

# Mentorships Cultivate New Farmers

*Programs provide crucial knowledge transfer as agriculture faces an aging workforce.*

**N**o one steps into an agriculture-related career knowing everything. Even farmers with years of experience learn something new every day. Nevertheless, the more knowledge and experience young people can acquire at the beginning of their careers in agriculture, the better their chances of success.

It is an especially critical time to help the next generation get established in agriculture, as more farmers reach retirement age while significantly fewer farmers are new to the profession. At a 2024 event releasing the 2022 Ag Census, former U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recognized the continued rise in the average age of farmers and the need to encourage more people into the profession. Young producers, age 34 or younger, amounted to only 296,480 of the 3.37 million producers in 2022, according to the Ag Census.

To bridge the gap between farmers near the end of their careers and those just beginning, organizations across the U.S. offer mentorship opportunities for young and beginning farmers. These promote farmer education, technical assistance and support to create successful farm businesses.

One such organization is Marbleseed, a nonprofit established in 1995, formerly known as the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES). The organization primarily focuses on supporting farmers in their transition toward sustainable, organic farming systems.

*Nic Stapel, of Cellanie Farms, Waunakee, Wisconsin, is learning about organic farming from Marbleseed mentor Harriet Behar.*



COURTESY OF MARBLESEED

Tay Fatke, Marbleseed's farmer education manager, says the organization currently offers two mentorship programs: Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship and mentorship through the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP).

For the last 18 seasons, Marbleseed's Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship Program has paired experienced organic farmers with applicants interested in learning best practices for organic farming and preparing for organic certification.

New to Marbleseed's offerings, TOPP is a nationwide USDA program that was launched in 2022 with partners in six U.S. regions. Marbleseed is a TOPP partner in the Midwest region, primarily working in Indiana and Wisconsin.

The success in these programs, Fatke explains, is in the mentor-to-mentee relationship built over time.

"We're letting farmers know they aren't alone," he says. "The organic community likes to support each other; they tend to not compete. There's so many opportunities. This is mentorship that's more guided, and it encourages beginning farmers to stay with what they're doing and rely on each other."

Years down the line, Fatke would like to measure success in the number of mentee farmers that become mentors.

"It's less likely that generations stay on the farm, so there's an education piece missing, and these programs help young and beginning farmers fill that gap," he adds.

## > MENTOR TO MENTEE

Beginning farmer Nic Stapel learned about Marbleseed's Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship Program through word of mouth. He enrolled and was paired with one of the original founders of the MOSES mentorship program, Harriet Behar.

In December of 2023, Stapel and his wife, Betsy, purchased a 140-acre farm in Waunakee, Wisconsin. Currently, Cellanie Farms is an organic-in-transition, regenerative, mixed-production farm and orchard.

"Having the opportunity to buy land north of Madison in a fairly populated area, protect that land from development and create a place where the community can come together to experience agriculture and meet their producers turned out to be a very important mission for us," Stapel says.



Young farmer Dylan Farrell rents an area inside of the greenhouse at A&W Farms, in Cambridge, Iowa, for his organic vegetable operation.

For the last year, he has worked with Behar to transition the farm to organic, a process that takes three years. It's a process that Behar knows well.

Since 1973, Behar has grown organic vegetables and has held several roles in promoting organic farming and transition, and mentorship alike, in addition to selling organic vegetables at her local farmers' market. In 1988, she joined a group of local farmers who wanted to encourage organic farming in the La Farge, Wisconsin, area and became a marketer. That group of farmers eventually became Organic Valley, a large, farmer-owned cooperative and organic food brand.

As Behar's interest in organic farming grew, she took on a role as an organic inspector, visiting farms and processing facilities all over the U.S., Central America, Europe and Japan. At the same time, she worked for MOSES as the senior organic specialist, which led to her starting the nonprofit's mentorship program.

For 14 seasons, Behar paired mentors and mentees, and monitored the growth of the mentees through midseason and end-of-season surveys.

"Two things were almost universal," Behar says. "The mentees said having a mentor helped mature their operation by two or three years, and they would not be at the level they were in without the mentor. They also said their mentor helped them focus, which is very important. And, the mentors would say they felt like their place was to be a sounding board and to help the mentees focus."

After the pandemic, Behar took an 18-month break. Now, she actively provides farmer technical assistance in addition to advocacy for the Organic Farmers Association.

Behar says that throughout her career, she's always felt like a mentor, answering the organic info line at MOSES and guiding farmers and facilities in earning organic certification.

Through Marbleseed, she and Stapel were introduced in January of 2024, shortly after the

Stapels purchased the farm. Location proximity, the needs of the mentee and the experience of the mentor made the pair a perfect fit.

This year, the farm is focused on diversified vegetables, specialty crops, root crops and peach trees. Eventually, he and Betsy want to host events for the community to engage and pick their own produce.

"Harriet is very thoughtful and takes a measured approach to the way that she mentors. I think having her perspective on what's worked and what's not, things like companion cropping or field design, have been helpful," Stapel says. "Harriet would say our appetite is much bigger than our stomach at this point because we're taking on a lot, but we've been able to accelerate our progress. Having her influence helps me and my wife make sure that the systems we're designing will function properly in a market garden setting."

Finding mentorship has been beneficial to Stapel and Betsy, who don't come from agriculture backgrounds.

"Harriet's been very good about not giving us too much too quickly. But, also, we find common ground with other farmers through conferences, like the Organic Vegetable Production Conference. Sitting with those seasoned, diversified farmers, they have the small tips and tricks that you wouldn't pick up if you weren't around them," he says.

## > EXPANDED MENTORSHIPS

Before TOPP was financed by USDA, Behar explains she had a lot to do with this program's founding. Doing advocacy work, she says former U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, from Ohio, tried to write mentorship programs into the farm bill without success.

"When Vilsack was looking at what to do to help farmers transition to organic, we said farmers need technical assistance and mentorship," Behar says. "TOPP is run by regional nonprofits because we felt those were the people who knew how to identify good mentors and had direct connections with possible >

mentees. We found the one-on-one interaction results in more success, because rather than talking to somebody over the phone, you've got someone following you through your journey.”

In TOPP's first year, the program reached more than 15,000 people through 222 events held across the country. The partnerships with local organizations have contributed to the development of free educational resources, technical assistance workshops, organic workforce training and mentorship programs.

## > LABOR4LEARNING

Growing up in the suburbs of Ankeny, Iowa, Dylan Farrell learned about Practical Farmers of Iowa through his environmental science teacher in high school. He initially wanted to enlist in the military after graduation, but he changed plans two years ago and decided to pursue farming instead.

The Labor4Learning program pairs beginning farmers seeking employment and additional training in farm management and production skills with experienced farmers looking for help on their farm.

Through the program, Farrell was introduced to A&W Farms, in Cambridge, Iowa. He says he has gained valuable insights and mentorship from its owners, Caleb Akin and Noah Wendt, first-generation farmers who have been in business for 20 growing seasons.

Over the last two years, A&W Farms has allowed Farrell to rent an acre of land and part of a greenhouse to start his own business, while still working for the farm.

“I didn't have any experience coming into the Labor4Learning program, so it taught me about equipment operation, business management, and they helped me get going with growing vegetables, marketing, finances, farm operating loans and general knowledge of making a business profitable,” he says.

Some Labor4Learning participants, such as Farrell, continue working for the farm and find their footing.

“They've been mentors for me with starting my own business, helping me get organic certification and trying to guide me with my business,” he says.

In his second year of business, Farrell is learning valuable tips to grow his vegetable business, including borrowing large hay bales from A&W to act as a wind barrier surrounding his vegetable plot, figuring out which fences work best for deer control and finding additional help when labor is scarce.

“It's hard to find somebody that's motivated to work in agriculture and willing to learn; it's a challenging field,” he says. “Sometimes, it's planting or tilling for 12 hours a day, but you have to get it done before hard weather hits. It would be good to have more laborers, but if the farm is not profitable, you can't hire more people.”

Although officially no longer a Labor4Learning participant, A&W Farms and Farrell are now working through a TOPP mentorship with the Iowa Organic Association to help Farrell gain organic certification.

“Since we are first-generation farmers, we're able to give Dylan a perspective of trying new things. We're able to give him a decent perspective to his vegetable production and be open-minded,” Wendt explains. “We're at a point, too, we've been farming for 20 years, so we have quite a bit of experience and knowledge on how to run the business, and it's helpful to give him that aspect, too. Some of the benefits we get from him is an open, younger mind that challenges us, as well.

“He's got a unique, entrepreneurial mind and good set of management skills, so we've been able to put him on deeper-level management stuff,” Wendt adds. “This year, he took over the Organic System Plan. I helped coach him, but he did it, and that was helpful to the farm.”

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To learn about more Marbleseed, visit [Marbleseed.org](http://Marbleseed.org). More information on Practical Farmers of Iowa can be found at [PracticalFarmers.org](http://PracticalFarmers.org).

Visit [OrganicTransition.org](http://OrganicTransition.org) to learn more about TOPP. ///



□ *Dylan Farrell uses hay bales for wind control surrounding his organic vegetable plot.*