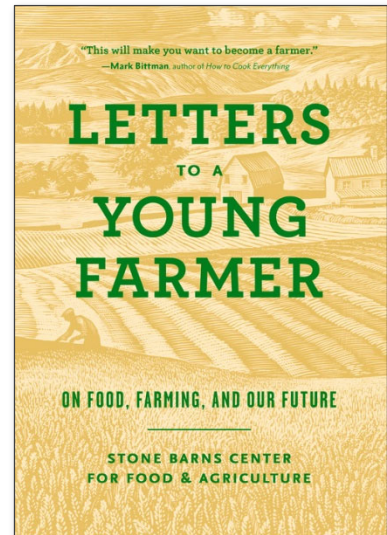


## Encouraging the next generation of farmers

Review by Gregory Zimmerman \*  
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Review of *Letters to a Young Farmer: On Food, Farming, and Our Future*, edited by Martha Hodgkins. (2017). Published by Princeton Architectural Press. Available as paperback and Kindle ebook; 176 pages. Publisher's website: <http://www.letterstoayoungfarmer.org/>



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Last summer, I was viewing one of the early morning agriculture news TV programs. One of the commentators stated that he is routinely asked for advice he has for young farmers. His advice: find a specialized market, such as organic, and sell direct-to-consumer. Interesting advice on a

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program intended for large commodity farms.

The book *Letters to a Young Farmer: On Food, Farming, and Our Future* presumes that its intended audience has already made the decision to sell direct-to-consumer. Many beginning farmers have. We've all seen the increase in small farms in the U.S. over the past several years. Now it's official. As reported in *The Washington Post*, the most recent Census of Agriculture found an increase in the number of farmers under 35 years old (Dewey, 2017). Many of these young farmers are new to farming, did not grow up on a farm, and are working small, diversified farms using organic methods.

The book is a collection of 36 essays by authors well-known in the organic movement (including Joel Salatin, Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, Eliot Coleman), in the more general

alternative ag community (Wes Jackson, Allan Savory, Temple Grandin), across the local food scene (Dan Barber, Mas Masumoto), and as nutrition advocates (Marion Nestle, Anna Lappé). Michael Pollan weighs in, as does Barbara Kingsolver. (Maybe John Ikerd was busy at the time?)

The essays (two of which are letters to specific young farmers) take on a number of subjects. Some offer congratulations on the excellent vocational and lifestyle choice young farmers have made; others voice appreciation for the hard work young farmers are taking on. Some attempt to inform the reader of the path laid down by their predecessors in the organic farming movement.

There's good advice to young farmers, such as the need to be good at the business end of farming—finances, marketing, risk management (which should include managing the risk to one's well-being). Some of the essays advise young farmers to make time for advocacy beyond one's own sales and for support and collaboration with fellow farmers. Another commonly discussed topic is the need for farms of all sizes and types. Some of the authors criticize the industrial mindset of big ag, and some suggest that conventional growers can be educated and won over, but none of the essays rail against conventional ag. In fact, some of the essays encourage collaboration with and support of conventional farmers and enumerate the opportunities to learn from them.

Beyond just offering advice, several of the essays celebrate the passion of farmers. They correctly point out that since farming is not a path to riches, it has to be as much a lifestyle choice as a career choice. I hear that in all my discussions with other farmers. Still, it is a business and to be able to continue in that business, we must not overemphasize the lifestyle choice. Farming needs to be more than a break-even enterprise. Similarly, no one goes into teaching or other public service professions

for the money, but they do expect to be able to make a living from their profession. Sustainability needs to apply to the farming enterprise and the health and well-being of the farmers in addition to environmental sustainability. I'd like to see more about that aspect of farming in the ongoing discussion of small farms.

This book is a good read and has a feel-good message. It provides a nice overview of many of the themes of the local, small, diversified farming movement. I recently met one young person who was working as an intern at an organic farm who mentioned enjoying the book.

However, the title might be a bit broad. It might have been better as *Letters to a Young Farmer on a Small, Diversified Organic Farm*. The audience does seem to be the farmers mentioned in *The Washington Post* article: the college educated, mainly white, young people living in progressive parts of the country, the type of new farmers who can afford to work as interns. That's not meant as a strong criticism, but rather as just a reminder that there are many other types of young farmers. The book did not include messages supporting young farmers from marginalized communities, some of whom may have additional challenges in accessing financing, markets, and services. Another missing theme was the role of farmers in addressing community food security. In my work, I have met several farmers who are quite active in food security issues. Helping people in their local community access fresh produce is a strong motivator for some young farmers. Their work helps improve food security and keeps them going as they face the challenges of farming.

The essays are generally short, easy to read, and thought provoking. I recommend the book to its intended audience and to anyone who wants an overview of what many writers in the food movement have to say.

## Reference

Dewey, C. (2017, November 23). A growing number of young Americans are leaving desk jobs to farm. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/a-growing-number-of-young-americans-are-leaving-desk-jobs-to-farm/2017/11/23/e3c018ae-c64e-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/a-growing-number-of-young-americans-are-leaving-desk-jobs-to-farm/2017/11/23/e3c018ae-c64e-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0_story.html)