

INCUBATOR FARMS

By Charlotte Scott



A few years ago, my partner and I started looking for land where we could start a full-time vegetable farm and CSA. Soon enough the reality of the current real estate market caught up with the dream.

It became obvious that we were unlikely to find arable, affordable land within a reasonable distance of our market. Furthermore, we realized that although we might chance upon affordable land or meet a landowner who wanted to rent or lend us acreage, the basic financial investments required for vegetable farming would land us in more debt than we could handle while establishing a business and family.

As luck would have it, a colleague of ours was launching a new incubator farm in the hills northeast of Gatineau, Quebec. The Plate-forme Agricole de l'Ange-Gardien was designed with people like us in mind: young and new farmers short on cash but full of the desire to farm, and the skills and experience to operate a small business. We chose to take on

the challenge of being new organic farmers at the incubator farm.

An incubator farm facilitates the creation of new farm businesses by providing participants with land, equipment and infrastructure at an affordable price

—it's like office space for farmers. Incubators usually arise out of partnerships between non-profit groups, communities, municipalities and agricultural colleges, and are

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funded by government and private grants, donations and membership fees. Incubators also provide community and mentorship to those with limited ties to Canadian farming culture.

Many incubator farms point to the Intervale Center in Burlington, Vermont, as inspiration. In 1986, Burlington citizens reclaimed and restored



Members of the Centre d'Initiative en Agriculture de la Région de Coaticook (CIARC). From left to right: Line Boulet, Myriam Fortier, James Sheldon, Jonathan Bruderlein and Jolianne Demers.

neglected municipal land and transformed it into an internationally recognized headquarters for sustainable agriculture. Intervale has an incubator farm, a nursery, a compost company and green spaces. The organization provides guidance to groups who want to nurture new farmers and put fallow land into productive hands.

Incubators provide a venue for a diversity of new farmers with different needs and goals. Bob Baloch realized he wanted to get back into farming after starting a backyard garden in Brampton, Ontario. His kids stopped fussing about eating their vegetables after tasting homegrown produce. It was time to grow more food, but he was afraid that the investment required would put his family at risk. Baloch started a small plot on the McVean incubator farm in Brampton operated by FarmStart.

“At McVean, obstacles can be tested. I can put in the time and make it work,” says Baloch. He now farms four acres at McVean

to supply specialty vegetables for his CSA and local farmers’ markets. Bob spent much of his youth at his grandparents’ farm in Pakistan. Incubator farms create opportunities for new Canadians with informal and/or multi-generational agricultural experience to make use of their skills, and to participate in Canada’s local food network.

Jolianne Demers and Jonathan Bruderlein of Ferme Méliot work three acres at the Centre d’Initiative en Agriculture de la Région de Coaticook (CIARC) in Quebec’s Eastern Townships. Both have degrees in agricultural science and years of experience on organic farms. “We couldn’t buy a farm right away,” says Demers. “Had we rented land somewhere else, we would not have been able to benefit from all the facilities and machinery that are at the incubator. The CIARC allows us to prove the financial viability of our business so it’ll be easier to get financing to buy a farm. Being at the

incubator also allows us to test out the region to see if we like it here.”

Enterprise-building is central to the mandate of many incubator farms, and farmers often need a comprehensive business plan before being considered. “Projects at the incubator need to be fairly fleshed out—farmers need to want to have a business, not a hobby,” says Ann Levesque, Coordinator at the Plate-forme Agricole in l’Ange-Gardien. “If you ask me ‘what should I grow?,’ I can’t help you—farmers need the passion to be convinced about their products to make it work.”

Some incubators, such as the CIARC in Coaticook and the Incubateur d’Entreprises Agro-alimentaires de Mirabel (IEAM) located north of Montreal, are connected to colleges and agriculture programs. A formal education, ideally in agriculture, is a prerequisite to farming at these incubators. According to Marie-Josée Ferron, the coordinator at the IEAM, the key to success is placing greater value on farmer education and training. “There must be an emphasis on developing management skills,” she adds. This emphasis on formal training plays into Quebec’s concept of *la relève agricole* (the process of taking over farms from the older generation), where government funding opportunities are often scaled according to one’s formal agricultural training.

McVean farm takes a different approach to new farmers, helping farm-curious newbies, as well as those with more experience in agriculture and business. Two acres of land at McVean are set aside for “test croppers” who experiment with a quarter-acre before moving on to the “start-up” and “enterprise” stages, which come with



Richard Williams hosts a CSA drop-off at the Plate-Forme Agricole de l'Ange-Gardien.

more acreage and funding opportunities. Monika Korzun, McVean's New Farmer Coordinator, saw three of last season's six test croppers continue farming. "The point of test cropping is to experience farming in Canada and help you determine whether it is for you. If you decide by the end of the season that it is not, that is great. Now you know."

Since we were part of the first generation of farmers at our incubator (which had been fallow land with no buildings), we had many opportunities to decide whether farm work was right for us. We helped build the high tunnels and wash station; tinkered with old tractors and cultivation tools; observed the installation of wells, septic tanks and underground irrigation networks; and waged an ongoing battle with quackgrass and thistle (which spread with great enthusiasm after the fallow

field was plowed under). The experience provided us with a realistic idea of the time, energy and money that would be required to build our own farm—something you can't learn from books.

Joyce and Stanley Ramnarine were test croppers during the 2010 season at McVean. Both had done small-scale farming in their native Guyana. At McVean, they tested crops such as bora, seim, poi, karella and other produce little known to conventional Canadian markets. "We both have full-time jobs," says Joyce. "We both wanted to farm and were fortunate to have the opportunity. This made it easier for us and we were happy just to be on the farm. We have gained marketing skills, and now are more knowledgeable in working with the soil, weed con-

rol and crop rotation. Sharing with 18 other farmers is a truly wonderful and remarkable experience."

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Coordinating multiple, overlapping projects on the same land is one of the greatest challenges at incubator farms. Land needs to be managed carefully to avoid misuse, especially for those practicing monoculture, or with limited experience with crop rotation. "Farmers need to build the soil on the whole parcel," says Ann Levesque. "If you plan on using three acres over three years, you need to rent it all now and plant green manures."

Land is already becoming scarce at some incubators as established farmers require more land, and the model gains popularity with new farmers. As Bruderlein and Demers discovered, this can result in unwelcome challenges like being assigned heavily compacted soil next to a busy road. At Intervale, limited space and a saturated local market for vegetables means that new projects must ca-



Bob Baloch (right) and his father-in-law Mohammed Sarwar, a retired farmer who helps Bob with the farm work.

ter to niche markets with value-added products and specialty produce.

Problem solving is an especially important lesson of the incubator experience. From coordinating tractor bookings to alternating days at the wash station, respect and cooperation between farmers is essential to the smooth functioning of any incubator project.

“Everyone has their own (sometimes crazy) ideas and you all have to coexist with the innate differences of approach,” says Bruderlein. “You have to be able to trust the other people.” Most incubators have regular meetings where coordinators consult with farmers to determine priorities.

More often than not, cooperation is also financially beneficial. “When farmers take their produce to the farmers’ market that is located in front of the McVean Farm, they all set the same price for the produce, rather than competing with each other,” says Monika Korzun. Having multiple farmers in a concentrated area also means savings on shipping and bulk orders, and opportunities for cross-promotion. Elmarie Roberts, who operates Sunbird Farm at the Haliburton Community Farm in Victoria, B.C., contributes to—and partakes in—a collective CSA program, and collaborates on transportation and marketing costs.

Intervale recently developed a productive way of dealing with tractor and equipment rental and maintenance, a perennial sore spot at many incubators. A group of mentor farmers created the Farmers Equipment Company and purchased most of the farm’s equipment with a small business grant. The company rents equip-



Charlotte Scott and Richard Williams of Ferme Lève-tôt harvesting tomatoes.

ment to individual enterprises at Intervale while taking care of maintenance and repair. They use their profits to purchase new equipment after consulting with other farmers to determine what the centre needs most.

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The collective character of incubators also reduces feelings of isolation. “Many new farmers are coming at it from a clean slate,” says Sri Sethuratnam, Start-up Program Manager at FarmStart. New farmers might not have access to agricultural communities or knowledge networks through family or school. It’s a lifesaver to have someone to talk to on rough days, and to share knowledge about everything from a fussy seeder to accounting. Manmeet Singh, a test cropper at McVean, says his incubator “is a great family-like environment where we can

share our problems and concerns, and we share our crops too. It is a great learning environment.”

At McVean Farm, community-building and education was an unexpected high point of Bob Baloch’s work. During the project’s first season, he found himself explaining the incubator concept to suburbanites who were surprised to discover the weedy lot down the road was viable farmland. Open houses and farm tours have had a tremendous response from the local community. For our part, local old-timers often stop in for an impromptu tour of our incubator in l’Ange-Gardien, amazed to see people labouring in the fields. This kind of personal interaction has done wonders for the incubator’s reputation.

While the incubator farm is a fine start, the model poses some significant challenges. Farming is most often limited to market vegetables, as infrastructure constraints, short tenure, and municipal regulations can discourage investments in livestock or equipment for field crops. On-site housing is not an option,

which can be quite problematic in the early spring when greenhouse furnaces need tending in the middle of the night, or when a farmer is juggling a day job and child care in the city with farm duties in the countryside. And, because farmers normally lease their land for a maximum of five years, there is always the question of “What next?”

It’s important for Bruderlein and Demers to own their own farm someday. They have a transition plan to make the jump from incubator to permanent land tenure, which includes building their business to a level that can support mortgage payments before buying the farm. Manmeet Singh is also looking for a farm of his own after his time at the incubator. “The biggest problem,” he says, “is that it is hard to find small holdings near cities and then installing infrastructure and buying machinery, which are somewhat expensive steps.”

There is no doubt that the logistics and finances of becoming a land-owning farmer are complex. “The government does provide some money to farmers, but most programs and grants support large, industrial, established farmers,” says Monika Korzun. “In Quebec we are lucky to have [financing] programs,” explains Ann Levesque, but such programs don’t exist throughout Canada. “The government must take charge of the future of its own agriculture, and take seriously those who prove they can take the risk and succeed.”

“It’s not just the government who is going to oversee the transition of land to new farmers,” adds Line Boulet, the coordinator of the incubator in Coaticook, “We have to work together. We have to have exchanges with our fellow farmers, help each other.” Sri Sethuratnam

notes that the momentum for the McVean farm has been local from the start. “The community has been involved at the grassroots,” he says, “It’s been more important than any political relationship.”

Sethuratnam sees the incubator as a stepping stone, and is looking into ways to get more fallow municipal land into production. “At any given time, we have five years,” he says in reference to the rolling lease agreement McVean farm has with the Toronto Land Conservation Authority. “Farmers need thirty to forty years,” Bruderlein says. He stresses farmers need to know they will be in one place long enough to benefit from their investments of time, money and energy.

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For others, owning a farm simply doesn’t make financial sense. Bob Baloch would prefer to lease municipal land, and invest his profits in machinery and a greenhouse. “Moving to rural areas is not really an option for some farmers,” adds Sethuratnam. “Some will continue to produce for city markets—this need pushes us to find answers.” He notes that the Intervale Center is asking the same questions after twenty years that McVean Farm is asking after three years.

While the incubator model may not address all the obstacles facing new farmers, the day-to-day challenges are tempered by community support, the development of skills and experience, and the

opportunities to cooperate and prosper with minimal financial risk. In spite of the continued gap between farm incomes and the price of land, those farmers who plan to move off the incubator are, on the whole, optimistic about finding their own piece of land—someday. Others count their time at the incubator as essential to making community and professional contacts that may blossom into new farming opportunities.

Many times this summer, I considered what my farming experience would feel like under a crushing debt load with no wiggle room for mistakes or experimentation. I feel lucky to be working hard at building a business while enjoying the luxury of pursuing this colourful, dirty, fresh, farming fantasy.

Charlotte Scott grows organic vegetables with her husband, Richard Williams, at Plate-Forme Agricole de l’Ange-Gardien, in Quebec’s Outaouais region. fermelevetot@gmail.com; popetski@gmail.com

Resources:

FarmStart: www.farmstart.ca

Plate-forme Agricole de l’Ange-Gardien:

www.demarretafermebio.com

Centre d’Initiative en Agriculture de la Région de Coaticook:

www.produitsdelaferme.com/ciarc

Incubateur d’Entreprises Agro-alimentaires de Mirabel:

www.cfam.qc.ca

Intervale Center:

www.intervale.org

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Photo on pg 12: Plate-forme Agricole de l’Ange-Gardien farm seen from across a field of organic oats.