

Doing Your Homework Before You Meet Each Other: Who are these People that want to lease my Land?

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I grew up in North Jersey, far from any farms. I have a liberal arts degree, used to work in the Met Life building. These things make me pretty typical of a farmer with ten years experience. Somehow, we new farmers are arriving at our chosen profession. We are motivated, optimistic, and we engage people in the important work that we are doing.

By and large, the farmers looking for opportunity here in the Northeast are new farmers, by definition those with fewer than 10 years experience.

As reassuring as it would be for a landowner to find a farmer with 30 years experience to lease your land, it is just not as likely. Farmers with that kind of experience have established operations and markets. Unless they are looking to expand operations, these are not the folks that will be knocking on your door.

You will hear from some of those farmers later in the program. My intention is to talk to you about these new farmers.

Don't be scared! I am not trying to sound a discouraging note. Today's new farmers have worked hard on farms and learned a variety of skills from experienced farm managers. The new farmer you want to establish a relationship with is one who has some solid experience on a successful farm and who demonstrates that they can and will consult with their mentors when the need arises. Our best farmers are the ones who realize that they are never done learning, after all.

A landowner is rightfully concerned when they meet a farmer who has just a few seasons under the belt or no formal agricultural training, certificate or degree. Ask the farmer why they feel confident. You are likely to hear about the sound operation they interned for. They may tout the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training – a network of farms that enhance internship training through operational tours and discussion on farm management practices. They may gush about all they have learned as a participant at conferences put on by the Northeast Organic Farming Association. They have learned sound, sustainable practices and that these skills, coupled with direct marketing, are the foundation on which a new agricultural venture is built.

I recommend that a landowner make a list of questions for prospective tenants that will help determine if this person is committed, knowledgeable and connected to the larger agricultural community, or if they should perhaps just be committed. So ask them about their mentors, ask if they are affiliated with any agricultural groups and ask what motivates them. In addition to leasing your land, you may feel moved to assist the farmer by helping them to navigate their new community and make good connections.

There really is a strong network of support for new farmers in the agricultural community. I believe most of us farmers see each other as collaborators rather than competitors. We want to strengthen our local food system. We want to see each other succeed. We need more farmers.

There are a few things that may concern you about your potential tenant. It may seem odd to you that a bright young person would want to get into a career that promises little financial return for all of their hard work. They have no visible means to pay for their own health insurance. Where will they live on such meager earnings? These are all legitimate issues, but ones best left to your tenants' concern. Your business with them is in the lease. As long as landlord and tenant are meeting the terms of the lease, you have done all that was asked of each other.

Many of us involved in the sustainable agriculture movement adhere to the concept of voluntary simplicity. Voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle choice to minimize consumption and the pursuit of wealth. I am not talking about choosing poverty. We examine what we need, figure out what is enough and don't worry about the rest. Maybe we feel we don't need cable tv or a second car. Some of us forego health insurance for obvious financial reasons, but also because we eat healthfully, get plenty of exercise and are generally indestructible.

You don't have to agree with all of this! I don't! Health insurance is important to my family. What I am trying to stress is that we can respect of differences on these concerns.

Still, many of us living simply are okay with a low income because we feel good about all the intangible benefits of our work. We get to bring people together in many positive ways. Some of us farmers put on community events or donate to local food banks. We contribute to a healthier environment and healthier eating. We are strengthening our regional food economy at a time when it is abundantly clear that we should not be trucking in our produce from California. I see new farms going into production in our communities as our Victory Gardens.

A landowner has a wonderful opportunity to be a big part in revitalizing our regional food economy. It is exciting and refreshing to see beautiful land in production and to see the products that land yields shared with the local community. People will thank you for sharing. I think you will thank yourself too.