

# Top 10 List for New Farmers

A collection of suggestions from the COABC Listserv that fully exceeds the top 10!

1. Start small and grow as your market grows. Also, make sure you can sell something before you start producing it.
  2. Share/borrow/rent equipment (larger than a hoe) rather than buy until you know what is worth investing in,
  3. Seek advice and mentoring from experienced farmers,
  4. Work part time with an experienced farmer while starting your own farm business,
  5. Share, lease or borrow land rather than take on the big mortgage at the beginning,
  6. Make feeding yourself and family a priority - try to be self-sufficient in veggies and learn how to store for the winter - a farmer who can grow most of their own food will save a lot of money. Also consider investing in a few laying hens and dairy goats if you have the space - great savings on animal protein if you are a consumer of such!
  7. Market direct to consumers: farm gate, CSA, farmer's markets, rather than sell to stores or wholesalers
  8. Research your planned farming venture as much as possible and subscribe to journals, magazines, and any other source of information that will keep information flowing in your life.
  9. Immerse yourself in farming - it is a lifestyle and not a job. You will find it very difficult to live a "city" life on a farmer's earnings however a smart farmer can live very well on very little cash.
  10. Inform yourself of all the "perks" available to farmers: make sure you register as a business and get your GST back on eligible expenses; keep all your receipts and make sure you know what is a farm expense for your income tax; get a farmer's card from BCAC; get farm insurance on all farm vehicles (or fleet insurance if applicable); buy marked fuel; get PST exemption where possible (farm equipment parts dealers for sure); make sure your land has farm tax status; register with AgrilInvest to start saving for those bad years; check out any grants available to farmers.
  11. Market cooperatively with other farmers if at all possible, even just taking turns driving each others' produce to the city is useful.
  12. Get to know your neighbors (farming and non-), it's amazing how good it is to have them on your side when the livestock escape, when hay needs to be brought in and when stuff needs to be borrowed.
  13. Take care of yourself, physically and otherwise. Stay fit during the quiet season, take time off when you can, make room for hobbies and activities even during the busy season.
  14. My accumulated wisdom, for what it's worth! I'm in my 12th season farming on a cooperatively-owned farm in BC's Fraser Valley and over the years have grown salad greens, basil, bedding plants, laying hens, dairy goats. It's all good. My partner and I have just bought a farm in New Brunswick and are starting a new adventure on the east coast, my ancestral home. We have some ideas as to what we'll be doing; we are taking the goats with us and are open to many possibilities.
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15. Start small but think long term. Think about where you will expand. For example, I fenced around a small area and then another small area, when I should have fenced the whole farm.
  16. Make sure you have enough water to farm. Take a class in irrigation if possible or check out how other farms are irrigating in your area.
  17. Value your labour when you set your prices. Work with other farmers to maintain prices which give you half a chance of paying your bills. Don't get into the race to the bottom by undercutting other farmers.
  18. Don't sell produce that you're not proud of. Strive for quality.
  19. Keep good records. You think you will remember, but you don't.
  20. Make sure your family supports what you are doing.

21. Two good crops for opening up new land or dealing with land that has not been used for a while are potatoes (if you don't have wireworm) and squash. They both have large canopies that smother out weeds.
22. Learn about green manures and use them to build up organic matter and smother weeds.  
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23. Never farm monogamously - i.e. Form a compatible collective/business of at least three equal stakeholders. I have seen too many farming enterprises falter due the fragility of human relationships.
24. Farming is NOT a dating service. Be clear with workers that their primary relationship is with the farm. Any extracurricular activities are minimal in the summer and better developed in the winter.
25. Use some kind of time sheet/card to log ALL hours invested in the operation. This helps evaluate priorities, prevent tension/resentments between workers, and permits a true cost accounting of most small farms' largest expense.
26. We break ours into Garden, Production (picking, packaging), Sales (organizing sales, pick lists, preparing orders, delivering) Administration (meetings, bookkeeping) and Repair and Maintenance. We used to have a Research and Development category, but unfortunately it was not used enough to collect the data!
27. Cultivate gratitude.  
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28. Be careful when asking farmers for advice because you will get it - and much of it will not be the same!
29. Sustainability includes your own sustainability, so find a way to not burn yourself out. Ever tried talking to a farmer in October? Yikes!
30. Wear sunscreen and a hat
31. Talk to the locals to learn about climate, soil, planting dates, diseases, pests, markets, etc...
32. If you are on leased land, then get a good lease in writing so you have stability and security. Your investment is in soil and infrastructure and it is hard to invest in these in the short term. It is also hard to invest in perennials. A rotating lease works well as it is renewed for a set period, say 5 years, every year. So you always know how much time you have left.
33. Write out a 5-10 year plan. And follow it! But don't be afraid to make changes as your farm evolves.
34. Read and get to know Canadian Organic standards (including the old BC ones) whether you get Certified or not. They contain lots of good info and history.
35. Buy organic seed. There is plenty out there and much of good quality. Self-pollinating crops from local growers are very good while the crossers are better bought from larger companies (i.e. Seeds of Change) which generally have better genetic diversity and selection. Also try to buy seed grown in a climate similar to yours.
36. Save your own seed. Get into the habit early. Only let your desirable plants go to seed.
37. Keep good records (I am happy to send you a simple excel template that works well) - you will thank yourself in years to come.  
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38. Invest in a proper cold storage early on
39. Buy or rent a large heated greenhouse
40. Hoe, hoe and keep hoeing.
41. Get a signed long term lease on any land from the get go.  
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42. Being aware of the scale of operation is very important.  
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43. Also consider what stage of development you are at.  
When we started the fields were in poor shape (though at least cleared) so we had about 3 years of ripping, ploughing, rock raking & picking, leveling, seeding and some field irrigation. A 70 hp 2WD JD2130 was adequate for those jobs, along with an entire truckload of equipment (sight unseen, internet purchases) from Sask. and Alberta. All that equipment has since been sold (more or less at a break-even, including shipping costs) and the 2130 proved very well suited to haying operations. At the end of

last year we ceased our contract haying in favour of putting more time into our vineyard, and so we sold the 2130, the baler and the mower/conditioner and have been looking for a small vineyard tractor. I think it will be ~20 hp, and doesn't even have to be 4WD.

My point is that every now and again you have to re-examine your operation and your current actual requirements. Anticipate your needs so you can make changes in an orderly manner and don't cling to stuff that just clutters your yard and your life for 50 weeks of the year.

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There are also a few don'ts

1. Do not bite off more than you can chew, your jaw will get very tired
2. Do not forget to cover crop - especially in the summer. You can get in three buckwheat crops easily in a summer and winter peas will start fixing nitrogen in three weeks in warm weather.
3. Do not buy equipment that you know will break in a few months because it is cheap. If you make an equipment investment, make it for the long-term.
4. Do not forget why you are doing what you are doing. Thus, make sure you take the time to enjoy your own food and the beauty of your farm. I'll get to this one day.
5. To prevent mistakes we made starting out: Started with too small a tractor, 35 hsp instead of 50

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Thank you to the Contributors to this list

- Alyson Chisholm - Glen Valley Organic Farm
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