

FOREST FARMSTEAD CURRICULUM

Forest Farmstead hosts a wide range of interns who come with different skills, different needs, and different desires. One fellow arrived with abundant skills and motivation to challenge him we set him the task of managing a small construction project. Another fellow arrived meek and wide eyed, having never even helped in his home kitchen (only his sisters were allowed to help mom!). The first skill he learned on the farm was to fry an egg. Despite the experience gap, both interns learned valuable skills that will be very useful to them down the road. In neither case did we know ahead of time what we would be focusing on helping them learn.

It would be ridiculous for us to publish a project management curriculum since it is a rare 19-year-old that is ready to take on that kind of challenge. Similarly, publishing a basic home economics curriculum would be all-too remedial for most interns. At the same time it is safe to say that most interns will leave the farm with increased cooking and homemaking skills and with more construction and workflow management understanding than they came in with. So, in the interest of meeting each intern's needs, our curriculum is less topic-focused and more approach-focused.

We expect a high level of engagement and productivity from our interns. In exchange, we take our 'payment' of education to our interns very seriously (we also feed them very well). We first work to understand their desires and needs, as well as where they are starting from. Then we focus their experiences on their goals within the bounds of what is useful at the time on the farm. We also make sure to round things out to make sure they are exposed to the full homesteading experience, and to fill gaps that we see they need that perhaps they don't realize are important.

KEY FEATURES OF EDUCATION AT FOREST FARMSTEAD.

DIVERSITY

It is very rare that one day will not contain three or more main work tasks each with its own opportunity for instruction, experiencing something new, or deepening one's understanding of something already covered. We also work with other homesteaders in the local community to provide experiences not available on our homestead (beekeeping, agro-forestry, and horses are some recent examples). We also have mutual agreements with other educational farms to allow free admission to workshops for our respective interns, which means it is likely that there will be a few formal instructional workshops available in any given intern's stay.

Forest Farmstead is not looking for grunts to just do the same task all day, day in and day out. Our operation is sufficiently diverse that we can make each work/learn day varied between field, forest, and kitchen, between physical, mental, and precision work. Furthermore we have the ability to focus the intern experience here to match their interests and abilities.

IN PERSON

Instruction will be given in two ways: The first is a formal introduction at the beginning of a task explaining the why and how of it, and how it fits into the larger picture. The second mode is extemporaneously during the job as Terrance, Erin, or Alden notice something cool or interesting about the job, or in response to questions. We are almost always working by an intern's side or checking in often so that they get plenty of opportunity for one on one instruction.

Of course Interns learn a ton that we don't teach them that just comes from living in this environment. The farm also has a library with a wealth of books on various topics that interns will be able to dive into if their interests grow beyond our direct experience.

HANDS ON

Most of what interns learn here will be by doing. Many skills and knowledge come just with the doing of a task. For instance plant physiology is best learned by pulling weeds. The evolutionary strategies behind matting roots, vs tap roots, vs rhizomes, becomes abundantly clear as one trains their body to overcome those various aptitudes for keeping the plants firmly in the ground. While this is supplemented by instruction it is fundamentally based on the intern's visceral experience.

There are other tasks in which formal instruction is essential but without the doing of it immediately afterwards would never really stick into one's brain in a useful way. For instance when we teach grafting in the spring we will talk over the fundamentals of grafting, demonstrate successful and unsuccessful grafts from the previous year, demonstrate one or more grafting techniques, and then allowing the intern to do as many grafts as they like. This last stage is where the learning sets in, the cambium layer once just another line in a target shaped drawing in a book, is now very clearly where the lifeblood of the tree either will or will not be able to flow into the scion wood to produce a honeycrisp apple on a wild crabapple trunk.

Not only does experiential education solidify the useful information in the intern's brain, it also instills familiarity and confidence so that years later attempting the same task again will not be intimidating, even if they do have to run to YouTube to refresh their brain.

CORE CONCEPTS TAUGHT AT FOREST FARMSTEAD

WORK ETHIC

While we support the individual needs of every intern we are not here to be anyone's parent (except our own kids). Likewise being a 'boss' is not our idea of fun either. We intend to be mentors helping interns achieve their goals insofar as they align with the tasks available on the farm. So we will not be forcing anyone to do anything; we will present tasks and opportunities based on our communications with interns about their goals and interests that also align with our current needs on the farm. An intern has a lot of control over how much he or she can get out of each task, by asking questions and communicating effectively where they want their experience to go. Of course we hope that part of every intern's goal is to see this farm succeed since the only tasks we can assign are ones that need done and sometimes those may not be on an intern's A-list.

There is more to teaching work ethic than the inherent experiential value of having full productive and meaningful workdays. We give formal instruction to our interns in their various tasks on work flow analysis, and task efficiency. While in an employment situation it is the boss who sets up productivity expectations. As a homesteader (a lifestyle many of our interns aspire to) or otherwise self employed person, it is essential for them to have an internal sense of one's own work efficiency since the results of one's labor is the major determination of success or failure in those situations.

Only once have we had an intern whose main interest was getting up as late as possible, taking as long a lunch as possible, and quitting the day as early as possible. He succeeded fairly well at it, though we would not have kept him on for a second term. Most typically we find our interns learn the love of work by having tasks that are meaningful, educational, and sufficiently varied as to not cause boredom or excessive physical stress. It is our hope that our interns will go on into life able to enjoy the depth, creative expression, and fulfillment available in every work task, and have gained skills to be able to focus their careers to provide them with satisfying work days.

HONEST SUSTAINABILITY

Many come here with the idea of 'sustainability' being one of their main interests. While interns will learn many sustainable practices while here, the fundamental element we try to provide is a realistic and practical approach to sustainability.

As an example Erin and Terrance were vegetarians during college because clearly it was more sustainable to eat plants that took a tenth the resources to produce than factory farmed meat. When they originally moved to the Forest Farmstead it quickly became clear that a pork chop raised out the back door on grass, kitchen scraps, culls from the blueberry processing line, and November 1st pumpkins, was actually more sustainable than a plastic package of factory farmed tofu shipped from Minneapolis. This example illustrates the situational component of sustainability; sustainable here may not equal sustainable elsewhere.

Another component of honest sustainability is practical limits. As an example folks will often come dreaming of a self sustaining homestead. They will come here and experience and learn many ways in which we have approached that goal. They will eat many meals where 75% or more of what is on the plate comes from here. Their electricity will come from our off grid small renewable hydroelectric system. They will experience food preservation and put up 100 jars of salsa, and then, at the end of the long day they will have a good perspective on the value of a jar of salsa at the store.

Our emphasis here is teaching to make a better world but also in discovering the ways our current world already works well. Our emphasis is minimizing our impact and being at peace with the impact we do make. Our emphasis is in doing good in a balanced way that eschews concentrating all efforts into maximizing virtues in one aspect of life, at the expense of other aspects.

A HUMAN'S PLACE IN NATURE

The Forest Farmstead is especially suited to provide the experiences and mentorship to viscerally understand how humans interact with nature and provide ways to do so skillfully.

Control

In our fields we do our best to have absolute control over what grows there. We till and weed to keep unwanted plants away. We chose which plants will go in at what times. We thin and transplant to keep the plants at set distances from each other. We fertilize so our plants will grow faster and healthier. We may even control the temperature by covering a row with cloth or plastic or mulch. Of course nature has its way of dropping more weed seeds, raining, or not raining, etc. That said it is in the field that the fundamental human trait of controlling nature is most emphasized and most appropriate. Interns will experience this struggle for control and learn skills to be effective at it, as well as when to stop trying and 'go with the flow'.

Stewardship

Our forest backs up against uncut wilderness all the way to the Canadian border and beyond. We use our forest for wood, for herbs, and for recreation. It is also used by deer, bald eagles, black bear, bobcat, salamander, coyote, grouse, mountain lion, and numerous birds and small mammals. It manages the water as it flows down the hill so we are not flooded in the winter, and so our pasture stays green all summer. The forest is a place where humans are an active participant but one among many. It is a place where our needs are just one of the considerations for appropriate forest management. The forest is the place where interns will learn about skillful resource extraction and the regenerative capacity of a natural ecosystem.

Companionship

In our pasture are some of the best loved animals that are also destined for the table. We raise our chickens from eggs and our bacon starts as piglets sucking on their mother's teats. Our society is one in which most everyone eats meat, eggs, or milk or uses various animal products. Yet squeamishness about the realities of the process by which we get these things has led to us consigning those tasks to others. On top of that we would like to pay as little as possible for that outsourcing. This leads inevitably to the control strategy mentioned above, but instead of plants it

is animals which are having their environments and lives strictly controlled to maximize yield at minimum cost.

Considering the possibility that plant abuse may be 'a thing', it is almost exclusively an academic and philosophical consideration. We the philosophers on the other hand are also in hard fact animals. We share many traits with those whom we are eating (to a greater or smaller extent) such as intelligence, capacity for pain, capacity for joy, the impulse to reproduce, etc. Our interns (depending on the season) will get a chance to participate in all stages of an animal's life, from placing eggs in the incubator to (always optional) taking an animal's life quickly and respectfully when it comes time to harvest. This intimacy with farm animals, we believe, is the only way to have the basis to approach humanity's appropriate relationship with our prey species.

Appreciation

The Forest Farmstead is sandwiched between the North Cascades National Park, and the Wild and Scenic Skagit River. As such there is an abundance of wild natural environment out the back door, or a bike ride away. While we don't 'teach' recreation we do encourage interns to take advantage of the abundance of opportunities around us. In this day and age of human dominance it is critical that we have areas of nature where we restrict ourselves to taking only pictures and leaving only footprints. Having an abundance of this nearby is a great contrast to have in the spectrum as we teach how to use the land well.

SPECIFIC SKILLS AVAILABLE AT FOREST FARMSTEAD

IN THE ORCHARD

- Pruning
- Grafting
- Organic treatment of orchard diseases
- Harvest
- Fruit storage

IN THE FOREST

- Tree planting
- Native plant ID
- Forestry
- Sustainable wild harvest of herbs
- Firewood cutting
- Tree felling
- Charcoal making

In the Field

- Direct seeding
- Transplanting
- Succession planting
- Greenhouse
- Cultivation
- Weed control
- Thinning
- Fertility
- Irrigation
- Pest insect control
- Harvesting
- Post harvest handling
- Crop storage

IN THE WORKSHOP

- Carpentry
- Plumbing
- Electrical
- Power tool safety
- Organization
- Tool care and maintenance
- Metal work

IN THE PASTURE

- Pasture rotation
- Pasture health maintenance
- Animal nutrition
- Food waste recycling
- Farrowing
- Castration
- Hatching of eggs
- Care of young poultry
- Egg production
- Culling of Hens
- Chicken Butchery
- Large animal butchering
- Curing and tanning of hides
- Fence and gate construction and maintenance

IN THE HOME AND KITCHEN

- Cooking
- Baking
- Cleaning
- Canning
- Smoking
- Pickling
- Fermenting

IN THE OFFICE

- Marketing
- Branding
- Social media
- Web hosting
- Photo and Video publishing
- Grant writing
- Budgeting
- Bookkeeping
- Sales
- Invoicing

CONCLUSION

At Forest Farmstead an intern will find an environment which allows him or her to grow in productive capacity and skill. Through training in and completion of a wide variety of tasks not only does the intern's skill base grow they increase in ability to manage themselves, and put their work in the context of a bigger picture.