



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

Young Farmers, Land Access, and Today's Economic Climate

(c) 2019

[Who Will Harvest When I'm Gone?](#) is an article from a few years ago that my partner Will came across recently. I have been thinking about access to land for new farmers a lot recently, particularly those who don't come from an agricultural background. This article made me ask "with the cost of land increasing exponentially, how are we as a society going to guarantee that open spaces are maintained for food production for future generations?"

After reading "Who Will Harvest When I'm Gone?" I've been thinking about Jeff Main's comment: "The trip to England clarified the notion that a farm was an ongoing workplace and resource for the community that could evolve and mature within a community for many generations." And I'm wondering how can we ensure that notion becomes reality in our country.

The article also states that "young, aspiring farmers are in dire need of farmland. For generations, new farmers typically inherited land from their parents or relatives. With more and more beginner farmers coming from non-agricultural, college-educated and urban backgrounds, they are faced with buying or renting land from other sources. But the cost of land has skyrocketed... Too many young farmers simply can't afford it."

Yup - that's pretty much exactly the situation I found myself in when I started Hopscotch. I've had lots of folks ask me why I chose a multi-plot farm model (growing in small, unused spaces in local backyards). Yes, it is a cool and innovative system. And yes, it puts more land in agricultural production in Jefferson County. And it is a nice way to work with other community members. And it happens to be an interesting marketing tactic.

But my answer usually surprises people - I didn't CHOOSE this model for any of those reasons. I chose it because it is essentially free and I cannot afford to purchase land. I

don't want to go into debt with a land purchase at the same time I'm starting a business. And to be quite honest, I'm pretty sure no bank would lend to me.

With my multi-plot model, my personal financial commitment is very low but my labor hours are quite high. This means that I will be starting smaller, and growing more slowly, but I think the trade off is worth it. With a comparatively small financial commitment, I have about 1/3 acre of land to use, spread across 4 plots; I am licensed to produce canned goods; and I can sell to wholesale markets and via my CSA and farmers market.

While access to farmland for young farmers is not a new conversation, I started to think about it in a larger historical context, trying to determine how and why things became so un-affordable. While it is true that farmland was historically passed down from parents to their children, there have also been periods of time when lots of young urbanites got into farming - like during the "back to the land" movement of the 60s and 70s." At that time, loads of young folks were buying land and homesteading and while most of them didn't last, some of them did - it's how Paul Muller and Dru Rivers started Full Belly Farm.

And it started happening again around 10 to 15 years ago. Except this time, something is different and many new farmers are priced out of purchasing their own land.

So, why is land so expensive now compared to 50 years ago? In the 1950s, an average wage earner was able to support a family, buy a house, and live comfortably on a single income. Even in the 1980s a family could put their children through private college on middle-income salaries. What changed? I don't know, but here are a couple of thoughts...

Population and Money.

The tech industry that took off in the 1990s on the west coast made a lot of people a lot of money. The percentage of people with high income grew substantially - and our

region's cost of living began to increase at a rate much greater than average inflation. Today, it is no longer possible for a middle-income family to afford to purchase farmland as that real estate often commands a premium price for development (we need to house all those newly transplanted techies, after all).

Also, the cost of education and average student debt is astronomically high. I feel fortunate that I graduated from college in the early 21st century. My education was still very costly, but nothing like what students are paying today. Will young people make the choice to go into a low-paying food production career if they have to pay back many thousands in school loans? I've noticed that, even in the last 5 years, there are fewer people seeking out farm internships and volunteer opportunities. I wonder if there is a correlation.

In this economic climate, there is some good news. New, innovative programs are being created that aim to link retiring farmers with an eager younger generation or to provide loan forbearance to farm interns. As access to land remains the single largest hurdle for new farmers, we must look to creative solutions, ones that require few financial resources to get started, as long as we are willing to "jump from plot to plot." (Although if the perfect, affordable piece of land came up, I wouldn't think twice before purchasing it.)