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## Young Agrarians Business Mentorship Program

by [Sara Dent](#)

October 2, 2017

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Young Agrarians is a network for new and young ecological farmers. Our program works to facilitate farmer2farmer knowledge transfer, and reverse the national trend of the declining number of new farm operators 35 and younger in Canada.

We are currently focused on ongoing programming in BC and Alberta, and our network at the grassroots level extends across Canada.

Our main program pillars are: Online outreach and engagement; educational events including workshops; farm tours and mixers; business mentorships; and land access.

Young Agrarians is now the largest new farmer organization in BC. In 2016 we partnered up with the City of Surrey, in collaboration with Quebec's Land Bank Program, L'Arterre, to pilot a Land Matching Program in the Lower Mainland. This program connects new farmers ready to start farms with farmland owners.

According to the most recent StatsCanada agricultural data (2016), farmers are getting older—but also younger. Farmers over the age of 55 is the fastest growing age group, with the average national age of operators edging up from 54 in 2011 to 55 in 2016. This trend parallels the general population. On the other hand, in 2016 we saw an increase in the number of farm operators under 35. This is the first time there has been an increase in farmers under 35 since 1991 when the number of young farmers started a steep decline, falling from 77,910 in 1991 to 24,120 by 2011. As of 2016, 24,850, or 9.1%, of Canadian farmers are under 35, with 28% of those new farmers in BC. Young Agrarians represent!

New farmers have a number of barriers to overcome when they start farms. Land is expensive in Southern BC—prohibitively expensive. Capital can be challenging to access for those saddled with student debt and without equity or collateral to leverage. Recent research conducted in 2015 by the National New Farmers Coalition, in partnership with the University of Manitoba, indicates that a whole two-thirds (68% of 1326 survey participants) of new farmers do not come from family farming backgrounds.

This plays out in a number of ways. Gemma McNeill and Doug Zaklan of Zaklan Heritage Farm were lucky enough to have land from Doug's family. But, as Gemma points out, that's only a first step. "Although we both had previous experience with farming, neither of us had the extensive business experience that is often overlooked when people get into farming."

She reflects that, "It's easy to think, 'Oh yeah, I'm going to grow some vegetables,' but the other side of actually running a business and making it profitable is forgotten. We'd done fairly well after our first season but realized after looking at all the numbers that, even though we set kind of unrealistic goals, it wasn't quite enough to consider making a living on or growing our business."

Young Agrarians helped Gemma and Doug connect to a larger network of farmers they could turn to for advice.

"Other farmers are the most valuable resources you can have," Gemma says. The program also provided assistance and guidance in setting up their social media strategy. "It's invaluable for connecting us to the public and to our customers, but it also connects us to other farmers. There is so much information available via social media. We can learn from other farmers all over the world."

While the community of Young Agrarians helped get them started, it was the Mentorship program that was truly transformative. Gemma reflects that the mentorship she got through Young Agrarians has bolstered their business and their confidence. "I think mentorship is really important because it's always helpful to have a family on board. Sometimes you're kind of 'stuffing your own silo'—you don't see other things. A mentor gives you a whole other perspective, to talk through things in a different way. Last spring was really challenging so I sent our mentor a message saying 'Hey, I'm really struggling and I was wondering if we could have a pep talk.' We talked on the phone for about an hour and worked through some of the challenges we were experiencing. It helped us feel a lot less isolated. Having a bigger community out there that can provide support is huge and really helps us avoid costly mistakes."

A new generation of young people have a number of reasons for getting into farming. Concern for the planet and climate change is a primary motivator for many new farmers. New farmers also want to be a part of supporting their local communities by providing access to fresh and ecologically grown foods. The best thing that people can do these days is to continue to get to know your local food producers, and help grow more interest in small-scale farms.

*About Young Agrarians (YA): In B.C. Young Agrarians is a partnership with FarmFolk CityFolk. Our mission is to grow the next generation of farmers in Canada. To learn more about us visit: [youngagrarians.org](http://youngagrarians.org).*



12/5/2017

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Sara Dent is Young Agrarians' co-founder, producer, and lead project manager. She has almost 20 years experience in the non-profit sector working on youth initiatives, and has focused on agriculture and food systems since 2006.

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