

The following is an attempt to give prospective Persephone Farm apprentices an idea of what life on the farm is like. Though nobody can give a complete description of what you may encounter living and working at Persephone, we can at least give you an idea of how we operate, and the kinds of situations, goals, and challenges that influence our life here. After all farm work, whether it is for a lifetime or a season, is quite an undertaking. We want you to know a bit about us, so that you can decide if Persephone is the right place for you.

The word “we” refers to a farm, two people (Elanor O’ Brien, and Jeff Falen), about 200 laying hens, the occasional rooster, and various cats. Jeff was raised in the Midwest, attended Reed College in Portland, and spent several years traveling and working on conventional and organic farms before starting Persephone in 1985. Elanor grew up in New York and gradually made her way west, working at farms on the way, before arriving at Persephone in 1990.

Persephone Farm is situated in Oregon’s Willamette Valley at the edge of the Cascade Mountains. The property encompasses 55 acres of river-bottom land bordered by the South Santiam River on one side, and Binegar Butte on the other. We live at the end of a 1 1/4 mile driveway, in relative isolation. Lebanon, population 15,000, is twelve miles away. Sweet Home, population 9,000, is nine miles away. There are many nearby parks and wilderness areas where one can hike or bike, and enjoy hills, trees, and waterfalls. These areas range from five to sixty miles away, but having the butte and the river next to the farm is like having a park in our own backyard.

In your search for a farm apprenticeship, you will often hear farm work characterized as very demanding, challenging, and hard work. But what does that mean? The only way to really find out is to try it, but first, we’ll give you some specific examples of what you can expect.

Our work consists mainly of manual labor. We bend, squat, kneel, walk, and crawl in order to plant, weed, and harvest vegetables and strawberries. We lift boxes of produce weighing as much as 30-50 lbs., from field to truck, unload from truck to cooler, then load from cooler into truck and unload again from truck to market or warehouse. While a variety of muscles are used, some are used more heavily and repetitively. There are hand tools such as hoes, clippers, and knives to grasp and use repeatedly. Much of our work is done outdoors, in whatever conditions arise. It may be dry, sunny, and 90-100 F, or raining, muddy, and 30 F; or anywhere in between. Farm workdays average nine hours, and market days are longer. Breaks and lunchtime provide some rest, and appropriate gear and ready drinking water protect your health.

Efficiency can be critical on a production farm such as ours. We work at a fast and even pace, performing tasks in the most efficient way possible without compromising quality. In the packing shed, this means setting up our work area for maximum efficiency; in the field, greenhouse, and pack shed, it means training our hands, eyes, bodies and minds to work in a coordinated fashion. New apprentices can sometimes feel frustrated if mastery of a new task or time goal does not come right away. It is important not to expect mastery on the first try, and to have the patience necessary for practice. There are plenty of experienced hands here who can answer your questions and provide tips and advice, and there are endless opportunities for practice.

Timing is also important. We often work towards a deadline, and must deliver a quality product, so that customers will continue to enjoy and purchase it. Tasks must be completed in a thorough and timely manner, in order to put forth our best. Working well together means everyone on the crew enjoys the work, workdays are completed in good time, and everyone is pleased with the finished product and the work accomplished.

There are mental challenges to our work also. We believe in providing a well-rounded education, and as realistic a picture of farm life as possible. Apprentices are given a fair amount of responsibility, which can include keeping track of which irrigation lines need to be turned on and off during the day, how many trays of which varieties to seed in the greenhouse, making sure produce orders are picked and filled correctly, driving trucks and tractors carefully, helping customers with recipe suggestions, totaling purchases, closing the chicken coop at dusk, making sure the chickens have adequate water, and putting tools away after use. Every apprentice wants to do a good job, and no-one wants to forget a detail which results in plants being over or under watered, chickens being killed by a predator, an order not making it on to a truck, or an account receiving produce of lesser quality than usual. Apprentices are trained in the specifics of these tasks; often written materials, such as irrigation maps and pick lists, are provided to help ensure completion. After a period of training, we expect apprentices to remember and employ the skills necessary to complete certain tasks independently and without being asked. This requires mental alertness, discipline, motivation, organization, creativity, flexibility, and attention to detail. These are the same qualities required to pursue farming as a long-term occupation.

We expect apprentices to make an active contribution to their experience at Persephone. This means that you are first on the list of those whom you see as responsible for your participation in, and enjoyment of, farm life. The farm is not here as a place for people to live between days off or trips to the city. The farm is here to produce food in an environmentally conscious way, and so that we may learn from this endeavor and have fun doing it. We expect apprentices to be active participants in farm work and in making life on the farm a positive and productive experience. We are not interested in hiring passive observers who expect us to make the experience for them.

The educational component of an apprenticeship at Persephone is informal, and consists, in large part, of learning by doing. You learn about materials that can be used to start seeds in the greenhouse by mixing the potting media and seeding. You learn about chicken pasture and feedstocks by feeding chickens; about harvest techniques and post-harvest handling by cutting greens early in the morning with sharp knives, quickly moving them into the cooler, and topping the boxes with ice. You learn how much water plants need by operating the irrigation system; about farm economics by training to sell produce at market and explain to customers how we set our prices; about conserving energy when driving farm vehicles. There is no formal coursework or classroom time. However, apprentices have access to the farm owners and experienced employees, in the field and at dinnertime, and can ask questions about areas of particular interest (when a question requires a more detailed or lengthy response than is practical during the work day, we may delay the discussion until dinner or another time.). In addition, there are agricultural texts, as well as many files full of information, concerning topics that may be of interest to you. Your education, like so many other aspects of your experience at Persephone, is largely guided by you, your interests, and your questions. In short, it is what you make it. Farms are unique in location, microclimate, cropping and marketing systems, so some of what you learn at Persephone may differ from other farms, or from your vision of your future farm. However we believe in providing you with a toolbox full of options for your future reference and consideration.

There is an underlying philosophical and ideological basis for our farming methods, which we feel is very important. However we must balance philosophy with attention to the financial picture, daily life, and farm operations. Clinging to an ideal that is impractical, stressful, or unproductive creates an unhappy work environment. In addition, nothing in nature, our farm system, or the markets is static. Changing environmental conditions, marketing conditions, or personal needs require flexibility and creativity. Much of our job as farmers is to respond to these changes while keeping in touch with our philosophy and vision. To a new apprentice, the historical perspective of farming here for the past 31 years is not immediately available, and the reasoning behind some of our practices may at first seem obscure. We welcome your questions, suggestions, and new ideas. We respond best to constructive suggestions that reflect an appreciation for everyone's work, past and present. We look for apprentices who are here to learn with an open mind rather than criticize with judgment. The farm is our life, and is very special to us. Persephone Farm has been greatly enriched by the wealth of creativity and contributions from workers over the years. We expect you to be open to constructive criticisms, suggestions, and new ideas. We expect you to approach us with ideas in a positive and timely way. We are committed to creating a forum and an atmosphere that is both receptive and appreciative of your ideas.

Our living quarters are simple. Our house is not large enough to accommodate worker rooms, but the community living room, kitchen, and bathroom are common ground for everyone during the daytime. There are three apprentice quarters, which have electricity, heat, running cold water, bed, dresser, desk, chair, shelving, and nearby composting outhouses.

There are many advantages to living and working together with a small group of people. It is nice to be so closely involved with the farm, not to have to commute to work, and not to have to cook all your own meals and do all your own dishes. And the combination of people working and living on the farm can be fun. But there are challenges to this arrangement also. What happens when someone doesn't feel inspired to cook dinner, or doesn't look forward to cleaning the kitchen after a full workday? Each of us is responsible for supplying our own energy and doing our part, as well as managing our attitude, or the whole endeavor quickly ceases to be much fun. We can also be encouraging, compassionate, and patient with each other in our difficulties, and helpful with suggestions. When we are tired, or frustrated, or our boundaries are challenged, it is not easy to be kind and understanding. However if we approach the season with a commitment to each other, and follow up with timely, honest, and sincere communication, we can be active participants in a thriving system. It can also be helpful to take some of your free time to yourself to balance the intensity of group life.

At Persephone you will sometimes be working by yourself, sometimes with just one or two people, and sometimes in a group as large as six or eight. It is important to consider whether this arrangement will suit you; if you prefer to work by yourself at all times, or require the stimulation of constant conversation or electronic stimulation at all times, you may not enjoy what we have to offer.

Aside from the same group of co-workers, you are unlikely to find many alternate social interactions at the farm. We have occasional visitors and host occasional potlucks and farm tours, but our farm is not highly trafficked. We are removed from urban areas and cultural and community events. The nearby towns are not especially diverse or stimulating, and the businesses there are not generally open late at night or on Sundays. Corvallis, population 50,000, is thirty miles away, and has a bit more to offer (restaurants, independent films, coffee shops, bike shops, live music, and dances). Eugene and Salem are 1¼ hours away, Portland and Bend are 2 hours, Seattle or Ashland are 5 hours. Public transportation is

scant. Your free time may not always be long enough to accommodate traveling very far and having a qualitative visit. Regular farm errands and deliveries to our wholesaler, as well as occasional sales at farmers' markets, provide some social interaction off the farm. It is important to consider whether the social and cultural activities available to you will be sufficient, and if you are reasonably comfortable living with yourself in situations where there are not constant distractions.

If the materials presented in this packet suggest that Persephone Farm is an interesting opportunity for you, please complete and return the enclosed application. Applicants are required to visit the farm for a full day. A visit can give you an even better idea of what the place is like and who we are; it also helps us get to know you better. *The visit requirement cannot be waived, under any circumstances.* Early applications are appreciated, as we try to make hiring decisions by April 1. But if we have not found enough people, hirings may happen after that date. Hirings sometimes happen mid-season as well, so do not hesitate to ask about job openings at any time.

If you have decided Persephone is not what you want, do not give up. Keep looking for the situation that is best suited to you. Thank you for contacting us.