



# Discussion Topic

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## QUESTIONS

1. How can your county Farm Bureau encourage one young farmer today to remain in farming and excel?
2. How can you encourage non-farming young people to get involved in production agriculture?
3. List the top three areas of opportunity for young farmers in the next 5, 10 and 20 years.

## How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm?

The agriculture community has been lamenting its own aging population for some time, and there seems to be no obvious solution.

The fact remains that fewer young people are accepting full-time farming as their preferred profession and way of life.

The reasons are numerous, but they're changing.

At one time, typical farm life meant barely scratching out a subsistence living with near-constant work, and young people wanted more income, more time off, and more opportunities that off-farm professions offered.

And along with that trend came the idea – right or wrong – that if you didn't come from a farm family, you had little to no opportunities to get into farming.

Partly because of economics and partly because it's tough to learn the complicated ins and outs of farming without years of experience, farming might be best left to the farm-raised next generation, although that's not always the case, Chamberlain said.

"I work with several farmers who didn't grow up on farms who made a go of it," she said. "It depends on the individual."

Attracting people to farming – farm-born and non-natives alike – remains difficult, but there are ways to be sure a young person who is interested in farming remains interested.

"First, I think on-farm kids need to be allowed to go with their own strengths," Chamberlain said. "Forty years ago, most people on the farm did the same job. It's not that way anymore. If someone is good with crops and doesn't like managing labor, let them do that. If someone is good with budgeting and finance, let them do the things they like. Above all, the older farm owner needs to be a mentor."

Along with mentoring, Chamberlain said, comes some common sense.

"In a business setting, keeping emotion out of management is important," she said. "For many family-run farm businesses, lines can be blurred when it comes to business and family responsibilities. Sometimes that can lead to negative attitudes, which can easily creep into the operation and put a damper on risk-taking. There is a time to be a mentor and a time to be a parent. And because farming is a business, it's best to separate the two."

Another thing the experienced farmer should do to ensure a smooth transition that welcomes a young farmer into the business is to give up control, a sometimes difficult thing to do.

"If they are your kids, have faith in how you raised them and that they will do the right thing," she said. "Define some things on which you're willing to pass control, and let the young person make the decision. Then stay out of it. You can mentor only to a certain point, and sometimes people have to make their own mistakes."

Michigan Farm Bureau strives to encourage today's young farmers with recognition on the county and state level, resulting in an annual banquet at the state annual meeting that highlights the state's best and brightest young farmers.

"Sometimes pride in farming can be overlooked during the daily work load, but I think all young farmers, when they see honors given to their peers, can know they're appreciated, and maybe give them incentive to take extra pride in their work and maybe win their own accolades," Chamberlain said.

The bottom line, she said, is that the farming community has a treasure trove of young, energetic, motivated and bright farmers coming up. They should be encouraged to step into agriculture.