

By Jane Mundy

Wwoofing It Up

These keen young international workers are definitely *not* dogging it on B.C.'s organic farms.

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No, wwoofers are not professional dog walkers. Think back to when kibbutzers backpacked to Israel (usually for that great combo of hard work and no pay) and you're getting close.

WWOOF stands for both WorldWide Opportunities on Organic Farms and Willing Workers On Organic Farms—and it's an organization that provides work experience in the organic farming movement. Farmers get extra hands to pull weeds, pick

grapes or milk the cows for about five hours a day, five days a week; in exchange, the farmers share their knowledge and passion and provide accommodation and meals.

WWOOF finds placements for tens of thousands of wwoofers in 70 countries. More than 650 organic farms across Canada are listed—50 percent of which are in British Columbia and Alberta. And anyone can join. Wwoofers generally come from big cities and long to connect with nature, their

hosts farmers and fellow wwoofers—and often want to learn English. Some find it a cheap way to travel, while others passionately want to learn firsthand how to live on organic food and cultivate a sustainable lifestyle. Here are a few we visited for insight into the wwoofing life.

Goat's Pride Dairy, Abbotsford

"I always wanted to work on a farm—hard to do with my urban

lifestyle in South Korea,” says Sunny Choi, 29. “And I want to learn how to make cheese.” Choi helps with cheese packaging, some milking and with feeding the animals. When we spoke last summer, Choi said: “Next week I will be travelling across Canada. Hopefully, I will find another cheese farm in Quebec.”

“Many wwoofers just want to learn English,” says the farm’s

owner. When screenig applicants she does ask about the potential wwoofers’ hobbies. If they’re into computer games, farm life

likely isn’t for them. “Some choose our farm because they want to start an organic operation at home and others specifically want to work with goats,” she explains.

Ranch O Plato, South Cowichan Valley

Nicole Stewart, 22, is an engineering student from Boston, Massachusetts. “Host Donna Mortin was my first choice because she needed a grey water recycling system built,” says Stewart. “They

seemed to be like-minded people who were socially conscious and environmentally aware.”

Stewart was soon shopping for pipes and old bathtubs in salvage yards, shovelling gravel and picking rocks—not sexy tasks. So what’s in it for her? “My main purpose is to learn about sustainable ways of living,” she explains. “I’m studying industrial engineering and I want to get into energy conservation. And it is all about meeting people with the same values.”

It takes a certain type of


volunteer to do this kind of work. “We’d keep her all summer if we could,” says Martin, laughing. “We hope a wwoofer leaves here with a glimpse into sustainable living and we hope they get as much out of their stay as we get from them.”

Ironwood Farm, Fanny Bay

If it wasn’t for wwoofers, the Odegards of Ironwood Farm would do things differently. “We wouldn’t grow as many types of vegetables on such a large scale,” says Barbara Odegard.

Over the years, the Odegards have hosted about 500 wwoofers. “Most of them have no knowledge of organic farming, but they leave with a profound sense of how to grow food and a huge respect for what we do,” says Barbara. “They realize there are other ways to live life, on a much simpler level.” Serious wwoofers might arrive early in the growing season and return in the fall, learning about organic farming techniques such as crop rotation.

Rhode Island’s Claire Harlan-Orsi and three other wwoofers from Germany were getting ready for the Comox Valley Farmers’ Market during our visit. “The most rewarding part is selling at the market,” says Harlan-Orsi. “Ooh, look at that beautiful chard,’ a customer says. I was partly responsible for that.”

Josi Kehl and Ariane Wiedau, both 19, and Christian Gerlach, 28, all from Germany, chose Ironwood because of the location. When I first meet them, two eagles soar over the verdant, gently sloping hills surrounding the farm, headed toward distant snow-capped mountains. Gerlach knew nothing about organic farming before arriving at Ironwood—the closest he had gotten to farming was picking a few apples. Now, he has a deep appreciation for the work, which is much more than he expected, that goes into organic produce. “We are never idle, but useful,” says Gerlach, laughing. 



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Go Now

Volunteer to go back to the land for a few weeks or a few months and learn about organic farming through wwoofing. Email wwoofcan@shaw.ca or visit wwoof.ca.