any large debris from interior and exterior of machine by hand.
5. Use non-food contact rag or brush to remove other dirt, debris, or cobwebs from exterior, going from top to bottom.
6. Cover external electrical components with plastic bag.
7. Rinse with spray nozzle, top to bottom.
8. Prepare wash water, using approximately 1 teaspoon soap per gallon water.
9. Using soap and food contact surface brush, scrub interior of machine, rollers, and sorting table from top to bottom, paying special attention to areas where grime can gather, such as the top of spray area/spray bar, flaps, edges of roller bars, and both sides of conveyor belt (if you have one).
10. Plug in and turn on briefly to move belts/rollers for underside access, then turn off and unplug before scrubbing. SAFETY FIRST - NO loose hair, strings, or sleeves while machine is running!
11. Turn off and unplug machine.
12. Continue scrubbing rollers or conveyor belt. If needed, repeat steps 10-12 until all portions of rollers or conveyor belt are clean.
13. Use non-food contact brush or rag to scrub exterior and soil collection pan with detergent.
14. Rinse the surface until all soap suds are removed, moving from top to bottom.
15. Apply sanitizer solution using spray bottle or hose end sprayer, spraying top to bottom, paying special attention to all surfaces inside the machine. Then, plug in and turn on to spray all surfaces.
16. Turn machine off and allow to air dry.

17. Clean food contact surface brush with water and sanitizer prior to putting back in storage location. Rinse non-food contact surface brush and/or place rags in laundry bin. Hang up the hose. Put all other supplies away.
18. Record cleaning and sanitizing activity on log sheet.

Squash (Yellow and Zucchini)

Family: Cucurbit

Greenhouse Seeding: Squash should be seeded into 72 cell flats. First fill the cells of the flat completely with soil. The soil should still be loose - do not force extra soil in. Next, poke a hole in each cell using your finger. The depth of the hole should be twice the length of the squash seed. Exercise caution in not making the hole too deep. Using a circular motion with your finger, expand the hole so it is about $\frac{3}{4}$ the width of the cell. Squash seeds should then be placed by hand in each cell. One seed should be placed in every cell. After you are finished seeding, use potting soil to cover the seeds so each cell is completely filled with soil.

Field Prep: Squash should be planted into plastic mulch. Green plastic mulch - 4ft wide - should be used for the first planting. Subsequent successions should be planted into black plastic mulch. Ground should be Chisel plowed and then disked several times. If too many chunks of soil are left, laying plastic will be difficult. Fertilizer should be applied at a rate of 120lbs of nitrogen/acre.

Field Transplanting Prep: Only transplant healthy-looking plants - overly long plants or those with dampening off should not be transplanted. Before transplanting, water the plants very well to ensure they are moist from the top to bottom of the cell. Each cell should be planted whole into the ground - do not disturb the individual plant.

Field Transplant: Squash should be transplanted using the water wheel. Use the 14'' spike wheels and plant them 1 row per bed. Squash are very sensitive to having their roots disturbed - make sure when they are removed from the flat and then planted into the ground that it is done gently and without the roots ripping. Fish emulsion should be added to the transplanter water at the ratio of 1 pint per full tank (so 2 pints total). Do not over apply emulsion. Make sure the emulsion is well incorporated by using a stick to stir it in with the water. Each 500' bed of squash should use roughly 6 flats of plants.

Harvesting: Squash are extremely sensitive to being damaged and must be treated with a lot of care. Always wear cotton gloves when picking squash and be sure to place them into boxes carefully. To harvest, grab an individual squash and pull with a twisting motion. You should harvest the squash with the stem still attached. Good quality yellow squash should be smaller than a cucumber but not less than 4'' long. Good quality zucchini should be the size of a cucumber or slightly larger. All good quality squash should be relatively free of blemishes, still have the stem attached and not be deformed in shape. Squash should be harvested directly into a $\frac{1}{2}$ bushel box. When the box is completely full, it should be carefully closed and placed on the ground to be picked up at the end of harvest.

Harvest goal: Good - 4 boxes/hour, excellent - 6 boxes/hour

Processing: Squash are field packed, meaning once they are placed in the wax box in the field they should then be moved directly to the cooler. In rare instances where a lot of dirt has splashed onto yellow squash, they will need to be washed in a tub and then repacked into ½ bushel boxes.

Packing: Cases of squash are always packed into ½ bushel boxes, which must be completely full. No other box size should be used.