

Horticultural Training at Abbey Home Farm

Abbey Home Farm has been delivering Horticultural Apprenticeships for over 12 years now and over that time has developed a structured and in depth strategy for training staff. At any one time we will have 3 apprentices and at least 1 trainee on the team. We are currently delivering both 2.5 year apprenticeships and 7 month Traineeships. Below is a complete overview of how training is delivered.

Venue

Abbey Home Farm is a 1600 acre farm, it has been Organic for 28 years and produces Organic Beef, Lamb, Pork, Chicken, Eggs, Cereals, Fruit, Vegetables, Cut Flowers and Dairy with on site butcher, baker, Dairy Processing, Café and Farm Shop. There is also a comprehensive education set up providing day and residential visits for schools and other groups as well as a pre-school nursery.

The vegetable enterprise is 13.5 acres producing 80 different crop lines of fruit and vegetables from 6 poly tunnels, Large Glasshouse a 3.5 acre market garden and 10 acres of field scale veg production as well as Agroforestry system and Orchard areas.

The variety of production scales and methods and the wide range of crops provides the perfect setting for giving apprentices and trainees a very broad and varied learning experience, giving them the relevant skills and knowledge to suit whatever direction their future careers take.

Traineeship

Time period – April to October

Pay – Free accommodation, lunch and £50/week for expenses.

Educational Aims – Cover in depth all Horticultural aspects of commercial organic vegetable production.

Method – Continuous on the job mentoring, weekly 1hr theory sessions and regular walk rounds to discuss relevant seasonal subjects. Programme of Farm visits and attending variety of events.

Cost – Free.

Theory Subjects covered – Soil, Crop Families, Rotations, Propagation, Ground Preparation, Protected Cropping, Compost production and use, Green Manures, Weeding and Weeds, Pest and Disease, Tractor Driving, Horticultural Machinery, Irrigation, Soft Fruit Management, Bulk Harvest, Crop Storage, Preparing for winter.

Practical Skills – Trainees will cover practical applications of all of above and constantly receive practical skills training during their working day throughout the seven month placement, covering all practical skills required to grow a wide range of crops.

Not Covered – We see the Traineeship as a very comprehensive introduction to commercial production covering all practical horticultural skills. We do not believe it is possible to give someone all the relevant skills and knowledge to start a business or become a Head Grower or Assistant grower in a 7 month period and strongly advise all our trainees to continue onto our 2.5 year apprenticeship or seek further employment experience within the horticultural sector before attempting to start their own business or apply for assistant or Head grower positions.

The key reason for this is that every growing season is totally different and before becoming a skilled grower one must have a few seasons under your belt. Also we believe that producing high quality crops through the winter is the difference between success and failure in a horticultural business and our traineeship does not run through the winter. See Apprenticeship below for detail of subjects not covered in traineeship.

Continued overleaf.

Apprenticeship

Time period – 2.5 years, three summer seasons and two winters

Pay – Minimum wage, profit share and subsidised housing.

Educational Aims – Cover in depth all aspects of Organic Vegetable Production.

Method – Continuous on the job mentoring, weekly 1hr theory sessions and regular walk rounds to discuss relevant seasonal subjects.

Cost – £480/year

Theory Subjects covered – Soil, Crop Families, Rotations, Propagation, Ground Preparation, Protected Cropping, Compost production and use, Green Manures, Weeding and Weeds, Pest and Disease, Tractor Driving, Horticultural Machinery, Irrigation, Soft Fruit Management, Bulk Harvest, Crop Storage, Preparing for Winter.

Organic Principles, Organic Standards, Converting to Organic, Inspection, Routes to market, Future Employment options, Starting your own business, Finances of growing, Different approaches to production, Sourcing Infrastructure and equipment, Finding somewhere to grow, Staffing options and management, Crop Planning, Seed – choosing and sourcing, Polytunnels – sourcing, siting, erecting and re-covering, Machinery theory, Machinery practical, Time management Prioritising, Agro-Forestry, Apple pruning, Preparing a business plan.

Practical Skills – Trainees will cover practical applications of all of above and constantly receive practical skills training during their working day throughout the seven month placement, covering all practical skills required to grow a wide range of crops. In their final year they will receive one to one sessions with the head grower focusing on field scale production, ploughing, machinery and starting to look at their future career, preparing business plans, crop plans, c.v's all focused on their next step on their career whether as an employed grower or starting their own business.

Responsibility

This is a key aspect of the apprenticeship, with constant mentoring apprentices are given specific areas of responsibility throughout their time at the farm, they are encouraged to manage their time, prioritise and manage staff within their allotted area of responsibility.

Season 1(6 months) – Harvest – apprentice is responsible for monitoring stock levels, manage harvest and pre-packing. Really good way to immediately immerse apprentices into the commercial world of fruit and veg, time pressure and quality control key areas focused on.

Season 2(12 months) – Poly tunnels – apprentice is responsible for all aspects of poly tunnel production, ground prep, planting, irrigation, tending and harvesting throughout a whole 12 month season, great place to learn key horticultural skills with the advantage of being in control of the weather.

Season 3(12 months) – Propagation and Market Garden – apprentice is responsible for all propagation, 60 different crops, 410 sowings in a season. As well as managing all activities in The market garden – ground prep, planting, weeding, irrigating, pest and disease management, harvest. This final year is where the apprentices truly refine their skills to the point where they should not be daunted by starting their own businesses.