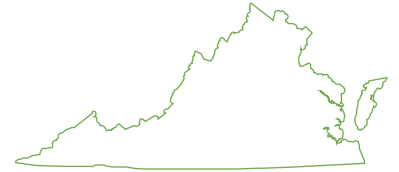


Farmer Mentor Programs



USDA/BOB NICHOLS

Farmer mentor programs offer experiential farm education, provide one-on-one business coaching, training, and other educational opportunities. Most pair experienced farmers with new and beginning farmers, transferring valuable expertise from one generation to the next. Others help established farmers improve their farming practices, increase profitability, and learn new skills. The USDA collaborates with [SCORE](#) to provide free business mentoring to farmers and rural business owners.

Virginia Program Description

There are many different farmer mentor programs operating throughout Virginia. Some operate only within a specific geographic area, while others operate statewide. Some focus on advancing specific soil health practices, and others offer more generalized support. Most are operated by nonprofit organizations or Cooperative Extension.

PURPOSE

Farmers benefit from a wide variety of both formal and informal educational programming. From Cooperative

Extension resources to soil health field days to business management classes at educational institutions, there are many opportunities to learn and grow. Sometimes, however, farmers learn best from other farmers. The function of Virginia's farmer mentor programs is to facilitate this learning.

HOW IT WORKS

There are multiple organizations throughout Virginia that manage farmer mentor networks. Some of these programs are listed below:

- › Virginia Soil Health Coalition's "[Virginia Farmer Mentor Network](#)" helps connect experienced farmers with other farmers to increase the adoption of practices that boost soil health and increase production. This program operates statewide.
- › Virginia Forage and Grassland Council's "[Farmer-to-Farmer Mentor Program](#)" pairs "experienced grazers with new or beginner grazers to help show them the ropes when it comes to successfully implementing prescribed grazing practices and techniques on their farms." This program is especially active in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

- › Virginia No-Till Alliance’s [“VANTAGE Farmer Mentor Program”](#) connects farmers who have extensive experience with cover crop and no-till practices with farmers who are less familiar with these practices, all in an effort to boost soil health and crop production through peer learning. The program is particularly active in the Shenandoah Valley.
- › Virginia Tech’s Eastern Shore Agricultural Research and Extension Center leads a [mentoring network](#) among crop producers in their region.
- › Virginia Tech and Virginia Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) co-lead the [“Integrated Conservation Agronomy Farmer Mentoring Program,”](#) which “provides a setting for informal conversations between farmers with flexibility in communication frequency, duration, and method.” This program operates statewide.
- › Appalachian Sustainable Development’s [“Farmer and Rancher Mentoring”](#) program is an on-farm internship opportunity for beginning farmers that provides hands-on education to those interested in pursuing a career in agricultural production. The program operates in Southwest Virginia.
- › Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition’s [“Farm Mentor Network”](#) works to “facilitate the exchange of knowledge and skills of experienced farmers and ranchers with the beginning farmer and

rancher community. It also provides an opportunity for long-term working relationships for successful farming.” The program is available statewide. Mentor Farmers serve as teachers and volunteer to share their knowledge and experiences. Each defines their own educational experience and sets the schedule and terms of the relationship.

CONSIDERATIONS

Mentor programs can be an effective way to connect the energy and enthusiasm of young farmers with the wisdom and experience of established farmers. Local leaders in Virginia who want to support farmers in their communities may consider sharing information about these mentor networks to facilitate learning, advance conservation practices, and improve agricultural viability.

To Learn More

- › [New Entry Sustainable Farming Project: “Supporting Mentors to Teach Next Generation Agrarians: A Farm/Ranch Mentor Training Toolkit. New Entry Sustainable Farming Project”](#)
- › [SCORE and USDA Partnership](#)