

A future in farming: one Blue Seal Farm Technician's story

by Robert MacPherson (submitted by PEI Agriculture Sector Council)

When I moved home from Alberta, I wasn't sure what it was I was going to do.

However, the two things I was sure of were that I needed a change, and I wanted to live on PEI. My mother's family has farmed in Middleton, PEI, since they immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1837.

Farming was the first job I ever had. I helped push potatoes down to the conveyor belt in a potato truck on my uncle's farm. Now I know even the small jobs on a farm are essential to the overall operation, but back then, all I worried about was which flavor of Seaman's Beverages I'd have at break time. Even though I enjoyed my summers on the farm as a kid, I never intended to continue in my families' tradition. This changed when my uncle asked if I could help out for the 2014 harvest. Sure, I said.

It's funny how you never really know what to expect until you're up to your elbows, and let me tell you, farming is full of surprises.

My experiences on the farm have ranged from illumination, to frustration, and back again. Nothing can prepare you for the multidisciplinary challenges agriculture demands every day. Nothing that is, except maybe the knowledge gained from 50 years of on-the-job training. Even then, the advancements in science and technology are changing every day. It's not enough to know how we did things yesterday, but how we will do them tomorrow.

Education is crucial to the agricultural industry

The **Agricultural Technology Apprenticeship program** is just the ticket to learning more about agriculture, a blue ticket to be precise.

When the program was started in 2002, the province and invested interests had a vision. They wanted to give some of the most vital individuals in agriculture a chance to develop skills and experiences towards a respected and defined trade.

After the apprenticeship hours, two and a half months of classroom, and a proficiency exam, you will have a diploma. A Blue Seal of achievement. This program is the first of its kind in Canada, and it seems only fitting that the hundreds of thousands of hard working Canadians who feed us every day have a chance to qualify for this achievement.

The classroom portion of the program covers topics spanning the agricultural sector. It's a lot to handle, but topics are covered and conquered with in-class participation, group activities, lectures, field trips, reading material, and quizzes.

The instructors are qualified, proficient, and professional, bringing years of experience with their expertise. You will also receive online resources and hard copies of all the material covered so you can refer back to the manuals throughout your agriculture career.

For employers: This is an opportunity to challenge individuals, and keep them motivated towards a career in agriculture.



PEI Farm Technicians – Class of 2016. Submitted photo.

For workers: Ask your employer if they would consider taking you on as an apprentice. Not only will you learn new skills making you a more valuable asset, it will also boost your resumé and qualify you for a raise or other job opportunities.

There are no losers in education, only smarter, more employable, and more productive members of society.

I see a future in an industry that promotes the PEI lifestyle, quality goods, and fine craftsmanship. There is great opportunity in farming on PEI, and I'm excited to be in agriculture.

The next intake for the **Farm Technician Apprenticeship** program is January 2017.



For more information, call the **PEI Agriculture Sector Council** at 902-892-1091. Visit www.peiagsc.ca

An Island apple farmer bonds with a Syrian olive grower

Submitted by co-authors Yvette Doucette and Tori Vail, PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada

From the moment **Geoff Boyle** and **Wisam Abou Assali** started talking, it was clear they had a connection that transcended their different backgrounds.

The Grove Orchard and U-Pick is an apple and berry farm in Warren Grove, PEI. It is owned and operated by Geoff. His son Matt is an investor who works there when he can. In March 2016, Geoff was looking for an employee through the **Employ PEI program**.

Wisam Abou Assali, his wife Dima Mreesh and their two sons arrived on PEI in January 2016 as refugees from Syria. They were sponsored by Saints Peter & Paul Orthodox Church in Charlottetown. Wisam and Geoff were introduced by Amy MacLean and Lisa Chaisson, who are members of the Employment Assistance Services team at the PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada.

Within days, Geoff invited Wisam (pronounced WisAHM) to join him in Nova Scotia on a training course on grafting and orchard skills.

"I had a feeling that Wisam was the person I was looking for," says Geoff. "I brought him with me to take the training, but I was really trying to see if we could work together. It isn't a big farm and I only need one employee. But we would have to spend every day working together. After two days of courses, eating meals, playing pool, and talking, I knew Wisam was the right guy."

In April, Wisam began working at the Grove Orchard. Together the two men spent April and May preparing 5,000 apple tree grafts for planting, and then working in the fields on a diverse number of crops. Geoff is new to farming and Wisam is new to Canada, and so the two men are learning as they go.

The farm cultivates a variety of berries such as strawberry, raspberry, high bush blueberry, and elderberry. The orchard has at least nine varieties of apples, two varieties of Asian pears, five varieties of plums, seedless grapes, plumcots (plum-apricots), and chums (cherry-plums).

The men work eight hours a day or more, depending on weather and crop needs. Geoff says, "I am not a do-this, do-that kind of boss. I try to work as hard as or harder than Wisam. We work together."

"Before the war in Syria, I worked in real estate and had another business," says Wisam. "I also owned two farms. Both had olives, figs, and grapes. The one near the mountains had olive trees with big olives good for eating. At the other farm we used the olives for oil. Between the trees we planted beans, tomatoes, and cucumbers. The beans were very good, very delicious," Wisam raises his hand to his lips in the universal gesture meaning tasty.

"In Syria we had a very beautiful home. Now, everything is gone. I have left behind everything, including my parents and my brothers.



Geoff Boyle, owner of The Grove Orchard and U-Pick, and Wisam Abou Assali, new employee from Syria, are bracing new apple trees.

"I stay on PEI because of my wife, her family, and my children, Ibrahim and Andreh, and now, because of Geoff. Geoff... he is so good." He hesitates, his eyes gone liquid with these simple but powerful words, and what this Canadian man means to him.

Geoff jumps in and fills the silence. He talks about the respect his family has for Wisam's family and the courage it took for them to leave everything behind in Syria to come here. Geoff goes on to say how important family is to both men. "That makes us the same," he says with emphasis.

For more information about the **PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada**, visit www.peienc.com

