

Working Holidays: Roll Up Your Sleeve and Become a Farmer for a Few Days

Submitted by Paula Hesje

Working holidays are a new concept to many Canadians but they are quickly gaining popularity as an affordable and inspirational way to vacation. Gone are the days of lounging on the beach. People are looking for adventure and educational getaways, and *TLC* The Land Conservancy of British Columbia's **Farm Conservation Holidays** are the perfect ticket.

This year The Land Conservancy is organizing four Farm Holidays in the Vancouver Island area to help urban dwellers connect with their food and the people growing it. The first holiday in June was at Michael Ableman and Jeanne-Marie Herman's Foxglove Farm. Halfway up Mt. Maxwell on Salt Spring Island, this diverse and historic 120-acre farm produces an abundance of organic fruit and vegetables which help Salt Spring residents to be more food secure.

We had 10 participants join us at Foxglove – an eclectic group with the common thread being an interest in growing food, spending time on a farm and exploring this unique opportunity to ask experienced farmers questions while out strolling through the fields. After a delicious dinner our first evening, Michael told us about what brought him and his family to Salt Spring Island and his experience at Fairview Gardens, a non profit organization based on one of the oldest and most diverse organic farms in southern California, where he farmed from 1981 to 2001.

The following morning after the rooster had called us to our coffee, Michael took us through the cultivated areas on the farm and spoke of his vision and hopes for increasing the local food production on Salt Spring Island. We then headed out to the barn to 'jenga' the hay bales up high on a trailer. A farm visit is never complete without a tractor ride! Irrigation piping was also laid down through the orchards of apple, plum, peach, persimmon, apricot, and almond trees. The hay bales provided the mulch that is needed for these young trees and we piled it high making 'ostrich nests' that will help to retain moisture, minimize weed growth and increase the biological activity and organic matter around the tree.

The Land Conservancy recognizes Foxglove Farm as a '*TLC* Conservation Partner' for the natural habitat and biodiversity found on the farm and to explore these areas, we went for an afternoon hike to check out the wild beauty of this stunning farm. We learned about the covenants that protect the water quality and supply, saw the Douglas fir forests that provide a home to the swooping eagles that we found enjoying the quiet of Maxwell Lake and harvested oyster mushrooms for our dinner that night. What a bounty this farm supplies!

One evening, we were fortunate enough to share our dinner with Pat Reichert who spoke about her Salt Spring Island Flour Mill and the latest news about the Salt Spring Island Area Farm Plan. Having been engrossed with the happenings on Foxglove Farm it was interesting to hear the agricultural context of the Island.

The tasks on the farm were diverse and done with everyone working together or smaller teams of three. Some of the activities were: transplanting French parsley, potting on artichokes, seeding lettuce, thinning beets and preparing the compost. We also helped Michael with his inaugural try on a new raspberry trellis – this innovative method allows for easier harvesting and a clearing for the growth for next year's canes. Michael was full of grins when the method worked and many hands were there to help out.

The group also spent time at Kim Hanson and Ron Puhky's Grandview Farm in the Fulford Valley where we learned about their grass fed beef, helped with fencing their free range chickens and went home with bags full of rhubarb for those always tasty fruit crisps.

Other agricultural Conservation Holidays are offered in July and August on farms located in Victoria (Madrona Farm, July 6), on Salt Spring Island (Duck Creek Farm, July 23-25), and in the Cowichan Valley (Keating Farm, August 22- 24). All holidays are planned in a balanced and holistic way. Time is set aside each day to enjoy the farm and natural environment or kick back with a book. Many holidays include recreational activities such as hiking, tours of wineries, and going for a well earned dip in a nearby lake. There is no upper age limit if you are in good health. For more information or to book your Farm Conservation Holiday, please visit www.conservationholidays.ca or call 1-888-738-0533. Hope to see you on the Farm!