



## A Resource Guide for Start-up Military Veteran Farmers

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### Introduction

Deciding what career to begin after discharging from the military is an important decision. Because agriculture can often bring a new sense of purpose and leadership to a veteran's life, many are choosing farming as their new career. Military veterans offer unique skill sets and discipline that are needed in the rigorous daily life of a farmer. Veterans receive a lot of on-the-job training, formal education, and tactical skills while in the military. Additionally, they contribute leadership, technical, and entrepreneurial skills to the agriculture community (USDA, 2019). Similarly, veterans need a challenging career that compares with the demanding life style of the military to ease the adjustment back into civilian life. For these and other reasons, U.S. government agencies are beginning to provide exclusive resources to military veterans to enter into agricultural opportunities (USDA, n.d.).

AgrAbility Virginia promotes safety, wellness, and accessibility on the farm through education, rehabilitative services, and assistive technology. AgrAbility Virginia provides military veterans with services in the form of education materials, networks, and adaptive tools to make work on a farm more accessible. More specifically, they assist in modifying farm and ranch operations, provide adaptive equipment, increase accessibility to machinery and areas on the farm, provide economic counseling, and identify funding available. For more information visit: [www.agrabilityvirginia.org](http://www.agrabilityvirginia.org).

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program (VBFRCP) is a state-wide and

coalition-based Extension program improving opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers to establish and sustain viable agricultural operations and communities in Virginia. The program offers a whole farm planning curriculum and training, online resources, social networking, and farmer mentoring. One outreach goal held by the VBFRCP is to support military veterans who are interested in starting a farm by connecting them with educational resources, trainings, and agricultural networks needed for successful entry and sustainability. For more information, visit [www.vabeginningfarmer.org](http://www.vabeginningfarmer.org).

AgrAbility Virginia and the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program have prepared this document to assist military veterans in and near Virginia who are interested in agriculture or starting a farm. The purpose of this document is to present information and resources that are available to you as a military veteran. This publication is not intended to be used as a comprehensive resource guide but a useful starting point.

### Networking is Essential

Networking and comradery shared within the military veteran community is extremely beneficial in all aspects of a new career in agriculture. It is not only important for overall health and safety as you begin a farm enterprise, it is estimated that 85 percent of today's jobs are found through networking (Adler, 2016). AgrAbility Virginia and the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program are excellent places to begin your networking and on-farm planning process. They will

provide you with resources and organizational connections to help get you started.

Four tips for Networking (Gundmundsson, 2015)

1. Know yourself and identify your goals.
2. Inventory your contacts.
3. Know what you want from associates.
4. Bring a mutually supportive attitude.

## Educational Options for Military Veterans

There are at least three main educational options available to veterans when they desire to learn about farming: 1) on-the-job internships; 2) technical training; 3) formal education. The Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) is awarded to both military members and military veterans for a duration of 36 months and can be used for financial assistance during technical training or towards earning a degree (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). The Post 9/11 GI Bill is awarded to combat veterans and can be used to receive a larger fund or receive one more year of educational funds (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021). The Reserve and National Guard (who were activated for at least 90 days after September 11, 2001) may be eligible for the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) (Army National Guard, 2021). Most educational institutions will have a veteran liaison and some will include an office dedicated to veterans returning to school.

## Farmer Training Programs

There are local and national training programs that will prepare you for daily chores and tasks on a farm. Most use a group or internship approach to learning. See the following section for a short list of hands-on training programs and courses designed exclusively for the military veteran that you might find useful. To learn about more training opportunities, or to learn more about these options, please contact the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program. For example, the VBFRCP offers whole farm planning trainings and resources for farm start-up that applies to a wide diversity of new and beginning farmers. It is important you find the program that works best for

your farming goals, learning needs, and personal interests.

## Virginia Programs

- Arcadia Center for Food and Sustainable Agriculture Veteran Farmer Program in Virginia. Since 2016, military veterans have been able to participate in a hands-on agriculture training program. It includes growing for Virginia's local market, encourage entrepreneurship, and agriculture job creation. This program is provided through three components: 1) Veteran Farmer Reserve Program; 2) Veteran Farm Fellowship Program; 3) and the Veteran Farmer Incubator. The Veteran Farm Fellowship Program is an intensive training program. Veteran Farm Fellows study and work full time at Arcadia Farm in Northern Virginia. The Fellows participate in all aspects of Arcadia's mission, including food access and distribution, sourcing, working with local chefs and retailers, and farm and nutrition education. Fellows work 40-50-hour work weeks and participate in the Farmer Reserve weekend program. Visit: <http://arcadiafood.org/> for more information on these programs from Arcadia.

## National Programs

- Veteran Farmer Coalition (FVC) is a national resource that has proven useful for national networking and state chapter development. Their website provides names of many other programs across the U.S. and offers some guidance. Visit them for more training opportunities for military veterans: <http://www.farmvetco.org/>
- Homegrown by Heroes (HBH) is a branding and marketing tool used by military veteran farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and producers to let consumers know that the products they are buying are from military veterans. Learn more here: <https://farmvetco.org/hbh/>

## Adaptive Agriculture Tools

Advances in technology and medical care during recent wars have produced more combat veteran survivors than ever before (Gerber, 2009). These veterans are returning home with amputated limbs, back, spinal, and/or other injuries. Goldberg (2014)

reports there are at least 1,200 amputees from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars alone. With this high rate of injuries, many veterans choosing to begin farming will need adaptive tools. AgrAbility Virginia can advise on retrofitting devices or structures and suggest adjusted work practices for farmers. Some solutions include changes to tractors, self-propelled equipment, adaptive tools, adapted livestock handling and housing strategies, and mobility aids. Refer to AgrAbility Virginia's On-Farm Safety Resources for examples of adaptive tools and strategies for farming with an illness, injury, or disability:

<https://agrability.alce.vt.edu/publications/on-farm-safety.html>.

## Mental Health Resources Available to Military Veterans

Many military veterans have mental health concerns and needs, including those who experience the challenges of Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder (PTSD). The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2018) estimates as many as 30 percent of combat veterans experience PTSD. Farming can be stressful and you may need additional resources to help cope with stress. Listed below are some local and national resources.

### Virginia Resources

- **Emergency and Crisis Mental Health Services in Virginia:** The Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services offers links to local resources. Visit: <https://www.dbhds.virginia.gov/behavioral-health/mental-health-services>
- **Virginia Community Services Boards (VACSB):** CSBs offer support for psychiatric emergencies 24 hours per day and provide a variety of other services. For more information about the services CSBs offer, visit: <https://vacsb.org/community-services-boards-and-the-behavioral-authority-csbs-and-the-bha/>. To find your local CSB, go to <https://vacsb.org/csb-bha-directory/>
- **AgrAbility Virginia** is an excellent resource for mental health information pertaining to farm

families. Find AgrAbility Virginia's mental health resources here:

<https://agrability.alce.vt.edu/publications/farm-safety-health-wellness.html>

### National Resources

- **PTSD Coach Mobile App:** Offers trustworthy information on PTSD and effective tools for identifying and tracking your PTSD symptoms; convenient, easy-to-use skills to help you handle stress symptoms; direct links to support and help; and is available 24/7. Download the app at: <https://mobile.va.gov/app/ptsd-coach>.
- **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Information on Substance Abuse:** Provides information about treatment, support, educational materials and links to services for a wide array of substance abuse related topics. Visit <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substanceabuse.asp> for more information.
- **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs General Information on Mental Health:** Provides treatment, support, educational material and links to services for numerous mental health related topics. Find information at: <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/>.
- **The National AgrAbility Project:** website offers a wealth of information for veterans. Visit <http://www.agrability.org/resources/veterans/#ca-regiver> for more information.

## Conclusion

The information provided in this fact sheet is a quick reference. This guide is designed to introduce you to basic resources and services that you may find useful as you begin your farm enterprise as a military veteran. There is a lot to consider when starting a farm. Additional resources are available to military veterans. We recommend contacting the AgrAbility Virginia Program (<http://www.agrabilityvirginia.org>) and the Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition Program (<http://www.vabeginningfarmer.org/>) to learn about resources available to veterans. Both programs are supported by Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Virginia Cooperative Extension is comprised of number of professionals and experts in the field of agriculture who can help you plan and develop your farm. Your local Virginia Cooperative Extension office has a number of resources for farmers, as well as agents to answer your questions. Learn more about Virginia Cooperative Extension and find your local specialist at [www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu).

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