

Richard Lee  
Richmond  
LD 901

My name is Richard Lee, and my wife Kate Del Vecchio and I own and run a small, MOFGA-certified organic, horse, human, and tractor powered vegetable, flower, and fruit farm in Richmond. We have been farming together since 2011 when I moved up here to apprentice at Buckwheat Blossom Farm in Wiscasset in order to learn and acquire the skills to grow food on a home and small commercial scale.

Both of us are former MOFGA apprentices at two different farms, myself at Buckwheat Blossom, Kate at Webb Family Farm in Pittston, and together at New Beat Farm in Knox. We without hesitation can say that not only were these work and learning experiences the backbone of our careers as farmers, but that our apprenticeships were invaluable.

In conjunction with the MOFGA apprenticeship program, our apprenticeships gave us the experiences needed to become farmers for over a decade. Without the learning and working experience provided by our apprenticeships, we would not have developed the skills and knowledge required to grow food in a competent, efficient, and safe manner. Particularly for myself as a person who grew up in New York City, I could not have developed the highly specialized skill of driving draft horses to accomplish the real work of growing food in addition to the myriad skills and knowledge in developing healthy soil, seeding, transplanting, irrigation, and using the tools and building the infrastructure necessary to accomplish those tasks.

As a person also working in the "skills" trades of carpentry and timber framing part time, I have been lucky to find people who appreciated taking the time to impart their skills to a younger and/or inexperienced person interested in learning what they know because they not only saw potential, but also knew the satisfaction of passing on their knowledge into the future. I am very passionate about teaching and was an educator before my career in farming. My choice to farm sustainably and on a small scale has as much to do with practicality as it does with economics. We farm because we care deeply about the future of our planet, our local community and ecosystem, and the legacy we leave for our children and beyond. We believe the work we do is vital for our future in the context of a changing, more unpredictable climate.

The skills of small scale, organic farming are simultaneously as broad as they are specialized and require years of experience to develop competency. I wouldn't dare say one could master growing food, but you can teach someone to be good at it with the proper training and experience. One thing we do that is harder to teach except through daily example (i.e. apprenticeship) is to read the time and place in which you're working in order to make and prioritize and reprioritize decisions on a weekly basis depending on weather, soil conditions, pest pressure, moisture levels, staffing, and more. You learn to deal with inconsistencies, problems that you can and cannot predict, and you plan for those and make contingencies for those plans. You also learn to be resilient and change or even abandon plans when you need to. You learn that opportunity can spring from the learned experience of a "disaster." However, you cannot learn any of this without experiencing it. I believe an apprenticeship is an excellent way to accomplish this.

We have had apprentices for three years now on our farm. We have learned to our surprise (and mild horror) that we pay wages on the higher side for apprenticeships amongst our peers. We strive to pay more and have increased our stipends every year; these stipends are the balance of what we calculate to be a minimum wage of \$15/hr based on the value of the housing and more importantly the education we provide with extra time taken to explain the details and management side of farming, teaching apprentices how to use tools and their bodies properly for their longevity, and helping them learn things specific to their goals in growing food in the future all within the context of a larger ecosystem in which we are trying to harvest solar energy to make food.

Unfortunately we are also up against a capitalistic economy that views humans as

“units” to plug into a money making machine, which is dominated by large scale farms and equipment with little regard to long term environmental costs to humans and environment alike, and is all undergirded by an expensive, fossil-fuel supercharged infrastructure built around transporting goods thousands of miles on roads and oceans that require vast maintenance. We also expect all of this to happen within two days. I don't think anyone would disagree with the statement that quantity comes at the cost of quality and vice versa. We strive for quality in our products, which means higher labor and also will translate to low cost to our health and environment. We find it difficult to put a cost on one's life, yet we pay dearly in health care by taking shortcuts with diet and processes, and investments in maintenance. The bottom line is not money, but time and what time we are willing to put into the quality of what it is we are producing.

We are happy to invest that time into quality of life and environment. We also struggle to pay ourselves, apprentices, and employees what we think we all deserve. Apologies to anyone in the financial or investment sector, but I think our work is more valuable than yours and we deserve to be paid at least as much as you. I have wrestled with the conundrum of paying and getting paid throughout my farming career and have come to the conclusion that I don't blame anyone who doesn't want to farm because it's hard work and doesn't pay well. You really have to believe in what you are doing to stay a small farmer. We are beholden to market values and suppressed wages against our wills. In resignation to living in a capitalist economy, I can at least acknowledge that we should be paying our workers a fairer wage. We as owners at least come away with a theoretical increase in value and productivity of our farm, apprentices and workers only take away their wages and their experience. It is in this context that I support LD 901. Everyone of our apprentices and workers deserve a better wage and in lieu of our inability to provide this, we hope that our society (tacitly through our state government) can support the people who are and will be growing their food.