

How to Be a Farmer

Four Parts: [Examining Your Personality](#) [Learning Whether Farming Is For You](#) [Beginning As a Farmer](#) [Thinking Like a Farmer](#)

The dream of living off the land, tilling the ground and growing your own crops, and connecting with nature is one that many people share. Particularly if you didn't grow up on a farm, it can be easy to romanticize the farmer's life, imagining it as a meditative, relaxed life far away from the frantic pace of "city life." But this isn't a genuine picture of farming, and not everyone is cut out to be a farmer. Some farmers would argue there's a big difference between someone who knows *how* to farm and a *farmer*, so consider your personality, your goals, and your strengths when deciding whether or not to be a farmer.

Part
1

Examining Your Personality

1 Consider why you want to be a farmer. Farming is hard work, and requires a lot of knowledge and upfront investment. You have to be part **entrepreneur**, part **small business owner**, part scientist, and part manual laborer. Even if you do everything right, farming is unpredictable: natural disasters such as floods or drought can wipe out crops, pests can decimate your harvest, and the price of crops can vary dramatically.

- Farming often requires a far greater time investment even than a full-time 9-to-5 job. Unless you want only a very tiny farm or large garden as a hobby, farming will have to become your life.

2 Think about your priorities. Ask yourself some questions about what you want your life to look like. What goals do you have for yourself? Are they concrete, such as a certain annual income or time with your family? Are they more abstract, such as a certain quality of life or a feeling of satisfaction?

- Consider what you are willing to sacrifice and what you are not. What do you need to achieve your goals, and what are you willing to do to achieve them?

3 Decide whether your personality is a good fit for farming. Farming can offer you a life of independence and connection to your land, but it is also a huge responsibility. Knowing how you're likely to respond to situations that may arise will help you decide if farming is right for you.

- Are you comfortable being solely responsible for a large operation? The success of many small farms hinges entirely on their owner(s). As a farmer, you're in charge of all the day-to-day operations as well as long-term planning. You will have to make many decisions where the fate of your farm may hang in the balance.
- Are you able to accept uncertainty and variability in your life? A farmer's life is full of uncertainty, and the possibility for failure is high. Even good years may see you operating at a break-even level and no more. Due to the hardships of farming, the number of farmers in America is expected to decline by 19% between 2012 and 2022.^[1]
- Are you a creative problem-solver? Farming throws many problems your way, and having the imagination to think of creative solutions will be vital to your farm.
- Are you a patient person? Farming has a very steep learning curve and you will undoubtedly make many mistakes when you first start out. It can also take a long time, even years, until your farm is fully successful, so you will need to be able to work toward long-term prospects.

4 List your strengths and weaknesses. Be honest with yourself here. What are you good at? What are your weak spots?

- Are you good at accounting and bookkeeping? In order to keep your farm operating, you must be able to calculate risk margins, record sales and purchases, and track profits.
- Are you capable of heavy labor? Farming can be backbreaking manual labor, even with modern equipment like tractors. You will need to be fairly fit and in good health to be a farmer.
- Do you have enough money to invest in farming? Starting a small farm requires a lot of initial capital. You have

to buy materials and equipment. You also have to buy land, or face unfavorable land lease relationships where you have little control over your farm.^[2]

- Are you a fast learner? You will need to absorb a lot of information and keep up to date on many trends and techniques if you're to succeed in farming.
- Do you have significant health problems? Health insurance can be quite expensive if you're self-employed. If you have chronic health problems or require many expensive prescription medicines, farming may not offer you enough reliability in your health care.

5 Decide whether the economic hardships of small farming are acceptable to you. Small-scale farming is a notoriously poor-earning business, and 91% of all small farms require outside income (either through other employment or through government and foundation grants) to stay afloat. If things like saving for retirement or sending your children to college are goals of yours, farming may not be for you.^[3]

- The median farm income was -\$1,453 in 2012. That means the average small farm in America lost almost \$1500 a year.

Part 2

Learning Whether Farming Is For You

1 Visit farming resource websites. In order to make the decision about whether to [become a farmer](#), you'll want to collect as much information as possible about what the process requires,

- Farm Aid is a nonprofit organization that provides information and resources about farming. They have a resource center devoted entirely to beginning farms.
- The National Young Farmers Coalition provides information and resources geared specifically for beginning farmers.^[4]
- The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, a branch of the USDA, has a project called Start2Farm that offers a vast amount of information on beginning a farm, finding funding, and locating services.^[5]

2 Reach out to your local cooperative extension. If you live near a college or university, you probably have access to their cooperative extension office. These offices are there to serve the needs of local small business owners and agricultural producers. They provide many resources on farming and agriculture, and often offer classes and seminars too.^[6]

3 Talk to farmers. Nothing beats talking with real-life farmers about their lives and experiences. If you have a local farmers' market, get to know the farmers who sell their goods there. Ask them about what they love about their work, and what they hate.

- If you have farms in your area, call or email them to see if you can meet with them. While farmers are usually very busy, they are also usually very passionate about their work, and they will probably be happy to talk to you.
- You can also visit online message boards to ask questions and learn from farmers. It's definitely preferable to talk with people in person, though.

4 Volunteer on a farm. If you are serious about becoming a farmer, volunteering on a farm is a good way to learn if the lifestyle is really for you before you have to make a major financial investment. Organizations such as World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms link organic farms with volunteer opportunities (for a small fee), and many local farms also offer volunteer programs.^[7]

5 Look around for farms that ask for “interns” or “apprentices” in your area. Many of these programs will offer you room and board as well as a small stipend in exchange for your labor.^[8] Experts recommend that you spend three to four years “apprenticing” if you're really serious about starting your own farm.^[9]

**Part
3****Beginning As a Farmer**

1 Determine what crops to grow. It can be overwhelming to think about what types of crops your farm will grow, but there are ways to narrow this decision down. The majority of agricultural crops grown in the United States are grain crops, such as corn, soybeans, and wheat.^[10] If you live in an area with a demand for it, organic vegetable production can also be a good choice, as it is one of the fastest-growing sectors in American farming.^[11] There are many resources that can help you decide what crops are best for you and your area.

- The New England Small Farm Institute provides a wealth of links to help you conduct research on crop planning.^[12]
- The National Agriculture Library is also a good place to start for information on regional crops.^[13]
- Contacting your state or province department of agriculture will help you determine specific information for crop planning in your area.

2 Find land to farm. Most beginning farmers cannot afford to buy their own land, at least at first. In addition, 80% of America's farmland is controlled by owners who are not farmers. Most expert sources recommend that beginning farmers "start soft," by managing someone else's farm, leasing farmland (from private owners or from land trusts), or take over an existing (and hopefully, profitable) farm from someone else.^[14]

- Word of mouth is still one of the most powerful sources for information about finding farmland. Cultivate your network of farming connections and do your research.
- Sources such as the "Farm Link Program Directory"^[15], "Farm On"^[16], and the "Farmland Information Center"^[17] may help you find farms to take over or farms that need managers.

3 Be honest about your potential locations. You may need to relocate in order to find affordable, plentiful farmland. You may fantasize about a farm in the Hudson Valley or the Bay Area, but keep in mind that such areas are also highly desirable to others and thus nearly prohibitively expensive. Look for farmland in an area that is populated enough to buy your products, but not so heavily populated that farmland is out of your price range.

- *Modern Farmer* recommends areas such as Lincoln, Nebraska; Des Moines, Iowa; Boise, Idaho; Mobile, Alabama; and Grand Junction, Colorado as potential locations. They are close to populated areas, but not so prestigious that you won't be able to afford land.^[18]

4 Secure financing for your farm. There are many loan and grant programs available for beginning farmers, including federally backed loans from the USDA. Many of these vary by your state, so do research by beginning at an online resource such as FarmAid or Start2Farm.

- The "Farm Service Agency Beginning Farmer Loan Program"^[19], National Council of State Agricultural Finance Programs^[20], Farm Credit Services of America^[21], and the American Farmland Trust^[22] are all good places to begin your funding search.

5 Limit your initial development. One way to control your initial startup costs and limit your risk of failure is to start small and develop your farm gradually. You don't need a bunch of fancy, expensive equipment to begin farming. Your principal focuses should be your soil and your product.^[23]

6 Grow what you know. While experimentation is great, when you're first starting out, start by cultivating what you have experience with. If you apprenticed on a berry farm, grow berries. If you trained on a pig farm, raise pigs. You can diversify later if you choose, but beginning with some expertise and experience in your area will be invaluable as you get your farm up and running.

7 Promote your products. Your network of personal and community connections will be your single biggest way to promote your farm products, but fortunately, you can also take advantage of other marketing options too. Place coupons in the local paper, create "pick-your-own" events, even cold-call restaurants in your area to see if they want to purchase your locally grown goods.

- Market yourself heavily on Facebook and Twitter. Post pictures of your beautiful farm and gorgeous crops on Flickr and Instagram. Create an inspirational Pinterest board. While these social media tactics may not seem

related to tilling the earth with your hands, they are very useful ways to get your farm into the public consciousness. As an added bonus, they're almost always free!^[24]

8 Join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) society. These are usually organizations that connect people living in the area who want to buy locally grown produce with the farmers who produce it. Most often, people will buy "boxes" at a subscription rate, and you will deliver whatever fresh produce you're growing at that time. In addition to providing sales, this can be an excellent way to spread word-of-mouth about your farm.^[25]

9 Consider farm tourism. While this route may seem like "selling out" to you, many city dwellers are eager to learn more about farming and get their hands (just a little bit) dirty. Consider promoting farm tours and gardening classes. You could even advertise as a wedding venue. Maximizing every revenue stream you can think of will help you stay afloat even if your crops don't do well one year.

- Wedding budgets are usually great news for farmers, as plenty of brides and wedding planners are willing to spend big to have their wedding in a picturesque rural locale. Prices for simply using your farm as the wedding venue can run into the thousands of dollars, which could be a significant chunk of your annual income.

Part 4

Thinking Like a Farmer

1 Continue to learn every day. Knowing how to grow crops and raise livestock is only the first step. Even once you've learned the basics, continue to do research on new techniques and opportunities, and always try to learn from other farmers. Don't get complacent about your farming.

- Rely on those who have the experience and real-life knowledge of farming and raising/growing livestock/crops to get the information and knowledge you need.
- You will also have to learn from your mistakes and learn from the mistakes of others. There's a saying that is common among airplane and fighter pilots that is easily applicable to farmers: "Learn from the mistakes of others, because you won't live long enough to make them all yourself."

2 Engage with your community. A strong connection to your community is crucial for running a successful farm. Developing a good relationship with your community means you're also developing a support network.

- You can't market your product or sell your livestock or crops if you can't or don't know how to communicate, network or talk with other people in your community. Make friends, acquaintances and business partners with the various people involved in agriculture, be they farm equipment mechanics, local butchers, local sale barn personnel, potential buyers, other local farmers, or various other tradesmen and -women.

3 Appreciate what you have. Most farmers are not rich, and they don't have lots of money to spend on various "toys" and luxuries that others may be accustomed to. However, farming offers you the opportunity to think creatively and resourcefully, to be your own boss, and to feel proud when you've put in a long, hard day of work. Many farmers say that they love the sense of independence they get from farming and couldn't imagine another life.^[26]

- Don't believe that you have to have all the latest equipment to be a farmer. Thinking they have to spend money on a bunch of unnecessary stuff is an often mistake for brand-new farmers. Ask established, experienced farmers for advice.
- Don't be afraid, though, to expand your assets to improve your farm. There's a fine line between working with what you have and having to spend money to get what you need (not simply want) for your farm.

4 Expect to be a jack or jenny of all trades. You will find you have to be a welder, a mechanic, an electrician, a chemist, a plumber, a construction builder, an accountant, a veterinarian, an entrepreneur, a marketer, and even an economist. Make sure you know which hats to put on given the situations that require them.

- If you don't have all of these skills, find someone who will teach you! This is where your community engagement will come in handy.

5 Respect your farm. As a farmer, your success depends not only on your own hard work and skills but also on the land, the animals, and the forces of nature that you interact with. Love your farm for what it is, and don't try to turn it into something it isn't. Cultivating a deep appreciation for the whole ecosystem of your farm will give you a far deeper understanding of it.

- Where you live will dictate what kind of severe weather to expect and whether or not you can raise certain livestock with success or failure.
- Respect your farm's equipment too. Farm machines aren't toys, and you shouldn't treat them as such. Understand that they are powerful machines that could easily maim or kill if not handled correctly, and follow [safety procedures](#) at all times.

6 Love and be proud of what you do. As a farmer you are growing food for other people who cannot grow food for themselves due to time, living spaces, or life choices. You, unlike many other people, get to experience rural life at its fullest: the highs, the lows, and the hard work that goes along with it. In America, only 2% of the population are actively farming. In Canada, a mere 5% of the population follow under this category. As such, be proud of the fact that you are a part of the minority that get to provide food for others.

Can you answer these readers' questions?

[Refresh](#)

On **How to Apply for HUD Housing**, a reader asks:

Does a credit check need to be done to qualify for a HUD apartment?

[Reply](#)

On **How to Treat a Caterpillar Sting**, a reader asks:

How long does the rash last?

[Reply](#)

On **How to Add Apps to a Smart TV**, a reader asks:

How do I add an app to a Sony Smart TV?

[Reply](#)

Tips

- Qualities such as hard work, responsibility, creativity, flexibility, intuitiveness, and an ability to learn are all desirable qualities to have in a farmer.
- Never be afraid to ask for help. Nobody begins life knowing everything there is to know about farming -- not even people born on a farm. It is much better to ask for advice than make the wrong decision and fail.

Warnings

- Becoming (and staying) a farmer is a major life decision that can have ramifications for the rest of your life. Take your time, do your research, and think hard before you make the decision to be a farmer.

Sources and Citations

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3. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/10/opinion/sunday/dont-let-your-children-grow-up-to-be-farmers.html?_r=1

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