

CROP CIRCUIT NETWORK LINKS AREA FARMERS TO A WORLD OF WORKERS

STORY BY SARAH ZOBEL

Though Vermont's farming season is frustratingly brief, the amount of work that's needed to harvest a successful crop is just as substantial as it is in warmer climates. For many local organic farmers and gardeners, regardless of the number of acres they're tilling, it's nice to have a few extra pairs of hands to help out.

Many of them, as members of Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, USA, have come to rely on guests—strangers, really—for assistance with the sowing, weeding, watering and reaping.

WWOOF-USA serves as an intermediary between farmers and those visitors, known as “WWOOFers,” almost as an online matching service would. Both farmers and WWOOFers complete online profiles; the latter then choose locations where they'd consider doing part-time unpaid farm work. In exchange, they receive room and board, as well as firsthand experience in sustainable agriculture and the opportunity to visit new places.

“WWOOFing is a great way to travel and learn so many new things without having to spend much money,” says Julia Rodricks. In May 2012, Rodricks and two college friends spent three weeks at Applepath Farm in Charlotte. Rodricks' brother had WWOOFed elsewhere earlier and reported such a positive experience that when Rodricks and her friends were looking for a communal adventure after their freshman year, Rodricks immediately suggested WWOOFing.

They considered locations in Maine and Vermont, but after exchanging emails with Applepath's owners decided that was the place. During their time in Charlotte, they worked on preparing the land for the summer ahead, clearing invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle, tilling the soil, and planting seeds.

“With WWOOFing, you have to go with the flow, because you're there to work,” says Rodricks, of Baltimore. “You can't just look at it as a vacation—you have to be ready for whatever they throw at you. You have to be open to new things and new experiences, whether it's trying new food or doing work that may be a little outside your comfort zone.”

At the same time, their hosts—owners Georgina Achilles and Benjamin Pualwan (known by all as Gia and Scout)—encouraged the women to explore the area, as they do with all their guests, whom they frequently invite to join them at concerts and social events.

“They wanted us to get the most out of our Vermont experience,” says Rodricks.

Applepath is not a commercial farm and hasn't even been a year-round, full-time endeavor—Achilles and Pualwan hold down jobs as a mental health counselor and a government management analyst, respectively—though a farm stand or a presence at a local farmers market may be happening within the next five years. They've recently installed a vineyard, where they're growing cold-hardy Marquette grapes; they also put in new asparagus, strawberry and garlic patches, which means there is now more work than the two have time for.

They're grateful for all assistance, and offer their WWOOFers a daily menu of tasks from which to choose. They ask for 30 hours of work a week, with the hours divided up among the days in whatever way works best for the WWOOFers. Achilles and Pualwan make it clear that they don't want even 31 hours, though there's no official timekeeping.

“We want them to enjoy the rest of their time,” says Achilles, listing some of the excursions on which they've sent or taken WWOOFers, including trips to Burlington and Montpelier. “We want them to have their other experiences too—it's all about balance.”

In exchange, Achilles and Pualwan offer breakfast and lunch provisions (“If they want Raisin Bran, we'll get them Raisin Bran!” says Pual-

wan) and share “big, grand dinners” made with local meats and—when it's available—their own produce. WWOOFers may bring their own tents or sleep in those provided, what Pualwan calls “cushy tents with futons.” They're also invited in the Achilles/Pualwan house for evening meals, and can take shelter there anytime the weather's really threatening. There's even a geodesic dome steambath and an outdoor shower that's angled away from the road for privacy but affords an up-close view of Mount Philo.

Those extras won't be found at the 53 other host sites around Vermont, but there's still plenty that's unique to each of those locales. Geographically, they range from the 826-acre Clyde River farm in Island Pond, where WWOOFers can tend vegetables, cultivate Christmas trees and hay, lead canoe trips and undertake woodworking projects; to Hermit Thrush Homestead in Halifax, near Brattleboro, where visitors might construct hoop houses and animal shelters or collect and boil maple sap.

At other locations, WWOOFers help raise bees and perennial flowers, contribute to the delivery of CSA (community-supported agriculture) shares—even explore the interaction between art and agriculture, as at the Dancing Root Permaculture Project in Middlesex. Hermit Thrush is one of several sites that offer year-round WWOOFing opportunities; others allow children and/or pets, but ask to be notified first.

The program is described as an educational and cultural exchange, and beyond the directive that hosts not offer stipends or other financial compensation to WWOOFers, what it looks like is largely left up to the individual host farms, and may even vary according to who's there at any given time. The length of visitor stay also varies according to location.

Kiss the Cow Farm, a grass-based dairy in South Royalton, asks that in the interest of efficiency WWOOFers plan to be on site for at least four weeks, and preferably all summer and fall. On the flip side, 10-acre Applepath's guests are generally in residence for about two weeks, which gives the WWOOFers time to get comfortable with the property, owners and expectations without things growing stale.

The organization that oversees it all, WWOOF-USA, is a non-profit whose primary role is the maintenance of an online directory of hosts and WWOOFers. It's an affiliate of a UK-based program founded in 1971 that was originally known as Weekend Workers on Organic Farms. That effort, started by a London secretary, allowed city dwellers who did not have the means or opportunity to do so to spend weekends in the country while supporting and learning about the basics of the organic food movement.

Today there are “WWOOF nations” on every continent except Antarctica, in more than 50 countries worldwide, ranging from Macedonia to Costa Rica, Bangladesh to Cameroon, Ireland to Canada; the U.S. branch was founded in 2001.

All are part of the newly formed Federation of WWOOF Organisations (FOWO), whose current chair is Sarah Potenza, executive director and co-founder of WWOOF-USA.

Potenza helped found WWOOF-USA after spending a few post-graduate months WWOOFing in New Zealand. At that time there were a handful of participating farms in the United States, but they were operating as so-called independents, without the benefits of the umbrella organization. Several of Potenza's college friends were WWOOFing at the same time in Canada and Australia, and when they returned to the United States, all agreed there was surely enough

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potential interest among U.S. farmers, gardeners and homesteaders to support a program.

“We thought that WWOOF could do such amazing things for people who want to learn about organic farming and sustainable agriculture,” Potenza said, “and there are so many incredible opportunities in the United States that we wanted to help provide a WWOOF program here.”

Her analysis was right: In the past dozen years the number of hosts—now found in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands—has grown to more than 1,600, while the number of participating WWOOFers is around 15,000, a figure that rises and falls somewhat according to the seasons. WWOOFers pay \$30 for an annual membership in the listings online or \$40 if they’d also like to receive a hard copy, while hosts pay on a sliding scale of \$5 to \$50 per year to be included in the listings.

Scholarships are available for both WWOOFers and hosts who can’t afford the fees. New this year, WWOOF-USA is awarding five small farm grants to hosts for projects that will further the WWOOF mission. The one stipulation was that each project include WWOOFers in its execution and outcome; among the grants being conferred are the construction of a greenhouse, the building and implementation of a mobile farmstand with sliding-scale prices and an education outreach program for urban youth that will allow them to spend time on a farm learning about growing and cooking organic foods.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Vermont is one of the organization’s more active states on the East Coast. Potenza says she’s done minimal advertising to recruit either hosts or visitors nationwide—most people hear about the program through word of mouth, by a sort of organic

grapevine, as it were. Like Rodricks, that’s how Applepath’s Achilles and Pualwan decided to join. Though they’d heard of WWOOF, their understanding had been that it was only for commercial farms, until Pualwan’s daughter and a friend spent time on a farm in Roquefort, France.

“The situation there was a couple that both had jobs had an old farm property they wanted to fix up,” says Pualwan, “and some old gardens that needed work and they wanted to get going, and it was noncommercial. And we said, ‘Well, this sounds a little familiar!’”

In fact, there are no requirements in terms of scale or business; the WWOOF-USA website makes clear that “[a]ny organic farm, community or garden project in the United States that would like to host visitors can participate in the program.”

Now in their third year of hosting, Achilles and Pualwan have already had visitors from Idaho, Oregon, Alabama, Maryland, Pennsylvania, California, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and Lebanon. Rodricks is planning to go back later this summer, but just for a friendly hello because she didn’t have time for a WWOOF visit. She did, however, recommend the program to a friend from Norwich, who will be staying—and working—at Applepath in August.

Rodricks hopes to WWOOF abroad later, but says she’s already benefitted from her first WWOOFing experience. At Applepath, says Rodricks, there was an emphasis on recycling, composting and avoiding plastic bags, habits she acquired and then maintained after she’d returned home, initially “completely annoying [her] family.” But now her friends and family are all on board, making efforts themselves to live a greener life.

“It rubs off on you,” says Rodricks. 🌿

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