

# SHARING THE LOAD

*By Mary Alice Johnson*

**As challenging as raising food has been for me, dealing with human beings on my farm has been more challenging. Vegetables don't talk back.**

I could write a book about the interesting characters who have spent time on my farm: dear tiny Fong with a PhD in microbiology and an unending willingness to work; handsome, scheming Chrystain who managed to impregnate two women on the farm and cash \$1800 in false cheques written on our bank account; Suzanna from Germany who could run with a wheelbarrow full of rocks uphill, load my truck for market, bicycle 40 km to help me sell at market, bike another 20 km, and swim in the lake after work!

My challenge has been to learn how to inspire, teach, manage and love these many folks and still make a profit at the end of the year. This article is an attempt to write down some of the skills I have learned.

## Everyone is important

First of all, each person on the farm should be regarded as essential, and they need to see themselves as important to the success of the farm. This view, which is necessary for volunteers as well as paid staff, results from people having meaningful work and knowing how this fits into the whole farm plan. The farm manager's job is to know what needs to be done and convey that mission to those who do the work. I have a list of all the work done on the farm each year and I make lists constantly and prioritize tasks for the month, the week and the day.

When people arrive, I show them a list of what needs to happen in that season, what the on-going tasks are, and what new projects are waiting in the

wings. Each Monday morning we have a walkabout with all the staff to review what needs to be done. We make lists together and decide who will take on which tasks.

## Ownership and accountability

When people first come to my farm, I need to know what they hope to achieve for themselves. Most want a simpler, healthier life and the skills to be more self-sufficient. They hope they will be respected for this choice and their work valued. All hope to be rewarded for their work in a tangible way, but not everyone expects paid wages. A significant minority expects to pay for their experience much as they would a university degree. It's good to give new people a list of what is possible to achieve/learn on the farm, to write down what interests them the most, and to revisit that list as the season progresses.

At the same time, I need to let them know what work pays the bills for the farm. An apprentice can learn how to make herbal teas, build a cob house, or set up a misting system; but if we don't plant the potatoes, harvest the beets and

go to market early Saturday morning, there won't be money to pay for the heat, electricity and taxes.

## Building confidence

I try not to under-emphasize the difficulty of the work, the long hours, the adverse weather, the isolation and the rough living conditions. Nor do I over-emphasize the returns. That way, a stay on the



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farm can be better than expected rather than harder.

When someone starts a new task, I use the phrase, "This task is difficult because...". This has several advantages over saying something will be easy. First, it forces me to think through all the problems the task offers. After doing something many times, I forget how hard it was the first time. Second, it asks the person who is taking on the task to focus. Third, if they fail, they will not feel so bad; if they succeed, they will feel great. Confidence building is a big part of managing staff.

## Motivation and morale

Not only should staff believe their work is important to the success of the farm, but they need to feel that the success of the farm is important, starting with their own health and well-being, branching out to our immediate community, and continuing out to the world. I don't begrudge our sometimes lengthy discussions during our communal lunch break. This is a time to discuss why we are working so hard for such meagre financial returns. We make sure everyone is introduced to wonderful recipes using the food we grow. We take turns cooking for the group. After a meal of tasty and health-giving food, we talk about books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, a CBC program on losing our genetic diversity, or recent articles in *The Canadian Organic Grower*. I learn as much from these discussions as the staff. This knowledge has often kept me farming when I am discouraged, and it inspires those new to the farm to feel the same way.

The farm not only offers wonderful meals, important work, and new skills, it also changes people's bodies. They become tanned, trimmer, muscular and have more stamina, and I make a point of telling them so.

## Teamwork

Much is to be gained by working as a team rather than alone. This gives the experienced workers the opportunity to show others how to do a job efficiently. Teamwork gives a chance to ask how to make a task easier and faster. One answer may be to break the task up into smaller pieces, so we can see an end to each piece.

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Teamwork allows for challenges, such as "Let's see if we can get a third of this done by lunch," or a reward, such as finishing the day early after doing a difficult job or doing a job quickly. Teamwork also offers more opportunity to give praise.

## Care and comfort

Let your staff know you are looking out for them. Make sure everyone drinks lots of water. Keep a well-equipped first aid kit at hand. Bring muffins to eat while packing for market. If you offer housing, ask them if they are comfortable and how you can improve their living situation. In your budget, plan funds for workshops that are of particular interest to staff members. For example, if someone is particularly interested in bees and you

don't have experience with beekeeping, is there a course at your local community college? Plan a good orientation for new staff. The time taken to introduce them to the farm facilities, work, tools, staff and community will pay off.

## Developing leadership

Try to identify individual strengths and understand how those strengths support the group. For example, ask a real stickler for detail to be your quality control person. Be sure to give this person lead time to think about how to solve problems, rather than putting him/her on the spot for quick decisions. Others are quite comfortable dealing with an immediate crisis. Look for your peacemaker, the person who supplies those warm fuzzy feelings we get when we love the people on our team, such as sweet Andromeda who gave a beautiful blessing at our Thanksgiving table that will stay with us for years.

There are often people who are great with the public; give them a chance to shine when a visitor or a TV crew shows up at the farm. If folks are committed to a long-term stay, think about how their strengths contribute to the farm and how to give them new experiences where they might not choose to go themselves.

With people who are very knowledgeable about a subject but would never speak out in public, give them opportunities to speak about the topic first in small groups with your support and then later in their own workshops. If staff members are stuck on detail, ask them to do long-range planning for the whole farm.

Recognize staff members who never choose to work on detailed concrete problems on the farm. Although this may not be comfortable for them, introduce them to journal keeping, weather monitoring and crop cost analysis.

### How to fire a volunteer

Although the old adage goes, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," more than once I have asked a volunteer to leave. I believe in giving folks the benefit of the doubt but I usually get a sense within a week if they are working out. Usually, I ask someone to leave, not because they are slow workers or unskilled, but rather because they are negative, unhappy or using the farm experience to solve personal problems. Our farm prospers from people who bring a spirit of

excitement, joy, willingness and appreciation. Those who do not, often realize their experience on the farm is not working out and make the decision to leave. If they do not come to that decision before I do, I tell them frankly what I see and offer to take them to public transport giving them a choice of today, tomorrow or later in the week.

### People, not vegetables, are our business

After many years resenting having to deal with people problems when all I want to do is grow carrots, I have come to realize that people are my business. I am growing public awareness of the importance of good food, as well as growing good food. My apprentices and staff are my greatest advocates. Everyone who

walks down my driveway is a potential convert to organic farming. Hopefully, I can rise to the challenge with wisdom, kindness and a sense of humor.

*Mary Alice Johnson, a past president of COG, has ten acres of land in Sooke, Vancouver Island, BC, of which four acres are farmed intensely. She has farmed with Marika Nagasaka (for four seasons), Andromeda Cowley, Tracy Sutherland and many other apprentices. The farm sells organic vegetables, fruit, herbs and flowers to two farmers' markets and to half a dozen restaurants. The farm has a small box program and sells seed through [www.fullcircleseeds.com](http://www.fullcircleseeds.com) and at Seedy Saturdays.*

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