

MICHAEL PILARSKI IS LOOKING FOR FARMING PARTNERS

Proposal for a worker-owned farming cooperative.

By Michael Pilarski
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I am looking for partners to start a new farming venture in the Okanogan Valley in 2008.

Mission statement (under development)

The Biodiversity Farming Co-operative (or whatever name is chosen) is worker-owned and managed. Co-operative members work together to grow a wide diversity of edible, medicinal and useful trees, shrubs, vines, perennials and annuals. A Noah's ark of plants. The co-operative produces and markets food, medicinal plants, nursery stock, seeds and other crops. The farming methods utilize permaculture design and ecologically-sustainable methods. A goal is to help feed people in the Okanogan and provide expertise and plant material to diversify and strengthen Okanogan agriculture. The co-op will work towards establishing an Okanogan Biodiversity Farm (or whatever name is chosen). The farm is a model and an educational center to inspire and teach others and a place for co-operative members to live.

I aim to start planting in the spring of 2008. I am currently looking for land to lease. A long-term situation is obviously preferred, but it is possible to move forward even if we can only find a one-year lease on one acre. The better the soil the better. Hopefully the cooperative will purchase land at some point and/or other pieces of ground can be leased in future years.

Simpler is probably better at the beginning. Buying land is complex and time-consuming. Buying it cooperatively is even more daunting. Big communities are definitely more daunting than small ones.

This winter I am looking for a feasible farming situation in Okanogan county. Ideally this year's planting site will have some infrastructure so that I, and others, can live on site this growing season. I own a 21' yurt and the material to put up a tarped, outdoor living space. I own most of the hand tools needed to work a large garden. I do not own machinery, so would need to hire in someone to do land tillage if equipment is not available on site already. I already have large amounts of propagation material growing at my Hood River, Oregon half-acre planting including a lot of medicinal herbs and berry plants. I plan on digging 2,500 raspberry canes there this spring to sell and plant. I am ordering hundreds of trees, shrubs and vines.

Even if the 2008 planting is on a temporary site it can produce harvests and income while growing out plants for the next year's move. Hopefully by spring 2009 we will have a long-term situation secured so long-term perennial plantings can go in (if not already in 2008).

My vision is finding one, two, three (more?) partners who want to do this for the long haul. Depending on how many partners there are, we can utilize the help of one or several interns who want to learn for one growing season.

The more people the more housing is needed. A place with multiple living situations or a large farmhouse would be awesome but we will have to adapt to what the circumstances deliver. One possibility is that some of us live off-site. Renting nearby for instance. Some interns are willing to sleep in a tent if there is a reasonable, communal living space.

Irrigation. A reliable source of irrigation water is essential. A site with a functioning irrigation system would be sweet. Relatively low-cost options are available if irrigation needs to be installed. Some partners may already have some irrigation equipment.

Vehicles. MP has a small station wagon. Farming always requires hauling materials around: manure, fertilizer, chips, mulch, vegetables, supplies, etc. Bigger trucks haul more stuff. They are also more expensive to purchase and maintain. Financial arrangements will have to take vehicle contributions into account.

Finances. It is easy to envisage large amounts of money going out. Farming doesn't usually generate much income till at least partway through the first year. Many perennial crops don't start producing till year 2, 3, 4, 5 or longer. I expect our ecofarm will lose money the first year. Partners have to be willing to invest money as well as time and energy. Depending on how smart we are will determine when the farm starts paying for itself. Income from grants, donations and workshops can augment income from selling vegetables, fruits, berries, propagation material, medicinal herbs, seeds, and other crops. I have expense/income figures for the first two years of my half-acre planting in Hood River, Oregon. We will make a budget at the start of our farm enterprise, so everyone is on the same page. Partner applicants have to bring experience and resources to the table.

My Vision includes:

- * Focus on perennial plants. Lots of trees, shrubs, vines and herbaceous perennials. Overstory/understory systems. Annual food crops are always part of the system. Annuals can be grown in between widely-spaced perennials in the early years of a planting. Site design needs to take into account that some areas have to remain in the full sun.

- * High diversity of species. 200 species the first year should be doable. If things go well we can aim for adding hundreds of species a year for awhile.

- * Minimize use of fossil fuel equipment. Tractor use is largely limited to the establishment phase. Aim to demonstrate systems that can be managed cost-effectively with hand-labor. Key to success will be well-designed systems to maximize symbiotic relationships and minimize human work. Let the farm ecosystem do most of the work.

- * Food production for sale/barter is a main component. What particular crops depends on who gets involved. Raspberries, gooseberries, currants and many other berries and fruits are high on my list. Winter storage vegetables are also high on my list: potatoes, beets, carrots, parsnips, onions, winter squash, etc. We would plant a good-sized, diverse home garden to feed ourselves and guests.

- * Medicinal plants is one of my specialties and I have a long list of medicinal plants to put in.

- * Co-op members share the decision-making, the work and the proceeds.

- * Rolling permaculture. Start small and every year you plant additional land (for the first four years or so). Personally I would start with a half acre. I am a skilled and fast worker. A co-op could start with one or two acres. Each year, additional ground is worked up and soil building crops planted. This can include 3 or 4 green manure crops grown and tilled under in one year; one year crops like sweet clover; or oats undersown with red clover and you till the red clover under at the end of the 2nd year. There are lots of soil building crops and combinations. Farm long enough and you'll try most of them. The idea is that you are building up the soil before planting the long-term perennial crop. You try to avoid planting into a rough field that is going to give a lot of weed problems. I find it possible to add a half acre each year of new intensive planting for a year or two after the initial year. Then the workload from harvest and management becomes so large that there is little time to put in new plantings. In other words there is an upper limit on how much land one person can handle (or a small co-op) Above a certain point the farm hires in labor, (old way) or the co-op splits and there are now 2 co-ops, then 4, then 8 sister co-ops which split off in some organic way. The mother farm helps nurse the new farms by providing propagation material, examples, experience, and love.

Here is what need to be done to do a planting this next spring.

Order trees, shrubs, plants, seeds (already in progress).
Set up a greenhouse (if there is time and resources).
Do soil testing.
Obtain and apply organic fertilizers.
Rent or set up housing.
Set up irrigation.
Have quantities of mulch trucked in.
Assemble tools and supplies on site.
Assemble the plant material and seeds to be planted.
Plant, plant, plant throughout the spring.

I personally want to live on a farm where the garden is right outside my doorstep and I don't have to drive to get there. Next best is to live within walking distance, or biking distance. Due to zoning laws and government restraints on how many dwellings or people can be on a particular piece of land, we might be constrained in how many people can live on site. Some partners could live at the farm and others off-site. Some partners might already live nearby and have their own scenes. What makes sense? Time will tell. Let's be flexible as we see what parts people want to play in all this.

How many people? What kind of people?

Two to four coop members the first year. If things are going well, then more people can be added. Or perhaps another small coop would form and put in their own planting. The two separate co-ops run their own finances but can also have a high level of cooperation. I think the time is right for the proliferation of small cooperative farms. Huge tractors and machinery have enabled individual farmers to farm hundreds of acres by themselves with their families and sometimes a few hired hands. If fossil fuel agriculture winds down, there will be a big need for small-scale, low-input farmers.

Financial arrangements.

A worker-owned cooperative is my initial thought but what possible models are there to choose from? What is legally expedient? Obviously no one wants to get taken advantage of. I am prepared to sink time, money and heart to create a garden of Eden where I can live for years to come. That is my motive. But other partner might have different, but compatible, motives/visions.

Each partner will bring their unique mix of resources, money, time and experience. Some partners may have more money or resources. Others may have more time to contribute or more experience. Overall, however, there needs to be some sort of equality in what we are putting into the venture. If some partners have more money to buy land than others then how would their larger investment be reflected in the legal arrangement or ownership? Lots of questions. Each partner will need their own independent income stream from outside jobs, businesses, savings, etc. until such time as the farming can support us. The more humble the lifestyle the easier it is to support it.

Some first year expenses:

Plants and seed
Greenhouse
Fertilizer and soil amendments
Mulch
Soil tillage
Irrigation system
Water fees
Land rental
Tools
Transportation
Structures?
Office expenses, printing, website

FOUR SCENARIOS

Scenario A. I can't find anyone to partner up with. So I move to the Okanogan, lease a half-acre of suitable ground and farm it myself. Do the planting, weeding etc myself with the occasional help of a few friends. Very low budget. Finance the farm by bringing in money from wildcrafting, teaching and sale of inventory. Keep trying to find someone compatible.

Scenario B. One or two other people join in this cooperative venture and are willing to invest their time and money. Each one of us has a lot of experience with growing plants. We all have good skills, different, but complementary. We are all good at getting along and have fun together. By combining our energies we achieve great things. It can be possible to handle planting two or more acres, as well as additional acres in soil-building crops. We get a greenhouse up early enough the first year to start a large amount of herbs and vegetables starts. We purchase and obtain a large amount of planting stock. Some high-quality interns or volunteers show up. Everything gets planted in a good fashion, weeding is timely, everything makes good growth and the vegetable crops are bountiful. We sell enough to recoup some of our investment or, more likely, we plow it back into the farm venture. In other words everything goes real peachy-keen for the first year.

Scenario C. A lot of people respond to this call and we start out with a large core group. Four to six partners. Some have money to invest in getting us off to a faster start. The range of skills available increases. Someone(s) is good at words on paper, organization, marketing, publicity, writing grants, and so forth. We put in a successful large planting. We acquire lots of rare (and usually expensive) plant material. Lots of educational workshops are organized and filled with students. The first year is a great start and the 2nd year can be even more significant.

Scenario D. Things don't go well. Two of the major things that could go wrong

- 1) People don't get along. Someone leaves, We stick together but no one has fun. Interns don't work out (but it is easier to tell them to leave than a partner). If we are leasing land, then relationship with the land-owner may be a factor.
- 2) The plantings don't do well. Too many weeds, or weeding not done at the right time or done well enough. The soil isn't good and things are stunted or die. Pests, diseases, gophers, and deer cause significant losses. If the irrigation doesn't work well or is broken at a critical point then some plants can suffer setbacks. Severe weather can affect yields. Farming is a gamble even under the best of conditions.

Obviously I am not voting for scenario D. Careful selection of partners and interns should mitigate against people problems and close attention to our farming practices should mitigate against plant problems. Matching our goals with our capabilities (and finances) can enable a good outcome. Optimistic but realistic. Able to rise to challenges.

A few thoughts on interns and volunteers.

My definition of an intern is someone who comes from outside the area and we provide housing. Accommodations can be rustic or tenting. The interns are there for the whole growing season or a significant amount. They are there to learn. Room and board, perhaps a stipend.

A volunteer is someone who lives locally who comes and helps us because they want to learn and/or want to help out because the co-op is a good cause. They are there off and on, usually for just part of the day. They have their own home and social life. They can be rewarded with plants or produce.

How many interns can a farm use? Depends . . . depends on a lot of things. Two main things 1) They have to be hard working and thorough with an attention to details. 2) They have to be easy to work with. Fun is a real asset. Ability to assimilate instructions well. No chip on the shoulder. Good interns can get a lot done. However your contact doesn't end at the edge of the field. They are part of the family. They have needs and a good farmer/intern relationship means that both gives to the other.

As a rule of thumb we could use a ratio of one intern per each co-op partner. So if we had two partners this in 2008 we could have two interns. Interns would ideally farm with us for the whole season. After a couple

months the interns would have a lot of training under their belts, know where things are, and how things work. At that point it can be possible to add more interns. The new interns would be partially under the guidance of the old interns and partially under the guidance of the partners.

My personal experience with farmer/intern relationships is large. I interned at a dozen farms when I was young. I founded and ran the Rural Apprentice Program from 1974 to 1983. It was one of the first WWOOF-type programs in the US. About 20 people have interned under me over the years. I have related to about 40 interns at Sunny Pine Farm since 1999.

I am in the early stages of creating a "Center for Outdoor Herbal Education". This is a school without walls concept. However it will have one or more campuses (herb gardens). The first campus will be my herb garden in Hood River, Oregon. The Okanogan planting would be the second campus. This would be one means to bring students to the farm. Five herb teachers are involved in the beginning phases and several herb schools. Eventually we envision affiliation with many herbal schools and teachers.

Ideally, everyone involved will have taken a permaculture design course. This will help put us on the same page.

I recommend two books:

Creating Harmony: Conflict Resolution in Community. Hildur Jackson, editor. 1999. Gaia Trust, Denmark. 269 pages. Distributed by Chelsea Green, Wind River Junction, Vermont. This book is about much more than just conflict resolution. It is about creating ecovillages in a wide context. Many excellent writers from around the world. The conflict resolution practices outlined are applicable throughout society.

Creating a Life Together. Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities. By Diana Leafe Christian. 2003. New Society Publishers.

Some pieces to the puzzle may be starting to come together.

A local friend recently mentioned that he and his wife have purchased 75 acres in the Okanogan valley, of which 30 acres is irrigated farmland. Half of the irrigated land they want to use for horse pasture but 15 acres is available for cultivation. They don't have time to farm it and are open to further discussion of leasing it. There is an old farmhouse on the property.

Michael Pilarski has 35 years of experience with plants. Other assets include: lots of propagation material growing at my Hood River planting; good selection of gardening tools; exceptional agriculture library; an herb business (fresh and dried herbs in bulk) with established markets; and Friends of the Trees Society's network. I have lived in the Okanogan off and on since 1972.

These initial thoughts are just the tip of the iceberg of what needs to be considered. Anyone interested should contact me.

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