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# The Merits of a Well-Structured Internship

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*Internships help participants build skills, networks and even a future in farming*

by Martina Schaefer & Nicola Inglefield

Have you found yourself searching for a job during the past few years? How about an internship? These days, everywhere you turn, it seems unpaid internships loom on the path to employment.

Before settling into a secure, paying job in your field, you have to provide a few months, or even a year, of unpaid or underpaid labour in order to gain the experience your potential employer is looking for. How one is able to support oneself under these circumstances leaves many grasping for solutions, which can deter people from even bothering to apply. The result is that those with bigger bank accounts, fewer financial obligations (or both) have the easiest access to this gateway to secure employment, leaving those who cannot afford to put themselves in such a financially precarious situation out in the cold.

It's an unfortunate trend in recent years, in various industries from media to accounting. Internships have received bad press, especially directed at large companies who, undoubtedly, can easily afford to pay entry-level employees.

But is there any merit to participating in an internship? Some folks would give a resounding 'yes!' Case in point: Sustainable farming internships offered by organizations like CRAFT Ontario ([www.craftontario.ca](http://www.craftontario.ca)).

CRAFT stands for the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training. Based in Ontario, it is an informal, member-driven network of farmers that offer internships on their organic and ecological farms. CRAFT is made up of farmers from around the province who use alternative methods to grow food, and who want to pass their knowledge onto a new generation of farmers. The aim, as stated on their website, is to provide "a practical, hands-on experience...meant to equip an intern with the kind of exposure to farming needed to consider a future in farming."

This innovative path to encouraging young people to pursue agricultural careers comes at a time when the farming sector needs them the most. Today's average Canadian farmer is 55 years old. Some are older, right around the corner from retirement, and most are looking for a new set of capable hands in which to leave the farm business.

However, many ready-to-retire farmers who are keen to continue a legacy of family farming on their land are faced with a lack of enthusiastic, skilled successors. The fact that our richest agricultural lands are diminishing, being paved over to make way for urban expansion and industrial zoning, is perhaps a symptom of this trend. Programs such as CRAFT that encourage young people to consider farming, seek to fill this gap by connecting experienced farmers with those who are interested in learning how to farm.

You may be reading this and think that an internship sounds a little too close to cheap labour for your comfort, and wonder who would be willing and able to take on such a farming internship. And who could blame you? Not everyone readily jumps in and gets their hands dirty trying to make a go of farming.

Though each host farm and their internship program is unique, CRAFT member farms commit to offering a few important things, including housing, a stipend, educational opportunities, chances to network with other interns, and invaluable mentorship from experienced farmers. Many interns remain connected to their mentor farmers and fellow interns well after completing their first season. That's more than many companies offering unpaid internships can say. And if you think interns aren't getting anything out of their experience with CRAFT farms, take a look at some testimonials from a 2007 CRAFT Feedback survey:

*"What sets this internship apart...is the exceptional balance...There is a flexible pedagogical approach that blends structured theory components, long hours of hands-on learning, and firsthand visits to a wide variety of other farms. The end result of this diversified approach is a more complete education for interns, the whole of it presented in an atmosphere of mutual support, shared responsibilities and deep caring for each other and the work being accomplished."*

*"The [host] farmers are committed to producing keen young organic farmers, something that the natural environment and communities in which we live will benefit immensely from now and into the future."*

On-farm, interns learn the ropes quickly – tending crops from seed through sale, identifying and managing pests and weeds, harvest planning, small engine mechanics, animal care, and myriad other tasks. Interns can also expect to gain strong skills in budgeting, business planning, customer service, and marketing, as well as familiarity with food safety guidelines and finely honed communication and teamwork skills.

Although developed in a farm environment, many of these skills are easily transferable to any career path and can flesh out a resume nicely, even if one decides not to pursue agriculture in the long-term. Furthermore, when it comes to satisfaction, many former CRAFT interns make it clear how rewarding their experiences were and how much pride they took in seeing the fruits of their labour – literally – being appreciated by customers such as restaurants or local families.

Some interns go on to work in related fields like community development, edible landscaping, and not-for-profit efforts to address hunger and food sovereignty. Others, who may have initially seen their farm

experience as something fun to do for a summer, find it so fulfilling that they change their plans and opt to pursue farming as a full-fledged career!

*“My time as an intern fueled my interest and confidence to the point where I am now, two years later, launching a co-operative organic farm with like-minded friends – most of whom have also taken CRAFT internships.”*

*“I have a University degree that I had no idea what to do with before my internship, and for a few years was at a loss over what I could do for a living that both provided for me and made me proud and happy.*

*The time I spent as an intern really opened up more options for me, and helped me realize what skills I have and how I can put them to good use. Now it’s a little heart-wrenching to consider doing anything else as a career, actually!”*



*Interns at Ignatius Farm in Guelph, Ont.*

With just a handful of academic programs concerning sustainable agriculture offered in Canada, the internship experience is a viable option for many people who do not want to or cannot afford to go to school. It also suits individuals who seek in-depth, hands-on learning in a shorter time span, or those who wish to emerge at the end of the season with a strong network to draw from in the future. As more and more young people, especially young women, enter the farming sector, it seems clear that opportunities such as this are invaluable in helping them forge a path towards self-development, skill-building, and perhaps even a future in farming.

If you’re interested in learning more, please take a look at the CRAFT website ([www.craftontario.ca](http://www.craftontario.ca)), which has information about the internships available and how the program works. You never know how a farm internship might change your life! ✨

## Calling All Squash Growers!

As the Seeds of Diversity Canadian Seed Library expands, we need more growers to keep our seed supply viable and get rare varieties into gardens across the country. This year, we’ve identified the Squash Family (squashes, zucchini, cucumbers, melons) as a priority since they require large isolation distances for seed saving, making them more difficult to find appropriate growers for.

We’re looking for members who could grow out seed for us. Here’s how it would work:

- We send you a handful of seeds
- You grow them for the season, carrying out basic roguing procedures to select for true/strong plants but leaving a population of at least 20 to fully mature
- You collect, clean and dry seeds
- Then send as many seeds back to us as possible

Here’s the catch: Pollinators can carry grains of pollen from male to fe-

male flowers across a distance of up to 1.5km! That means, for seeds to grow true to type, the cucurbit family requires 1.5km of isolation from other plants of the same species, since all varieties within one species will cross-pollinate with other varieties of the same species. When this happens, the fruit will grow to look like its mother plant, but the seeds inside - when grown out the next season - will produce fruit that is a hybrid of the mother plant and the plant from which the pollen was obtained.

The varieties we’re hoping to grow out are not carried by many Canadian seed companies, so expanding our supplies is particularly important. We need growers with large isolation distances from others growing varieties of the same species, or those with experience with hand pollination.

**Please email Seed Library Outreach Coordinator, Angie Koch, at [angie@seeds.ca](mailto:angie@seeds.ca) if you’re interested.**

### **About Seeds of Diversity Canada**

*The foundation of our food system - the plant gene pool - is eroding quickly. For thousands of generations, farmers and gardeners selected and perpetuated thousands of varieties of plants for food, clothing and medicine. However, over the past century 75% of the traditional varieties have become extinct and many more are endangered.*

*Healthy biodiversity is necessary to successfully adapt to changes in climate, pests & diseases, nutritional needs, technology and growing practices. To support food security in the face of change, we need a vibrant, diverse and regionally-adapted gene pool to draw on.*

*Our Seed Library is a living gene bank which connects home gardeners, farmers, seed companies and seed banks in an effort to protect Canada’s food biodiversity and make it available to all people.*