

Adventures on an Organic Farm

Read about one young Canadian's experience working as a volunteer on an organic farm in England. Through a global network known as WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms), Jane travelled to Henley-on-Thames, England, and lived with a local family. Here she recounts some funny and interesting stories from life on the farm!



Bleary-eyed from an overnight flight from Canada, I stumbled into the baggage area at London's Heathrow airport and found a payphone to call the woman who was to be my host for the next couple of weeks. I had come to England to work as a farm hand on her property. "Hi Jane!" she exclaimed upon answering the phone. She sounded chirpy and entirely undaunted by a drive to the airport at 6:30 am. How early is early on the farm? I wondered nervously. Deciding on a place to meet, we realized we were both wearing hats that would allow us to be easily recognised. I was wearing an outrageous purple felt cowboy hat with leather flowers on the brim. I had fallen in love with it at a thrift store a few weeks earlier, and I knew that working on an organic farm was one of the few jobs where such an accessory might be considered acceptable.

I recognised my host immediately when I saw her; she was wearing an Australian-style hat that instantly reminded me of my childhood hero, Crocodile Dundee. She had an air of mischief and adventure about

her that only mounted as she led me to her vehicle in the car park – a Land Rover that appeared to be straight out of an African safari (affectionately called 'The Landy'). Still navigating by Canadian orientations, I headed for the right hand side of The Landy – until my host then reminded me that in England the passenger door is on the left! I climbed in, and we took off in the direction of Henley-on-Thames, an affluent town famously known as the home of the Henley Royal Regatta. In the forty overwhelming minutes we spent careening down the left-hand side of narrow English roads, my host cheerfully predicted that I would love her garden, her hometown, her husband and two young children, and her extended family, and that I would still be living with them the following June!

WWOOF stands for 'World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms' or 'Willing Workers On Organic Farms,' depending on whom you ask. The various interpretations of the acronym are indicative of the informal, decentralised nature of WWOOF. Joining a national or



regional WWOOF organisation is a matter of paying a nominal fee to gain access to the contact information of organic farmers in that country or region who are willing to provide room and board in exchange for labour on their farm. Then it is up to the participants to contact the hosts and for the hosts and participants to settle all of the details.

The farm in Henley was my first WWOOFing experience, and I was my hosts' first "WWOOFer". As such, we would both be learning as we went along. I learned straight away that I had done very well in terms of room and board! I spent most of my first day catching up on sleep under a down duvet in the family guestroom. When I woke up in the evening, I learned that my host was a talented cook and that supper was normally accompanied by a nice glass of wine. When the children wished me goodnight in English accents, I was thoroughly charmed.

Only after a full day's rest did I venture out to the vegetable plot. After surviving a whirlwind tour of the garden and a rapid explanation of the elaborate, non-sequential, fourteen-year crop rotation scheme, I was defeated by my first assignment – to "please decamp the courgettes". Dozens of British English terms had baffled me in the hours since my arrival, but this was the first exchange that I could not bluff my way through with a smile and a nod. I begged a translation and learned that I had been asked to,

"please gather up the zucchinis and move them out of here". I learned many new vocabulary words while working in the garden, both specialist terminology (who knew that the cabbage/broccoli family was called 'the Brassicas'?) and the British terms for common herbs and vegetables (for example, coriander for cilantro, courgette and marrow for zucchini and large zucchini, aubergine for egg plant). None of these vegetable-related mix-ups, however, left me in nearly as much confusion as my ignorance that in England, 'pants' is a cute term for 'underwear' (whereas for me, 'pants' is what the British refer to as 'trousers').

On my second day out at the vegetable plot, my host had other business to take care of, so I was accompanied only by the family's wiry Parson Russell terrier. I was tasked with the simple, late September job of disassembling the sweet pea supports. I worked cutting the string that bound the poles together at the top of the wigwam-style structure, and I was careful not to damage the plastic netting wound around the structure that the sweet peas cling to as they climb. I stacked it in a loose pile to be bagged and stored for reuse next spring. Imagine my horror when I turned around to see the family dog rolling in this pile of netting, entangling and strangling himself more and more tightly as he struggled! I had no idea what to do; I did not grow up with dogs and, though small, the



dog was still unfamiliar to me. I tried to cut him out of the netting with my knife, but he wriggled fiercely and nipped at my hand – I feared I would accidentally stab him before I freed him. I decided to carry the netting-swaddled dog the five-minute walk through a campsite back to my hosts' home, hoping that he would not choke before we made it. To my surprise, when I picked him up, the dog calmed instantly. Sitting on the ground, cradling the dog like a small child, I was able to cut him free of his mesh straightjacket.

Fortunately, most days out at the plot were far more peaceful. The garden was a paradise for daydreaming. The physical labour left my mind free to wander wherever it wanted to go. I felt healthy and strong and often proud of my work. I helped to plant an orchard of cherries, pears, apples, quince, walnuts and cobnuts that should provide fruit and nuts for decades. Of course, much of the work was tedious. Weeding very young carrots, for example, requires a concentrated effort of kneeling and squinting, and the end result is thoroughly uninspiring, if visible at all. Other jobs were gruelling. I remember specifically digging up 2008's potatoes in clay on a cold, wet day and planting 2009's potatoes in wrist-breaking, flinty soil (through this experience I resolved that one day when I have my own garden, I'll skip the spuds).

Of course, all of this didn't happen in two weeks. My host's

predictions on our drive from Heathrow were one hundred percent correct. I instantly adored her immediate and extended family (who all live miraculously close to one another), and in June I was still residing with them, harvesting the season's first strawberries and raspberries. Just before I left, my host family went on holiday and entrusted me with the responsibility of overseeing the entire operation by myself – the vegetables, pigs, sheep, chickens and, of course, the dog. Still in the mindset of a student, I thought of this as my final exam, and I was very proud of all that I had learned and accomplished in 8 months time. I am no longer a WWOOFer, but I still keep my Wellies, raincoat, and my purple cowboy hat in Henley-on-Thames to wear when I visit.

Jane graduated from the University of North Carolina in 2007 with a degree in International Studies. She completed a Masters in Humanities at Toronto's York University in 2008 before moving to England. She currently lives and works in Oxford.

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