



A Landowner's Guide to Leasing Land for Farming



Understanding Your Land

A. NATURAL FEATURES

The first step in selecting a management strategy and tenure relationship is taking stock. Look at what you have to offer. Determine the amount and quality of land and facilities. Remember that farmland will vary throughout the region and even within a single property. Few parcels of land are “ideal.” Size, soil quality, slope, access, location, micro-climate and other factors contribute to the picture of what you can offer a farmer or farmers. Some parcels may be too difficult to farm. The fact that land is “open” or has been farmed in the past does not mean that farmers will line up at your door to farm it today. Your local county conservation district and field office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can help you assemble a portrait of the natural features and farming history of your property. Information about potential markets and local agricultural services adds to the picture.

These natural features may include:

- Soils and their suitability for farming.
- Wetlands, streams, ponds or riparian areas.
- Wooded areas.
- Special species’ habitat.

A map or aerial photo of your property will help your conversation with a prospective tenant. Private consultants could help sketch out possible farming scenarios. For example, perhaps you have 40 acres of land with different types of soils and some wetlands. Workable options might include 10 acres of market



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vegetables, an eight-acre orchard on the hillside, a small chicken yard, and a fenced-off wet area. An alternative scenario for the same property might be a herd of sheep on pasture.

Other natural features on your property may figure into its farming potential. Historic stone walls, unique plantings or scenic vistas may preclude certain farming activities.

B. PRODUCTION POTENTIAL

Each parcel of land is unique and will have different production potential based on soil, land and water qualities. The NRCS has mapped the soils in most counties in the Northeast. Some states have classified those soils further into prime and important agricultural soils. Ask the NRCS agent in your area

for a copy of your county’s soil survey, which carries a great deal of information about the farm’s soil and its properties and capabilities for crop or woodlot production, pasture and wildlife habitat. You can also find information about your land’s soil by using the Web Soil Survey from the NRCS and plotting the boundaries of the land of interest.

C. INFRASTRUCTURE

The availability of buildings, particularly housing, is critical for many farmers. Landowners often

overlook this factor. Affordability often is as crucial as availability. If housing and/or farm structures do not exist on or near the farm, it might be possible to allow permanent buildings or temporary structures such as moveable greenhouses and residential trailers.

In addition, the potential of a specific piece of land is determined partly by infrastructure that already exists on site. Irrigation, storage facilities or livestock housing make certain types of agriculture more viable on a given piece of land. Rental rates can be calculated for farm structures.¹

¹ *Holding Ground: A Guide to Northeast Farmland Tenure and Stewardship*, New England Small Farm Institute

Types of Farming Endeavors

Agricultural operations are as diverse as the types of food we eat. Some farms are set up to grow only a few crops, some to raise animals, and others to produce a variety of products. Some farms grow Christmas trees, berries or sugar maples. Each business is different and is run differently. Some farming businesses are private, some are nonprofit organizations, and others are run as cooperatives. Some farms market their products directly to consumers, while others sell their goods through wholesale channels. With the wide variety of possible New England farm operations, it's important to be open to, and understand, the most appropriate options for your property.

Here are sample types of farm operations:

Animal production, particularly of sheep, goats, beef or dairy cattle, horses, or alpacas, requires a reliable source of water, adequate fencing, shelter such as open-sided sheds or closed barns, and an area of non-wetland pasture adequate to maintain the animals without soil deterioration. You will need to take precautions to ensure the animals stay in good health, are prevented from straying onto roads or neighboring property, and are safe from marauding dogs or coyotes. Poultry for meat or eggs has some of the same requirements as livestock.

Dairy farms that are already set up for dairy production can use lease arrangements to continue the operation. Dairy production requires climate-controlled milking parlors, suitable fenced pasture and paddock space, barn space for hay storage, and a water supply. It is unlikely that a renter could start a dairy operation from scratch, but if the finances and capital plant are in place, a new farmer might be able to start a successful milk setup.

Diverse farms are operations that grow plant crops and raise animals. As the sustainable farming movement continues to expand, these kinds of farms are becoming more common. With an integrated system, farmers rotate animals and plant crops to take advantage of the way both can complement each other and the land. Diverse farms count on multiple crops, often in combination with animals, and sometimes include value-added aspects such as on-farm processing (for example, berries to jam). Some diverse farms conduct educational programming or agritourism activities.

Greenhouse production, whether in the form of hoop-house structures or temporary or permanent greenhouses, can allow farmers to extend their season or possibly grow

vegetables or flowers year-round. You will need to agree with the tenant on the exact location of the structures, make sure that they are in compliance with local codes, and work with the tenant to provide adequate heat and drainage for these facilities.

Hay or grain production requires fields with good access for tractors and other equipment. In particular, if the field's vegetative cover has reverted to weeds or goldenrods, or if lime and manure have not been applied regularly, it may need rehabilitation and re-seeding. Grain production requires reasonably level terrain and somewhat better soils than hay fields.



Tree/perennial production, including growing tree fruit, berries and Christmas trees, requires a long-term commitment. With most fruit trees or shrubs, it will be several years after planting before the first crop can be harvested. Provision will need to be made to keep trees or shrubs from growing up to brush and possibly to remove them when they reach the end of their productive life.

Vegetable and flower production normally requires better soil than hay or pasture. Even a small acreage can produce a high volume of produce or plants for the fresh market. Marketing vegetables and flowers can be done through an on- or off-site farmstand (if you — and zoning — allow retail sales at your property), a local farmers' market, a community-supported agriculture operation (CSA), or off-site retail or wholesale sales. Fencing and/or other deterrents may be needed to prevent crop destruction by deer, raccoons, crows or other pests.