

# BIG RIVER FARMS

## FARMER EDUCATION PROGRAM



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## Why does the program exist?

So that all people who desire to start their own organic vegetable farming businesses have access to education, land, infrastructure, markets, resources, and connections to meet their goals.

## What are the program goals?

- Farmers have the skills to manage a plot of land with organic growing practices, including sustainable land and infrastructure management
- Farmers understand Organic Certification and feel confident to achieve and maintain certification independently
- Farmers understand and use Food Safety practices
- Farmers establish reliable markets
- Farmers learn to operate their farm as a business, independent of BRF
- Farmers establish connections with other farmers and service providers and are confident accessing available resources
- Farmers explore options for land access to transition off the incubator farm
- Farmers meet personal goals
- Farmers develop leadership skills

## Am I eligible?

You are eligible for the program if...

- You would like to learn more about operating an organic vegetable farm in Minnesota
- You want to farm commercially (sell what you grow)
- You identify with a group that is historically under-represented in farming (immigrant, refugee, person of color, women, LGBTQ, veteran, low-income, or other)
- You have access to the resources needed to participate (transportation, money for the costs of the program, enough time to meet program requirements)

## What is included in the program?

The Farmer Education Program provides education, land, infrastructure, and access to markets for beginning farmers. What is offered varies by each program track – see the track descriptions on pages 5-9 to learn where to start and what is included.

### I. Education

#### ANNUAL MEETINGS

- 1:1 Meetings:
  - Planning & Goal-setting
  - Plot Plan Meeting
  - Mid-Season Check-in
  - Fall Review
- Group Meetings:
  - New Year Welcome

- Seed Order & Greenhouse Plan
- Planting Schedule & Plot Map
- Organic Certification Packet
- Big River Farms Market Processes
- Farmer Listening Session
- Organic Certification Inspection
- Food Hub Contracts & Farm Budget

## **CLASSES**

- **WINTER CLASSES** – 1-2 times weekly, held in St. Paul over November, January, February, and March. Exact timing and topics covered is dependent on farmer needs and interests, but generally include:

- **Planning your Farm Business** – create a plan for the year and content to be used in creating a formal business plan
  1. Farming as a Business (values / financial goals and plans)
  2. Market Goals & Plan
  3. Production Goals & Plan
  4. Management Goals & Plan
- **Records & Reports**
  1. Filing Farm Taxes (Schedule F)
  2. Record Keeping
  3. Writing an Annual Farm Report
- **Introduction to Organic Farming** – basics of organic farming in Minnesota and what it means to farm commercially
  1. Introduction to Organic Farming
  2. Crop Families & Profiles
  3. Plot Planning
  4. Introduction to Markets
- **Improving Production** – taught by other local farmers/experts; topics rotate on a 3-year basis
  1. Whole Farm Planning (prioritizing purchases, increasing efficiency, systems)
  2. Markets (understanding options, wholesale, branding)
  3. Organic Practices (building soil, organic systems plan, pest/disease/weed management)
  4. Technical (succession planting, crop specifics, season extension)
- **Marketing**
  1. Promoting your Farm Business
  2. Communicating with Buyers
  3. Local Markets Tour
  4. Farmer-Buyer Meet & Greet

- **GROWING SEASON CLASSES & SKILL SESSSIONS** – 1-2 times per week, held at Big River Farms. Exact timing and topics covered is dependent on season and plot needs, but generally include:

- Intro to Seed Starting & Greenhouse
- Post-Harvest Handling
- Food Safety

- Harvest: Estimating Amounts, Techniques, Equipment, & Efficiency
- Tractors: the Basics, Safety & Troubleshooting
- Soil Fertility
- Pest & Disease Management
- Irrigation
- Direct Seeding & Transplanting
- Organic Sprays
- Tool Maintenance & Sharpening
- Weed Management
- Trellising Tomatoes

### **FARM TOURS**

- 2-4 tours of area farms per season will expose participants to different systems, equipment, and structures of farming. Tours will address topics such as buying a farm, whole farm planning, animals, etc.

### **IN-FIELD HELP**

- Farm and Education staff is available for 1:1 in-field help throughout the growing season for land-based farmers. Shared Plot farmers (see p. 7) will receive this as part of their weekly education, and second- and third-year farmers will be assigned a Farmer Mentor at the beginning of the season. Each farmer will have a weekly check in with their mentor, to go over their records, ask questions, and make a list of priorities for their field.

### **HANDS-ON LEARNING**

- **Community Work** – Each land-based farm team will contribute 30 hours to maintaining the communal farm spaces, infrastructure, and CSA pick-up. Community work includes:
  - Community work days (2.5 hours, as needed) – group projects, including construction, maintenance, and on-farm clean-up
  - Packing shed clean-up (5 hours each week, farm teams rotate)
  - CSA Box-packing & Pick-up (2-4 hours each week, farm teams rotate)
  - Other projects – (hours flexible) may include weed-whacking, mowing, etc.
- **Greenhouse watering** – one-three times daily, approximately 18 weeks – BRF staff will water all plants in the greenhouse from March 1<sup>st</sup>-May 15<sup>th</sup>. BRF staff will water once each day in the morning from May 16<sup>th</sup>-June 30<sup>th</sup>; farmers managing their own plots at Big River Farms will be responsible for watering their own plants in the greenhouse beyond the morning watering and at all times beyond June 30<sup>th</sup>. Shared Plot farmers will not be responsible for watering their own plants in the greenhouse; a fee for this service is included in the cost to participate.

### **ASSISTANCE BEYOND BRF**

- **Business Plan Help** – BRF connects farmers to agencies/consultants that provide 1:1 assistance in business plan development.
- **Transition Plan Help** – BRF connects farmers with agencies/consultants that provide 1:1 assistance in creating a plan to transition off the incubator farm.
- **Conservation / Organic Transitions Help** – BRF connects farmers, especially Organic Transitions and those transitioning off the incubator, with

agencies/consultants that provide 1:1 assistance in creating conservation plans and organic transition plans.

- **Continuing Education** – When funding is available, BRF provides scholarships for farmers to attend farming workshops, educations, and conferences outside of BRF.

## II. Land

**Shared Plot:** Farmers that have little or no experience farming in Minnesota share a 1/8-1/2 acre plot, managed cooperatively and with help from BRF staff. The group will work with staff to make a crop plan, field map, order seeds, complete records, etc. Each year we will focus on 3-4 crops. *Farmers attend trainings at least 1-2 times per week*, which might consist of a formal class, community work, or skill session, *in addition to 2 or more days of field work*. Produce grown on this plot is grown for BRF markets, and any income generated will be divided equally among farmers who meet program expectations and attendance requirements. Farmers are also welcome to bring home extra produce from this plot.

### Individual Plots:

- A detailed budget is required to manage one's own plot, due by March 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Land allocation is based on availability, fulfillment of program requirements/learning objectives, and a detailed budget/management plan, and is subject to staff discretion.
- Preference is given to Basic Education Program farmers over Whole Farm Management farmers.

## III. Infrastructure

The following infrastructure is provided at Big River Farms (pricing details on page 11):

- Farm Operations (equipment, supplies, fuel, greenhouse, repairs, tools, certification, soil tests, etc.) – valued at \$1200/acre
- Buildings (cooler, packing shed, storage, etc.) – valued at \$320/acre
- Utilities (trash & electric) – valued at \$135/acre
- Tractor Work (valued at 10 hours @ \$25/hr per acre, including 6 hours on tillable land, and 4 hours on roadways, set up, etc.) – valued at \$250/acre

## IV. Market Opportunities

**Farmers Market:** Farmers participate in the aggregated farmers' market stall to learn about farmers' market processes and sell their own produce. Participation is highly recommended for all Basic Education Program farmers. The number and frequency each farmer is allowed/required to attend markets will vary depending on the number of farmers in the program.

**Food Hub Sales:** Limited produce markets are available through the Big River Farms CSA and wholesale accounts managed by BRF staff. Farmers are the producers for these accounts, which allows for a starting market and educational opportunity. A portion of these accounts are contracted with returning farmers. Big River Farms is not responsible or able to purchase all produce grown by farmers. It is the expectation that farmers work to

develop their own markets, independent of BRF. Staff support, classes, and other resources are available to assist in this process.

**Selling as Certified Organic:** Big River Farms is Certified Organic and all farmers are trained in how to uphold this certification. All farmers are required to follow these standards and to participate in the application process and the annual inspection. Farmers are able to sell their produce as organic in their independent markets (aside from BRF) but a formal process must be followed, and is subject to staff discretion.

## Where do I start?

There are multiple points of entry into the program depending on your interest, experience, and level of commitment. The next few pages provide information on the different options.

### *Option 1: Classes Only*

<b>Who Should Enroll:</b>	Farmers and community members who want to learn about organic farming, but do not wish to or are unable to commit to farming land at Big River Farms
<b>Program Duration:</b>	NA
<b>Time Commitment:</b>	Participants can enroll in a single 2-3 hour class, a series of select classes, or the entire season
<b>Participation Requirements:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Complete required assignments &amp; records</li> <li>✓ Attend three 1:1 meetings</li> <li>✓ Attend regular hands-on skill sessions at Big River Farms and track new skills learned</li> </ul>
<b>Cost:</b>	1 class: \$20 Entire season (includes 15+ classes/farm tours/other educational opportunities, regular skill sessions, & three 1:1 meetings): \$250
<b>What's Included:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1:1 Meetings (entire season only)</li> <li>○ Classes</li> <li>○ Farm Tours</li> <li>○ Skill sessions</li> </ul>

## Option 2: Shared Plot

<b>Who Should Enroll:</b>	Those who have little or no experience farming, would like to learn to operate an organic vegetable farm in Minnesota, and are able to commit to farming land at Big River Farms
<b>Program Duration:</b>	1-2 years
<b>Time Commitment:</b>	Hours vary week to week, but <i>at a minimum</i> consist of: 5 hours/week, January-March* 15+ hours/week, April-October, including both weekend and weekday hours* 5 hours/week, November* *Estimates <i>do not</i> include time driving to and from the farm!
<b>Participation Requirements:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Make a commitment to farm organically</li> <li>✓ Complete required assignments &amp; records</li> <li>✓ Attend three 1:1 meetings per year</li> <li>✓ Attend required classes &amp; group meetings</li> <li>✓ Attend regular hands-on skill sessions at Big River Farms and track new skills learned</li> <li>✓ Record a weekly minimum of 15 hours throughout the week spent at the farm during the growing season, working in the shared plot, attending classes, at farmers market, CSA distribution, community work days, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Cost:</b>	\$700/year* <i>*a limited number of need-based scholarships are available</i>
<b>What's Included:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1:1 Meetings</li> <li>○ Group Meetings</li> <li>○ Classes</li> <li>○ Skill sessions</li> <li>○ Shared-plot Maintenance</li> <li>○ Farm Tours</li> <li>○ In-field Help</li> <li>○ Assistance Beyond BRF</li> <li>○ Land (shared)</li> <li>○ Infrastructure</li> <li>○ All farming supplies (shared)</li> <li>○ Market Opportunities (CSA, Farmers Market)</li> <li>○ Permission to harvest for personal use from shared plot</li> </ul>

### Option 3: Independent Plot

<b>Who Should Enroll:</b>	Farmers who have at least 1 year of experience farming on ¼ acre or more in Minnesota or a similar climate and would like to learn more about production, markets, business planning, food safety, and organic certification while farming an independent plot at Big River Farms
<b>Program Duration:</b>	1-4 years
<b>Time Commitment:</b>	Hours vary week to week, but at a minimum consist of: 5 hours/week, January-March* 15-20 hours per week for each ¼ acre, April-October* 5 hours/week, November* *Estimates <i>do not</i> include time driving to and from the farm!
<b>Participation Requirements:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Demonstrate competency in the core skills taught in the shared plot track</li> <li>✓ Make a commitment to farm organically</li> <li>✓ Complete required assignments &amp; records, including a detailed budget</li> <li>✓ Attend three 1:1 meetings per year</li> <li>✓ Meet on a weekly basis with a farmer mentor</li> <li>✓ Attend required classes &amp; group meetings</li> <li>✓ Maintain plant health and control weeds (see above for time estimates)</li> <li>✓ Sell produce to a minimum of 1 market</li> <li>✓ Community work</li> </ul>
<b>Cost:</b>	Education: \$250/season Land: \$150/acre Infrastructure: \$646.50/acre (see below for details) Not included: Other Farming Expenses (see below for details)
<b>What's Included:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1:1 Meetings</li> <li>○ Group Meetings</li> <li>○ Classes</li> <li>○ Skill sessions</li> <li>○ Farm Tours</li> <li>○ In-field Help</li> <li>○ Hands-on Learning</li> <li>○ Assistance Beyond BRF</li> <li>○ Land (independent; 1/8 acre-4 acre plot)</li> <li>○ Infrastructure</li> <li>○ Market Opportunities (CSA, Wholesale, &amp; Farmers Market)</li> </ul>

### ***Option 4: Organic Transitions***

<b>Who Should Enroll:</b>	Farmers that have an established farm business, with 2 or more years of experience farming in Minnesota, and would like more education in how to farm organically
<b>Program Duration:</b>	1-3 years
<b>Time Commitment:</b>	Hours vary week to week, but at a minimum consist of: 5 hours/week, January-March 2-3 hours/week, April-October 5 hours/week, November
<b>Participation Requirements:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Have access to land, infrastructure and markets to farm</li> <li>✓ Make a commitment to farm organically</li> <li>✓ Complete required assignments &amp; records</li> <li>✓ Attend three 1:1 meetings per year</li> <li>✓ Meet on a monthly basis with a farmer mentor</li> <li>✓ Attend required classes &amp; group meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Cost:</b>	\$250 per year
<b>What's Included:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1:1 Meetings</li> <li>○ Group Meetings</li> <li>○ Classes</li> <li>○ Skill sessions</li> <li>○ Farm Tours</li> <li>○ In-field Help</li> <li>○ Assistance Beyond BRF</li> </ul>

### **Option 5: Whole Farm Management**

<b>Who Should Enroll:</b>	Farmers who have completed the learning objectives of the Basic Education Program and want to gain experience in whole farm management as they operate as an independent business at Big River Farms
<b>Program Duration:</b>	1-4 years
<b>Time Commitment:</b>	Hours vary week to week, but at a minimum consist of: 5 hours/week, January-March* 15-20 hours per week for each ¼ acre, April-October* 5 hours/week, November* *Estimates <i>do not</i> include time driving to and from the farm!
<b>Participation Requirements:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Demonstrate competency in the core skills taught in the Basic Education Program</li> <li>✓ Make a commitment to farm organically</li> <li>✓ Attend three 1:1 meetings per year</li> <li>✓ Attend select required classes &amp; group meetings</li> <li>✓ Maintain plant health and control weeds (see above for time estimates)</li> <li>✓ Contribute to community work</li> <li>✓ Obtain independent organic certification</li> <li>✓ Responsible for own tractor work</li> <li>✓ Manage a cover crop rotation</li> <li>✓ Responsible for own markets</li> <li>✓ Help teach an aspect of the Basic Education Program at least once per year</li> </ul>
<b>Cost:</b>	Education: \$250/season Land: \$150/acre Infrastructure: \$646.50/acre (see below for details) Not included: Other Farming Expenses (see below for details), organic certification fees
<b>What's Included:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1:1 Meetings</li> <li>○ Group Meetings</li> <li>○ Classes</li> <li>○ Skill sessions</li> <li>○ Farm Tours</li> <li>○ In-field Help</li> <li>○ Hands-on Learning</li> <li>○ Assistance Beyond BRF</li> <li>○ Land (independent; 1-4 acre plot)</li> <li>○ Infrastructure</li> <li>○ Market Opportunities only as available (CSA, Wholesale, &amp; Farmers Market)</li> </ul>

## How much does it cost?

2020 Education Program Fees	Education (flat fee)	Land (based on acres)	Infrastructure (based on acres)	Total
<b>100% Actual Cost - 1 Acre</b>	\$1940.00	\$250.00	\$1905.00	<b>\$4095.00</b>
<b>Classes Only</b>	\$250.00	-	-	<b>\$250.00</b>
<b>Shared Plot*</b>	\$700.00*	-	-	<b>\$700.00</b>
<b>¼ Acre Individual Plot</b>	\$250.00	\$37.50	\$161.63	<b>\$449.13</b>
<b>1 Acre Individual Plot</b>	\$250.00	\$150.00	\$646.50	<b>\$1046.50</b>
<b>Organic Transitions</b>	\$250.00	-	-	<b>\$250.00</b>
<b>1 Acre Whole Farm Management</b>	\$250.00	\$150.00	\$646.50	<b>\$1046.50+</b>

**\*A limited number of need-based scholarships are available for shared plot fees.**

**Other farming expenses** (These expenses range from \$500-\$1500 for a ¼ acre of land. They are included in Shared Plot fees.)

- Seeds and transplants
- Irrigation drip lines/hose/sprinkler
- Mulch material
- Pest control (row cover, traps, organic pesticides)
- Seed starting supplies (potting soil and trays)
- Harvest containers and harvest supplies
- Produce boxes (\$.80-\$2.22/box)
- Farm promotional materials (business cards, brochure, market signs, website, etc.)
- Tools (personal - for long term investments)
- Liability Insurance (this is required for you own markets, such as farmers market. It costs between \$85-\$400)

**Transportation is not provided by BRF.** ¼ acre requires a minimum of coming to the farm two times a week during the growing season for approximately 15- 20 hours per week. Farmers should be prepared to commute to St. Paul for all winter classes and commute to Big River Farms for all classes from April through October. Having a running vehicle and money to pay for gas and repairs is required.

**Payment Schedules:** A deposit of \$50 and agreement to a payment plan for the remaining amount due is required upon signing the participation agreement in January. All education, land, and infrastructure fees must be paid in full by May 1<sup>st</sup> unless an alternative deadline is agreed upon. A limited number of need-based scholarships are available for shared plot farmers; please contact our office for more information.

Supply invoices for purchases from the Farmer Store are generated on a monthly basis as supplies are used, and payment is due by August 1<sup>st</sup> for all invoices generated March-July, and within 30 days for all invoices generated after July 1<sup>st</sup>.

BRF reserves the right to redirect amounts due to farmers for produce purchased to be applied to outstanding program/supply invoices that are overdue by 60 days or more.

## How do I apply?

- **Step 1: Contact our office** at 651-433-3676 or [info@mnfoodassociation.org](mailto:info@mnfoodassociation.org) to find out about upcoming information sessions and classes.
- **Step 2: Attend an information session** to go over the program details, ask questions, and tour or see a slideshow of the farm. Applications will be available.
- **Step 3: Turn in your application** to the Farmer Education Program Staff by December 15<sup>th</sup>. You can email it to [info@mnfoodassociation.org](mailto:info@mnfoodassociation.org), or mail it to Big River Farms, Farmer Education Program, 14220-B Ostlund Trail N, Marine on St Croix, MN 55047.
- **Step 4: Our staff will follow up with you** to determine if the program is a good fit and with information about what comes next.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How many classes am I allowed to miss?

Regularly attending classes, meetings, and other scheduled events is an important part of the program – if you are not interested in an education, this program is not for you. Required and optional classes are different depending on your year in the program and existing skillset.

- Farmers are expected to communicate in advance with staff if they are unable to attend a required meeting or class.
- Three unexcused absences from a required meeting or class will result in non-participation.
- Missed classes can sometimes be made up with alternative activities, pending staff approval.
- We understand that emergencies and unexpected events happen and will work with you to accommodate your schedule; however, if you are not able to commit to spending regular time at the farm, the classes only option is the best for you.

### How much money will I make?

How much money each farmer makes varies depending on many factors: level of experience, time spent at the farm, consistency of markets, weather, etc. A shared plot farmer with little to no experience might generate \$700 in gross sales over the season, whereas an experienced farmer on 2 or more acres could make \$30,000. ***Do not expect to make a profit in the first year if you have little to no experience!*** We focus first on developing good production skills, and once farmers have a good product, we will move to business and marketing.

### Can I farm with my friends and family?

Yes. Program costs are per farm team, which can consist of any number of people and whomever you choose. One to two farmers are designated as primary contacts, and they will receive all communication from staff and will be responsible for relaying information to the rest of the farm team.

### Will Big River Farms buy all of my produce?

No. We will contract a limited number of crops with returning farmers who have proven themselves capable of producing quality produce, but will never be able to buy everything you grow.

### Can I grow whatever I want?

Shared plot farmers will be assigned 3 to 4 crops to grow each season, which helps them as a first step to focus on growing a fewer number of vegetables well. Independent Plot, Whole Farm Management, and Organic Transitions farmers make their own crop plans, which must meet organic standards, fit within each farmers' budget, and may not contain invasive species.

**Can I have animals at the farm?**

No. We currently do not have any staff available to take care of animals every day.

**Can I grow things other than vegetables, like mushrooms, perennials, and bees?**

Currently our program only offers education on organic vegetable production. We are open to reviewing proposals from returning farmers who wish to use the farm as a space to try something new – approval will be on a case-by-case basis.

**Can I come to the farm whenever I want?**

In addition to required class/meeting times, you can come to the farm whenever you want between 30 minutes before sunrise and 10:00 PM at night.

**Where is the farm located?**

Big River Farms is inside the Wilder Forest, just outside of Marine on St. Croix, MN. It is a 30 mile/40-45 minute drive northeast of St. Paul, and a 35 mile/45-50 minute drive northeast of Minneapolis.

**I am not low income – is the cost the same for me?**

Our organization works hard to raise funds to help subsidize the cost of farming for people who would otherwise be unable to afford it. If your financial situation allows you to pay more than the rates listed, please talk with our staff to determine a price that's fair for you.

**For more information...**

Big River Farms is a program of The Food Group, a nonprofit organization with the mission, "*Fighting hunger. Nourishing our community.*" Learn more about Big River Farms and the other programs of The Food Group online at:

[www.bigriverfarms.org](http://www.bigriverfarms.org) | [www.thefoodgroupmn.org](http://www.thefoodgroupmn.org)

Big River Farms  
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