

A Free Farm Holiday If You're Willing to Work



By SEAN O'DRISCOLL Associated Press
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It started with an ad on Craigslist: Free holiday on an organic farm on Long Island, work for your keep and enjoy wineries and great beaches nearby.

The farm would even supply transportation from New York City and bicycles to get around once you arrive. All a friend and I had to do was take the subway to a farmers market in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and a van would pick us up. The entire experience wouldn't cost a penny. I suspected it was all too good to be true. Perhaps some religious cult hungry for new members was trapping us with dreams of idyllic rural life.

But when we got to Williamsburg, it was clear that these farmers were genuine and making a lively trade at the produce market. We helped load boxes after the market ended, sat in the van, and took the two-hour ride to Garden of Eve, an 80-acre organic farm on the north fork of Long Island.

The farm owner, Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht, met us in the farm store and showed us the accommodations. The apprentices and migrant workers were staying in the farmhouse so we had a choice between a garage adjoining the farmhouse or a gazebo in the fields.



This August 2008 photo courtesy of Eve... [View Full Caption](#)

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At first we chose the rather downbeat but conveniently-located garage, but changed our minds after seeing the solar-powered wooden gazebo, with a partially glass roof looking up at the stars. The gazebo was spacious, clean and somewhere to spend the night listening to the woodland sounds outside. Beds are provided; bring your own sheets.

We began work the day we arrived, mowing the lawn with a little tractor and then working in the fields with the apprentices, all of whom were very helpful and gave us lots of advice.

One major caution: This is hard, physical work and the aches will build up if you're not used to it. Of all the crops, tomatoes were the most difficult to pick. When broken, freshly picked tomatoes spray a natural irritant that stings so badly I couldn't see and had to wash out my eyes before restarting work.

Any produce damaged during harvesting can be flung to the farm's 1,000 egg-laying hens, which live in a free-range enclosure in the fields. Hundreds of them rush to see what's on offer when the food is thrown over the fence. The hens have a very relaxed regime. Several of them squeeze through the fence every day and wander around for a few hours before we open the gate and persuade them back in. Some are already waiting at the gate, clucking at us to open it.

Garden of Eve takes in volunteers from mid-April until Thanksgiving, so chores vary according to the time of year.

In spring, volunteers move plants from the greenhouses into the fields, feed them and take care of seedlings.

"Generally, we don't turn away volunteers if we have room," says Kaplan-Walbrecht.

"Volunteers are good workers and they help us to see our farm with fresh eyes because they are so enthusiastic."

After work and a shower, it's a walk or cycle to the nearby beach, which offers a magnificent view across Long Island Sound. The farm owns a beach house it rents to its farm managers and the managers let us relax there when we weren't on the beach. Some nights we returned to the beach to listen to the ocean and watch shooting stars streak across the sky.

When we weren't working or at the beach, we were visiting the local wineries. My favorite, Palmer Vineyards, is within walking distance and is known locally for its rose merlot. Palmer offers wine tastings throughout the summer as do many of the local wineries.

By day five, I was really tired. The volunteers' work schedule is only loosely enforced but you are expected to work 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. The aches were worth it for the huge free organic lunches cooked up by the apprentices.

By day six, I had to be back in the city, so we took a ride in the delivery van after one of the best holidays of my life.

It was a workout, a vacation and a return to nature, a chance to check out wineries, stargaze and swim in the ocean, all literally without spending a dollar. The only time I used cash was one night when we ate out in one of the many authentic Mexican restaurants nearby. Try doing that in Vegas. Also, for the eco-conscious, we didn't burn a single extra gram of carbon getting there or coming back. I've even adapted the organic farming lessons I learned to the onion plants I grow in my apartment.

Many other farms offer similar stays. A very helpful organization called Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms can help you find opportunities around the country and around the world.



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This undated photo courtesy of Melanie Ross... [View Full Caption](#)

WWOOF-USA program manager Ryan Goldsmith says that the group's website now has details of over 1,500 organic farms across the U.S. "The biggest concentrations are in the west and east coasts, but we are adding hundreds more from around the country," said Goldsmith. "Every single one of them needs your support, and volunteers will get so much out of it too."

If You Go:

WORLDWIDE OPPORTUNITIES ON ORGANIC FARMS: <http://www.woof.org> and <http://www.woof.usa.org> .

GARDEN OF EVE: Located in Aquebogue, a hamlet of Riverhead, N.Y., on Long Island, about 80 miles east of New York City; <http://www.gardenofevefarm.com> . Farm workers can pick up volunteers at New York City farmers' markets. Long Island Rail Road service also available to the town of Riverhead from Penn Station. Free lodging and food in exchange for work, with accommodations including the tranquil gazebo or the large, two-story farm house, where apprentices and workers share music and fun.

PALMER VINEYARD: Aquebogue, Long Island; <http://www.palmervineyards.com> or 631-722-9463 631-722-9463 .

ACTIVITIES AND FESTIVALS: On Saturday nights from 7 p.m. until midnight, weather permitting, the Custer Observatory in Southold provides an entertaining view of the night sky, using telescopes and laser pointers. Adults, \$5; children, \$3; <http://www.custerobservatory.org> or 631-765-2626 631-765-2626 . Long Island's strawberry picking season begins in June, mostly in rural areas on the north fork located near or along State Route 25A. Garden of Eve hosts a garlic festival the last weekend in September.

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