

The “Not Our Farm” Project and Farm Labor

by Martha Jackson Suquet



Some of the team at Little Seed Gardens, Chatham, NY

As a former farm apprentice and employee, I have years of memories of the labor required to make a farm operation work. Rounds of intensive greenhouse seeding, a whirlwind of field planting in late spring, and then a seemingly unending stretch of harvesting, weeding, and trellising. The work requires skill and endurance. It can be joyful and invigorating—particularly in the company of a solid farm crew—but it is also bound to be draining and tedious.

The extreme physical difficulty of farm work is generally inevitable. Simply put - farming is hard work, and it needs to get done no matter the weather. But the balance of joy and misery also depends on the labor conditions of each farm workplace. Are workers being paid fairly, do they get enough break time, do they have access to bathrooms, is the on-farm housing safe and livable? Many workers (myself included) have experienced working conditions that were exploitative, unfair, and unacceptable.

When farms get media and community attention, that attention often focuses on farm owners and operators as the heroes of the story. But the basic truth of modern agriculture is that workers form the backbone of nearly all farm businesses —seasonal workers, long-time crew leaders, new apprentices, experienced laborers. Berkshire Grown recognizes the fundamental importance of everyone who farms, and we want to share their stories as well as actions that community members can take to support them.



Workers are the backbone of Berkshire farms. Left to right: Little Seed Gardens, Chatham, NY, Woodlife Ranch, Williamstown, MA

[Not Our Farm \(NOF\)](#) is “a project and community of farmers who have chosen farming as a career but do not have their own farm business or land.” The stories shared via Not Our Farm include workers exploring why they love farming despite the challenges, recounting poor treatment at past and current jobs, and dreaming of what truly sustainable farm work would look like. Participants come from farms across the spectrum—large, small, nonprofit, for profit, urban, rural.

Anita Adalja, the founder of Not Our Farm, has worked on farms for twelve seasons. They have always valued growing food but have struggled to find safe spaces to work that were free from racism, sexism, and homophobia. Adalja currently farms in a collective with three other farmers, working to create that safe workspace that didn’t exist for them.

Adalja points out the false assumption that all farm workers are working their way toward a successful farming career, and that putting up with exploitative conditions might be worth the knowledge gained through experience. Instead, workers often don’t get to see all the sides of the farm business and are being paid wages so low that they aren’t building up capital toward their own operation. And many don’t work on farms as a path to ownership. Adalja herself doesn’t believe in equating success with ownership. Farming is a skill, and many of the farmers sharing their stories through NOF pride themselves on growing food, stewarding land, and supporting their communities rather than striving for farm ownership.

One important point the project makes is that unfair working conditions are an issue throughout agriculture. They can—and do—occur on small, family-operated farms as well as larger corporate operations. If we want to improve farm labor, we need to look in our own communities and not pretend that the issues all lie in larger farms outside of our region. As farmer [Zel Taylor](#) says, “the focus on sustainable agriculture also needs to include the sustainability of the people actually doing the work.”

Better wages are one avenue toward improving working conditions on farms. Not Our Farm worked with Good Food Jobs, a farm and food job site, to change their policies on farm job postings. All jobs posted on the site must now include a minimum wage of \$15 per hour. Good Food Jobs has also posted a series of [stories](#) from Not Our Farm, and is collecting information about farms who have improved their labor practices.

Here in Massachusetts, the [Fairness for Farmworkers Act](#) is currently in the Committee for Labor and Workforce Development in the House. The proposed bill (H.1979, S.1205) would raise the minimum wage for farmworkers, require that workers be given one day of rest each week, and be able to earn overtime pay. This legislation isn't going to solve the deeply-rooted issues that surround farm labor, but it would be a step toward lessening exploitation. Of course, the burden of higher pay for farm workers affects the bottom line for the farm owners, and eventually that higher cost is reflected in the cost to consumers, but without someone to sow, harvest and sell the crops, the food won't make it from the seed packet to the kitchen table.



Abode Farm team, New Lebanon, NY

A common thread in the Not Our Farm stories is that farm owners and managers who remember their experience as workers often create more equitable workplaces. At Abode Farm (pictured left) in New Lebanon, manager Ellyn Gaydos calls upon her experiences as a crew member. She notes that managers can make sure that employees get paid on time and have lots of access to free food from the farm, which really matters in a low-paying field. “Passing on skills is another really important aspect of agricultural work and one which helps employees feel more fulfilled and farms run better,” she says.

A recent Berkshire Grown farmer workshop, “*Building Capacity for Collaboration:*

Maintaining a Strong Farm Team,” aimed at farm owners and managers, addressing some of the issues that can arise as managers work with their teams. Farmers Claudia Kenney and Willy Denner of Little Seed Gardens in Chatham, NY discussed their approach to building strong farm teams and handling conflict on the farm over 28 years of farm management. Much of the focus was on how to accurately label the emotions and needs that come up, so that managers can have effective communication around those workers’ needs. Several participants shared moments of conflict that they’d dealt with on their farms, often resulting in a valued team member leaving the farm and/or continued feelings of resentment and frustration.

What can we do, as a community that loves farmers, farms, and farm workers, to support everyone in our local food system?

- Anita of Not Our Farm wants farm customers to get to know the whole farm: talk to both farm owners and employees at the farmers market or CSA pickup. Understand that a farm is very rarely just one person and appreciate the whole farm team.
- If you know a farmer struggling with labor issues, Berkshire Grown can help. They offer [technical assistance](#) for farmer members to help them strengthen their business practices. Contact jordan@berkshiregrown.org.