

Chicago Tribune

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**QUESTION OF THE WEEK**

If your boss were a character from "Star Wars," who would it be?

Responses inside



**ANSWER THIS**

How often do you update your resume? Email

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# Ground game

## New farmers seeing growth in green acres

**K**erry and Max Taylor had no delusions about whether running Provider Farm would be easy.

"I was heavily influenced by a farming couple I worked for after college," Kerry Taylor says. "I was so impressed by their ingenuity, work ethic and good humor. I was young and the work was exhilarating, and I loved that farm the minute I arrived."

The couple grow and sell about 150 crops on 20 leased acres on the historic Woodbridge Farm property about 30 miles southeast of Hartford. Popular crops include snap peas, carrots, broccoli, tomatoes and what Taylor calls "amazing beets." She says kale and kohlrabi are becoming popular, too.

The Taylors aren't alone in their choice of career. According to Secretary Tom Vilsack, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2012 Census of Agriculture reflects that trend. A preliminary report from this latest census shows more young people are tilling the soil.

"A bright spot in the data is the slight increase in young farmers," Vilsack says. "While the aging nature of the farming population is a concern, we are hopeful that as we attract and retain the next generation of talent into rural America, this trend can also be reversed."

According to Reggie Knox, executive director of California FarmLink, a nonprofit organization that helps farmers lease and purchase land, access capital and improve their businesses, changing attitudes in society and in the marketplace are making it easier for farmers like the Taylors to make a living off the land.

"We're seeing an increasing number of direct marketing opportunities, such as farmers markets," Knox says. "Legislation in the '70s and '80s allowed farmers to sell produce direct to the public at state-certified farmers markets without having to observe packing and grading standards if selling wholesale. This made it a lot easier to sell direct to the public."

Provider Farm's bounty is sold through what's called "community supported agriculture," in which customers buy a membership or a "share" for the season that entitles them to a weekly portion of the vegetable harvest.

### It's fulfilling, but not easy

To get started, the Taylors answered a listing in a farm publication and negotiated a five-year lease. "Leasing is very common nowadays and a great way to get started," Taylor says. "We also have three other leases for our vegetable fields."

Despite finding land and the experience of having worked for Brookfield Farm in Massachusetts, Taylor says nothing prepared her for how emotionally difficult the job is.

"When you step out on your own, there is no one to look to for help when there is a problem, nothing will happen if you don't do it," she says. "I have never felt so alone, even during my time in the Peace Corps, than in our first year of running our business."



Kerry Taylor at the Provider Farm acreage southeast of Hartford, harvesting a crop of kale. Max Taylor

### Resources for new farmers

- National Young Farmers Coalition supports practices and policies that will sustain young, independent and prosperous farmers now and in the future. NYFC helps new farmers find training opportunities, internships, land to lease — and provides information on obtaining credit and capital. [youngfarmers.org](http://youngfarmers.org)
- National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is an alliance of grassroots organizations that advocates for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources and rural communities. [sustainableagriculture.net](http://sustainableagriculture.net)
- American Farm Bureau Federation describes itself as the voice of agricultural producers at all levels. Founded in 1919, the organization's goals are "to enhance and strengthen the lives of rural Americans and to build strong, prosperous agricultural communities." [fb.org](http://fb.org)
- United States Department of Agriculture is the agency that develops and administers federal policy on farming, agriculture and food. USDA provides a wealth of statistics, charts, planting guides and resources. [usda.gov](http://usda.gov)

### New farmers not just young

And it's not just younger folks who are finding their futures on the farm. Emily Oakley, interim director of the Tivoli, N.Y.-based National Young Farmers Coalition, says that although there are many "young" farmers, there also are "new" farmers, as well. "They are definitely people coming (in) as first generation farmers, but not as a first career."

According to Oakley, the three main obstacles that young and new farmers face are access to land, capital and services. Her organization and others, like California LandLink, work to put farmers in touch with these resources.

Some young farmers buy their land, but large numbers start off leasing acreage. That's what Oakley is doing. "We're leasing from a kind and generous couple ... about an hour east of Tulsa." Oakley says they've "grown practically everything you can grow." Favorites in the marketplace right now include kale, lettuce, beets, turnips, greens, cucumbers and squash.

Although some farmers come from agricultural families, that's not the case for everybody. Oakley grew up in the city, and went on to obtain a degree in agriculture. Like many others, she gained first-hand experience by working on farms. "You'll need several years under your belt before you can go out and apply what you've earned on your own farm," she says.

### Is a farm in your future?

So, is now a good time to choose a career as a farmer? Yes, says Knox, who points to the increasing support — government and otherwise — for small-farm operators.

"It's a better time now than 10 or 20 years ago," he says. "It's challenging, though. You have to learn a lot of skills."

Taylor agrees with that. "Anyone considering a career in farming needs to get experience," she says. "Fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities through apprenticeships or working for a farmer."

Those skills help farmers cope with the unpredictable, such as bad weather, pests or crop failure. "You just have to deal with it, but I think experience really helps and makes you tougher," Taylor says. "Talking to other farmers and having a good community helps. And perspective. My mentor would always say, 'Think of Shackleton' — referring to Ernest Shackleton, a polar explorer whose ship was trapped in ice. It's quite a harrowing story, but his crew survived. As we grow tired of this winter, I just think about the California farmers who are desperate for water."

— Leigh Hanlon, Tribune Content Agency