

# LEARNING AGROECOLOGY ON THE LAND:

## HOLDING A FARM WALK



## Abstract

Recent decades have seen a growing recognition that diversified, small-scale, organic, and agroecological farms have been underserved by standard public agricultural research and Extension approaches. At listening sessions, Washington small-scale farmers expressed interest in learning about organic and agroecological farming techniques directly from the most innovative and successful farmers in the state. In response, WSU Extension worked with Tilth Producers of Washington to launch a series of interactive farmer-to-farmer workshops on the state's leading organic farms each growing season. Inspired by the Pasture Walks held by producer grazing networks, we named these "Farm Walks." After 15 years and over 150 Farm Walks, we draw on evaluations and our experiences as organizers to develop guidelines and share insights with others who may want to offer similar programs.

## Introduction

Recent decades have seen a growing recognition that diversified, small-scale, organic, and agroecological farms have been underserved by standard public agricultural research and Extension approaches (FAO 2011; McIntyr et al. 2009; IPES-Food 2016; Méndez et al. 2015). To address this challenge, this publication offers guidelines for organizing farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities on organic and agroecological farms. Such programs can be organized by Extension educators or by farmer associations; however, the most critical requirement is finding knowledgeable and experienced farmer educators who are willing to open their farms and share what they know. This approach can also be valuable for developing ongoing learning networks of established farmers and aspiring farmers who want to preserve, generate, and exchange agroecological and organic farming knowledge with each other. The ideas presented here are based on a 15-year partnership between Washington State University (WSU) Extension and the Tilth Alliance of Washington. Since 2004, these organizations have worked in

partnership with sustainable and organic producers to host over 150 Farm Walks across Washington State, each attended by an average of around 40 participants. Each Farm Walk was carefully evaluated using on-site evaluations and follow-up contacts with past participants (Ostrom 2016).

The educational value of on-farm research and demonstrations led by farmers working in partnership with university specialists has been recognized since the origins of land-grant university Extension in the late 1800s (Colman 1963; True 1928). Then, as now, these methods have proven most effective in situations where well-respected farmers and farmer associations offer leadership and provide their expertise in collaboration with university agricultural specialists in an approach that recognizes the valuable knowledge contributed by each party (Colman 1963; True 1928; Smith 1949; Pretty and Chambers 1994; Méndez et al. 2015). Even in the face of advances in digital information technologies, farm field days and farmer field schools have shown that farmers still highly value learning from other farmers in realistic on-farm settings (FAO 2019). This approach has proven particularly salient in ecologically based farming systems where knowledge and practices are often farmer-generated and vary significantly according to site-specific ecological conditions, geography, and farmer goals and resources (Hassanein 1997; Lobry de Bruyn et al. 2017; Méndez et al. 2015; Riley 2008).

## What Is a Farm Walk?

The purpose of a Farm Walk is to enable farmer-to-farmer learning on the land. A Farm Walk is an organized opportunity for farmers and agricultural professionals to learn from the most innovative organic and agroecological farmers by walking through their farms with them, listening to their stories, observing their strategies and outcomes first-hand, asking questions, and having dialogues. They are typically half-day events held on well-established, innovative farms that follow organic or agroecological practices. WSU Extension and the Tilth Producers of Washington (now reorganized as "Tilth



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Alliance”) initiated this educational program in response to requests heard at listening sessions with small-scale farmers. Inspired by the Pasture Walks organized by producer grazing networks in the Midwest (Hassanein and Kloppenburg 1995; Paine et al. 2000), “Farm Walks” were established as a venue where advanced farmers could share their innovative farm management techniques with other farmers to generate new knowledge. The learning environment is specifically designed to share knowledge and expertise about sustainable farming practices from one farmer to another and with future generations of farmers (Ostrom 2016). In contrast to a conventional field day, a Farm Walk is led by farmers. The role of university specialists, Extension educators, and other agricultural professionals in a Farm Walk is to facilitate the exchange of ideas among all participants and to serve as resource people who can answer questions and contribute academic background where needed.

Different Farm Walks should have learning themes focused on the unique attributes of the host farm. Examples of past topics have included habitat enhancement for beneficial insects, soil and nutrient management, irrigation and water management, season extension, managed grazing, riparian-zone restoration, organic dairying and meat production, marketing, selecting and maintaining equipment, choosing crop varieties, harvesting, processing, postharvest handling, and food safety regulations.

## Planning a Farm Walk

Ideally, a team made up of Extension educators and leaders from sustainable producer associations can form a planning committee to choose host sites and plan events. Historically, farmer members from the Tilth Producers’ board and WSU Extension combined to form a Farm Walk committee to choose host sites and plan events. In recent years, Tilth Alliance has hired staff to assist with their educational programs, though the farmers still have advisory roles through their board. Having a partnership with a sustainable farming association such as Tilth Alliance has been foundational to both identifying the best farms to feature and building a network of farmers interested in participatory sustainable farming education. Having multiple organizations involved has also helped with publicizing and promoting the events.

## Selecting a Host Farm

To host a Farm Walk, farmers need to be willing to openly share and discuss the technical details of their operations with other farmers and agricultural experts. We also suggest that organizers visit the farm ahead of time or consult with local Extension offices to ensure that the farm is well managed and exemplifies a well-integrated organic or agroecological farming system before recruitment as a host farm. Once an invitation is extended, farmers need to be brought into a conversation about what constitutes a Farm Walk, what role would be required of them, what assistance would be provided, and any honorarium or

stipend they would receive to assist with any additional expenses incurred (e.g., portable latrines, demonstration supplies, additional staff, or lost worktime). Farmers need to be included in identifying the topical themes for their farms, the sites to visit on their farms, and outlining schedule for the walk. End-of-event evaluations, needs assessments by Extension, and membership surveys by farmer associations are all helpful ways to identify the types of farms to feature.

## Assembling Resources and Expertise

It is important to work with the host farmer well in advance to identify one or two topical themes to feature for the walk. Once the host farmers and the learning themes have been selected, appropriate university specialists and other outside experts should be identified and invited to participate as resource personnel. They can contribute their expertise by attending themselves, where possible, and by suggesting printed materials to provide as handouts. We have found that in addition to university specialists, experts such as USDA farm loan and crop insurance officers, state department of agriculture personnel, organic food certifiers, conservation district staff, and food safety experts have an outreach mission and appreciate the invitation to participate. This is important because they bring a depth of scientific, academic, and regulatory expertise and background knowledge to have on hand. However, outside experts should be prepared ahead of time so they understand they will not be the main presenters. Instead, they need to recognize they will be there primarily to answer questions and contribute to dialogues where in-depth expertise is required. This can be a challenging role. Outside experts should be coached to understand that farmer-generated knowledge is valuable agricultural science. Such knowledge, however, can also be improved by rigorous testing, review, and validation.

## Staging the Event

It is important to work with the host farmers ahead of time to determine how many visitors they can accommodate. We have generally found that a group size above 50 can be unwieldy. Over the years our average attendance has been around 35 participants, but up to 40 seems manageable, depending on the nature of the site. The group can sometimes be divided into smaller subgroups to enter greenhouses and processing areas. Collaborate to plan the layout of the registration area, the parking area, the bathroom and handwashing facilities, and the sites on the farm to visit. Consider which parts of the farm will be best suited for highlighting the selected topical themes. In some cases, farmers will have on-farm research projects with WSU to explain and showcase. Farmers should ideally be encouraged to share both their successes and challenges. Learning should be as visual and experiential as possible. Depending on how large the farm is, the distances between learning stations and the number of learning stations should be

minimized so that older participants and people with disabilities will not encounter problems moving from station to station. It can be a good idea to have a transport vehicle on hand to assist those with mobility problems. Given that Farm Walks often draw attendees from a distance, we suggest setting a schedule that allows for driving time on both ends of the day and offering a window for check-in and registration (Table 1). Handling registrations and payments online in advance makes for a smoother check-in and helps to manage total numbers of participants. Because not all farmers will have access to internet technologies, it is also a good idea to reserve a few spots for in-person registrations.

## Creating Equitable Learning Spaces

The heart of the Farm Walk concept is to spotlight the knowledge and experiences of the host farmers. University specialists and agricultural agencies relevant to the study topic are sought out and invited to participate as knowledge resources. However, rather than making formal presentations as at a typical field day or conference, academic specialists are invited to answer questions as they arise and to engage in respectful learning dialogues where they can provide more background. Facilitators should be well trained and ready to facilitate dialogue across different perspectives and knowledge frameworks, including bridging practical and academic

knowledge or seeking out accurate answers to regulatory questions. Facilitators should prepare ahead of time to learn

### Equipment and Supply Checklist

Note that Farm Walks on livestock farms may require additional supplies and safety precautions. For more information, please consult the WSU Extension publication *Practical Biosecurity Recommendations for Farm Tour Hosts* (Kerr 2017).

- Sandwich boards to mark farm turn-off and parking areas
- A folding table and chairs for registration
- A shady area with some seating options for initial circular gathering
- Handouts
- Photo release and liability forms
- Water cooler (with ice) and paper cups (with trash can)
- Restroom (can be portable) and handwashing facilities
- Battery-operated microphone
- Headsets and transponders for simultaneous translation in multilingual settings
- Designated photographer

*Optional:*

- warm drinks if cold
- cold lemonade in water cooler if hot
- snacks to share while filling out evaluations at closing

Table 1. Example of a farm walk schedule.

	Activity	Who
12:00–12:30	Check-in and Registration	Sponsoring Organization(s)
12:30–1:00	Welcome, Orientation, and Introductions	Facilitator(s)
1:00–1:20	Overview of Farming System	Host Farmer(s)
1:30–2:00	Farm Site 1	Host Farmer(s) and Resource People
2:15–2:45	Farm Site 2	Host Farmer(s) and Resource People
3:00–3:30	Farm Site 3 or Starting Place	Host Farmer(s) and Resource People
3:30	Closing, Acknowledgements, and Evaluations	Facilitator(s)
3:30–4:00	Informal Conversation with Hosts	Host Farmer(s) and Participants

*Note:* Schedule should be adjusted according to walking times and number of sites to visit. Try to avoid delivering information while walking between sites as most people will miss it.

about the knowledge and skills of the different resource people who have been invited to attend, to recognize the experienced farmers in the audience, and to be ready to pull the appropriate people into the conversations where their areas of expertise are needed. Facilitators may also need to be ready to hold presentations by academic experts in check because participant evaluations clearly show a preference for learning from other farmers rather than university or agency specialists. Similarly, evaluations show that participants prefer an interactive learning environment where attendees can ask questions and exchange their own knowledge and experiences with the hosts and with other farmers while immersed in the farm location. Organizers and facilitators should pay close attention to dynamics of equity and inclusivity across gender, race, culture, and farm size when promoting and holding these events. During the event, facilitators may need to take an active role in ensuring equal speaking time for different participants.

## *Designing Welcoming Multilingual Formats*

In geographic locations with significant populations of immigrant and refugee agriculturists, it is important for Farm Walks to reflect this diversity. Farm Walks can feature refugee- and immigrant-owned farms and utilize multilingual educational formats. We have found that involving hosts and participants from different racial and ethnic backgrounds often requires establishing networks and relationships of trust over a period of time. It also requires learning more about the preferred languages and the most effective informational channels for engaging the target audiences. Accordingly, events can be promoted through strategies that go beyond standard email and internet announcements, such as in Spanish language radio announcements and newspapers, visually attractive posters and fliers, postcards, text, telephone calls, and word-of-mouth.

The day of the event needs to be well planned in advance to ensure that registration materials, handouts, and evaluations are available in the relevant languages and that experienced on-site interpreters have been arranged. If possible, headsets should be distributed to all participants as they register (unless they are truly proficient in multiple languages). This way the discussion and questions can originate in whatever language the speaker prefers and then be translated back to the other languages. When opening the event, the welcome should be presented in multiple languages using facilitators who speak each language. Ensuring an inclusive and lively dialogue in multiple languages at the same time may require especially attentive facilitation. Further ideas can be found in *Communicating with Latino Farmers: Cultural Aspects and Strategies* (García-Pabón and Ostrom 2015) and *Creating Access to Land Grant Resources for Multicultural and Disadvantaged Farmers* (Ostrom et al. 2010).

## **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

Based on evaluations and follow-up surveys of past participants in Washington State, the Farm Walks organized through the WSU-Tilth Alliance partnership have been popular and achieved valuable learning outcomes among a diverse range of new and established farmers. They have also established valuable new relationships and opportunities for sharing knowledge among Extension, farmer associations, and diversified small farm audiences. In a typical year with multiple Farm Walks held throughout the growing season, from day-of-event evaluations, respondents farm around 12,000 acres in total, with farms ranging in size from less than an acre to over 1,000 acres. The average farm size was 115 acres. Typically, over 95% of farmer respondents report a knowledge increase in at least one subject area and 100% say they plan to change a farming practice as a result of their participation, including such practices as expanding cover crops, implementing rotational grazing, diversifying crops or markets, and improving habitat for native pollinators. As the first generation of sustainable and organic farmers begins to retire, arranging this kind of knowledge exchange among experienced and incoming farmers is increasingly critical to retain the knowledge required to implement ecologically, socially, and economically resilient farming systems.

Agricultural professionals and interested community members have also benefited from attending Farm Walks. Our evaluation results indicate that university scientists, Extension educators, and agency personnel have all had valuable learning outcomes from seeing organic and agroecological farming systems and innovations firsthand. An additional key finding is that multilingual, immigrant, and refugee agriculturists will be unlikely to participate without prior planning, targeted outreach, and relationship building.

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