

So, You Want to Be a Farmer?

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The local food movement sweeping many parts of our nation has raised awareness of the importance of those who grow our food. As a result, many now consider farming to be the viable profession it once was. However, the details of day-to-day on-farm operations are not discussed openly. Therefore, the would-be farmer is left with a romanticized view of farming, much different from the reality. Farming can be rewarding, but it is also physically, mentally and emotionally demanding. Before you start farming, ask yourself this question: Do I have what it takes to be a successful farmer?

ISFOP Small Farm Specialists often receive queries such as the following: I like nature. I like growing things. I want to be close to nature. Could you please help me get started?

To be a successful farmer, it helps to have these interests. But, successful farming also takes a lot of skills, resources and other personal attributes. The following self-assessment tool should help you to identify some of your potential strengths and weaknesses with regard to choosing farming as a full-time occupation. By honestly answering the following questions, you could save time, money and heartache.

1. Quality of Life

- a. Do you think you will be happy living on a farm? Yes__ No__
- b. Are you willing to work long hours on your farm? Yes__ No__
- c. Are you prepared to live on a budget? Yes__ No__
- d. Do you have an exit strategy if farming doesn't work? Yes__ No__
- e. Would you consider volunteering on a farm before farming for yourself? Yes__ No__

2. Consider Your Physical Limitations

- a. Do not have any physical limitations, such as arthritis or back pain? Yes__ No__
- b. Are you capable of lifting 50 pounds repeatedly? Yes__ No__
- c. Can you stand for prolonged periods of time? Yes__ No__
- d. Do you suffer from seasonal allergies? Yes__ No__
- e. Are you aware of the physical dangers/risks that exist in farming? Yes__ No__

3. Skills

- a. Do you have training in agriculture? Yes__ No__
- b. Do you have computer skills? Yes__ No__
- c. Do you have marketing skills? Yes__ No__
- d. Are you willing to attend educational conferences/workshops? Yes__ No__
- e. Is there a special product you want to grow and sell? Yes__ No__

4. Available Capital

- a. Do you have enough savings to absorb a loss in the first 2-3 years of farming? Yes__ No__
- b. Do you have access to credit? Yes__ No__
- c. Are either you or your spouse/partner willing to work off-farm to provide income and/or health insurance for the family? Yes__ No__

5. Available Land

- a. Do you have enough farmland available to you? Yes__ No__
- b. Do you own the farmland free and clear? Yes__ No__
- c. Does your agriculture business meet the zoning requirements in your area? Yes__ No__
- d. If you answered "no" to a, b or c, have you considered moving to a new location? Yes__ No__

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6. Available Labor

- a. Do you have a farming partner or a partner/spouse willing to do farm work? Yes ___ No ___
- b. If so, is this person willing to support you in this lifestyle? Yes ___ No ___
- c. Do you have other family members willing to work on the farm? Yes ___ No ___
- d. Do you know of anyone you could hire on a part-time basis? Yes ___ No ___

7. Record Keeping Skills

- a. Are you willing to keep records of sales and expenses on a weekly basis? Yes ___ No ___
- b. Are you familiar with the U.S. federal, state and municipal tax codes? Yes ___ No ___
- c. Do you have reasonably good writing skills? Yes ___ No ___
- d. If you answered “yes” to c, would you consider writing a grant proposal? Yes ___ No ___

8. Open-mindedness

- a. Are you willing to learn and accept assistance during your start-up period? Yes ___ No ___
- b. Would you allow your farm to evolve with changing markets in your area? Yes ___ No ___

9. Positive Outlook/People Skills

- a. Are you an optimist? Yes ___ No ___
- b. Can you handle stress in positive ways? Yes ___ No ___
- c. Are you a people person? Yes ___ No ___
- d. Do you have good relationships with your neighbors? Yes ___ No ___

The above questionnaire is not intended to cover all the aspects that go into being a successful farmer. Nor can answering all of the above questions with a resounding “yes” guarantee you success as a farmer. After you complete the survey, contact your local ISFOP staff member. Make an appointment to talk about your interest and your desire to become a farmer. Success in agriculture takes skill, patience and persistence. The ISFOP will assist you in every step.

If you want an ISFOP FOW to contact you regarding this self-evaluation, send an email to your local LUCE ISFOP FOW, or mail this with your contact information. ■

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