

Young farmers start up organically...

with help from local agricultural development fund

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Five years ago, Charlotte Scott and Richard Williams hadn't anticipated becoming organic farmers while bustling along with their busy lives in Montreal. But for these first generation farmers, that's what a desire for deeply spiritual, deeply satisfying work and a six-month apprenticeship can inspire.

Through their media studies backgrounds and previous work experiences, both Charlotte and Richard have developed an innate sense of, as Charlotte puts it "working with the community for the community." Charlotte focused on the environment and culture for her MA thesis, and previously worked in community radio. Richard wasn't satisfied with his MA studies and left to work with an independent record company. When he turned 30, Richard set out to discover what he really wanted to do with his time.

He secured a six-month apprenticeship with *Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm* in Les Cèdres, a five person farm co-operative located less than an hour's drive south-west of Montreal (www.fermetournesol.qc.ca). By the end of his first day, Richard knew that he wanted to be involved in (as *Tourne-Sol's* mission statement reads) "promoting and developing organic agriculture as a viable and sustainable food production system."

After Richard's apprenticeship and three seasons working on organic farms, the couple knew it was time to combine their skill sets and forge ahead on their own. They met up with Anne Levesque, who introduced them to an incubator-style farm program located less than 30 minutes from Gatineau. Known as the Agricultural Platform of l'Ange Gardien, the program is an

initiative of the Centre for Research and Agricultural Technological Development of the Outaouais Region (CREDETAO), of which Anne is the co-ordinator.

The program provides participants with ongoing support and mentorship, infrastructure and land to farm in order to establish themselves over the course of five years. Alongside the technical support and workshops, each participant has access to a multi-use building (cold room and personal storage rooms, washing stations, potable water, toilet) a central field irrigation network, high tunnels and heated greenhouses, tractors, machinery and a storage shed. Participants rent the land, pay for their use of electricity, and pay a membership fee. These costs differ depending on which year the participants are in of their five-year program. The first three years allow for the project to establish itself, and the next two provide room for the project to grow. *Ferme Lève-tôt*, Charlotte and Richard's project, is one of five projects operating some of the 58 acres available in the program.

Richard and Charlotte are currently near the end of their first growing season. As field crop producers they are trying out about 150 varieties of vegetables to see what they would like to continue growing. They sell approximately two thirds of their harvests through their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and the rest through the community market in Chelsea.

The routine of field work is both physically and mentally demanding yet for Charlotte and Richard it has also become a form of meditation and contemplation. They find it deeply spiritual to put their hands in the soil, to be able to make a healthy income growing food this way for the community members who support them. Their satisfaction also comes from knowing they're working with their (CSA) community and it feels quite like a partnership.

Their farm name, *Ferme Lève-tôt*, means 'early riser', and pays tribute to their new parental roles of a growing and nearly 18-month-old Emmett, who fortunately loves mucking about in the fields as much as they do. Since the Agricultural Platform program doesn't offer housing on the farm, their greatest challenge this year has been balancing the home/farm/childcare equation.

It's been a year of learning to work together, and of finding their way. While contributing to a wider ecological farming movement Charlotte and Richard are also developing a bond to the land and community in which they flourish. This can only mean more good things to come.

Follow their success online at <http://fermelevetot.wordpress.com>. For further information on the Agricultural Platform of l'Ange Gardien program visit www.demarretafermebio.com.

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