



ORGANIC Apprenticeship scheme

Apprenticeships are an essential way for growers to help develop a well-equipped and experienced workforce, says **Keith Denning**

In 2007, the Soil Association launched the apprenticeship scheme as an alternative to the formal education route into horticulture and agriculture.

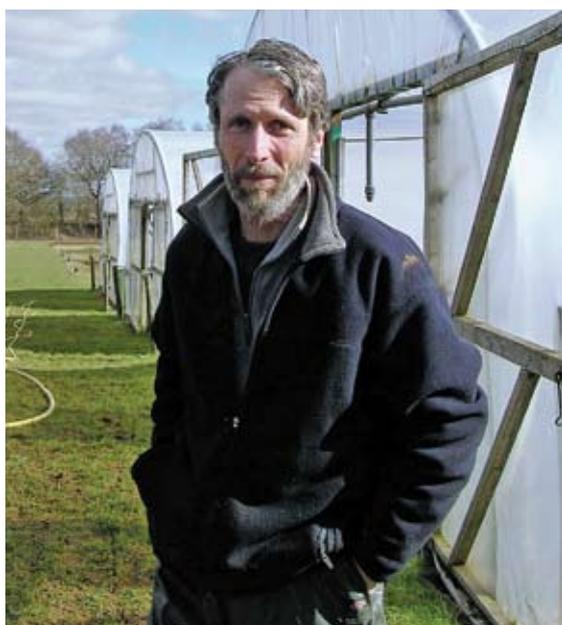
The scheme was set up in partnership with the Organic Growers Alliance (OGA) and Organic Research Centre, thanks to a dedicated and diverse group of producers all serious about backing the future of organic production. The level of interest in the scheme is already staggering: in 2009 alone, the Soil Association received over 200 serious enquires from people across the UK, all looking to gain first hand experience on a farm, while learning the principles of organic horticulture.

The idea for an organic apprenticeship scheme first emerged during informal discussions among OGA

members, where the need for a young skilled workforce who could one day take over from us was becoming all too apparent. We wanted a scheme that would help those who were committed to a career in organic farming and growing to get first-hand practical experience – the skills and knowledge which a classroom simply cannot provide.

I work at Abbey Home Farm, near Cirencester. Together with Hilary Chester-Master, who owns the farm, we have been involved in the apprenticeship scheme from the outset and are now entering our third year of apprenticeships. As the farm's senior grower, I am responsible for providing our apprentices with practical and mentoring support while they are on the farm. We have had four apprentices in total, with one graduating

Above Apprentices Becky Kelly, Tonje Mortensen and Laura Green learn sowing techniques at Hankham Organics



financial strain this two year commitment puts on growers and – in negotiation with the apprentice – some farms have reduced their hours at certain times of the year when workloads reduce. At Abbey Home Farm we are lucky to own accommodation which we rent to the apprentices. However, the host farm is under no obligation to provide accommodation as apprentices are just like any other employee. Some apprentices may live on-site – as, for example, at Daylesford Organic Farm – while others may live locally. But the more you can offer the apprentice, the more applications you are likely to receive.

Apprentices do not necessarily take up any more of a grower's time than normal employees. Of course, they require initial support and guidance when they arrive – just like any new member of staff – but as they

Above left Apprentices attend a number of seminars, like this one at Daylesford Organics
Above Experienced growers like Tim Deane can pass on their knowledge and experience
Left Keith Denning is now entering his third year of having apprentices

Don't be put off by the idea you need to have strong teaching skills. Having an apprentice is about sharing your skills and experience

last year and the other three due to graduate in 2010 and 2011. Hilary is also on the apprenticeship steering group, which was set up to help shape and develop the scheme.

How does the scheme work?

An apprentice is like any other full-time employee. So you will obviously want a hard-working apprentice who fits in with your team. Once you register your interest in the scheme the Soil Association provide you with support to help find the best apprentice for your farm. The decision of who you take on is entirely up to you. At Abbey Home Farm, we are lucky to receive regular applications and we select and interview suitable applicants just like any employee. We also insist on a three month probationary period to ensure that both parties are happy.

Over the two years, the apprentices work full time and are paid the national minimum wage. I am aware of the

gain experience and confidence they are able to work increasingly on their own. And as they are dedicated and driven by their passion for organic farming and growing, we find that apprentices quickly become acutely attentive to the work they carry out on the farm.

As a work experience provider I have certain commitments. For example, I must set aside a dedicated one-to-one period each week to discuss a particular topic with each apprentice. This could be of seasonal relevance, or a specific topic that they are interested about. Finding time can be tricky but these discussions highlight just how mutually beneficial the scheme is for both apprentice and host. In fact, their questions often force me to think about why we do things in a particular way, and this has helped us to become more effective and efficient. Indeed, the apprentices often think up innovative ways to improve our farm. For example, our recent graduate wrote her



end of year project on designing an orchard for the farm. Not only did she win the award for the best project but it also helped us see the possibilities for expansion.

Do not be put off by the idea that you need to have strong teaching skills. On the contrary, having an apprentice is about sharing your wealth of skills and experiences. And the Soil Association provide support to both work experience providers and the apprentices along the way. Guidance notes are available on how to run your weekly mentoring sessions and apprentices attend regular seminars on other holdings as part of their learning. Everyone involved in the scheme is committed to making it work.

Real benefits

Although we take on seasonal workers each year at Abbey Home Farm, apprentices offer the kind of benefits you only get from long-term employees.

We involve our apprentices in many aspects of the farm, from propagation through to harvest in the production of vegetables and fruit in the polytunnels, gardens and fields, as well as work in the shop and café. Many day to day issues are looked at and the process of decision making discussed. This not only means we can pass our knowledge to them but that they are more widely exposed to long-term business issues, such as seasonal challenges and marketing, which they can take forward into their future organic farming career.

The future of farming and growing in this country depends on finding and motivating young people to work on the land and giving them the practical skills to succeed. Yes, it means taking the necessary time to nurture the next generation but do not underestimate the potential benefits of having an apprentice. The rewards – in terms of personal satisfaction and to your business – really are significant.

FIND OUT MORE

Want to know more about what's involved in providing a placement opportunity to an apprentice? Contact **Lisa Nunn** on **0117 914 2453** or **lnunn@soilassociation.org** Visit **www.soilassociation.org/apprentice.aspx**

Keith Denning is senior grower at Abbey Home Farm, Gloucestershire. www.theorganicfarmshop.co.uk

An invaluable experience



Kate Colwell is an apprentice at Abbey Home Farm, Gloucestershire, and graduates this year...

I joined the scheme because I wanted to learn how to grow my own food, as a sense of

grounding and survival. Food and cookery have always been two of my key passions and it just seemed like the right path to take.

My plans are far from set in stone but I know that – whatever I do – I will always be growing my own food. I've gained a particular interest in growing flowers since working at the farm shop at Abbey Home Farm, so I would like to explore this as a possible business venture. I would also like to get involved with community growing, perhaps by getting others involved in growing as a community or maybe through setting up a CSA.

The whole experience has been invaluable for my future and I've gained a huge amount from the apprenticeship scheme on so many levels.



David Lashley is an apprentice at North Aston Organics, Oxfordshire. He graduates in 2011

I became aware of the problems we face with climate change and peak oil, and how localisation could offer solutions. I've

always been passionate about food, so learning how to grow it seemed the right thing to do.

I think that urban areas can produce small but significant quantities of their own food – especially fruit and vegetables. This form of food production could also help raise awareness of food and farming – and help change people's behaviour.

I'd really like to start my own place as close as possible to an urban area, probably following a CSA model. I had several ideas of what I wanted to do in the future, but my time as an apprentice means that I am developing the skills to back them up. I've met a lot of people with significant organic experience, which has been invaluable. My experience has far exceeded what I hoped the apprenticeship scheme would give me.