I am a biodynamic farm extension agent, visiting organic gardens and farms and offering advice. This was not planned. It just happens that many gardens are sprouting up to meet the demand for local produce, and I've been a local market gardener for 30 years. If someone with 30 years of experience in organic growing in Tennessee had visited me when I started, they could have saved me 20 years of mistakes. Well, only if I had listened and taken their advice, which is doubtful. I had read books and knew everything by the time I was 25. It took many years to realize how little I do know. So how can I help others?

I answer questions, based on my observations of their gardens and my own similar situations. I want to know how the nitrogen and carbon cycles are managed, what equipment is used, the quantities of lime applied, and what the compost looks, feels and smells like. I'm interested and fascinated by gardens.

Every farm is unique, and reflects the intentions of the farmer. Most of the "farmers" I meet are new to it. An accountant, a lawyer, and two psychiatrists are among the professions, the folks I've met have given up to become farmers. They're very intelligent people.

But farming requires something more important than intelligence. Farmers have what's called common sense, and you can't get it by reading books or on the internet. It is transmissible with farmer to farmer contact.

My dad was a farmer, and from him I learned when to plow, how to use a hoe and what to put in a compost pile. But he didn't know that Tennessee gardens need extra lime, or how to loosen up heavy clay soil. He farmed in the rich soils of Illinois. My neighbors here taught me a lot about farming locally.

Visiting other farms has been extremely educational for me. I learn about techniques, tools and varieties I've heard about but never ran into. I try to remain open-minded, which is hard to do because I'm so opinionated. Still, it's a useful challenge to try and understand how a person manages their land.

My biodynamic advisory service puts the primary focus on soil health. I farm like old timers, so I want to know why folks deviate from the way people have always grown food. A high school textbook on farming that's a hundred years old clearly explains most of what I do.

I don'[t charge for this. A few extra volunteers on our farm allow me a little extra time, and they also learn by visiting other farms. I've been given much information over the years, and want to continue the tradition of passing along anecdotal knowledge. Maybe I can shorten for others the long learning curve I undertook several decades ago, and in the process acquire more new ideas.