



THE AUTHORITATIVE GUIDE
TO BECOMING A SUSTAINABLE
21ST-CENTURY FARMER

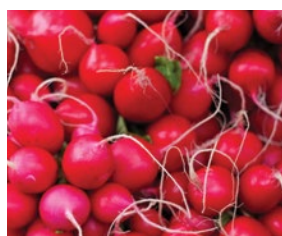
START YOUR FARM

ESSENTIAL FOR GROWING AND RAISING
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GRAINS FOR MARKET

FORREST PRITCHARD

New York Times–bestselling author of
Gaining Ground and *Growing Tomorrow*

ELLEN POLISHUK



ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

START YOUR FARM

“*Start Your Farm* is an eminently readable, entertaining, and important book for new farmers. The authors don’t hold back on the tough parts of farming. They coach the reader on how to overcome obstacles and reap the financial and emotional rewards on the other side. I recommend this book to anyone looking to make the brave leap into a farm career.”

—**Lindsey Lusher Shute**, cofounder of the
National Young Farmers Coalition

“This book is full of wisdom, wit, and practical advice from two of the most respected figures in agriculture today. Anyone interested in farming for a career should pick up a copy. There is no career more rewarding than farming, and this book eases the burden for those starting out.”

—**Ben Hartman**, author of *The Lean Farm* and
The Lean Farm Guide to Growing Vegetables

“A must-read for anyone who feels called to be a farmer. *Start Your Farm* is the most insightful, honest, challenging, and yet joyful and hopeful book I have read for would-be farmers. Prichard’s and Polishuk’s decades-long experiences in striving to farm sustainably also provide valuable insights into what it will take to farm successfully in the twenty-first century. Read this book and learn from two truly professional farmers.”

—**John Ikerd**, professor emeritus of agricultural economics,
University of Missouri

“If you have romantic Instagram ideas about living off the land, you need to read this book. Jam-packed with practical advice and real-life vignettes, *Start Your Farm* gives you the down and dirty—the financial, emotional, and physical aspects of running a working farm. But this gritty realism is perfectly balanced with hope and encouragement. Pritchard and Polishuk not only talk the talk, but walk the walk, and they will guide you through the intricacies of starting a farm of your own. If you have what it takes, that is!”

—**Lisa Steele**, author of *Fresh Eggs Daily*

“If you dream of farming, *Start Your Farm* provides proven practical advice, delivered with a sense of humility and humor. It’s as much a ‘why’ as a ‘how-to’ book, separating it from the plethora of guides for beginning farmers. Clear, concise, and highly useful, this book will help you make smarter decisions and fewer mistakes. I wish I had access to this kind of wisdom when I started farming forty-eight years ago. Get out there and farm, and carry this valuable info with you!”

—**Amigo Bob Cantisano**, founding member of Organic Ag Advisors
and the Ecological Farming Association

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. CHAPTER ONE .

WHY BE A FARMER?



Forrest

If you've picked up this book, you've probably already dreamed of becoming a farmer, growing food not just for yourself, but for your greater community. You yearn to work with the soil, feel the earth in your hands, and are ready to accept a life of daily chores, intellectual challenges, and uncertain financial returns. You're not intimidated by the possibility of seven-day workweeks, are physically capable of hefting forty-pound hay bales or irrigation pipes, and have the emotional resilience to endure an entire year—or five, as can happen—before you make your first profit. All that's left is to trade in your suit and tie for sturdy boots and a dilapidated hat.

Still interested? Allow us to be the first to say “thank you.” The world needs your help. Moreover, congratulations! Managing a successful farm is a deeply satisfying, joyful experience, and taking this first step—through self-education—is key.

Farming is one of the most ancient and important jobs on the planet. It's no hyperbole to say that advancements in agriculture have almost single-handedly carried our civilization forward from the Stone Age, ushering in a modern age of food abundance and, consequently, personal free time that the world has never seen before. To wit, as recently as one hundred years ago, nearly 40 percent of Americans were full-time farmers. That's right, 40 percent! Today, it's less than 2 percent. Instead of being farmers, 98.4 percent of Americans now have the freedom, or luxury, to pursue another career entirely, confident that their next meal will be available whenever they choose. This is truly an unprecedented period in human history.

Over the course of the twentieth century, nutritious, reliable, and abundant food transformed our entire globe, sending population rates booming skyward, extending the average human lifespan, greatly reducing disease and famine, and even sustaining peace. While at first glance, one might think these advancements have occurred, respectively, through medicine, technology, or military influence, the actual reason lies primarily with food security. In order to do their jobs, scientists, doctors, inventors, and soldiers alike must eat.

My own grandfather, a career farmer born in 1903, was granted deferments from both world wars because he was considered too valuable at home, growing food for GIs and civilians alike. This is an ancient tradition. Two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Virgil was tasked with writing *The Georgics*, a poem to persuade warring soldiers to return home to become farmers. Even George Washington, retiring to his farm after leading the American Revolution, wrote, “I had rather be on my farm than be emperor of the world.”

Yet, as fundamentally important as food is—an absolute necessity for life—there’s no guarantee whatsoever that people will choose to become farmers. Strange, isn’t it? When I was in college, guidance counselors encouraged students to go to law school or pursue an MBA to start a high-tech company. On career day, recruiters from Coca-Cola, General Electric, and Pfizer flooded the campus, pitching entry-level jobs to enthusiastic marketing, business, and economics majors. Each year, a famous accounting and consulting company hired a small army of my classmates, freshly graduated twenty-two-year-olds, and trained them to give business advice to Fortune 500 companies.

Already intent on being a farmer, I watched, perplexed, as several of my friends received fifty-thousand-dollar salaries straight out of college. My own knowledge of how to make money revolved around harvests of apples or pickup truckloads of sweet corn. When I heard about my friends’ salaries, I was genuinely curious. “How can a new graduate get paid that much?” I asked. “And where does that money even come from?” A few years later, my question was answered. That popular accounting company, the one that hired dozens of my classmates, imploded. It was the auditor for a large company called Enron and was caught up in one of the greatest corruption scandals in United States history.

Of course, this was only one example of a mainstream occupation, but it left a huge impression on me and got me thinking about bigger issues—questions

of economic stability and the role of corporate and personal ethics. That said, enthusiastic as I was to start farming, I wasn't naive enough to believe that companies would show up at my college to recruit young farmers, or that such businesses even existed.

The takeaway was loud and clear: No one on the corporate end prioritized the professional training of young farmers. And, from what I could tell, back in the early 1990s at least, farming wasn't even a consideration for most recent college grads. But I continually went round and round with one question: *With everyone needing to eat, who is going to feed us?* For an entire generation—an entire culture—to turn its back on farming, I rationalized, there must have been some key element I had overlooked.

Like any budding scientist (and a good farmer is undoubtedly a biologist, ecologist, and geologist wrapped into one), I needed to test this hypothesis. What better laboratory than a farm community? Returning home to the Shenandoah Valley, I spoke with my friends who had graduated from larger universities, programs that, unlike my liberal arts college, offered degrees specifically in agriculture. They told me how their classes had focused on large-scale, chemical- and machinery-reliant operations geared toward industrial-scale farming: corn, soybeans, wheat, and confinement animal production. When I asked about small to midsize farms, or sustainable and organic agriculture curriculums, they shook their heads. By and large, their professors were dismissive of alternative models for agricultural success. They were taught that economics was the most important consideration, and when it came to scale, big was better—and bigger was best.

Next, I spent lots of time with local full-time farmers, men and women who operated the dairies, ranches, orchards, and grain farms in my local community. Asking for advice, I was flat-out informed by several farmers that making a profit in farming—“especially these days”—was next to impossible. In fact, they said that a college degree should be a passport away from agriculture and that I'd be crazy not to pursue a different career while I had the chance. Even my own father, a lifelong government employee who worked in Washington, DC, discouraged me. “How will you make money? Pay for health care? Take a day off?” Despite my enthusiasm for farming, I had to admit that I couldn't answer these tough questions.

Looking beyond my agricultural community to society at large, perceptions about farming and food were clearly at odds. Back then, on television, farmers were portrayed as overalled men in distant Midwestern locales, uneducated folks with country accents driving beat-up pickups. They performed vague, humorous-sounding tasks like “slopping the hogs.” The relationship between farmers and their crops seemed fully disconnected, as though food simply originated at the grocery store or from a bag at the drive-through. When I brought up farming out in mainstream society, I discovered that most conversations began and ended with the price or the taste of food, rarely digging into where it actually came from.

I struggled with this cognitive dissonance for many years. At turns, I was frustrated and disillusioned, even verging on cynicism. And often for good reason. In the early days of my career, heading home from a farmers’ market with a paltry fifty dollars, it was hard to stomach seeing the lines of cars at McDonalds or the vehicles overflowing from the nearby supermarket parking lot. But, as the comedian-philosopher George Carlin once said, “Scratch a cynic, and you’ll find a disappointed idealist underneath.” In my heart, I knew that I was an idealist, but a practical idealist. I was on a mission to save my family’s farm, and I wasn’t going to let cynicism—or anything else—stand in my way. Yet, for the better part of a decade, I had little idea of how to actually *do* it.

It took many years, but I finally had an epiphany. The enormous responsibility of feeding our society, so that each and every one of us can live our lives as we currently do, fully hinges on a legion of independent, altruistic *volunteers*. Defying conventional economics, purely on their own volition, farmers willingly devote their physical energy, money, and especially their land—with no guarantee whatsoever of financial compensation—to produce food for their fellow humans.

In a way, it was beautiful to know that such people existed. But it was also shocking when I realized how fragile the entire system truly was. I remember being left with so many questions. What compelled them? What drove and motivated them? Surely, it wasn’t money or job security—I had known far too many cash-strapped farmers over the years. Yet, as a society, we were completely reliant on a group of hard-working people who raised their hands each year and said, “I’ll do it. I’ll volunteer for this job.”

It was a mystery that I couldn't begin to fathom. But it was perhaps that very mystery that made me want to join in as well. I understood that no one was going to hire me, salary me, or give me a raise. If I was going to farm, I'd simply have to be stupid or stubborn enough to commit to the job.

If it seems strange to think of farmers as volunteers, then think about these questions: In what other occupation do people undertake a job with endless hours, no guaranteed pay or days off, and no realistic likelihood of retiring? And what other job is so fundamentally important for society but remains so consistently misunderstood? The more we dig into these questions, the clearer it becomes that one would have to be intentionally defiant, even borderline contrarian, to sign up for this career. Running a farm is an endurance race that has no finish line.

Farmers, it turns out, are a very special subset of the population. The sacrifice involved in making this commitment is foundational; it means willfully turning one's back on the mainstream. As Wendell Berry eloquently states in his poem, "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer,"

[. . .] If contrariness is my
inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission
to go in at exits and come out at entrances, so be it.
I have planted by the stars in defiance of the experts,
and tilled somewhat by incantation and by singing,
and reaped, as I knew, by luck and Heaven's favor,
in spite of the best advice.

Being a farmer, as Berry makes clear, is more than just a job description. It's conscientiously choosing a different way of life—a willful, intentional defiance of cultural norms and expectations. Once this journey is begun, there's typically no going back. But that's okay. After your first taste of success, you won't want to anyway.

Still, in the face of these daunting cultural and economic challenges, it begs the question: Why be a farmer? The answer, to be sure, is complicated. I could spend page after page praising the merits of fresh air and sunshine, of rich soil and pure spring water, of honest hard work and abundant harvests—and each

would surely be a worthy reason to devote yourself to a life of agriculture. But this wouldn't do justice to hard realities such as paying for land, supporting a family, planning a budget, securing health care, or any of the myriad unromantic daily details that contribute to farming success.

Alternately, I could tell you exactly why *I* chose to farm, placing my degrees on a now cobwebbed shelf, setting off to rebuild miles of dilapidated locust fence, digging ditches for water pipes beneath a towering July sun, and returning home each night exhausted, penniless, and smelling of pig manure—yet sublimely satisfied. At the end of the day, though, this remains my story alone, circumscribed by my own idiosyncrasies. Certainly, there are lessons to be shared here, and I'll share them. But it's impossible to farm exactly like someone else. One-size-fits-all farming has always been a recipe for eventual failure.

Instead, there are far better reasons to be a farmer—reasons that specifically involve *you*. Farm because you hear the call, and you must listen. Farm because a nagging voice inside your head insists, *You have to do this. You have to try*. Farm because, despite the mountain of evidence to the contrary, you are convinced that you can succeed. In your heart, you *know* you can do it.

Understanding why you should be a farmer will forever be a personal process, one that will unfold as you apply the information contained here specifically to your unique circumstances. No one but you can fully explain it. But when the day arrives when you've grown your own food, earned your own paycheck, and glimpsed what it means to be self-reliant, perhaps words will no longer be necessary. Certain sweet moments in life transcend description.

THE LANGUAGE OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

From the get-go, we want to share some strong opinions that we have about sustainable farming, lessons we've cultivated over many decades. We'll use the rest of this chapter to define and espouse important terms and concepts and to spell out how they apply to contemporary agriculture. Then, in the ensuing chapters, we'll investigate these topics more thoroughly. As you pursue your own farming dreams, keep these themes in the front of your mind. Following this advice might not guarantee success, but it's certain to put you on a firmer path to economic and agricultural sustainability.

Do you dream of starting your own farm but wonder where to begin? Or do you already have a farm but wish to become more sustainable to compete in today's market? *Start Your Farm*, the first comprehensive business guide of its kind, covers these essential questions and more:

- Why be a farmer in the 21st century? Do you have what it takes?
- What does sustainable really mean, and how can a small (as little as one acre) to midsize farm survive alongside commodity-scale agriculture?
- How do you access education, land, and other needs with limited capital?
- How can you reap an actual profit, including a return on land investment?
- How do you build connections with employees, colleagues, and customers?
- At the end of the day, how do you measure success? (Hint: Cash your lifestyle paycheck.)

More than a practical guide, *Start Your Farm* is a hopeful call to action for anyone who aspires to grow wholesome, environmentally sustainable food for a living. Take it from Forrest Pritchard and Ellen Polishuk: Making this dream a reality is not for the faint of heart, but it's well within reach—and there's no greater satisfaction under the sun!

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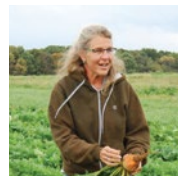
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FORREST PRITCHARD is the *New York Times*–bestselling author of *Gaining Ground* and *Growing Tomorrow*. He is also a full-time organic livestock farmer and seventh-generation producer. **ELLEN POLISHUK** is a first-generation sustainable vegetable farmer. Formerly an owner of Potomac Vegetable Farms, she is a sought-after farm consultant and conference speaker.

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