

Could I Do This On My Farm?

by Jim Sander 2022

If a farmer wants to participate in a program like the Wildflower Lane Farm/TABLE relationship, they could simply be paid a supervisory fee for their efforts. They would supervise a team of volunteers on their farm, and be paid a monthly fee for their efforts. When you add in their fee, the food relief group is still paying very little for the produce. Take the case of my farm, which supplied \$80,000 of produce for a material cost of about \$8,000 in 2021. If you added in \$10,000-\$12,000 for the farmer's supervisory fee, Table would have gotten \$80,000 of produce for about \$20,000. The quality would be far superior, and you have created a part-time income to help the farmer buffer against the ups and downs of farming these days. It's a win-win-win ...

If a farmer gets paid \$10,000-\$12,000 for their efforts (in addition to reimbursements for their materials costs), this amounts to a buffer for them of approximately \$1,000/month. A logical question might be "how many hours per month am I going to have to put into this operation." And, "How do I get paid?"

On my farm, the average volunteer work shift is about 3 hours. Most volunteers work about 3 hours, once a week, usually in the morning. A small group of dedicated volunteers works substantially more, basically because they like to, but the average shift is 3 hours per week.

For the last 3 years, I have averaged working about 600-650 hours per year (actually 9 months, March-November), and the volunteers have collectively put in about 1300-1350 hours. It's about a 1/3-2/3 split, with me logging in 20 hours per week, and the volunteers 40 hours.

However I spend a lot more time working than another farmer might. Every time a volunteer shows up, I work with them the entire time. I don't need to, but it's just a practice I enjoy. In another situation, a farmer could spend 1/3-1/2 of that amount of time with the volunteers. During a typical 3 hour shift, a farmer could start the volunteers out for 20-30 minutes in the beginning, check in halfway through the shift, and finish up with them for a similar amount of time at the end. In other words, the farmer could put in 1 or 1.5 hours during a 3 hour shift, and then tend to their own work in the neighboring field the rest of the time.

Most of the work done by volunteers is simple manual labor. It's either common sense, or simple training which volunteers can pick up quickly. Over time, some volunteers can train and supervise newer volunteers. If the farmer is working in the field next to them, it's a simple matter to keep an eye on things. You can also send an employee or family member over to check in. Sometimes I have volunteers start without me once they have been trained.

In an average scenario, it would be likely that the farmer could spend about 10 hours per week in a supervisory capacity for about 9 months or 36 weeks. This would amount to about \$30-35/hr for their efforts (\$10,000-\$12,000 divided by 300-400 hours). Some weeks more, some weeks less.

The farmer's work would be predominantly supervisory in nature. The volunteers would work the land in accordance with the way you work. They would be responsible for prepping beds, planting, maintenance, weeding, picking, packaging, and transporting the produce. Of course, the better their performance, the higher the output. The farmer's job is just to supervise and advise.

In the end, the farming is pretty simple. You would start with simple things, possibly just 3 or 4 different vegetables on 1/4-1/2 acre. The minimum size I would recommend is 1/4 acre, the maximum would be one acre, at least in the beginning.

The most important piece of the puzzle is the reliability of the volunteers and the coordination of them, which is up to them, not the farmer. The easiest way to find good volunteers is to work with a group that is already established, such as a religious group, school, retirement community, company or group with a social agenda or mission, etc. This is much easier than trying to bootstrap this up yourself and convincing people that you are doing a good thing. If you work with an established group, that gives you a group that already has a social bond and mission and has an ample pool of volunteers. This group would coordinate everything. The produce would be either donated to a local food group as their project, or it could be sold to their members and the money made there would fund some socially responsible activity. Remember, most people want to do something to help and want to be part of something larger than themselves. Everyone has a few hours each week to contribute. Additionally, when you see such tangible results in such a short time, and create an environment for safe social bonding, it helps the group itself. As word spreads, more people enlist.

The farmer can be paid in a number of ways:

1. The most obvious way would be to get paid with a monthly check for supervision. Hard costs for materials are paid to the farmer as they are racked up. In my case, I keep my receipts and submit them to TABLE every quarter, and they cut me a check for them. On top of that would be your supervisory fee for the month.
2. A non-profit group with 501-C3 status could give the farmer tax credits for work performed.
3. The farmer could be provided with large numbers of volunteers for short periods of time, such as planting or harvest times. Rather than hire unknown people to help in these times, volunteers could put in a certain amount of time, which would go towards the farmer's compensation.

In the end, it all comes down to the willingness of the farmer to participate, and the coordination of the volunteers. Everything else is pretty simple and the details can be worked out as you go along.

This country has done this before. We called them "War Gardens" during WW1 and "Victory Gardens" during WW2. Some estimates maintain that 30-40% of the country's produce was grown that way at the time. If we did just a fraction of that, it could fund substantial local projects, get us all working together for a common cause, eating better, and getting some much needed outdoor exercise while socializing. It's safe, simple, and basic. Everyone gets it.

We've proven that this system works, and it continues to evolve and develop to even better outcomes each season. You might find, like we have here, that with a little change and commitment, you can solve some local problems while upgrading everyone's quality of life. I haven't seen a downside yet.