

## A New Way to Serve

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### Summary

Agriculture, the green industry and horticulture can help returning veterans integrate back into civilian life with productive careers. Likewise, the human talent and skill-sets that veterans offer can be a great employee resource for the green industry. After being first introduced to The Veteran's Farm of North Carolina (VFNC) in 2016, I became a founding board member and was inspired to pursue a career in agriculture. The Veteran's Farm of NC, Inc. (VFNC), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to assisting veterans and military personnel/unit commands with consultation, training and education, equipment usage, and land acquisition. Through a grant from USDA/NIFA and thanks to partnership

with other industry leaders, VFNC now offers three on farm training programs: 1) Veterans Agricultural Training and Education Program (VATEP), 2) Farm Military Assistance Program (FARM MAP), and 3) Skillbridge Internships. The flagship program for VFNC is VATEP, a six month on farm training program for veterans. FARM MAP is a more concise program of on farm training lasting two to four months for transitioning service members.

Skillbridge internships offer transitioning service members on farm or on the job training in the agricultural industry <https://skillbridge.osd.mil/>. In addition to these on farm training programs, VFNC continues to offer mentorship, networking, and an extensive equipment loan program.

## INTRODUCTION

In North Carolina, agriculture (including the nursery industry) is the number one source of income for the state, followed closely by the United State military. While historically there was much overlap between the farming and military populations - not only in NC, but in the US as a whole - these two career paths began to separate - following the passage of the GI Bill at the end of WWII. Small farms went to the wayside with the introduction of expensive massive machinery and large monoculture farms. As the average age of farmers has steadily increased, fewer people are seeking careers in agriculture and horticulture due to a number of barriers. Vet Farm seeks to remove those barriers and guide transitioning servicemembers and veterans to a fulfilling career or farm ownership.

Because of these issues, the agriculture industry (including the nursery industry) is in dire need of new farmers and professionals. Supply chain issues during COVID highlighted this need more than ever. It is vital that we have in place small local suppliers of agricultural products and skilled agricultural workers in their respective communities. Veterans are the ideal population to meet this need. They bring the strong work ethic, management experience, intuitiveness and interest required to be successful - whether they are building a small business or pursuing a career in agriculture. In return, veterans gain a new purpose and place in the community.

The barriers transitioning soldiers and veterans face when leaving the military and pursuing a career in agriculture are: 1) lack of technical agricultural skills and knowledge, 2) land acquisition, 3) lack of resources, 4) need for mentorship, 5) need

for networking opportunities, and 6) obstacles to obtaining equipment. The Veteran's Farm of North Carolina (VFNC) seeks to address and remove each of these barriers. Our training programs provide a wide range of agricultural skills and knowledge in numerous production models, providing hands on practice and the practical knowledge required to develop these skills. Participants are educated in how to find land to suit their needs and how to obtain financing in creative ways to meet their goals. Curriculum includes education in navigating the wide range of resources available from government agencies such as USDA, National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA), Cooperative Extension, as well as non-government agencies such as Farm Credit, Veteran's Business Outreach Center, and more. Participants receive ongoing mentorship throughout the program and beyond to help them achieve their goals, whether that is starting a small farm business, obtaining a college degree in the agricultural field, or seeking an agricultural career. VFNC is there to encourage and advise them every step of the way. Finally, transitioning service members and veterans have a vast networking opportunity with our partners and with each other - giving them a new military community and assistance with finding their place in the civilian community.

## CURRENT TRAINING PROGRAMS

Veterans Agricultural Training Program (VATEP) is VFNC's flagship training program for transitioning service members and veterans. VATEP is a new 6-month training program at our 21.5 ha (53 ac) farm located in Cameron, North Carolina. This program

is partnered with Fayetteville Technical Community College and students will complete online coursework in a variety of subjects with hands-on, practicums to be completed on the farm. The VATEP program provides participants with hands-on, on-farm training and education for numerous models of agricultural production. Main topics for the curriculum are: farm safety, soil science, livestock husbandry, crop production, horticulture, agritourism, niche-products, business plans, carpentry, mechanics, electrical and plumbing. With VATEP, VFNC seeks to bridge the gap between a beginning farmer and other educational programs, providing practical skills and knowledge required for starting a small farm business or seeking a career in agriculture (**Fig. 1**).



**Figure 1.** Students learning farm safety as part of Veterans Agricultural Training and Education Program (VATEP) on farm training.

The second program VFNC currently offers on farm is the Farm Military Assistance Program (FARM MAP). This is a shorter, more condensed two-to-four-month program offered as part of the Career

Skills Program (CSP) in partnership with the U.S. Army at Ft. Bragg. Staff members of VFNC actively recruit transitioning service members at the Soldier for Life/Transition Assistance Program Office (SFL/TAPS) on post while they are in their last year of service. The program is also available to spouses as space allows. The FARM MAP program provides participants hands-on, on-farm training and education at VFNC's farm. This more concise program offers intensive education in the development of a working farm plan, soil science, livestock husbandry, crop production, & horticulture skills. Participants are also introduced to the variety of educational and career opportunities available in agriculture. Through a prior partnership with North Carolina State University as Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) and now our FARM MAP program, VFNC has been able to provide training to over 300 transitioning servicemembers and veterans so far. These classes are continuing in an ongoing basis every 6-8 weeks (**Fig. 2**).



**Figure 2.** Farm Military Assistance Program (FARM MAP) participants learning hands-on plant propagation in our training greenhouse.

The third program available through VFNC is our Department of Defense Skillbridge Internship opportunity. We are currently working to expand this program, offering on the job training and internships to transitioning servicemembers with agricultural employers. This program combines the on-farm training offered through VATEP and FARM MAP with career opportunities. We are actively recruiting interested employers

to participate in this job placement program through VFNC. The Skillbridge Internship seeks to connect participants to the local job market and provides on-farm training for those interested in starting a small farm business. This program provides participants hands-on, on-farm training and education allowing them to work behind the scenes of all production models (**Fig. 3**).



**Figure 3.** Students receiving hands-on training in bee keeping. Some available farm equipment in the background.

VFNC actively recruits interested veterans both in and out of the service and exposes them to the myriad of opportunity agriculture has to offer - assessing their needs and goals, then placing them in the program best suited to meet those needs and assist in accomplishing those goals. Veterans learn that the agriculture industry has many desirable career opportunities. Recruiting also means educating a veteran before they start farming to develop the skill-sets, have a plan, minimize risks - and the foundation to develop an economically successful business. These VFNC programs

help create best management practices (BMPs) through education based on past experiences and real knowledge - from experienced members of agriculture-related industries.

### **ADDITIONAL SERVICES**

From its inception in 2016, VFNC has provided ongoing consultation and mentorship to all program participants and to any interested veterans. Frequently, this mentorship comes when a veteran has started a small farm business or is seeking further educa-

tion and has not participated in our programs. Experienced farmers and those with careers in the agricultural field are available to provide advice, advocacy and encouragement. VFNC mentors accompany interested persons to assess land, enroll in programs with government agencies, or advise on educational programs to meet their needs and offer support. VFNC also offers an equipment loan program, currently maintaining an inventory of over \$200,000 of donated

equipment including tractors, implements, trailers, a truck, freezers, poultry processing equipment and more - all available to any farmer veteran in need for temporary use. The equipment in our program is in constant use at various veteran owned farms across eastern North Carolina - and we continue to accept financial donations, and gifting of agricultural and general construction equipment, as well as infrastructural items to help meet these needs (**Fig. 4**).



**Figure 4.** Veterans at Veterans Farm of North Carolina accepting a tractor donation from KIOTI Tractor.

Finally, VFNC has built a network of over 700 farmer veterans and links them to critical resources in NC. These resources include local farmers markets and outlets to sell their product along with extensive collaboration with other farmer veterans. This network provides the support, encouragement and military “family” many service-members find is missing from their new lives as a veteran. We believe this network, coupled with a new purpose and place in their community, is helping to reduce the alarming statistic of 22 veterans/service-

members per day losing their lives to suicide. There has been emerging interest in the last several years in agriculture as a form of therapy, even coining the term “Agri-therapy”

<https://www.farmaid.org/blog/farmer-heroes/agriculture-as-therapy-for-veterans-and-all-of-us/>. VFNC believes this is a vital part of our mission (**Fig. 5**).

VFNC’s objective statement is, “To give veterans a new mission and America new farmers.”



**Figure 5.** Pictured left to right: Robert Elliot, Founder and Executive Director of Veteran’s Farm of NC, Inc. (VFNC); Administrative Assistant, Samantha Manning; Board President, Donny, current Farm Military Assistance Program (FARM MAP) participant, Hanna, intern for NCSU Horticulture Dept, and other volunteers at FARM AID 2022 with hydroponics and various information about VFNC. Robert also taught a workshop on mushroom production at this event.

### IPPS-SRNA INVOLVEMENT

In January 2020, the IPPS Southern Region of North American (IPPS-SRNA) executive committee unanimously voted to extend free student memberships to those enrolled in the STAG program - which continues to participants in VFNC programs. This decision was an excellent first step in bringing together two groups that have much to offer each other.

We look forward to seeing this relationship grow and prosper in years to come, as IPPS members - to “Seek and Share” the collective knowledge - with veterans who wish to become colleagues. It is a win-win for all with the career opportunities the green industry offers veterans, and the human talent that veterans can bring to the nursery profession!