



Story and photos by Michael Cooney

# Roger's Rules

## Rising Sun Farm

**S**pending the growing season working at Wisconsin's clothing-optional Rising Sun Farm producing high-quality vegetables sounds like an ideal labor for any young person seeking an alternative lifestyle. It is, but it's also hard work requiring the careful stewardship of limited resources, the careful and deliberate cultivation of the produce, and always an attention to producing a superior product. In short, there is a considerable learning curve and a mastery of what interns on the farm call "Roger's Rules." Living mostly off the grid, interns learn to be resourceful in their spare-time entertainment with no TV or Internet, and often find the close living and working environment both personally challenging and a welcome community experience.

At first glance Roger Browne looks like the aging hippie farmer that he is, but when you look again there are the sparkling eyes and when you listen to his relaxed and thoughtful speech you realize that Roger is out to save the world or at least the few acres he tends with the assistance of seasonal interns.

Located in rural western Wisconsin near the college town of River Falls and within an hour drive to the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Rising Sun Farm utilizes just one acre in a

five-year rotation, in addition the green houses (hoop houses) to produce carefully cultivated vegetables that are prized in local gourmet restaurants.

The clarity and intention of purpose one experiences when visiting the farm is remarkable in a world where most people don't want to be where they are, and doing what they are doing. In a world where happiness is based on, if only we could have more stuff or experience, Roger and his crew are living examples of "less is more" and that "mindfulness" may be everything. And when weather permits working naked makes it all even better.

Interns quickly discover that life on the farm, while simple and basic, is also good. Working with nature, enjoying the satisfaction of seeing crops grow from seeds to maturity, and collectively sharing the experience of farm life is a rich existence.

We didn't fully appreciate the quality of the produce we saw being harvested in the morning, until we dined at a local gourmet restaurant that proudly featured Rising Sun Farm produce. Having a delicious leek and mushroom soup was made all the better knowing those leeks and the care with which they were grown, harvested, and delivered.

## An informal list of Roger's Rules, as told by the interns, include:

- Make the most of the farms limited resources.
- Balance work and play.
- If you can save a step, do it every time.
- Don't party without Roger.
- Use the right tool for the job.

## Roger's 14 Guiding Principles for those Considering Farming are:

1. Let your farm mission be your guiding principal to design around and to consider future decisions against.
2. Every farm is unique: don't try to copy someone else's farm.
3. Find your market niche.
4. Do not buy a seed until you know where you will see the crop.
5. Choose your assets wisely; make them work for you.
6. Find a farming system that works for you.
7. Have a plan in place and easily accessible because the growing season is crazy.
8. Don't plant more than you can take care of.
9. Be thinking or you won't be in business very long.
10. Use the power of observation.
11. Think positive thoughts about your farm to influence a positive outcome.
12. Enjoy what you grow!
13. There's no substitute for experience
14. Your marketing is only as good as your relationships.

## Rising Sun Farm Interns

### Ashley Salizar.

*I first visited Rising Sun Farm* in 2008 when my sister was working here and I think it was the setting and the amazing food that brought me back. I have worked at other farms that have been much larger and more commercial; Rise Sun Farm's scale is smaller, a lot more beautiful, and more established than the places I've been. The biggest thing is that "Roger's ways" are a lot different than everyone else's ways. Roger focuses on efficiency in everything you do.

We are always thinking about how many steps we are taking in a day. Like don't walk to the end of the hoop house to pick up one bunch of kale and then walk to the front of the hoop house to pick up another bunch and then, oh, I forgot one and go back. So we're always thinking about our steps and also thinking about what's going to happen next with the vegetables. While I'm doing

scallions, we're going to cut the roots off so you make sure they're lined up so you don't have to re-bunch them once you get to the tubs. He's got a lot of different things that he likes and sometimes it seems silly, like hauling a raspberry picking stand to do the cherry tomatoes. But it makes a lot more sense than holding them in your hand and only using one hand to pick and now you have two free hands and you can pick twice as fast.

We get paid a small wage, plus lodging and food. We also get use of the vehicle, which is really nice because none of the three interns this year have their own vehicles.

This summer I have been able to save the most money at Rising Sun compared to any other job I've had because my expenses are so low. I've also learned that it doesn't take a lot of money to really survive. Roger doesn't have a big savings, but at least he has everything he needs year to year.

Working this intensely with people is mostly fun, but it can also be difficult living and working at the same exact place. When





there's an issue, you don't go home and have space from the people you have issues with. You go home and those people are at home, too. It's been interesting. I've learned a lot about working with people, and that it's important to solve issues right away instead of letting them boil and boil and then it's going to blow up.

Working in a clothing-optional environment has been very comfortable for me. I don't like to label myself a naturist, but a "comfortist." So I don't look for opportunities to take my clothes off particularly, but if it's warm outside, the last thing I want to do is to adjust my clothing and have sticky clothes on me. It's been great. I love it. It's comfortable. It makes working a lot easier. The only thing is remembering where you put all your clothes.

Working here has impacted my life; it's definitely made me think a lot about where my food's coming from and how I don't need a lot of stuff to live. I think in the future I'll definitely be having a garden, and I always wanted a really large house; but now while I don't want to live in a one-room cabin my whole life, I would rather have more outside space than indoor space. So I think just knowing that I can grow food and be self-sufficient has taught me a lot. I think I learned more here at Rising Sun in three years than I learned in college for four years.

### **Eric Senewalt.**

*I first came to Rising Sun Farm* after reading about it in *N* magazine(26.2). I was attracted by the naturism as well as the farming and nutrition practices. I came here with not a lot of hands-on knowledge of how to grow vegetables and get them to market, so I have learned a great deal.

When I first came to the farm, I thought Roger was all about the productivity and efficiency, but it is more than that. Unlike some other farms I've visited, where it's just about business, Roger incorporates communal and social elements into farm life. At Rising Sun, friends, family, and community all join in working and playing together. One of my favorite parts is the community meal every day.

On Sunday's we've done canoe trips, went to the Minnesota State Fair, and we went to see music together at the Music on the Park series in River Falls. Plus there are the farm events like the annual Strawberry Festival, weekly volleyball games, and the big Fall Harvest Festival.

Working in a clothing-optional environment feels pretty natural, and very comfortable. I really enjoy getting full exposure to the sun; it certainly would be my first choice for working. With the season ending, I wish there were more places like this where I could work without clothes.

### **Meil Flores.**

*The sun comes up, the sun goes down, the sun will shine, the rain will come, and the clouds will blow over.* The natural rhythms of farm life have had a transformative effect on me. One of the reasons I



came to the farm was to heal my root chakra. I learned that I'm antsy. I like to be at a high vibration—zing, zing, zing—and don't really like to spend a lot of time in my root, so I came to a good place to get grounding. And it has worked over the past six months.

I have experienced a complete process of moving at a slower pace; the farm work slows you down, even though you have to be productive. The pressure is to produce a product of quality, integrity and consistency, while also dealing with any erratic formations in nature and then the erratic formations with the other people you work with. I don't really like being told what to do, so to be around a lot of people who are very excited about food and know what they're doing so well can be very frustrating.

I enjoy being here, I want to enjoy the sensuality of the land and the plants and be able to commune with them and commune with nature and feel the spirit of the land. Then Roger's like, "That's how most people feel, but you've got to work on your productivity, because the pressure is we are sustaining our lives through this small operation." Roger feels the brunt of that because he's the man who does the numbers and makes the orders. While it can be a bit of a respite for the interns who come here for their own purposes, it's still a business.

I like the clothing-optional part of farm life. I've noticed that I feel sad going out into the real world now because I immediately sense that pressure and the judgment of others. Here I can wear rags or be naked. Then you go to the outside world and it seems like there's so much to prove through all the right accessories and the right shoes. Just to be accepted by people as you are is like a different kind of experience. I have loosened up over time, but I think that goes when you develop trust and safety. When I first came, I noticed one of the interns hugging a volunteer bare chest to bare chest, female to male. Then I noticed that at the end of the season I did that with someone who I trusted because we grew close and it wasn't an issue anymore. I don't even think twice about it now. To me, that's a lot of growth; it just took time to naturally develop.

So I've been enjoying that and the exposure to all the naturalists but they say no, we're naturists! I'm like, all right, whatever you are then! I really appreciate the freedom, and I'm a radical so it's just nice. We were at the beach the other day and I took my top off and Ashley said, "We're in public; we can't do that here!" Because of her proximity and how used to being naked with her I forgot that we couldn't do it. I'm like, oh good, no one saw. That's why it's nice to have sanctuary space.

I'm very grateful to the farm allowing space for people like me who had a different agenda. Yes, I wanted to be able to learn how to grow food for survival, which is also a root chakra thing, but I also wanted to balance my own psyche. So that's not something you could ask of a lot of farmers like, "I came to balance my psyche on your land!" **N**

