

Soil Association (Supplementary - ABR0033)

The Future Growers scheme – work-based training for organic producers

For nearly a decade, the Soil Association Future Growers scheme has been training aspiring organic fruit and vegetable producers. The scheme grew out of a recognition by established organic growers (on small to medium sized farms) that as they were reaching their 50s, there was a real dearth of new entrants coming into the sector. At the same time, the demand for organic was growing with rise of the organic box scheme and farmers market.

Many of these growers had learned their trade in horticultural colleges, which had since closed or been amalgamated into the larger agricultural (land-based) and further education (FE) colleges. While some of these FE colleges to offer horticulture training, the focus is on amenity or sports horticulture, landscape gardening, and nursery production rather than fruit and vegetables. Those that do offer organic training often do so as hobby courses for back garden growers. Within the agricultural colleges, large scale vegetable production is more likely to be covered in livestock or arable systems as part of a rotation, with organic seen as a marketing niche rather than a holistic production system. Formal commercial organic horticulture production training is almost non-existent.

How does Future Growers work

In 2007, the Soil Association and a group of organic growers set up an informal apprenticeship programme that was to become the Future Growers scheme, with the aim of training new entrants. The scheme was coordinated by the Soil Association, with a steering group of growers and support from the Organic Growers Alliance, Garden Organic and the Organic Research Centre.

Over the past ten years, the scheme has evolved, from a two year apprenticeship to include a six month traineeship (introduced in 2013) to take advantage of farms offering seasonal work.

Now the Future Growers scheme focusses on providing a six month programme of rich farm-based training events that are available for any aspiring grower to participate in. It draws on a well-established network of farms to host field trips and deliver seminars. Participants can access an online learning community, bursaries for conferences, a certificate of completion and career support. They join a close-knit and supportive

learning community that has been one of the biggest successes of the scheme.

Hosts farms advertise their placements on the Organic Marketplace with new recruits encouraged to participate in the Future Growers programme of events. There is access to guidance on managing work-based learning, including how to structure mentoring sessions.

Our mailing list includes over 800 people interested in training as an organic grower.

Funding for the programme has come from individuals' fees supplemented by independent grant-making trusts. The scheme is not accredited and so has not been eligible for statutory funding. Many of the participants have been career changers aged 25 -35 years old and often with a first degree in an unrelated subject.

The Future Growers has always emphasised the benefits of training while in paid work positions. As paid employees, they gain an understanding of the economics of labour, the cost of production and what has been described as being able to 'count seconds in pennies' – they learn to work in a functioning commercial environment. This is the model we want Future Growers to learn within, so they can go on to earn their own livelihood.

It is important to note that we are not interested training new entrants who are only interested in organic farming as a lifestyle choice, or primarily as a therapeutic or educational activity. We train new farmers to grow more good food for more people.

Over the past decade the scheme has played an essential role in filling a generational skills gap. Future Growers has now trained 71 new organic producers (42 apprentices and 29 trainees) and brought new energy and enthusiasm into the sector. Of all those that started the scheme, 71% are still in growing, a figure of which we are immensely proud.

Many other informal internships and apprenticeship schemes now use the Future Growers model to shape their training and farmers looking to retire often ask if we have ex Future Growers to take on their land.

The wider context

Lastly it is important to consider the impact of Brexit on horticultural labour in the UK, if restrictions on movement of people are imposed. Limits on unskilled workers entering the country will hit the larger

horticulture enterprises hardest, although many medium sized farms also bring in Eastern European migrant labour, particularly for harvesting.

Limits on imported labour from the European Union would increase costs as businesses may have to pay local workers more. On the one hand, larger businesses may simply move to higher mechanization to keep labour costs down. However they may also be prompted to look at their recruitment, training, employment and management practices to make horticulture jobs more attractive and bringing more local people into the sector. It is also likely they will introduce a seasonal worker scheme.

A newly introduced business levy to fund apprenticeships means larger horticulture producers will have training budgets to spend. If these are used to invest in horticulture apprenticeships, as part of new employer-led frameworks and new crop production apprenticeship standards that are in development, the sector as a whole will benefit. Rather than needing to create their own standards and qualifications, small to medium scale organic farms would be able to piggyback on these and formalise the training they are already providing. The danger is that they will not be relevant for small to medium organic and ecological farms.

Whatever the future holds, the Soil Association is committed to helping new entrants to horticulture onto the first step of the ladder and to ensuring that they can develop farms and livelihoods that demonstrate better growing, better food and better business.

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