

Getting Started Farming & Ranching in Marin County

Background

You may dream of farming or ranching for many reasons- the desire to work outdoors, produce food for your family and community, continue a family legacy, steward the land, or whatever your passions may be. To be sure your dream can come to fruition and be sustainable, it is important to understand your land and location, natural resources, market, business plan, and more. Planning with the following topics in mind is fundamental for successful farms and ranches:



- Land for your operation
- Natural Resources: Soil, Topography, Climate, Water Availability, Conservation
- Business, Marketing & Financing
- Farm Planning: Production, Pest management, Processing, Labor, Organic Certification
- Training and Classes

Helpful resources and links are listed at **Grown in Marin website** <http://ucanr.edu/gettingstartedfarmingmarin>

Land and Location: Where will you farm?

Finding the right land is a key step to getting started. When buying land is not feasible, consider options for leasing land. Be sure you know everything you can about your land before any agreements are made. A landowner new to farming could start out by leasing to an experienced farmer or rancher. It is also important to consider the zoning and permitting policies and regulations that apply to the property, ensuring they allow the activities you plan.

Natural Resources

Soil- The type of soil on your land may dictate what your land can produce, and its potential fertility. Online soil survey maps at NRCS or California Soil Resource Lab can help you get an idea of what soil types are prevalent in your area and then a laboratory test can confirm exactly the texture and status of soil in your respective fields and pastures. These results will help you plan your land use, crop selections, and soil management.

Topography- Understanding the topography of your land will also impact what you can produce. The land or portions of it may be flat, hilly, or too steep for some uses. This knowledge is also helpful for erosion and run-off control, especially in the rainy season.

Climate and Water- Marin has an ideal mix of climates for growing and raising a wide range of products. Consider if the climate is appropriate for what you plan to produce. Some considerations include the risk of frost, prevailing winds, average high and low temperatures throughout the seasons, and water availability. Will the short period of winter rainfall provide sufficient water to make it through the warm, dry summer? What are the yearly and seasonal livestock and crop water demands? It is important to understand local water availability and limitations.

Conservation- Another consideration is the potential for land stewardship and conservation that can complement the agricultural practices on your land. Consider the biodiversity, wildlife, ecosystem services, watershed, renewable energy potential and other natural resources that can be protected and improved on your land. Both the Natural Resources Conservation Service Petaluma district office and the Marin Resource

Conservation District have long successful conservation track records. Check on deadlines for various cost sharing programs.

Business, Marketing & Financing

Being a farmer or rancher also means being an entrepreneur. Growing and raising the food is an important component, but without a market, your farm or ranch will not have a future. You must consider where and to whom you will sell your product, what the initial investment will be, and when you can expect to see a profit.

Business plan and Financing- Creating a business plan allows you to embrace the entrepreneurial aspect of farming or ranching. Your plan depends on many factors including, but not limited to, your goals, resources, capital, risk adversity, and potential markets. A business plan will include all the necessary inputs and hoped-for outputs in a well thought-out timeline. Determine the costs of production, cash flow, and potential profitability of your agricultural business. Additionally, you should plan how you will manage your financial risk, strategies for monitoring and curtailing costs, and a method for evaluating your business and marketing progress. Your business plan will include everything from the costs of transportation, structures, machinery and equipment, to the costs of seed, land, feed, and labor. Preparing budgets is an important part of your business plan and securing financing. Your plan will demonstrate to potential lenders, investors, and business partners that you have fully researched your idea and know how to produce and sell it.

Marketing- Marketing should begin before sowing seeds or purchasing livestock. There are a variety of marketing models used by many farmers today. These include farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farm stands, pick-your-own, agritourism, contracts with retailers, restaurants, processors, institutions, and more. It is important to understand how to enter these markets and grow a customer base, while enjoying friendly relationships with fellow farmers. You should have an idea of current consumer demand for your product, what niche you could fill perhaps with a value added product, and your potential competitive advantage. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogs) is now an important aspect of farm marketing. Conducting market research and creating a market plan will help you get started.

Farm and Ranch Planning

Now to the farming and ranching! Plan the timing and management of production so you will be able to bring your goods to market. Create a yearly production plan, cultural and pest management plans, and post-harvest handling/processing, storage, and transport plans. These activities will all involve managing a workforce (even if it is just you! You have to manage your hours, too). Also consider processing or value-added products.



Production planning- Creating a plan allows you to be prepared for the inputs you will need at the beginning of every season. You will plan out your cropping or grazing patterns and rotations based on local seasonality and your market. It is also important to consider nutrient management for optimum production such as nutrient cycling, application of fertilizer, compost, or cover crops. For many perennial crops or animal production operations it is helpful to plan years into the future. County Crop reports can provide an idea of what is currently produced in your county, what is right for your climate, and where you can find your niche.

Pest management (insects, weeds, animals, diseases)- In order to bring the best product to market, you will need a plan for pest management. This will depend on what you produce and your local climate. At the University of California Integrated Pest Management website <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/crops-agriculture.html>, you can

look up more information and guidelines by pest or crop.

Organic Certification- If you are considering organic management and certification be sure to understand what's required. The Getting Started with Organic Certification Factsheet on the GIM website can help.

Post-harvest handling and processing- Consider how you will handle your product after harvest. You have to plan how it will be slaughtered, packaged, stored, and transported, and the infrastructure (cooler, truck, etc.) required. A food safety plan is another key element. There may be many complicated regulations you are subject to, especially for processing operations. If you are interested in value-added products, some processing may be required. Depending on the kind of processing required, you should research what zoning, permits, and licensing may be necessary. You might be able to rent space in a commercial kitchen to process your goods. Find out more from local, state, and federal food agencies.



Labor- Will you need more than one pair of hands on your farm or ranch? At a certain size and volume of production, or season, you may need to hire employees. You will have to comply with labor codes, health and safety laws, and consider the necessary insurance. Think about what kind of work force you anticipate, how you will manage and train employees, and what kinds of benefits you will be able to provide.

Training, Classes and More

A wide variety of programs, classes, centers and resources are available nearby. From college programs at campus farms and gardens to farmer incubator programs, search the list at Growninmarin.org under Resources for Farmers (<http://ucanr.edu/gettingstartedfarmingmarin>) to find the programs that are right for you.

Prepared by Juliet Braslow and Ellie Rilla, December, 2012. More information about getting started farming & ranching is available at the Grown in Marin website (<http://growninmarin.org>), or by calling the UCCE Farm Advisor's office 415/473-4204.