



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

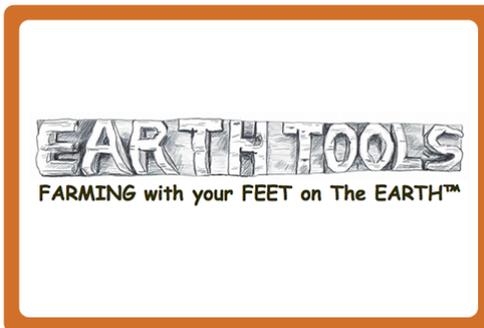


EPISODE 101

Curtis Millsap of Millsap Farms on Family, Faith, Time Management, and Pizza

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 101 and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. My guest today is Curtis Millsap. Curtis raises two acres of vegetable with about 22,000 square feet under plastic at Millsap Farms just outside of Springfield, Missouri. He and his wife, Sarah, make a living from the farm with the help of their 10 kids. A full time farm manager and one other employee.

Curtis shares how his farm grew over the years and then how it shrunk on its path to profitability and a more family and faith focused life, shedding most of its livestock and farmer's markets in favor of production that they can really stay on top of and the addition of a major value added enterprise with their pizza club. We dig into the pizza club and why they structured it as a membership program and how that works on a farm that's wired for community.

Curtis shares how they have leveraged seconds and family labor including Sarah's skills as a pizza magician to grow the enterprise and make it work. Curtis also lets us in on how they created a farm that allowed them to take five full weeks of vacation last year. We talk about the routines and management systems they built to support Curtis's quality of life goals including the fundamentals of Curtis's paper-based system to stay on top of tasks and projects. He also shares the good and the bad about the Chinese style solar greenhouse that they built.

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Curtis Millsap welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.



- Curtis Millsap: Thanks, Chris. It's good to be here. I'm really honored to be here. I love the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. It's been the last couple of years since you started, it's been one of the high points of my week is when it comes out and I've learned so much to listen other farmers talk about what works on their farm and what doesn't. I'm really glad to be here.
- Chris Blanchard: Thank you so much, Curtis. The honor goes both ways because this show doesn't work without people like you willing to give up an hour and a half of their day which isn't something that comes cheap when you're a vegetable farmer, so basically layout what you do on your farm for all of your competitors to copy so thank you.
- Curtis Millsap: Yeah. You bet. Although I think Walmart is probably our competitor. I like to think the rest of us is cooperators.
- Chris Blanchard: There you go. Yeah. It's always funny I think in the organic farming world it's competitors in a very loose sense, and not in a way that any traditional business would consider it, I think.
- Curtis Millsap: Yeah. Absolutely.
- Chris Blanchard: Curtis, I'd like to start off today by having you put Millsap Farm context, where are you guys located and what are you doing?
- Curtis Millsap: Okay. We're in Springfield Missouri which is the Southwest corner of Missouri. It's a pretty big metropolitan area, about 400,000 people, and so that's our market. We have 20 acres of farm and of that, we only cultivate about two acres. We grow about two acres of vegetables and on that two acres, we have actually up until last year, we had about 12,000 square feet under cover and then this year, we really bumped up and we add another eight, almost 10,000 square feet, so we're at about 22,000 square feet under plastic nowadays between big greenhouses.
- We got a Chinese greenhouse. We got a couple of high tunnels, and we got a bunch of caterpillar tunnels now as well. We really have invested heavily in that. We do 150 member Summer CSA. We do about a 70 member Winter CSA which my farm manager keeps telling me, "Are you sure we do 70 winter members?" But we do, so far we do it well. Both those numbers have grown gradually over the last nine years, so it's how long we've been doing CSA. We bought the farm about almost 10 years ago and then started farming full time, the following year.
- I have been a full time farmer for nine years and during that time we've had grown from I think originally we had 25 CSA members, and just gradually ramped that up. We do farmers markets as well. At one time we were doing up to five or six farmers markets a week and we're down to just one now and



it's a good market. The farmers market of the Ozarks, since they covered pavilion so it's a year round market.

In fact my wife is getting ready right now to go to market, she'll be there for a special holiday market this afternoon. We also have some restaurant sales. That's not a real big thing but it's a growing thing for us and we really like it, it's a neat way to move produce and really for us. It's the third leg of sales, which we like. We having three marketing outlets.

Then we also have a pizza club on the farm and we have about 250 people out to the farm every Thursday from May to October for pizza, wood-fired pizza. We got two big wood-fired ovens that we built on the farm and we make all the, most of the toppings and ingredients ourselves, and we have live music, and it's really a big party once a week.

That's the marketing end of things, and the production end. Now staff-wise, I've got a full time farm manager, Kim B., who's been here for four years now, and I've got a farmhand who's also been here four years, Cammie. Both of them are amazing resources as you can imagine to have people of that longevity on the farm. I've also got 10 kids and my oldest is out of the house. He's been out of the house for quite a while, but my next ones down are all fairly young, 13 and down.

I've got eight girls and one boy in that group. I have a lot of small kids and young ladies around the house, so they're also a lot of help on the farm and of course in pizza night, they're just amazing help, so that gives you a snapshot of where we are. Zone-wise, I think we're considered seven, between six and seven. It's one of those weird zones, but we get cold, so we get down, for us cold, it's negative 10 or so. We get that every other year, and then we get hot.

We get hot in the summer and we stay hot. We're not like South Arkansas hot, but we'll get a couple weeks usually where it breaks high 90s or 100 for consistently and pretty much the month of July and August. It's going to be hot and if it drops below 60, it feels like a really cool night so most nights are stay pretty warm.

Chris Blanchard: What is it about the Ozarks? It's funny. We've had a number of guest on the show from that Northwest Arkansas, Southwest Missouri area. There seems to be a lot going on there.

Curtis Millsap: It's interesting that you say that because what I hear about people like out in upstate New York or even upper Midwest, I think, boy, they have a lot going on up there so maybe that's perceptions. We're pretty scattered around here but there are some really innovative growers, and maybe part of that is because ... I know everybody feels like they have a challenging environment.

We probably all do. We certainly feel I there. This week, we're talking a little before the show but it's swinging this week from, so last Sunday it was



negative one. This Sunday it's supposed to be 62. It's not going to freeze at night for the next four nights and before that, this last night it was low of 22 or so. It's really a challenging environment from a temperature swing perspective. We also have really high humidity.

We're on the edge of the plains here. We're on the Ozark plateau, we got really neat rolling hills and a lot of forest and stuff. We're still connected to the plains pretty close by so we've got some high winds. It's not uncommon for us to have 40 mile an hour winds and then several times a year, we'll have 50 plus mile an hour winds, and so all those things add up to a pretty challenging growing environment.

I think the people who've stuck with it are pretty innovative and think outside of the typical model or at least, like Patrice is a great example, Patrice Gros. He's a good friend, those No-till down there in Eureka Spring. You had him on a little while back. Patrice is just an inspiration because he's one of these guys who started with the homestead model and then went, but I want to do this commercially and then he said "But I really want to respect the soil." I really want to make this work.

He's done this in part as a response to the climate that were in here. Where it gets really hot, it gets really cold, and you got to have soil that supports your plants no matter what's going on and then some infrastructure too. I think he's a good example. Mark Cain is the same way. Those of us who are around here who are making a living doing it, you got to be pretty resilient in the Ozarks. It's a lot of swinging from highs to lows and humidity stuff.

Chris Blanchard: You said making a living, so you are making a living at this. I want to back up a little bit because you've got two acres of vegetable production and half acre under cover, but then you're supporting. It sounds like two full time employees at least and then 10 kids and you and your wife, Sarah, all on this farm. That's a lot from a little.

Curtis Millsap: Absolutely. Yeah. That's a good theme actually for us, that's a lot from a little. My wife, Sarah and I when we started this nine years ago, we really started from more of a vision of community more than really wanting to be agricultural producers, I guess. We're one of the farm but the motivation behind that was community. I really think that stems out of our faith.

We both grew up in a Christian church and then we've both have grown over as adults into that, into a more for understanding what that means to us. One of the things that it really means to us is living in community, and supporting the community around us, caring for the people around us. I think the bible really means that when it says love others as yourself. I think that's a real thing.

We really wanted that to be who what we were about. The initial part of that was in adoption, so the reason we have 10 kids or part of the reason we have



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10 kids is because we have five biological and five adopted. When we got married that was a big part of what we wanted to do in the first place was to reach out to kids that are in tough places and bring them into our home and we both really love the outdoors, and we thought originally it would be kind of a sort of a, we'd work at a camp or a ranch or something like that with a youth program.

We really didn't picture ourselves as independent farmers necessarily, but as we grew as a couple and as we did some teaching at New Mexico, we worked in Colorado for a little while and as we're doing these things, we thought we really just want to be out on the land. We'll do, however that works out best, that's going to be the best direction for us to go.

We moved back to the Ozarks, as we're expecting our first biological daughter and we're looking for what was next, I did some construction for a couple years, but we eventually bought this piece of land with the idea that it had enough space for us to include other families and other, and by families I include single people and whatever.

There would be other people connected to us through this piece of land. That has really worked out that way. I think, I really feel like that's partly a reflection of our faith and our moving forward in that. I also think that it's partly a reflection of creating an environment that is healthy for everybody. By healthy, I don't mean that we don't all work hard and that we don't sometimes have squabbles and whatever, but that we respect one another and love one another enough to make all that work.

Then that ties in financially too. I think when you extend that. I think of our community as this little core here on the farm with basically we've got my farm manager and her family live here on the farm. My farmhand has been living on the farm here for four years. My wife and I and our kids live in the house. A different times we've had other families living here either interning with us or apprenticing with us or we've had several young folks who came to us maybe through roofing or whatever and ended up staying for six months or a year or more.

Those connections I feel like are really core to who we are, and then as you look beyond that, and then we have community supported agriculture. Those people, we know those people pretty well. They're families that we've connected with over the years, and so we know when they're expecting babies. We know what's going on in their lives. We've been to a couple of funerals. It really becomes an extension of our farm and our family.

The bigger community, people who come to pizza night which is I think we got a 3,000 members email list for that event so there's a lot of people involved in that and we reach out to large community that way, and we have school tours, and groups that from the local university to come out and work with us



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or volunteer in exchange for some class time experience and then farmers market as well.

That whole thing was for us initially, our motivation and all of that was about creating community and so for the financial thing which, sorry, it was a long way around to the money question. The money question is there. You can have all these good feelings and how do we actually make this work financially, and that is we have found ways to interface with that community that generate enough income that it works out.

Initially in those first few years, I did do some off-farm work as well, but I haven't had to work off-farm in the last, I think about six years now. Five or six years. We have gradually grown our income over time but nowadays we're bringing in the gross. I don't know what it is quite this year, but last year it was about 260, maybe closer to \$270,000 gross. That meant that my family actually netted about \$36,000 or so.

That's not a lot for a family of 11 in the home, but we also grow a tremendous amount of our own food. Being a farm, there's a lot of things that we have that are partially written off on the farm end of things and so it's enough. I will tell you that four or five years ago, I went to the accountant in February, and of course, I went to the accountant, and for me it's always usually a pretty good thing because with my kids you're pretty much know you're going to walk away with a pretty big refund check, which is kind of fun.

We're going through this and I bring out all of my receipts and we balance things out, and this is, I'm a shoebox receipt keeper, I'm not a great organizer unfortunately through bookkeeping. I get to the end of all these write-offs and things. She looks at the number in the end. This is classic Ozarks too, she goes, "Honey, are you all doing all right?"

She was like "I don't see how you making it." I was like "Well, we're doing okay. I don't know either." I see the numbers in front of me and I also agree that it looks really skimpy for what we're doing for how many kids we have, but we took some vacation and we got a working car, we're all well-dressed and fed and housed. I guess it's working.

That's a long answer. Yes, I also pay a couple salaries. They're small salaries. It also includes room and board which helps. Again it's one of those things I can offset with an in kind thing, and one of the things we've learned on our farm early on was any way that we can keep expenses inward, so by providing housing instead of paying somebody enough to house themselves somewhere else then that to me that's a benefit to the farm.

I know that not all people can view it that way, but with our community-centeredness, that works pretty well for us. Yeah. Everybody seems to be pretty happy. They stick around for multiple years, and each year



we're able to give them a raise. Actually one of your guests, Steve Pincus, Tipi Produce was, that's been a while now maybe that's two years ago I guess.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah. He was one of my very early interviews.

Curtis Millsap: Yeah. Well, listening to Steve talk, that was just inspirational because here's a guy who has done community on his farm for a long time with his workers, and really seems to have a great handle on it, and so listen to him talk was inspirational. One of the things he did was he inspired me to give everybody a big raise. Well, we got to keep this thing equitable. It's not like any of us are getting rich but we all seem to be doing okay, so yeah.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that even with all the stuff going on. You guys are still managing to take vacations.

Curtis Millsap: Yeah. Last year we took about five weeks of vacation. We went to Colorado for a week and a half in the summer. We went to Arkansas for a week in the winter. We went to, actually my wife and I went to Belize last January. We went to the northeast, well, to us Northeast Washington and went to Colonial Williamsburg for about almost two weeks last fall.

Yeah, we really get out a lot and part of that is I have found that if I don't leave the farm, then I don't stop farming. It's hard to walk away from it. You got to put boundaries around it. As long as I'm here I'll find myself drifting back towards tending things but the reality is when I walk away anymore I've got a staff that I walk away and I just don't worry about it.

I really find myself for days at a time going, I'm just not thinking about it, I'm not worried about it. If they have a problem, they'll call me but they're experienced enough and intelligent and resourceful enough that I really just don't worry about it.

Chris Blanchard: It sounds like rather than limiting your work hours on a daily basis, where you're really choosing to find that quality of life balance point is in terms of getting off the farm for extended periods of time.

Curtis Millsap: Yeah. The way that we have found balance on the farm. I should probably step back and tell you a story about this because it'll help illustrate where we've come from. One thing I want to say is that I hope that nobody listens to us talk about five weeks of vacation and feels bad about themselves. That's certainly not the point. It's more about this can be done. This is hopefully people look at this go, I can do this. This is good. This is something to aspire to.

That's the way we were. It obviously didn't start out that way. Like everybody, we had our startup phase, and then we had three years there, there was no grindstone, and if we got to take a week away, it was a big deal. I started farming originally. We started with kind of a Salatin's type model in our head,



and so that's what we've read and that was interesting to us, pastured poultry and so on.

We did pastured poultry. Alongside that we also did the vegetable CSA, about 25 members or so, and the farmers market, and that was the first couple years where the years we were doing five farmer markets at a time. You interviewed my sister-in-law a while back, but she was out on a farm some at that point too, she helped manage the greenhouse for a year, and we were doing some plant sales through that.

She was doing potted, we call them starter plants. A lot of flowers and stuff. We were burning the candle on both ends, and I think to be fair, I think that's what startup is. I don't think anybody gets to start something up without having a real intense period, and that was us. We started out. First year, I think we have little less than an acre of vegetables and then we had all about 500 meat birds, and had a couple hundred layers and then we had the next year we added some goats, and we added some turkeys.

We peaked out about four years in, three years in I guess it was as far as overall work. We got up to seven acres of vegetables. That summer we did I think 1200 meat birds and 400 turkeys and about 800 laying hens and we had about 40 goats which by the way is 40 too many goats no matter what else you do in your life. We had about 30 head or so.

Well, okay, so from one perspective. When people would come visit, they'd be like wow, you guys are such a cool diverse organic farm. But from the inside, it felt like this juggling too many flaming balls all at once. You knew this cannot go on. You can't do this for long. It took me a while to realize that. I burned out a lot of good health in the process. Really there was one moment that was really an epiphany.

The year before that, this was three years in, it was the year we peaked out at the seven acres, which is by the way a classic example of we did well with one acres, we did pretty well a few acres and we were like hey, if we go up to seven acres we'll make a lot more money. Obviously that doesn't work that way.

Chris Blanchard: It's one of those lessons you usually have to learn with a two by four over the head kind of a thing. We did that on my farm with particularly with the chickens and the pigs.

Curtis Millsap: Yeah. Yeah. Which are fun. Livestock is cool and whatever. Year three was the year that I went I don't think I'm actually a livestock guy, it turns out. Here's what I realized over time. I've been able to put it in words over the years, but I'm not a check twice a day kind of guy. That's really what poultry needs. You can't away from a pen of pastured poultry and not check on it later that day. I'm really more like a check on it every other day, kind of guy.



That didn't work out well for pigs or poultry or anything else, other than the carrots. I realized carrots don't care. Tomatoes are all right with that. If you got a good watering systems and you trellis properly and so on, you could walk away from those for two days and be okay. You can't do that with animals. Year three was that revelation, like okay I'm apparently not really wired up for animals.

If I had to give something up at that point, we were having a lot of predator loss with our animals, with our poultry. It was an obvious thing. It was like "Okay, we'll give up animals. We'll just stop doing livestock next year." But we kept the seven acres of vegetables. Now in doing that, this is borrowing neighbor's land, it was really a nice piece of land but it was not our land.

In doing that, I thought well we'll be able to get a handle on that then. We'll cut our labors, cutting our labor needs basically in half. That was somewhat true. It certainly was a better year than the year before when we just did the vegetables focus on that. Actually our income stayed about the same which was interesting too but what happen really was that I still had way too much to do.

We never fully mechanized, so we were in that weird dead zone that people talk about. Of course I've read about it, I knew it existed, but everybody bleeds again. Beat it on their own. I had larger than two acres, smaller than 10 acres. It's a really weird. It's hard to mechanize fully enough to really take advantage of the economies of scale.

You go to 10 to 200 acres and now you've got machines that can do these things and you can do. I've got friends who do 80 acres but it's like three or four folks but that they're totally mechanized. On the other end, here's us with three of us full time plus a lot interns and apprentices and things coming in and out of at different times.

We feel like we're really busy with two acres, so we were at the seven acre weird zone, and this was my epiphany moment, and this is really the moment where it all congealed in my head. I was out late at night of August, I'm out there tilling in the dark. I think it was 9 o'clock at night and I'm tilling because there's a 30% chance of rain this night and I'm trying to get some carrots seeds to make around, so I'm tilling weeds on there to plant carrot seeds.

There's so many things wrong with this picture. The reason I'm doing this is because I'm hoping it'll rain, because I don't have enough irrigation to even properly irrigate carrot seedlings in August. Why would you bother? There's no point being out there. In that mindset, this is what I do, I'm a seven acre vegetable farmer. I've got ego tied up in this thing.

I've got this idea of who I am. I've got people who are depending on me by golly, and I'm going to make it happen. I'm out there tilling, and it's dark, and



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I'm thinking, and really honestly, it was like the finger of God just came out of the sky and pointed at me and say "Hey, stupid. What are you doing on the tractor?" I'm trying to plant carrots. There are at this time five little girls in the house who want a bedtime story, and you're out here on the stupid tractor.

Are they really going to care in 10 years whether you grew carrots in the fall of 2000 whatever. Is that going to matter? Am I going to look back and go boy, aren't you glad that farmer Curtis was so good at raising carrots? Of course I wasn't either. I've been doing it poorly even at that but I had this impression if I work it harder and bigger, I'm just going to somehow succeed. It was a big reset. It was a big epiphany moment.

It was a moment of repentance truly, and by repentance I mean turning around, back in a way, going I got to stop this. This is not working. This is going to end badly, and so I did. I finished out the season, of course I felt like I needed to try and honor my promise to my CSA members, and so I did finish up that season, but I said "Next year we're going to cut back to three acres." That was 2012 was the year that we cut back.

Three acres I thought I could eek out three acres of cropland on my farm. I just couldn't see us getting smaller than three acres. I thought well that's the smallest we can get. 2012, you remember is that horrible drought. They haven't had a drought like it in decades, by May, I was planted to two acres, and it was all I could do to keep it watered.

This is the Ozark, so we're already getting ... This is extremely hot year, we didn't have a frost, a significant frost after February of that. After the middle of February of that year. I could have planted tomatoes the first of March. That's the weird year it was. As opposed to normally, first of May. We were two months out of schedule.

By May, we were in the 90s, it's dry, it's hot, it stopped raining. It didn't rain again until September. I just said "I'm at two acres, if I do anything more, then for the rest of the reason I'm going to be putting in triage." Deciding which crops are going to die because I don't water them. Nobody likes that. That's a horrible way to farm, that the seed, it's just such a bad feeling to know that you're not doing the job well and that things are going to be sacrificed for that.

That's when we stopped at two acres. That year, we had a better net a better gross than we've ever had before. That's to me that speaks of the right amount of resources both people, water, land, fertility, machinery, all that applied to the right purpose and now we understood better what we were doing.

I had reset my priority. I was saying "Okay. Remember this is about community, this is about family, this is about serving these people that are



around me and loving and caring for them. Sharing the light of God with them. It's not about how many stinking carrots you grow. It's not a contest."

It took a lot of ego. A lot of ego dying for that to work. Because I was attached to this idea of we grow seven acres of vegetables and we do poultry, and we do goats, and we do pigs. Since then we've been very disciplined. Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: It's so much easier I think to measure acres and dollars and sales and row feet of carrots than it is to measure the fuzzy stuff like I read four stories to my girls last week. Nobody brags about that stuff. You don't get to go to a farmer's conference where people say ... Even me, I didn't say, so tell me about your family life. I asked you tell me about your farm.

Curtis Millsap: Sure, which is fair, it's a farming show. Yeah, everybody talks about farming and recognize it's a lifestyle but I don't know if there's enough talk about then what does that really mean for us as farmers. I'm sure you've known plenty of them. I've known a lot of farmers who burned out after a few years. A lot of these young excited, like myself, young, excited people.

Had I not had that epiphany in the field I don't know where I'd be now, but I don't think I would be at a point where I could relax in my home and have a conversation with you about what a great family life I get to have with these wonderful children and wife, and this community around me. I would be in a very different position because I was burning through things pretty fast back then.

Yeah. I think it is a conversation the farmer community has to have if we're going to get past the macho ego, maybe it's not even macho, it's just an ego thing of this is what we do, this is who we are, we work harder than anybody else. That's true whether you have a high quality of life or not. Farmers just work hard. It's just the nature of the beast. You can't do this from a recliner. You can't do this from your office chair necessarily.

It's important that we have these conversations and I've seen some really cool programs where farm beginning folks or farmer network, farm mentors and there are some of those now that are starting to include social work aspect of how do we teach farmers to have a more balanced life. I think that's really important. I like to see that and certainly when I meet young farmers, to me, when I talk to them about best practices.

When I talk to them about using covered space or irrigation or any of that. I wanted all to be within the context of because this will help you achieve your real priorities in life. It's not because it'll grow bigger and better carrots. That's just a symptom of doing things the right way, but really the bigger issue is can you meet your life goals that you set out in front of you when you started up the farm, because nobody sets out to farm to be able to have bragging rights as to how many tomatoes they picked this summer.



Everybody starts out farming, all the people I've known start out because they really are passionate about it. They want to be involved in this really cool thing that happens when you interact with soil and seeds and water. It's amazing. It is a creative act. There's hardly anything that compares to it in the world but it also can become this absolutely life-stealing vortex of emotional and soul killing, time sucking, all those stuff.

How many of us have known families that were sacrificed on the all throughout the farm. That's best my hope is that people would grab the hold of this and say "Okay, there is a way to do this." Obviously there's not a one size fits all. For us, it's meant this very small intensive production where the community farms, pizza nights and so on.

I also know people who do this really well and have huge farms. It's not a scale thing, really. I think what it is, it's mostly at least for us, it's been about recognizing what's really important in our lives and then making sure that those things stay at the front. It is certainly not a one-time decision. I talk about that epiphany moment, and that was a big deal, and it's still a moment that I go back.

The definition of faith is not actually what we sometimes think. We sometimes think it's trying to believe something that we don't really believe. The definition of faiths is remembering and choosing to believe what you knew to be true even in times when it doesn't, when there's doubt, when there's time where it seems like.

For example, I think on my farm, one of the ways I exercise my faith is by remembering when it seems like the most important thing that I need to get done right now is to make sure I get that extra role of what it's in. Just remember that if that is in direct conflict with this thing that I really do know, when I really step back far enough. I really do know that it's much more important that I raise my daughters and my sons to be wonderful people and adults that connect and communicate with the world and contribute and love people.

Then I go, okay that reminds me. I think I'll let these carrot slides today. I think I'll go inside and have dinner with my family. That to me was a large part of what phase is about, is that constant remembering of the real truth and that's a challenge. It's a challenge for me everyday. I certainly do not have mastery of this. Every week I have a day where I go, man I blew it today.

Then I got my nose down in whatever I was doing and then forgot to look up and pay attention to little girls who wanted me to see her little dress and or my now 13 year old who have important big life questions. They want to ask that they're shy so you got to spend enough time with them to actually engage them. You can't just pop in for 10 minute daddy session and be like okay I got 10 minutes. Tell me all your important question.



You really have to build that relationship with time, and some of that time can be working beside each other, but we still have to be aware and choose those moments and so that's ... Honestly, I'm preaching to myself as much as anybody else. Don't say I'm not on a high horse here. I'm just trying to share because I think this is where we, or this is where we really sometimes lose it as farmers is we don't. We forget these things. The reason we got into it in the first place. We forget to remember these things.

Chris Blanchard: Curtis you talked about the importance of, you put it in terms of faith of remembering every day that what's important and prioritizing that. That's a really easy thing to say. I know that in the past, you and I of course responded about getting things done, David Allen's book and systems for implementing the values that you want to live out in the world. Are there things that you've done, I mean concrete structures that you put in place or things like that that help you remember to make the time?

Curtis Millsap: There's a number of things that have happened on the farm. Choices I have made on the farm or even daily routines that we have on the farm, that support those. I'll give you a couple of examples. One is my day always goes better, if I get up in the morning and have some quiet time. For me, that means sitting down with a cup of tea and my bible and praying and reading the bible and just giving myself time to meditate. Think about the bigger picture.

If I do that then I tend to walk in to the day with the right mindset that has those priorities in the right way. That's big deal and it's hard. Because you get up and immediately the farm is right there in your face. All the undone paperwork on the desk is the first thing I see or the 15 email messages that came in yesterday I didn't have a chance to respond to, because I was out in the evening doing something.

Then also there's always as a father of a big family, there's always family stuff too. My mornings out of 10, somebody in my family wakes up early, and then got some small person who wants to talk to me or have a story read or whatever, and those are good and noble things, but I do, I have to, I really tried to block that time out.

For me at least and this is probably true for a lot of people. That tends to work in ways, I tend to have month or two at a time where I'll be really good at that and really be devoted to that time and then I'll get out of the habit for a little while and then I'll pay for it, because I'll be scattered throughout my morning, so that's a big one to me. It's getting settled in the morning. Meditating. Thinking about what's important.

To me, really honestly, it's not just meditation implies. There's a lot of different ways to think of that. For me, that means focusing on God, Christ. It's that getting into the right mindset. That's a big deal. On a more concrete,



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maybe end of things. We start each day with morning meeting with my family and my crew. We used to not do that, we used to have just the crew or I would have breakfast with my family. We work that back and forth for a while.

Eventually we just went to this thing, where we're just going to have breakfast together every morning. What has happened because of that is my family has grown in a sense, so now my crew really is a part of my family and I think we all view each other that way. Even people who come in for short-term experiences, workers and interns and people, they walk away saying "You know I really felt like I was part of the family there."

If we start our day as a family unit, then in some way, I feel like that enforces that priority. It says this is what matters, it matters that we're going to sit down and have breakfast with ... I've got a 13 year old girl, 12 year old, two 11s, two 10s, a seven, a six, and a four year old. We sit down all together. It's a busy table but that's a good reminder that we're not here just to get our work done today. We're also here to interact with all the people around us.

Whether they're volunteers on the farm or family members, they all have a place to that table and everybody gets to contribute and be a part of that. Then we move into morning meeting and that's when we really get organized for business and work but by blocking that time out in the morning to have a meal together, I think it does set a priority there as well.

On the bigger picture, or structurally on the farm. One of the things that's really helped us is I'm a list-maker, I love list. I carry clipboard all the time and I always have, it's actually the running joke around. Where's my clipboard, I'm always looking for a clipboard, I have it. Carrying it out at the field and setting it down and then two hours later I cannot find it, no matter where I look and then it's got to be here, right?

The clipboard is really really key to me and I have several of them, I have them organized anymore on a clipboard rack, which I love those things, steel clipboard racks. You can put eight clipboards in them and you can see the top of the clipboards, you can see which one you're looking for. I have that's for the shop, I have one that's for the field. I have that is my office, office top, and then we got a special project clipboard so for building tractor shed, for doing a renovation project or something there'll be a clipboard that's devoted to that

We've talked about getting things done system and that's, it's always capturing the idea as it comes into your head, and if you don't have a way to write it down, and I've tried. I've done some with my iPhone. I've got more involved with that, I use the reminders on my iPhone quite a bit, just to capture those momentary thoughts, and this frees up so much mental space. I find on days when I don't have my phone or notebook in my pocket, I'd get my brain gets cluttered with all these things that I'm seeing, noticing that need to happen.



That's something I can take care of today or right at this moment that they need to get written down so that I get them taken care of eventually. I'm pretty free with what I put on my list. I'll put stuff like build a swing set for the girls. I don't feel like I have to have this real sharp delineation between my family life and my farm life, there's a big bleed between those two but I used that system to capture it.

Now where I tend to fall down is in translating that into action sorting and acting those, some of those notes sometimes will get lost for a while, and so I guess part of what I'm saying. It still helps to get that written that. That's a big deal to me.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah. The getting things done, well, we call that processing. It's the idea that you write it down, that's the capturing, but then that's always the next step and I think in some ways, the capturing is always really appealing but yeah, it's what do you do with the information once you have it on the piece of paper and then how do you get that to pop back up in front of you in a time when you could actually deal with, build a swing set for the girls.

Curtis Millsap: You bet. One of the things that I do that way, and this is really getting down to the details in my world, is I rewrite my clipboard list pretty regularly. I'll go through it and I'll have maybe 10 pages on that clipboard on it, after a while, couple weeks or maybe a month or so, I'll have a lot of pages. Some of those task will be checked off, some of them aren't.

I prioritize them, 1-2-3, one to me is we really need to make sure it happens the next day or two. Two is hey if we can get to it a week or two, that's pretty good. Three, can sometimes the really long-term stuff like build a tractor shed. Get the pizza area. Clear out some more trees at the back of the pizza area and so we have a little more space to sit back there. Those could be number three.

I assign resources based on those priority. I really think for me at least farming is 90% figuring out when to do things, because most of us know what needs to happen. Sort of if we've done a little reading, little studying, spend some time on other farms. We get it, we know what needs to happen. Getting that ordered out in time, that's what's fascinating to me.

I was trying to remember. I was thinking, it seems like Ben Hartman had a lot to say about that and timing, and maybe J.M. Fortier as well but both on the show were talking about the value of learning to prioritize your time. I agree wholeheartedly. That's been something that's just always seem to me like the most important thing I can teach my managers, my interns, apprentices is how to sort this endless list of things that a farm and a family generates and to priorities and then being able to act on it.



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The processing part of GTD. I have a different version of it, but it's the same concept. This how do we take this list and make it into ones, twos, and threes. Part of my rewriting which happens like I said about every couple weeks or about every month is I really do to start with totally clean piece of paper, often times it'll be recycled piece of paper, so I'm writing on the back.

It's a clipboard, and I'm transferring, going through my list on what's been done, what hasn't been done and I'm putting it on, and at first I don't prioritize it, I just write it all out there and then I go through and prioritize it again. When that's working properly, and again it's one of those things that sometimes I'm really doing well at, sometimes I'm doing less well at.

When it's working really, that's a good system for me, and eventually stuff that's three, then something moving up to twos, and eventually to ones. That's very gratifying when you look back and see. A good example of that, back in I think it was 2009. We haven't been here very long. It might even been our first year. We had a worker who came from St. Louis, but he had been up in Wisconsin on a pizza farm up there, and he came and visited us.

Spent several weeks with us, had a great time, really enjoyed days and spent a quite a while with them. He was so enthusiastic about this pizza farm he'd been on. He's like man this is so great, you guys would love this. The way you guys are wired up for community and everything. You would really love this, and so it went on the list. It was this list, it's like build pizza oven.

I think it's the time I was trying to use that, the month folder system for GTD. the next year list. Yeah, it's like the 2014 list or whatever. Shortly after that, I really settled in to my clipboard listing process, and so it made into the clipboard, made it to the long-term project clipboards, I've got one of those and those are all threes.

There are things that I know eventually, if this farm is going to keep moving forward, we want to do these things. One of them I got on was build a pizza oven, and it took three years for us to get back to that. Finally, in fact this is 2012, which ironically was that drought year where we scaled back dramatically, but because we did, suddenly we had just a little bit of flak time in our labor, and we had a guy who was interning with us that year, who had some masonry experience.

I was like wow this seems like the perfect alignment. I've got the time. I've got the guy who's got the experience and I've had a little bit of time, by then I bought a book, read up on it and had an idea how it's going to work and so the timing was right, and we put the pizza oven together in about four days. It wasn't really that it took that much time but it was that it took us three years to find the four days to do it.



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Since then we've built second pizza oven, we've built the shed over it, and we started hosting the big pizza night. It never would happen if we hadn't captured that initial impulse that they brought to the farm saying hey what about pizza farm. That stuff, I really, I do, I think captured so important. Even if that stuff sits on a clipboard somewhere for a couple years before you actually get to act on it, it's still valuable.

The other thing I love doing, and this is where this is getting nerdy. I love looking back at old to do list that are checked off. In fact, if I do something that's not on my list, I'll go ahead and write it on there and check it off. I did it, I should get credit for it, even if it's only on my little piece of paper that's going in my file, that I may never look at again. I want to make sure it makes it on the list.

That's really the core of my getting things done system. Some of the other stuff, I've been more or less successful with but that clipboard thing for me. That's my capture and process system, and it works pretty well.

Chris Blanchard: Curtis thanks so much for sharing all that with us. What I'd like to do now is take a break and get a word from our sponsors and then we're going to come back and dig into, well, I think the pizza club, the Chinese greenhouse and some more information just on how you're actually growing your crops.

Curtis Millsap: You bet. Sounds good.

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We're back with Curtis Millsap from Millsap Farms in Springfield, Missouri. Curtis, I wanted to ask about, I knew going in that we're going to talk about pizza, but I was curious to hear you refer to it as pizza club.

Curtis Millsap:

Yeah. Pizza club. Well, that is one of those things that you end up naming because people tell you to name it that, and in my case, what it was was we have an understanding with the health department. They call us a private party. As a result, we basically are un-inspected cause we are a private party. Couple years ago I had a conversation with planting and zoning guys, who wanted to talk to me about events I was hosting.

I said "Oh events? Okay." Fortunately, one of the guys who's up there is understands what we're about out here and he said "Now Curtis what it looks like here is that you really set out for these events to be attended by your membership, right?" I said "Yes, yes, that's right. That's what I meant." He said "All right. If your website said, it was clear that it's all for members then I think we'd have no problem."

I said "Sir, it will say that in 20 minutes I promise you." That's been the last we've had to hear from the county. What our pizza club, the way it works is when you'd come in, you sign up and of course people sign up in advance but we get their name and email and they've become a member of the pizza club when they do that, and they pay for the first admission to the pizza club.

We've used that terminology and whether or not that will keep us. Keep the health department happy on the long-term, we'll have to see. Right now, it works for them and it works for us, and so that actually is the origin of that. It also reflects, I feel like it does in some ways reflects more accurate than what we're about, which is not just a restaurant.

This is very much a community event with ... It's a pretty high percentage. I'm not sure what the actual percentage is week to week, but certainly a super majority of folks who are returning pizza club folks and so some of them will buy the moment we open up ticket sales in the spring they'll buy all the tickets for the whole season for their family, so they'll come out every Thursday night and that's their invest their night out.



Chris Blanchard: People buy a ticket to your pizza night and then that gets them their pizza or are they paying for the pizzas in addition to that?

Curtis Millsap: No. You're buying an entry for \$12 and then it's all you can eat pizza, so yeah. The reason we do that, we look at a lot of other pizza farms. People do it differently. Most places have pizzas you order, and that's a standard restaurant model. You saw our rolling line, the people who are contributing. You'd understand we do not get consistent size pizzas out of this line up.

I've got literally, I've got seven year olds, and I've got 70 year olds rolling pizzas side by side. Sometimes my seven year olds can do better than some of the much older and more experienced people, but they're really erratic size-wise. That was part of our decision was we can't really sell pizzas by the pizza, if some of our pizzas are going to be 10 inches across, and others are going to be 18 inches across, that's not very fair.

Then the other thing was it's really, we want it to be a mixer. We want it to be a social events. What we see with this system is since nobody's got eight pizzas that's theirs. They don't like unless you order like a gluten-free or some special thing, otherwise, you just come up to the buffet table and you'd pick up as much pizza as you want, and then you go back to the table, and a lot of times those tables gets shared because there's only for 250 people, I think we only have about a dozen tables.

People bring their own chairs, they bring blankets, they have this party but people end up sharing tables with one another, so I also think it does get to the true essence of it, it's not just nomenclature, I really do feel like it reflects what's going on on the ground.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit about where you're getting your ingredients for the pizza. How does that all integrated with your two acre vegetable farm?

Curtis Millsap: Yeah. Pizza farm, I mean pizza night, excuse me. Pizza night in addition to being a great community event is a wonderful outlet for seconds produce. The bell pepper with a spot or all the tomatoes. You have many seconds tomatoes, I don't know. It feels grown tomatoes, it seems to me like often times were like 50% seconds.

It used to be that we'd try and sell those in bulk or we'd try and do things with them but it was hard to get them all utilized. Nowadays they all go on the pizza sauce. The bell peppers. We've got a bunch of bell peppers, a little bit of black spot or something, no problem. We cut that off, we slice them up and put them on pizza. We use a lot of produce and actually our Mondays morning starts with a conversation or at our morning breakfast meeting.

We're all sitting there and one of the topics we'd cover on Monday morning is what are we going to put on pizza this week and the real question is what do



we have a lot of that we would like to have a little less off, and get rid of it in this way. It's really wide ranging. My wife is a pizza magician. Sarah, she scours the Internet, she experiments, she has just a lot of innovative and creative ideas.

So puts things together like for example one of the perennial favorites is a BAT, a bacon, arugula and tomato. We also do things like Ratatouille pizza. Eggplant, bell peppers, onions, tomatoes. She has done fennel pizza. Potatoes, that's one of the weirdest ones. We've done a blue potato pizza with a cream sauce and my father in law who also lives on the farm here with us and he's the pizza cutter. He calls those Whodathunkit pizzas.

Every week we have cheese pizza. We always have a cheese pizza. We usually have one that's it's sausage an onion or something that you would expect. Then there'll be two Whodathunkit, and then that Whodathunkit, it might be peaches and Gorgonzola or they might be these other odd beets, one that she loves to put on pizza, my wife's a have beet for that. She makes wonderful combinations with beets.

Originally the first year that we did this. I've been like "Honey, are you sure that's?" I learned to keep my mouth shut of course, but there's still that internal like how's that going to work out? They're always awesome, so something I realized. I got to stop doubting this. This is always good. I have got to stop thinking that for some reason she's going to fall off the wagon and make a bad pizza. She hasn't done it yet.

Chris Blanchard: No disrespect to Sarah but have you ever had a bad pizza?

Curtis Millsap: Well, exactly, right. It's true. You get some mediocre pizzas every once in a while but really if somebody is thinking it through at all, they make good pizzas. It's a wonderful combination. As far as ingredients, we do almost all the produce comes from our farm, the only exceptions would be like if we have mushrooms or something like that. We have got mushroom farms locally. We're able to buy a lot of mushrooms from.

The dairy is we have a goat cheese dairy that we get a lot of goat cheese from but all our mozzarella is still coming from Sam's. We'd love it if we could come across a farm-based mozzarella solution but we haven't come across that yet. All our tomato sauce, we raise on farm. We buy organic flour. We're not really in a good hard wheat raising region, it's a little too warm down here for good hard wheat so we don't really have a local option on that.

We do raise a lot of the corn that we use for corn mill. We have an heirloom corn variety that we raise. It's a red corn, and we grind that for the corn mill for the kids. Roll out the barrel and then set them on the skid with corn mill under it. Yeah. We do, we locate a lot of the stuff here locally. We get really creative with it, and that's been the thing that people really remember. People



come out because they just think it's intriguing to come out to the farm for pizza.

They walk away remembering, one that we have these incredibly creative pizzas, and two that they just had this amazing experience on a farm and that's really what it always comes down to is that people say this, I really like this phrase. People will say I just didn't know there were things like this anymore. What I realized after a while was they don't really mean.

They say we're going to try and pinpoint. They don't really know quite what they mean by that. They can't point back and say "Well, there must have been things like this in the '40s." It's not like that but what they really mean is this is the way that I thought things were supposed to be.

I thought I was supposed to be able to go and enjoy a meal with family and friends in a totally low-key environment with wonderful food and delightful music and a place where the kids can go and play and enjoy and I feel safe, and on a beautiful location where we've got rose and flowers and vegetables and greenhouses and forests and lawns for them to hangout and enjoy.

That's really what they mean with all that, and to me that's the most important thing about this whole thing of excellent food and then this all-encompassing experience. Let me say too, I think that we live in this culture where people are so disconnected from not even just the source of their food, but the country side in general.

People live their whole lives getting in their cars, and their garages, and driving to work, and going in the building and come back out in their cars, and they go back in their house, and they go sometimes for days without ever setting foot out in the yard, let alone actually getting out where there are trees, and things growing, and birds and such.

If they do go out in the lawn, it's to mow it- and granted, your grass has to get mowed if you're going to keep it short. When they come out here and they connect to the bigger sky and the trees full of stuff and a little bit of wildness back there in the woods. I tell people don't go too far back in there, there's poison ivy. That's with all that stuff, knee-high, as far as you can see, that's poison ivy, don't go where we don't mow.

You can look out there and you can see so much going on. I think that really is something that people are crazy and so that's part of the experience that we're providing here too is that connection, and then also of course the connection to the amazing thing of taking a seed, putting it in a soil, and then it actually turning into a full-sided plant.

That's something that people don't do anymore which is amazing to me and then I grew up gardening. I've done it as long as I can think but I meet a lot of people who really have never planted a seed. I think that's really, if we can do



something in this world. It's to get people to connect with that. From my perspective, what that's about is when you get connected to that.

When you get connected to the land and the soil, it's creation, you can't be out there for very long before you start thinking much bigger thoughts than the thoughts you were thinking when you started. You come at it with the thoughts about all the long list of things you have to do and all this stuff. I think most of the time when you're out there in the field long enough or you're out in the soil long enough.

You start to think about what is this all about, what's going on in the big picture. To me that leads us to the really important things in life. Makes it step back a little bit and look at the universe, the creation around us, and all that from just eating pizza. It's a pretty good gig.

Chris Blanchard: This whole project started in, you said in 2012 when you had a little bit of extra time because of the drought. Can you tell us how pizza club developed from there?

Curtis Millsap: In 2012, we had that little bit of extra help to get the pizza oven built. Immediately, as soon as we 10 days after we built it, it was dry enough to five up and try pizzas, and we're like wow this is really good I wish we've done this four years ago. We weren't really ready and honestly, I'm like a jump in the deep into the pool kind of guy.

My wife, Sarah, is to some degree too. We do have 10 kids, so obviously we're deep into the pool kind of folks. She was not really ready to put herself out there commercially as a pizza chef. I was ready to try and sell some tickets, and she was like. No, let's just practice on friends and family. That worked really well, so we took about, it's about six months or so where we did. We hosted a lot of family birthday parties, friends birthday parties.

We didn't do anything for pay. We just did a lot of fun times with family and friends. Really in hindsight, I think that was great. My wife is wise beyond her years, so she really did see that and understood how that was going to work out. By spring of 2013, we were ready to try get our feet wet in doing it a little bit for profit.

We didn't really know quite what that was going to look like. We haven't tracked our expenses closely enough or really thought through a lot of the logistics of it. We started saying we'll advertise if there are CSA. We're having a pizza night this week, if you want to come out. I think our first pizza night in 2013 that was a commercial pizza night. I think we have 30 people so it wasn't a big deal.

Frankly, it was also one of the things we're like well that was a lot of work for 30 people. We're not going to do that. If that's as big as we're going to get, that's not going to work in the long term, but it was fun. That summer, it grew



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gradually. I think by the end of the summer we were running about 150 people regularly. That was when I realized we needed a second oven to keep up with demand.

By that time, we had built a pavilion, just a long simple pole bar and shed over the top of the ovens. We had started to sort out different equipment for our rolling table, pretty simple stuff, stainless steel table, things like that we had located. We had an evening venue and at the end of the year, end of that summer, we started having music.

That really was a game changer. I can't overestimate, over-exaggerate what a great thing having live music at an event is. It changes it from just being kind of a casual gathering of a few people who might have a conversation with one another to it being a party. I'm not talking about, obviously I'm not a big ruckus kegger or something.

I'm talking about a really a celebration, an enjoyment of one another. We got music. You got good food. It's a BYOB event. We don't sell. The only drinks we sell are soft-drinks and things but we do allow people to bring in beer and wine and alcohol. That was a turning point for us, the end of 2013. By the beginning of 2014, we were filling up regularly, so we're now about 200 seats, 200 people and that's actually adults.

When I say 200 adults, we're bringing in probably another 50 or 60 kids regularly. Really on average Thursday nights now, we're running about 250 adults which is probably more like 300 with kids. We're charging \$12 a head for adults all you can eat pizza and \$5 per kids. We don't actually have people pay in advance, we have them reserve in advance. We cut off when we meet, reach our 250 people.

We're usually selling out now about a week and a half, two weeks in advance, sometimes as much as a month depending on the, as we get close to the end of the season. People try and cram in, make sure they make it to the last few. It's really grown. One thing that I think if anybody is thinking about doing this. You really have to figure out where is your labor going to come from.

In our case, we have our of course on-farm help and they're a big part of this. They're just key to making it all happen. Cammie is, she is the prep master, she gets down there and preps all the surfaces, all the pans, washes and cleans, and stacks and sorts. Divides out the dough. My two daughters, two oldest daughters make the dough and they make buckets of dough in advance, we put them on the walk-in coolers so they could sit there for 24 hours or if we don't use them because of weather changes and we can't have an event. We'll go ahead and save them for the next week so that's a real big deal.

We also, my wife spends most of the day, most of Thursday prepping the final toppings, and she has a lot of help with that, but some of that help is six years old that wants to wield a knife, so sometimes the help is more or less helpful.



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They all want to contribute and that's a big part of how we've made this thing work is by tying the family back in at those moments.

Then once we're actually setup for pizza night. We start serving at six, so we really start prep about 4:30 on site, and at that point it's all hands on deck. Everybody on farm is down there prepping, making sure that everything is ready when the first people walk in at 5:15, 5:30. People actually take out seats 45 minutes in advance because there's only 12 tables.

They want to make sure they reserve their table. They'll come in. By that time, we're ready. One aspect that we really didn't think about in advance before the first couple of big events was parking. We got to think about that, it's a lot of cars to get into a space and you got to make sure that they're all going to be directed well, so we've got a guy, one of the guys who works on farm and thus regular, his son comes and directs traffic and does a great job of it.

We jus have all the little pieces that have come into place over time. It's a really good event and it's a good event for the farm both in terms of community interaction and also bottom line frankly. It helps us make the bills meet. Last year I think pizza sales were about \$70,000. That's a pretty significant portion of our income and the net on that is it's actually a little harder to nail that. We've been doing a lot of investing and it's a simple infrastructure stuff but something around the net return on that is about 30 to 40%, maybe a little more of actual after we've paid for expenses. That doesn't necessarily cover labor that the expenses of putting on the event.

Chris Blanchard: Always hard to account for labor when you got six year olds cutting up peppers.

Curtis Millsap: Actually department of labor gets a little fuzzy about that. You start putting them on the time sheets and then start to think this is a problem, but they love to be part of it.

Chris Blanchard: I also wanted to circle back about something you mentioned at the beginning of the show. You said you've got in addition to all your high tunnels and regular greenhouses, you guys have a what you call a Chinese greenhouse.

Curtis Millsap: Yeah. We started covering space right away, in fact we bought this place because it has a 6,000 square foot greenhouse on it, that was the initial attraction to the farm. It's a 40 year old big structural greenhouse. Right away, we recognized there are huge advantages to covering your growing space and we talked about some of the challenges of farming in the Ozarks.

The first year that I covered my greenhouse out there, I covered in October. January we had a freak thunderstorm, it's 70 degrees and it dropped literally baseball-sized hail on my greenhouse plastic and it was devastating. Definitely was one of the chances to practice your faith. At that point you can either



curse God or you can go, okay, well, God gave, God took away and blessed this God.

That was my response but then still I look at that and went wow, if that happen in the summer time, that would totally wipe out your crop. You'd be looking at nothing. Whereas in the greenhouse, although we had damage to the greenhouse itself. The plant inside were safe. We right away were looking at ways to get some control over our environment. Ways to build roofs over things.

We've done a lot over the years with high tunnels and so on. The Chinese greenhouse in particular was a model we saw. Sanjun Gu who used to be the horticulture specialist for the state of Missouri. Lincoln University actually. He's from China and he'd worked in these greenhouses over there, and he gave a presentation at Great Plains Growers Conference which by the way that's a great conference, anybody who's looking for a conference.

We were at the Great Plains and saw him present about these. He was calling them Chinese earth tunnels. I've heard him call it a lot of different things but the basic premise is you've got your north wall is some sort of structure, it's either masonry or in China often times even just packed soils then cut back with a backhoe or something. It's a big earthen wall on the north side with a berm and so that berm goes all the way to the top of your greenhouse.

There's a little short north roof and in my case it's about four feet wide and then the rest of it is a south facing grazing slope, it's double plastic over metal hoops, pretty typical high tunnel greenhouse structure and then it's got east and west, and also concrete blocks with earth berm. What I ended up using for my structure is these big, what they call concrete waste blocks.

What happens to the ready mix concrete that goes back to the plant. They dump it in these forms and then when it sets up. They pull it out and they sell it. They sell it for a fraction of what it would cost you to buy concrete. These were good resource for us. We struggled with that for a while in figuring out how we're going to hold this soil back because we're in a zoned county, so we had to build something that met their standards.

We got it engineered. We had this looked at by a structural engineer and he stamped it and then we started stacking up blocks in this U-shape. We've dug out the interior. We've put that soil on the back. The whole thing is set in the ground about two feet and then it's got all this massive structure around it. Our overall structure is 22, 24 feet deep by 72 feet long.

The only thing I would do differently if I could build it again would be to build it longer because it's a great structure and I wish I had more space in it. In that space, we've got almost 100 ... What was it, 3,000 pound blocks and we had a 100 of them. It's almost 300,000 pounds of concrete and that's a lot of mass



right there, and then you got that backed up by all that soil that's banked against those walls as well.

What you got is this huge thermal flywheel. I've seen other models that people have built that are not, that have built their columns kind of Chinese greenhouses but one of the things we really wanted to do when we went to build ours is just build it as true as possible to what we could find on Chinese websites for those, and things like that. I don't speak Chinese, it was really difficult sometimes to discern exactly what we're looking at, because it almost always the text is almost always in Chinese.

We got a pretty good idea and the commonalities were this thermal mass walls, south facing slope, always dug into the ground a couple feet, and then the north roof. I had looked at other things that people have built in the states or in Canada, and none of them quite worked to just stay true to that model, and my thought was and I had looked in the numbers and now it's slipped my mind because numbers sometimes do.

It's thousands and thousands of acres that are covered by these in China. They're growing the majority of their winter vegetables in these kind of structures. When Dr. Gu presented about this, he was showing pictures of himself standing in a Chinese greenhouse beside mature cucumbers and watermelons in February. He's saying "This is no supplemental heat, this is a climate very similar to what we experience here in the Midwest." He said "Maybe a little less wind."

That was the big difference but in times the temperatures highs and lows, it was very very similar and I was hooked. I think this is brilliant so that's how we got started and then once we built it. There's been a learning curve obviously. It's a little bit of a difficult structure to ventilate because you don't have that second wall to open up.

We got one dropped curtain wall on the south side. It's been a little challenging to figure out the drainage. It's two feet below the ground level, so we've had a few floods in there. We now have a big sub pump in there and that keeps it drained out as long as the power doesn't go out.

We've also struggled with grow media. We tried originally some grow bags in there, at long grow sock actually. I love the concept. I really did but the first time our media was really high, high PH, it would turn out to be like 7-7 or even an 8-1 or something. It was really way too high for vegetables, and so we didn't know that. We bought to this compost thinking it was growing compost and there was a miscommunication.

The guys thought we were just using it for erosion control, so it's important know what you're doing with your soil. They migrated to replace it with better compost but even then we struggled with those socks. For us, it seems like in the winter times. They have so much evapotranspiration, is that the right



word? Yeah. I think so, cooling off that the water exit those socks, that the soil temperatures always stayed pretty cool.

It was also hard to keep them wet enough, so we eventually got rid of the socks and went to just raised bed, and they're just used oak one by twelves, to build these raised beds and fill them with compost and some soil. A little bit of everything but mostly compost. We've had no problem since then really with our grow media, it's worked really well.

We have used those grow socks in other settings and had better luck with them. There's something about the combination of that structure and this grow socks, it was kind of a bad combination. Never really quite sorted out what was going on there, but the Chinese structure in general, it is the most temperature stable structure on the farm.

Last weekend when we got down to negative one, I got up a couple times in the night. One night I did the fire feeding. One night Kim B. my farm manager did it. We were traipsing across the farm to feed the fire in the big greenhouse to keep it above freezing. We've got some fig trees and some other things in there that we didn't want to let freeze yet.

In the Chinese greenhouse I didn't even worry about it. I know that it's going to be okay. We got a slight frost which nipped our turmeric. We have a bunch of turmeric still growing in there. Well, now growing now because it's nipped but it was until last weekend. It just holds its temperature so well, it's amazing. The lowest temperatures that I've dealt with it were negative 13.

We had a cold snap about two years ago. In the zero and below zero, every night and quite a big below freezing every day for about a week and even in that long cold snap. We still only saw frost in the Chinese greenhouse from about maybe 25 or so. We still got head lettuce, carrots, radishes, turnips, beets, anything you'd want to grow, cool weather crop. We could still pull off marvelously in this space. It's been a good space for us.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of media are you using in those raised beds now?

Curtis Millsap: For media we've gone back and forth. Originally we had all those composts within the socks, and so we did cut some of those socks open and amend it. We felt like we still were having some PH problems so we did add some sulphur to that to bring it back up, I'm bringing the PH down a little bit.

The bigger thing that I think happened was just that compost matured. I really think that was the main problem. The compost was still fairly hot, and I think you just can't grow good produce in hot compost, it's very hard. Since then we have mixed some soil in. At times we've had access to some top soil, either from renovation projects around the farm.



We've also done a lot of wood chips on the bottom of the bed, so we have chipper crews who would bring out a lot of wood chip piles to us, so we always have several hundred yards of wood chips sitting around and ideally we let them sit for couple years. We found if they set for couple years and mostly decomposed, they'll still be chippy, but if you put that in the bottom six or eight inches of your foot tall raised beds, and then top that with a nice layer of compost on top, it really makes a nice growth media.

Over time you can't even tell they are the wood chips of course. It turns into the beautiful humans down deep. We're able to grow carrots in that and that is my gold standard as far as are we doing well with what our soil is doing. Can we grow nice long straight carrots because we don't, not just the rocks but there's so many things that come into play in that. We do some really nice stuff in those these days. Composts, wood chips, soil, native soil have been an amazing ingredients for us.

Chris Blanchard: All right. We're going to take a quick break. Another word from our sponsors and then we'll be right back with the lightning round with Curtis Millsap.

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All right. Curtis, you ready for the lightning round?

Curtis Millsap: I'm ready.

Chris Blanchard: All right. What's your favorite tool on the farm?

Curtis Millsap: Okay. I have to say I really struggle with this one. The obvious answer it's such a cop out is my tractor. I love tractors. I hear about marketing gardeners who would just use a BCS and we have a BCS as well, we love it. I love getting on that tractor, and just a little thing. We got a little 28 horsepower Ford with a front loader.



With that front loader is brilliant. It's like having an eight person crew, just ready to help you any time you need help. I love it. People who farm without a tractor have the greatest admiration for that but I really love it. The other one that ties, and it does tie into the community thing as well, but the one that really does in terms of quality of life stuff for me has been the biodegradable black plastic.

We used the non-biodegradable stuff for a while. We just found that there was, we never got out of the fields. We always have black flags to line out in the field, after we've pulled it out and so we really got put out with that. With the biodegradable stuff came along and I know there's a lot of controversy around that, and I wouldn't belittle that but it is such a huge labor saver to go out and lay black plastic, plant your head lettuce and tend to it, and the next thing you do is harvest those head lettuces. Yeah. To me that really speaks to quality of life stuff, because when you find a product that can reduce your time doing what's really ... I don't think weeding the head lettuce is anybody's favorite job on the farm. When you can get rid of something like that, then to me that's a really powerful tool. That's really probably it, is our black plastic mulch [01:24:30]. We've learned a lot of different ways to work with that and things like that. This is the base product, it's such a useful tool for us.

Chris Blanchard: Your favorite crop to grow?

Curtis Millsap: Carrots. I love carrots. I love the magic of pulling a long orange beautiful sweet tasty root out of the ground. I think it's amazing. Every time it does, it makes me smile, everybody we did carrots. They're not easy to grow on our soils necessarily. We don't have real bad soils surprisingly being in the Ozarks. We're typically really rocky around here, but our soils are not too rocky right on our little spots.

We have these in carrot soils, but I really enjoyed learning to grow them better. To give you an idea of how far we've come on this. When we're doing that seven acres back in the day. They're literally were at least once or twice when I had to brush hog down the bed to be able to see if there were carrots to dig under there. That's a bad day, when you're like let's get the brush hog out, and see if there's any carrots under that. You do not want to have to do that.

Chris Blanchard: Well it gives you room for improvement.

Curtis Millsap: Well, there was a lot of room for improvement those early years. Learning to do pre-emergence reading with flame reading. Even pre-plant reading with black plastic, tarps, we've done a lot of that sort of thing. That's J.M. Fortier. That was a great thing that he has really made more popular. Figuring out how to read your soil and of course the Nordell's have been talking about waiting your soil and not the crop for years, but there's a key concept and with



carrots, they're such a big payoff. Nobody likes weeding carrots, they're horrible to weed.

You get them out there into a weed-free bed. You can see this beautiful roll of carrot seedlings come up. To me, it's gratifying from there right on into this DuPont. I love carrots, that's my favorite.

Chris Blanchard: What's the best advice you've ever gotten?

Curtis Millsap: I think the best advice came from my dad. He was a vice principal at a middle school for many years. My dad said treat people the way you want them to be, not the way they are. What he meant by that for the most part was if you go around reacting through the way people are, then you pretty much perpetuate them being that way. If you expect the bad kid to be bad, and you go into it ready for that or you treat them in a demeaning way because you know they're going to misbehave or whatever then you're just going to get more of what you expect.

When you expect you write things from people then they tend to setup and provide it. Obviously it's not magic formula here but there is a difference in attitude when you go and look at people and say this is who I think you can be. This isn't some sort of make them improve themselves. This isn't about manipulating them. There's just about in your own head thinking I know this person can be an amazing wonderful person to spend time with, an incredible worker, or whatever.

If you start with that, then I think you're a lot more likely to get there. Now obviously we've also had plenty of people who moved on from the farm that that didn't, attitude when all that was wrong with what was going on in there. Sometimes the best thing you can do for those kind of workers is to let them go.

Starting with that attitude that I'm going to treat you the way that I know you can be, I'm going to treat you towards your potential rather than treat them with what they're currently performing at. That's probably the best advice I ever got, and it was my dad's. He's straight at good advice.

Chris Blanchard: Then how about you on the advice front. If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?

Curtis Millsap: Well, I would tell myself to intern first off, I think that would have been really powerful. I didn't get a chance to do that. It would have been hard. I had a new baby on the way. I had an adopted son who was 14 where I moved here to Springfield to start at farming. That would have been really challenging I know that.

That's what I tell everybody who comes in and wants to know about learning to farm. Find a way to intern. Somehow find a way to get on a farm that's



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doing what you want. I think key element of that is find a farm that is doing what you want, not just growing the things you want or selling the way you want, but the big picture is they have the quality of life.

Paul Arnold is a great example. A guy who, when I read about his farm, when I read about his life, the guy has done. He walks the talk. Find somebody who does that and attach yourself to them for a year or two. Sure there's no better way to do this, so that would have been my advice. Now I didn't take it. The second bit of advice, knowing that I wouldn't take my own advice would have been, well for goodness sake, don't get bigger than two acres. There's no reason.

That's not universal advice, that's just to me specifically because that turned out to be my sweet spot is managing two acres. I would love to be able to tell myself that in the first place and save myself three years of messing around with bigger and bigger and really messing around, screwing things up.

Chris Blanchard: Curtis. Thank you so much for really insightful and informative hour and a half here on the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Curtis Millsap: Thank you, Chris and thank you for what you're doing. I tell you. I fell behind this summer which was a big bummer. I've missed about 20 episodes. I'm going to catch up on this winter, but I never fail to learn something from a Farmer to Farmer Podcast, and certainly a lot of that is the guest who brings wonderful expertise and knowledge, but a lot of it is you do a great job of interviewing people, and I really appreciate that. I want to tell you thank you for that, so thank you for having me.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Wrapping things up here. I'll say again that this is episode 101 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You could find the notes for the show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Curtis. That's C-U-R-T-I-S. Transcripts from this episodes are brought to you by growing for market, get 20% off your subscription with the code podcast at checkout.

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Thank you for listening. Be safe out there and keep the tractor running.