Request for Applications for the Incubator Farmer Program—Horticulture

Last year, CCE Tioga purchased a 107-acre farm in Candor, NY and officially named it Hilltop Community Farm. One of the primary goals of Hilltop Community Farm (HCF) is to serve as a farm incubator for beginning farmers and a model demonstrating regenerative agriculture techniques and systems. We envision a diverse set of aspiring farmers working the land using regenerative techniques; learning from on-site mentors as well as experienced local farmers, Cornell staff and researchers, and from each other in a mutually beneficial system.

HCF Plan for Crop/Horticulture Farmers

Land tenure: 3 years

We will work with you from the start to build your farm business, including marketing your products, so that in three years you can take your business to your own farm or lease acreage from a local farmer. There is an opportunity for fruit tree and berry growers to have a longer tenure at the incubator.

Land acreage size: ½ acre

There will be six ½ acre plots available, suitable for annual vegetable, cut flower, herb or specialty crop production. Farmers will be asked to sign a land stewardship agreement that gives them responsibility for maintaining their plot using regenerative agriculture practices. CCE will not require farmers to be certified organic but the farmers will adhere to Organic Practices laid out by the USDA’s National Organic Program (NOP). Any fertilizers, soil additives, pesticides /fungicides used must be OMRI- approved.

HCF will provide:

1. ½ acre plot of land suitable for crop production per farmer. The entire crop growing area will be surrounded by an 8’ tall deer exclusion fence. The plots were plowed, disked, cover cropped, and limed in 2022.
2. Water access—a shared well will be provided for the farmer to use on their plot. Guidelines for irrigation will be determined at the beginning of each season. You will be expected to use water wisely and respect others’ right to water use.

3. Rental of 40 hp New Holland tractor w/ front end loader and cultivating attachments at 10 dollars an hour. All farmers will be trained in the use of the tractor prior to use.

4. A Walk-in Cooler for shared use

5. A wash station for produce/crops

6. Hand tools for cultivation and harvesting and a tool shed for storing the tools

7. Use of a high tunnel starting in the 2024 season.

8. CCE will work with you to locate a greenhouse grower who will grow your vegetable starts.

9. CCE will provide advice on best practices for soil health and sustainability. Technical assistance with the raising and marketing of your crops will be available from CCE Tioga staff as well as experts at Cornell University, Cornell Small Farms, and other Cornell Cooperative Extension staff throughout the state. You will also have connections with the Tioga County Agriculture Resource Group.

10. Mentoring will be provided in setting up basic irrigation, weed control and cultivation techniques, season extension, crop planning, seedling production, harvesting, etc.

11. Recordkeeping is an important part of farming, and the staff at CCE Tioga will help you set up a recordkeeping system for your farm venture.

12. As part of your farm incubator training, you will be expected to learn or take courses about how to make a business plan and work with a mentor to create a strong business plan. You will be expected to take two online courses from Cornell Small Farms this winter: Plan Your Farm and BF 102 Exploring Markets and Profits. Plan Your Farm is self-paced and BF 102 begins January 12th and ends on February 16th.

13. The staff at CCE Tioga will provide technical assistance for you in finding land to lease or purchase at the end of your incubator tenure. CCE Tioga is a regional navigator for the Farmland for a New Generation and will help connect you to resources to access land.

14. CCE Tioga will provide the beginning farmer a comprehensive soil test report from Cornell’s Soil Health Laboratory that will serve as a baseline for soil health for your plot.

15. CCE Tioga staff will assist you in applying for a microloan to finance your venture (Kiva loan, FSA, etc.) if you need access to funds to launch your farm business.
The beginning farmer is responsible for:

a. Committing to working on your plot for 20 hours per week. CCE staff works regular work-week hours, so if you require our assistance, it should be during regular business hours. You will have access to your plot during daylight hours every day of the week.

b. The cost of the plot is $100 the first year, increasing $100 each year. A deposit of $200 will also be required at the beginning of your tenure to cover the cost of plowing/cover cropping should you decide the leave the incubator. The $200 will be returned at the end of your tenure.

c. Developing a detailed business plan that includes a budget and potential revenue streams

d. If you use a greenhouse grower to grow your starts, you are responsible for their fees.

e. Supplies and investments for your venture; this may include: seeds, drip tape irrigation, compost, fertilizer, seeds/plants, harvest bins, marketing supplies, etc.

f. The incubator farmer is responsible for weed management on his/her/their plot. This is of primary importance as a weedy field can lead to weed bank that will make cultivating crops difficult for years. When weeds grow, we will expect a timely response to manage the weeds.

g. The soil is stony! We will work with you to find a place to dump stones. Do not leave stones or weeds or other materials in the laneways—it will impede our ability to keep the laneways mowed.

h. We expect the incubator farmers to respect that their farm enterprise has been partially subsidized by very low-cost land access and infrastructure, and commit to seeking marketing channels that do not directly reduce or undercut the ability of our local farmers to sell their products. That is, we expect you to charge the “going rate” for your products even though your cost of production may be lower as you will benefit from the land access and infrastructure at Hilltop Community Farm for a very low fee.

i. We expect the incubator farmers to attend all-farm meetings and trainings (held monthly) and to work to keep your plot and area clean and presentable.

j. Hilltop Community Farm gives tours frequently. You should be comfortable being an ambassador for the farm incubator and willing to answer questions from the touring public. Please make every effort to keep your plot tidy and presentable. It is good for the tours and a good farming practice.