



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

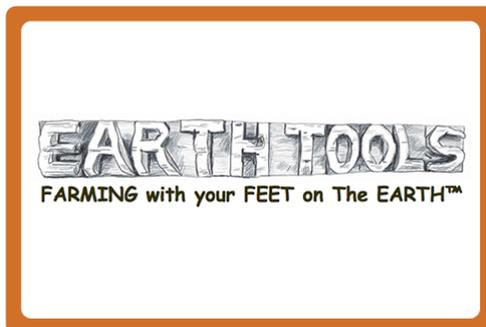


## EPISODE 103

**103: Todd Nichols of Nichols Farm and Orchard on Managing Production and Markets on 300 Acres**

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, Episode 103. This is your host, Chris Blanchard. Todd Nichols is the head grower at Nichols Farm and Orchard in Marengo, Illinois about 65 miles northwest of Chicago. Founded in 1977 by Todd's parents, Nichols Farm currently produces about 260 acres of vegetables and 40 acres of apples. Nichols Farm markets to some 200 restaurants, 15 farmers markets each week and a 450 member CSA. Todd digs in to what a farm this size looks like and the sorts of investments they've made in equipment and infrastructure to ensure that they can complete the large amount of work that often needs to be done in a very short amount of time. We talk about the low-density approach to cropping at Nichols Farm, the work flow they use to provide outstanding service to the restaurant and farmers market customers, and the ways their 4 different farming locations create advantages for disease management and coping with the weather. Nichols Farm is certified to the Food Alliance Sustainability Standard, but is not certified organic. Todd shares his reasons why and how he farms differently because of it, and some of the other ways that Nichols Farm has taken a green approach to their agricultural production.

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Todd Nichols, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Todd Nichols: Chris, thanks for having me. I'm a big fan and excited to hear your voice in person.

Chris Blanchard: So glad that you could join us here today in early January. I'd like you to tell us about Nichols Farm and Orchard. Give us the lay of the land, where you guys are located, how much you're farming, all of those details to set the stage for



the rest of the conversation.

Todd Nichols:

Sure. Well, our farm is a family farm. My mom and dad started the farm in 1977. They moved out here to Marengo, Illinois, which is about 65 miles northwest of Chicago. At the time, both of them worked for the airlines and they wanted to move in the country and my dad was a gardening enthusiast and so they wanted to live somewhere that was commutable to the airport at O'Hare. Marengo was about an hour drive from O'Hare and very commutable and that's where they ended up buying a 10 acre lot.

At the time, my dad jumped right in to a big garden and he really aspired to have the hippie mentality, self-sustaining, live off of the land while living and working in the city at the time. He was doing that right from the get-go. He bought a cow and had pigs and sheep, and he had a big vegetable garden, much bigger than he needed. I always tell people my dad started as a market gardener without a market. He essentially was growing way more than he knew what to do with. He started off completely organic and had that idealistic view on growing produce. At the time, he was bringing his extra produce to his co-workers at the airport.

Going back in the '70s, the farmers markets were not a big thing. There was only a handful of them in the whole metro area. A co-worker of my dad told him, "Hey, you've got all this produce. Why don't you go to a farmer's market?" At the time, my dad had barely even heard of farmer's markets let alone been to any or even thought of vending at any. He was fortunate enough in the 1978, he got into the Evanston Farmer's Market, and we still sell there today after, this will be our 39th year. That's kind of how we got started. From there, we've grown. I'm 35 right now and I have 2 brothers who are 45 and 38. We all grew up here on this farm, mostly, and we've grown into the business. I always tell people that I grew up at a farmer's market. I literally did. I was that little kid in the back of the pickup truck playing all day, you knew all the customers, knew all the vendors, and to this day I still do.

Going back to the farm, he started on the 10 acre farm and garden more or less, and after he started a little production, he managed that as a second hobby job for until about 1989. About ten years, he did it as a second career. Over time, he acquired a few adjacent lots and grew a little bit more. By the time I was in high school or so in the mid '90s, he was farming, we were farming ... I mean, we were always involved as kids, but he was farming about 80 acres and we were doing farmer's markets, strictly almost, strictly farmer's markets. We had a busy schedule. We would go to a farmer's market every day. That's pretty much what grew the farm to where we're at.

As my brothers and I grew up and became adults, I went to school for horticulture at Iowa, Iowa State, and as we all grew up and came back to the farm, we had to grow the farm substantially to accommodate multiple families. Today, we go through 16 or 18 land acquisitions. My dad and us have got 530 acres and we all make our living from the farm. We're supporting our



3 or 4 families as well as all our employees and everybody else. On that 530 acres, we're farming about 260 acres or more of vegetables, and we have a lot of perennial fruits, like apple trees, maybe 40 acres of apples, and pears, and peaches, and plums, and just about anything you can plant, we try; blackberries, we do a lot of raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, pretty much anything, you name it. That's kind of the lay of our land.

My dad started off the farm completely organic. As he got into fruit trees was kind of where he realized that he couldn't grow strictly organic. We don't abide by strict organic. We actually carry a Food Alliance certified sustainable as a third party entity that rates us on our practices, but we're a little more diverse than a lot of strictly organic farms would be. When you're heavily invested into something like apple orchards, growing strictly organic in the Midwest is a pretty risky business. I've known a few people that have gotten into it, certified an acreage, an orchard, and gotten out of it. Having that diversity has kind of led us to a place where we're not conventional and we're not organic, but I like to think we're somewhere well in between, and we employ a lot of organic practices. I'm always striving in that direction, but at the same time I'm accepting of some of the realities of business. We probably wouldn't grow 60 acres of sweet corn if we were certified organic. We'd probably just branch that off the list. Same with apple trees and a few other crops that we just ... It would be tricky.

Our main business, and the backbone of our farm had been farmer's markets. We've always done as many as we could, really. Today, we go to 15 every week, and those are a major part of what we do. As the trends have changed and as we've grown the farm, farmer's markets are still a big part, but we also, 40 to 50% of our sales comes direct from restaurants. We run a 5 day a week delivery route throughout Chicago-land and serve close to 200 restaurants. In the last 6 years, I've gotten into CSA, which has kind of been my personal little pet project. I've been working on that and last year we had about 450 members. We offer a pretty full season including the fall, so we're doing up to 28 weeks of, 29 weeks of CSA with fruit and included.

A big part of what we do, and a big part of why we're not strictly organic, is that we grow a lot of fruit. Fruit is a big part of our CSA, and I think of it as something that a lot of our competition doesn't offer their own fruit often let alone fruit every week. CSA, we're very much doing the marketing model that all the guys in our industry are doing, the farmer's market, the restaurant, and the CSA. We're doing it as big and as best we can with the family backing behind it. It is truly a family business, but we employ quite a few people, too.

Chris Blanchard:

Todd, I'm really interested to dig into the farming to start with, because 260 acres is substantial, a lot. Certainly, I think, larger than anybody that we've had on the show to date. Tell us what 260 acres of vegetable production looks like. What kind of systems are you using to get things done? Can you kind of walk us through a crop and the kind of equipment that you would use, the way you got things set up to manage that scale of operation?



Todd Nichols: We've slowly grown into our size. A big part of it is that incremental growth over the years. A big reinvestment that my dad's always put at high priority is having tractors. We've got a lot of tractors of all sizes and of all, from orchard sprayer tractors to several high clearance tractors, I think we have 14 tractors. A big thing with that is when you have an opportunity to do a lot, we can really get a lot done. In the spring, if you have a short window and you need to spread fertilizer or work fields, transplanting, we've got plastic laying going on, we've got as many guys on as many tractors doing as many things that need to be done. You end up being a lot more productive. If you limit yourself to 1 or 2 tractors, you're limited to what you can do on 2 tractors. That is a big part. Employees are a huge part of it. If we didn't have a sizable crew, we surely couldn't do as much as we're doing.

Chris Blanchard: How many employees do you have?

Todd Nichols: We have about 50 people working. In the field, I think we have about 30 people working. There's about 10 people that are on salary, year-round employees, and those guys are diverse, a mechanic, a couple of older guys that drive tractors mostly, I've got a crew foreman who's very bilingual and pretty much in charge of all the laborers. Then we've got several people in the marketing department, and then of course my family and my brothers. It takes that, and we're always looking for more help. I really am always looking for more.

Back to the growing, a lot of that acreage is eaten up in a few crops, really. We could definitely cut out our acreage quite a bit if we didn't grow a lot of sweet corn, which we grow 50, 60 acres of sweet corn on most years, and I do a lot of beans. We harvest beans with an oxbow, so beans are a big part of our rotation. They're also a big part of just ... Over the years, we've been known for our beans at a lot of markets, so we sell a lot of beans. I probably plant more than I need. That's kind of our philosophy on almost everything we grow is that we plant more than we need. We find it much better to have extra and not have to harvest it than to run out and the lost potential in that way. In most cases, most of the cost of growing is in the labor of picking it. If we just simply have too much, like in sweet corn, we just don't pick it.

We're also filling the space in a lot of ways. When we're growing crops, we're growing more than we need, but we're also utilizing our farm to its fullest potential in a lot of ways. I do aspire to put more land out of production, but that hasn't always been the case that we've been able to take a whole lot of land out of production.

Another part of why we eat up so much acreage is that we're into relatively low-density. We started off with very wide rows, and some crops, we keep at wide rows for a multitude of reasons: air flow, ease of harvest, ease of machinery, ease of cultivation. We actually use a 42 inch row on a lot of things like sweet corn and beans and a lot of crops that most people would grow on



a 30 inch row, we grow on a 42 inch row. It's hard to change a system like that after you've got it started, because you've got equipment that lines up. That 42 inch row kind of all goes back to some of my dad's original equipment, and then it just kind of multiplied from there. We've accepted the 42 inch row on a lot of stuff. Then a lot of crops we grow on a 3 row bed with a 21 inch row, which is still wider than a lot of people would grow a lot of those carrots and greens and lettuce and that kind of stuff. The wideness is not necessarily always a negative for us.

Chris Blanchard: It was certainly something as my farm evolved, we started off with 10 inch rows, and then we ended up going up to 12 and then to 15 for exactly those reasons that you mentioned, around air flow and therefor the disease control that that provided. It really changed our disease situation, especially in crops like carrots, which we were having a real problem with Alternaria in those. It also really did make the weed control so much easier.

Todd Nichols: It really does make cultivating a lot easier. If you're manually cultivating or hoeing, it makes it easier, too. The way I see it is we could be more productive, that everyone can look forward to running like that, but for us, it works.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you're using the Oxbo bean harvester, which is a mechanical bean picker. Do you use a lot of mechanized harvest aids?

Todd Nichols: You know, traditionally, no. We're working our way there. In fact, I just got a corn harvester delivered this month. With the uncertainty of the future of labor and agriculture, I figured no better time than now to make sure that we are mechanized a little more. I'm also thinking seriously about getting a root harvester. One thing about us is that we're in a location that has always had a lot of labor. I don't know what it is, but there's a horticultural industry that is kind of out here at the edge of Chicago-land. There's a lot of jobs for mostly migrant and Latino guys that are working in the horticulture industry. In our area, there's a ton of nurseries and sod farms. Not so many vegetable farms, but it's also home base to a whole lot of landscapers and that type of company that generally hires Latino guys. Not that I have anything opposed to non-Latino guys, but the reality is those people that apply at our farm are mostly Latino guys, and most of our field harvest crew consists of that.

That has been one reason why we've never been pushed into mechanization completely. Of course, we're growing a huge variety, so there's very few crops that we could justify it anyway. We barely grow enough of any one crop to justify mechanization, but the corn and the beans and a few other things, those options are out there. You'll never escape the need for hand labor in this industry, at least on our level and our diversity. We grow so many crops. We often tell people we have over a thousand varieties of crops grown on the farm. That's true. Every year, my seed order will consist of maybe 400 items, and then our orchard, we grow a 243 varieties of apples, and 40 types of pears, and pretty much everything in every catalog, we've tried. An awful lot of them stick if we find a way to make them profitable. A big thing of our



appeal at any farmer's market is our sheer diversity. We really strive to grow everything. So many of those things are just not, you're just not going to do mechanical, you know, artichoke harvesters and cucumber harvesters are beyond me for mechanical. It becomes a little tricky. We are fortunate to have that labor force that has made it possible.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, especially when you talk about coming from a neighborhood where there's a lot of horticultural production already, because even though it's not necessarily vegetables, and even though knowing how to put trees in pots or how to prune berries doesn't necessarily translate to how to pick peppers in a specific sense. I think that similar work and that way of working is really important in terms of finding good people who are experienced farm laborers; people who get it from the get go.

Todd Nichols: Yeah. It is the trick, and we've burned through a lot of people through the years that didn't quite get it. It'll be a constant need. Like I said, who knows what the future brings in the labor market around here, so I am pushing to mechanize a bit, but we'll never escape it.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned doing some hand weed control. Obviously, that's not the only thing you're doing for weed control. You said you have several high clearance tractors. I assume you're using those for cultivating?

Todd Nichols: Yeah, cultivating or spraying. We've got a couple of the John Deere 5100 series. They're 100 horsepower, makes them pretty versatile. As far as their clearance is a little high for a few implements, but for cultivation, they're nice. I have a couple of older guys that pretty much take care of most of the cultivation on the farm. That is the biggest thing. Our weed control, the basis of it starts with hopefully a clean rotation, and then cultivation is the biggest back bone. I wouldn't say we have any magic trick. In fact, we probably have some of the weediest fields of a lot of farms you've had on here. Things get lost in the weeds occasionally, and that's part of it. You miss a beat and all of a sudden you lost the battle and you've suffered and prices went up. A big part of making it work for us is that we're able to tweak a profit out of most any crop, even sometimes if it looks like it's lost in the weeds, you'd be amazed what it looks like after a nice frost and all the weeds die.

Occasionally I get discouraged in that department, but we've gone to more transplants over the years. If there's things that I can transplant ... For years we tried direct seeding lettuce more and more and that was just always, if you didn't hoe it, there was no hope. I've gone to a lot more transplants and we're able to cultivate a lot better now, I think. There are some crops that we're not stuck to organic, so some crops I am able to use some herbicides that make it equitable, like sweet corn. I'm not trying to grow corn organically for a multitude of reasons. If you're not trying to grow it organically, you're left with the option of both and herbicides are big in a few crops. Most vegetables, there's really nothing out there anyway, but when it comes to corn and beans, I can utilize some of those if I have to.



Chris Blanchard: I'm curious how you make that choice. For me, I came into agriculture through organics. My interest was an environmental interest, and the first farm that I worked on was organic. Almost every operation that I've been a part of was organic, and certainly everything that I'd managed. When I say we were organic, it was a defining part of our operation. It sounds like that was something that was true with your parents. How do you thread that needle, I guess, on a decision-making basis? When you're looking at something and going I could cultivate this or ... I mean, obviously you're not doing it ... Well, I shouldn't say obvious. I'm guessing that you're not doing it, you're not standing there looking at a crop of corn making a decision about whether you're going to cultivate it or spray it. It's a management decision that you've made. How have you made that decision of where to hue to organic practices and where to say you know what, we're going to go a little bit over here?

Todd Nichols: Yeah, that's something I deal with often. It is tricky. We probably take it more crop by crop. There are crops that I know that we can grow without herbicides or fungicides and insecticides even, and those are generally the crops that I feel like we could be weed-free enough to get a yield, I might have an insect infestation that'll make it unmarketable anyway. I'm weighing all those options, and I'm just accepting of the fact that we're not going to grow sweet corn organically and try and compete on the market that we do. At the farmer's market level, I have competition who's completely non-organic and I have some organic, but when it comes to a crop like sweet corn, there's almost no organic competition because nobody's doing it because it's just ... I mean, I know people doing it, but they're not doing it on any scale that they're the guy that's got the lot of corn. At our market, I sell 6 bins of corn at one of my markets every week. If I have a week where it's 40% infested with worms, then it cuts that tail in half and it's just ... I take it crop by crop.

Now, with fruiting vegetables, like tomatoes and peppers and an awful lot of things, I know that I can grow pretty much organically in most cases. Transparency is a big thing, you know? In the market clientele, we find that there are a percentage of people who just will not buy from us. Until we carry a Certified Organic stamp of their approval, they will not buy from us. That's okay. The reality is the majority of people will. We try and be transparent about it. We carry the Certified Sustainable stamp, and we explain what that entails. We're, like you said, threading the needle of organic or conventional is a fine line and it becomes very tricky. I do strive for organic practices and wherever applicable without limiting ourselves completely to such. Having the orchard is really kind of the Achilles heel of the organic thing for us. As long as half of our farm is in orchard, I'll never be Certified Organic. Am I completely limited to that? No. I know that probably burns a lot of people that are practicing strict organic, but it's kind of a realistic outlook on things in my opinion. I don't want to do away with all of the conveniences of modern agriculture. At the same time, I do want to produce a clean product as best I can. It becomes tricky.



Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about what the Food Alliance Certification entails.

Todd Nichols: Food Alliance is out of Washington, and we started carrying them as a third party audit because one of our markets wanted us to have a third party certifier. It turned out that half the people at the Green City Market in Chicago couldn't be Certified Organic. When you're talking to fruit guys from Michigan and stuff, none of them could be Certified Organic. We found Food Alliance as an alternative that gave us some market appeal. What they entail is they have a few hard line rules, like no GMOs, no pesticides off of a list of what they consider to be highly toxic. We don't use organophosphates, no neonicotinoids, there's a list of products like that which you can't grow.

They also grade you heavily on your soil and water conservation, your ecological and environmental conservation. Of our 530 acres, about 100 acres is in pretty much conservation land, and that's scored well. In fact, the certifying agents came out and she was out here one time, she told me how she had to deny that stamp to some organic guys who were farming fence-row to fence-row. Using organic practices, but what was the real ecological impact of that. Are you addressing the fact that there are other components involved with the ecology of your farm, like the environmental and the wildlife?

They also grade you on your human resources. They looked deep into our labor policies and that kind of stuff, and what to make sure you're treating your employees safe and fair. It's kind of a well-rounded outlook on sustainability without strict organic policies. It's a far cry from what I consider strictly conventional, but it's also a leg to stand on when a customer comes up at a farmer's market and says, "Are you guys Certified Organic?" No, we're not, but we're Food Alliance Certified Sustainable, we grow an awful lot of things without pesticides. We grow some crops that we wouldn't grow organically, and that's part of why we operate the way we do. Until the market drives us a different way, we're comfortable with that.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about your marketing approach. I mean, you've got the CSA, you've got the farmer's markets, you've got wholesale. You're doing all of those on a really large scale. You said 450 CSA members. That's nothing to disrespect there. But 20 farmer's markets and 200 wholesale customers, how do you guys manage that? Wow.

Todd Nichols: It's tricky and I wouldn't say we ... There's always room for improvement on everything. It's kind of a learning curve every year. The local restaurant scene has really exploded in the last 10 to 15 years. We went from less than 5% of our gross to nearly 50% of our gross is direct to restaurants. In that end of the business, we have 2 full-time delivery guys who operate refrigerated trucks, and they go on a route everyday and pretty much cover the entire metro area. I have 2 people that fill orders in the barn over in the packing shed every night. We do that overnight because we're offering a very next day service. Unlike a lot of guys doing this, our cut-off is 3:00, 4:00 in the morning before



the truck gets on the road. If you're a sous chef that just closed out on Friday night and you ran out of sunchokes or rutabaga or whatever and you want to place an order at 2:00 in the morning, it's going to be on our truck by 5:00 in the morning and it's going to be on the road and you're going to get it by noon or so the next day. We're really kind of pushing that super service to the restaurants, and that is a big part of what we do now.

Of the 200 restaurants, there's all size restaurants in there. We're lucky to have a few that are really major supporters that spend substantial. There's quite a variation in deliveries, from everywhere from ... We don't have a minimum delivery as we're offering a premier service. We do offer such a variety that we rarely would need a minimum delivery. Deliveries go anywhere from \$50 to \$1500, and a lot of restaurants are buying 4 days a week. We might go to the same restaurant 4 days a week. They feel like they're getting the absolute best, freshest every day. They're not buying a lot more than they need and sitting around on it. We're also in the city 7 days a week, so there's always that potential to get it to them if we need to. We're really catering to the restaurants and trying to ... We do a lot of custom growing. We grow a lot of crops that we just wouldn't grow for market even because the limited demand.

Serving the restaurants, the scene has changed our crop lineup quite a bit. There are crops that we used to ... We used to do ... Like sunchokes or something ... We've always grown sunchokes. It didn't take much to have too many sunchokes. At a market, we might sell a few. As the restaurant scene has gotten into it as a storage crop, we grow about 2 acres of sunchokes now and I sell them all winter. It's a huge crop for us. It's a crop I can grow organically really well, so it's one of those things that we just wouldn't have used to grown.

Chris Blanchard:

I know that on my farm winters were nice because a lot of our crops, like beets and carrots and rutabagas, we would have harvested them all in the fall, we'd wash a couple of week's supply and have them in the cooler. Somebody would call and order 5 cases of beets, we walked into the cooler and pulled out 5 cases of beets put them on the truck. Really easy. During the summer, and I think this is true of most small market farms, we would actually wait until somebody ordered their 5 cases of kale before we went out and harvested the 5 cases of kale. That was an important part of our model. Clearly if you're accepting orders at 4:00 in the morning to be delivered that same day, you're not doing that. How are you guys managing your harvest and post-harvest handling and all of that packing? How do you decide how much you're going to pick? I guess, just walk us through that.

Todd Nichols:

Yeah. It's a steady flow. We harvest 6 days a week. A big part of what kept the everyday always having a supply on hand is that we go to farmer's markets 7 days a week. We go to 15 a week, and having that demand for the markets is always there. There's always the need to have some of everything. Restaurants get first pick, so if we didn't have enough on inventory in the



cooler, we just don't have it at the market. If you do have some lead time it helps, not that everybody's putting their order in at 2:00 in the morning. A lot of guys are a day ahead, so you do have a rough feeling of what you need and we call out to our crew chief in the field and arrange to have special orders met.

In general, we try and have an inventory that is always on hand. That's where it becomes very tricky because it produces a little more waste than we'd like. Waste is kind of part of the biz. I wish there was a way to do away with it, but the reality seems to be that if you didn't have enough, a lot of opportunity lost. We do have waste, and certain crops are just not that popular anyway. In general, we're picking every day. We know that there are 3 days a week that are kind of surge days where we know we need a lot of this or that. Saturday's the big one, of course, but the markets are flexible. That's the good thing is that after the restaurant ... That's part of why we fill our orders done by 4:00 in the morning is that we know what's left for all the markets, because there's just not always enough of everything for everybody. By getting the restaurant orders out of the way as the priority, we're able to run the markets out of that. Generally, there's enough to go around.

Chris Blanchard: How are you guys actually managing the marketing to the restaurants? I guess I'm looking at both from an outreach perspective, but also just on a day-to-day basis. Are you guys using any kind of software to let people know about availability and facilitate ordering? Are you guys still going old school on that with emails and phone calls or fax machines?

Todd Nichols: I've put a lot of thought into the potential for having that software and the need to be updated often. We really are just kind of doing it old school, email apps and weekly email list and taking orders by email. That kind of leaves you the most flexibility. When you have a very fluid product line, it's much easier to change your product list on an email or a spreadsheet than it is to go into a program that you have to change it a lot. We are kind of old school in that respect, and we've gotten a little more high tech with our invoicing and everything. Still, we're not over complicating it, to tell you the truth.

As far as outreach, a big part of why we've been able to get our name out there to so many chefs is through farmer's markets. Being part of all the city markets that are the most happening city markets really has brought ... A lot of the chefs come to the market, look around, and see who they want to deal with. Starting those relationships like that has been a big part of it. Another thing is having those personal relationships with the chefs rather than the restaurants. A lot of restaurants come and go, and chefs are still in the industry. We've got a lot of clients that were, if you look at it like the chef's the client, they move on and often move up. They bring up the new restaurants, maybe better opportunities. Spreading the word through a restaurant like that, you'll be a sous chef at one restaurant that we deal with and we know personally, and then they move on and now they're a head chef at the next restaurant. That kind of organic growth has really been the core of how we've



grown into it.

I think matching that with the service that they feel good about is probably what's kept us in business in the restaurants. There seems to be no magic trick for us. One thing is that we do offer the next day service, and we generally have the supply to meet the demand. If you're a very small operation and you don't have it, you're going to leave them disappointed often. We try not to do that. We've been able to nurture the restaurant business along quite well. Things like microgreens, we do a full greenhouse of microgreens and stuff like that. It doesn't take too long to figure out, to change your operation. In farming, you can't change it tomorrow. It might take a year to change what you're doing, but give yourself a year and you can change direction and do what you need to be doing to make it work. For logistics, no, we don't do anything that is that creative.

Chris Blanchard: Of course, you're at 15 markets a week. I said 20 earlier, but you just said 15, so I'm going to go with that.

Todd Nichols: Yeah, it's about 15. It changes a little bit, but ...

Chris Blanchard: You guys are obviously delegating some of your marketing to other people. Can you tell us how that goes, because for me, again, and I'll speak from my experience in the farms that I worked on, having the farmer at the market was usually a pretty important part of how we sold our produce.

Todd Nichols: Oh yeah.

Chris Blanchard: How do you guys handle that with 15 markets a week?

Todd Nichols: Traditionally, we've always tried to have 1 family member at each market. Luckily, we do have ... I have 2 brothers and my parents involved. As my parents are getting old now and them not doing as much, they don't go to markets at all. We all go to market on Saturday. That's kind of our big market day. We go to 4, we did 5 market Saturday this year. We do try and have a good representation at each market. I have my older brother, Chad, he's not as much interested in farming as much as marketing, so he definitely does his share of markets and goes to market everyday. That's his job. He runs a lot of our markets. Then we have another full-time guy who's a great attitude and enjoys running markets well, and he's been with us for 12 years. He runs the other half of the markets. There is always somebody reasonable at each market.

Of course, the markets that we go to, we do 14, 15 a week, and over the years we've tried 30 or 40 markets probably. The reality is there's just so many markets out there that are just not worth going to, especially if you have much of an overhead or are really trying to make any money. Of our 14 markets, most of them are very good. It does take more help beyond that. Mostly we have anywhere from 3 to 6 people working at each market. At our best



markets, 6 people is rarely even enough. In that case, we hire mostly city people who can meet us there and work less time. Those people are generally enthusiastic and don't get burned out so quick. If you do a grueling 5 or 6 day a week market schedule, you end up hating farmer's markets. Everyone's been there, I think. On the right rainy day, if you've had enough, the cheap customer, you've got to keep a good attitude. It's not really for everyone, but for us, having at least somebody good running each market is very important.

Chris Blanchard: Having talked about the restaurant sales, having talked about the farmer's market, when I looked at your website, I was actually intrigued by your CSA and the number of options that you guys were offering. You've got the basic fruit and veg, but then you've also got this chef's premium box that you pack. Then you guys are also offering home delivery. Talk a little bit about how you're managing that kind of diversity in creating options for your members, because like everything else that you're doing, the more things you offer, the harder it is to manage.

Todd Nichols: Yeah. I've kind of taken a mixed approach on the CSA. The option of doing a custom pack CSA has crossed my mind a lot. I see the appeal, but logistically and packing seems very tricky. We do offer pretty much a standard share, and that is most of all the shares we do. It includes fruit every week, and it's a little higher price because it includes fruit every week. \$40 a week share is our standard share. I've tried to keep it very simple. In fact, we do a half share, which is just every other week, so that makes it much easier. For a while there, I was doing a smaller share and it just left too much room for error, either people taking the wrong shares or whatever. If you get 10 emails a week about this or that, it just drives you nuts. We tried to simplify the half share and the standard share.

I do offer a chef's share that I get relatively a few takers. That's for more enthusiastic people that want to spend \$65 a week. They'll get 15 to 20 items in the box and are more apt to get things like zucchini blossoms or wild mushrooms, things that I'm not going to put into a standard share. This year, we're working with a producer of jarred items as an add-on. I've never really worked with add-ons, but we're going to play with it a little bit this year and see. Like I said, the CSA's kind of been my pet project, and I've been experiencing growth. We've slowly gotten up to 450 members.

This year, I'm doing home delivery, too, which I see it as a big potential, but we'll see. I'm working with a third party delivery service that seems to me the only realistic way to go about a home delivery. To cover the Chicago-land area on any day would be just too much without a third party company. They'll pick it up and deliver it same day essentially. For an added cost, that is put onto the consumer. For no added cost to me, really, they're going to do that. We'll see how it goes. It's a learning curve for me. I'd been willing to try anything that works. I still see growth in the CSA industry, despite all the talk of their being stagnant. I think there is potential. It might be getting a little saturated, though.



Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to take a break, get a word from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Todd Nichols from Nichols Farm and Orchard in Marengo, Illinois.

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We're back with Todd Nichols from Nichols Farm and Orchard in Marengo, Illinois. Todd, you mentioned that this farm was started by your parents, Lloyd and Doreen, and that you also farm currently with your brothers, Nick and Chad. What's your role on the farm? Obviously, you're not doing everything with that many people involved.

Todd Nichols: Yeah. I've grown into the role as I'm pretty much Head Grower. I'm also CSA manager, and I'm also, probably I like to think of myself as the ideas guy. We all have our roles. I stay on the farm every day, except for Saturday. That is where I want to be, to be active on the farm, making management decisions, cropping systems. That kind of stuff is what I spend most of my days doing. Working with so many different crops, it's definitely a challenge. We have a fair amount of greenhouse crops, too, that I'm quite a bit a part of. My brother Chad is mostly in sales, and my brother Nick manages all the restaurant sales. He also manages all the greenhouse plantings and that kind of stuff. It really is



important to delegate and try not to worry about everything, because if you just stick your nose in every component of the farm, for one, you'll never get anything done. Two, you'll end up really frustrated that you couldn't do it all. I try and stick to the field, and that's where I want to be.

Chris Blanchard: As Head Grower with so many acres and so many crops, do you actually spend time on the tractor, or is most of your work going around and figuring out what needs to be done and then making sure that it gets done?

Todd Nichols: That's kind of how I start my day. I do actually do all of the planting, direct seeding. I'm fortunate I don't have to do hardly any cultivating, so I've got a couple guys who mostly do that. We've got a guy who does all the irrigating mostly, so I don't have to worry about that too much. I'm mostly in charge of any succession plantings, and just trying to keep it all together. I meet with our crew foreman every day and give him the outline for any special directions we're going that day. We're lucky to have crew that's been with us for so long that I really don't have to walk everybody through everything every day. That is a big component.

I spend an awful lot of time driving around. One part of our farm that I think is of great value is our farm is spread over 4 different farms actually. We have an 80 acre field that's a mile and a half to the north of the main farm. You have the main farm, which is 220 acres, mostly unirrigated there. Then we have 85 acres down 2 miles to the west where we have our new packing shed. Then actually part of our land we trade with a agronomic farmer neighbor, and we trade him 2 of our acres to 1 of his acres, but we're under his central pivot irrigation. Center pivot's not great for everything, but if you're talking like corn and beans, you sure can't beat just calling your neighbor and saying hey, turn on the water. That's part of the deal. Compared to our other irrigating systems on the farm ...

Anyway, back to the crew. I have a guy on irrigation. My dad is involved. He actually kind of manages the orchard. My dad mostly, he runs the orchard now. As far as making the spray commitment of an orchard is pretty time consuming itself. We have over 10,000 trees on over 40 acres of orchard. It's kind of his baby. 243 varieties on 10 or more different root stocks ends up giving you an orchard that's almost unnavigable to most people. There are literally all varieties of trees all over the place. The orchard is still his thing. He's in his early 70s now, so he doesn't want to do a whole lot, but he's still involved and he likes to run the orchard and take care of that.

Chris Blanchard: It's interesting to me that you're so spread out. I mean, you talk about 2 miles in one direction and a mile and a half off in another direction, that's a lot of space to manage. Even just from the standpoint of moving equipment, because tractors just don't go that fast down the road.

Todd Nichols: Definitely newer tractors go a lot faster than older tractors, but still it is a lot of down time. There are some serious negatives to being spread out. They're



kind of offset by the positives. It's hard to think that it's a positive, but I can't tell you how many times we've had adverse conditions on one field and not the other, whether it be hail or wind or too much rain, no rain at all, disease. A couple years back, we had a late blight that was the worst in years, a few years ago now, but the late blight in the tomatoes totally took out all the tomatoes on 1 field, and the other field was okay. That kind of geographical diversity really has come to our aid in so many cases that I can't even count. There are definitely logistical issues with that, but where we're at, too, there's different soils around. If I could go back, I would have put us all on a sandy loam and the right soil, but that wouldn't have been good for apple orchard. The geographical diversity has got some pros and cons, for sure, but it is hard to ... You lose a lot of time and a lot of production. I try and multitask every time I do make a trip, but I end up driving a lot.

Chris Blanchard: How are you guys handling that with harvest?

Todd Nichols: We break our crew into 3 crews. They each have a cube van that they go around [in], and there's 1 designated driver. They mostly do the traditional things like picking the greens early. Crops like that you want to get out early in the day. Otherwise, 1 crew will mostly stay in 1 field and do all the things that are over there before they move on. There's always one guy who's kind of a driver and he will drive back to the farm and take any crops in every hour or 2, he'll come back to the wash barn and bring the crops over. It's tricky. We're doing the best we can as far as trying to save time, but there's always room for improvement.

Chris Blanchard: Circling back to the family, how do you guys work together? Do you guys have formal structures in place for communication, or is it kind of on a catch-as-catch-can basis? How do you guys actually work together in this business that you all own together?

Todd Nichols: You know, you'd be surprised that we even function as a business some days. We actually work together best by working apart. It's good that we all have our own thing and there are components of the family that don't always ... Like any family business, it's not all hunky dory, and it is tricky. As far as formal in-writing types of things, Mom and Dad are still the patriarch and matriarch. They've got the final say on most everything. Until that time, the brothers and I are at some level of mercy. It's tricky, it's really hard to work with family business. Feelings get hurt, and everyone's not on the same page always, and work ethics are different. It's very hard. At the same time working for a family business, in my case, my son had a kidney transplant last year and I needed to take off a fair amount of time. The family pulled together when you needed them. On a day-to-day, it makes Christmas interesting. When you work together, it makes holidays a little different around our house. We really don't have any formal structure. It's hard to believe sometimes. At some point, when my parents are no longer in the game, it'll be interesting to see where the farm goes. The glue that sticks it all together is that my dad is still the driving force, and my mom still keeps him grounded. Me and my brothers



bring home the bacon.

Chris Blanchard: Do you guys have a formal succession plan in place? That's a huge topic now in the farming community as, I mean, not just your parents, but a lot of the founding generation of the organic and local farm scene are getting older now and are going to be aging out.

Todd Nichols: Yeah. We do have a formal family trust and that kind of stuff. There's a lot of assets here. The all the equipment and everything is something to be desired, and not to mention we all make our livelihoods. As we all get older and have our own views on life, I don't know how it'll work out post-my parents. I know I'll be here. I can't speak for my brothers, but I think we'll manage, Chris. We are family, it's a love-hate thing. I have 3 kids and my brothers have 3 kids between them. Hopefully they all want to be involved at some level or not. I'm not pushing them into it. I have 3 boys in the family, so I got assume that I've got a small workforce on my hands.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned before the show started that you were the kid that got dragged along to farmer's market. Do you drag your kids along to farmer's market?

Todd Nichols: You know, I don't. When my parents were starting it out, it was small potatoes. Markets today for us are a serious business. I bring my kids a couple times a year at most, but it's a long day. It's a 16 hour day and I work my ass off. I'm dealing with tons of people and having a kid at your heels needing this-and-that is tricky. As my kids get older, I do plan on working them into it more, but no, I haven't pushed them into anything. They're kind of spoiled really.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that one of your kids had a kidney transplant last summer and that you ended up spending a lot of time off the farm and that the family was able to pull together and cover for you. It's one thing to say family pulled together and covered for me, but it's another thing to be, you know, when you're the Head Grower on the farm, to be spending ... I think you said when you were talking before the show, a day a week off the farm, that adds up in terms of just missed seeding or missed tilling or missed giving somebody direction. How did you guys handle that?

Todd Nichols: You know, a lot of that went missed. It's not the end of the world. The thing about this is we grow crops and we take them personal and it's very serious, but at the same time, they're just crops, Chris. It's not the end of the world if I miss a week of arugula and radishes and we didn't have as much spinach at the end of the year or something. There were some things that went missed. What are you going to do? At the same time, at least I didn't have to lose my job over it. My family was there supportively. Yeah, you miss some opportunities, but that's a big part of the diversity of being a farmer like this is that we don't count on any single crop or anything. No crop we grow accounts for more than 10% of gross. It is that blend and the seasonality of it all.



Extending the season and having the perennial crops and everything, there's quite a bit of buffer that you've got a lot of room for error. There's no year that we don't have crops that completely fail. To tell you the truth, in 38 years doing this, we've never had a year that was worse than the year before.

Chris Blanchard: Really?

Todd Nichols: We've had 38 years of growth every year, even in the driest year, even in the wettest year. Part of that is that we've been gross-minded, but at the same time, the diversity has led us to a place where it almost feels like we can't fail. I know that's a terrible thing to say or ever to feel, but after you get used to having successes even with failures in between. We feel like there's, without crop insurance, the type of farming we do is insurance in itself.

Chris Blanchard: You talk about growing every year, that's in terms of gross sales. Is your net growing every year as well?

Todd Nichols: You know, we try and keep it in check. After paying ourselves, which is part of the cost of business, there's always been net. Some years, you spend the net more. The reality in farming, you have the fixed costs, which are the seed and all the inputs like that, and then you get the much more variable costs, like did we buy a new tractor this year or did we buy a wash line or did we spend it in one way or another. That level of net has been variable, but you try and balance it between how much taxes do you want to pay on profit really. One thing my dad's always been really about is just he hasn't pulled money out of the farm. He's always put it right back in. As you grow and grow and grow every year, you put more into it and it kind of perpetuates itself to the point where we do have an arsenal of equipment and all the means to really grow even more. It only becomes easier.

Chris Blanchard: Is your wife involved in the farm?

Todd Nichols: Not a whole lot, no. She mostly is a stay-at-home mother. As our kids are getting a little older now, she's getting out there a little more. In certain ways, I wish she was, and in certain ways, I'm glad she's not. In fact, neither of my brother's wives are either. That does keep that autonomy. It keeps me from bringing work home always. Maybe it's on my mind, but I don't have to share with her all the problems or the intricacies of what I might be thinking about when it comes to farming. We have our own interests. We like to travel, we like food, and we like to cook, and we like to go out to eat. We have 3 little kids that consume an awful lot of our time, and having 1 chronically ill child is very tough. She is not too involved, no.

Chris Blanchard: Todd, do you live on the farm?

Todd Nichols: I do live on the farm. I have a house on the farm, and my brother Nick has a house on the farm. We are all connected. There's 5 houses on the farm, so also our foreman lives on the farm, and a couple other employees that share a



house.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that on the farm that's down the road, that you guys recently built a packing shed down there. Can you tell us about that and what you did and how it's working for you?

Todd Nichols: Yeah. A couple of years back, we had been working out of my dad's backyard and slowly growing from the same packing shed and wash area that he worked with in the early '80s to our point recently. We decided that it would be in good interest to build a new packing shed down the road. We started from scratch and we had a drive to make it a green building. We built the building itself is 140x80, and it's heated insulated. It's got a 6 bay loading dock, and it's powered with 140 solar panels on the roof, which creates about 90 or 100 kilowatts. There's a 100 foot windmill, which creates another 20 kilowatts. It pretty much creates enough energy on its own to power the 4 coolers we put in there, so we put in 4 coolers and a freezer. Then the building itself is also heated and cooled with a geothermal system. Literally, about half of the cost of the building was put into these green energy expenditures. It's a really neat building and it's great to have this space to grow. I just ordered the new wash equipment that we're putting in there, and having the extra cooler space was big. We put a freezer in there, like I said. We've gotten into freezing crops for a few restaurants, so that's another value-added type thing.

We also built a greenhouse out there. The greenhouse is 80x120, and that's geothermally heated, which is pretty rare for a greenhouse. I don't know if it was totally cost effective, we're yet to see. To have a geothermally heated greenhouse is something that my dad aspired to invest in. We're really invested in the new farm over there, and we've since then built 6 high tunnels. 4 of them are heated, and now we're kind of focusing production over there. Having the space is really a big factor. You can never have enough cooler space. We put in 4-16x40 foot coolers that are 10 foot tall, and it's easy to outgrow those even. When you have 100 different crops on inventory, you really have to have the space to get in and get out and not unload the entire cooler to get something out of the back. That was a big change for us and that's kind of our future direction over there. It really took the center of production out of my dad's backyard and into a much bigger space.

Chris Blanchard: If you could change on thing about that packing house, what would it be?

Todd Nichols: What would I change? I would have put three-phase in there. We didn't put three-phase power because it was a big cost. Now that I'm looking at some washing equipment, that three-phase would have been very advantageous. I would have put more floor drains. The county became a little tricky when it came to floor drains. There was a reason we minimized our floor drains. But yeah, three-phase power is one that I would have changed.

Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to turn to our lightening round after we get a quick word from one more sponsor.



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We're back with Todd Nichols. Todd, to start off the lightening round here, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Todd Nichols: Man, that's tough. Of course the obvious, something like a bean picker is pretty awesome. One that I use a lot is a Ferris Polyplanter, which is a Monosem vacuum seeder that drops it through the Ferris Polyplanter, pokes a hole in the plastic. Great for planting squash, and I use it for cucumbers and melons, corn; anything I want to plant on black plastic, it's something I've gotten a lot of use out of. After I got that, I really liked the Monosem planter setup, and we ended up going to ... I've got an NG Monosem planter and a MS Monosem. I'm running all Monosem vacuum planters, and those are kind of my tools of choice for my most important job of planting seeds.

Chris Blanchard: Equipment, you said, is really important for your farm. What is your favorite resource for equipment? Where do you turn to for information about that?

Todd Nichols: The internet, of course. Publications, Facebook blogs, your show. Your show has kind of inspired me ... Your show inspired me to buy a corn picker. That and other things. Things like that, trade shows are fun, too. I always try and go to the Michigan show or any show that has substantial equipment component of it is always fun.

Chris Blanchard: That Michigan show being the Great Lakes Expo, right?

Todd Nichols: The Great Lakes show is a big expo, yeah. I've always wanted to go to the big North American one in California. I haven't made it yet. Those types of things are great. I've got a lot of free time in the winter, and looking for new ways of doing things. The one thing I like about what we do is that we can change what we do and do it differently or do it better. There's always a better way or a new way to do it. That's what keeps it interesting.

Chris Blanchard: Right. What's your favorite crop to grow?



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- Todd Nichols: Favorite crop to grow. Personally, I like growing corn. I don't know if it's because we don't grow it organically or not, but the control of corn seems like something that is very reliable. It germinates quick as well, and strong, predictable. It's not like carrots. I love growing carrots, too, but it seems to me like half the time I have a hell of a time. I feel like a successful grower when I grow something that reliably comes out of the ground nice.
- Chris Blanchard: It's got those nice, big seeds and it gets up. It is pretty substantial out there in the field, too. You know you accomplished something.
- Todd Nichols: Yeah. You don't have to get out of your truck to know that it's up. There's something to it. It's fun.
- Chris Blanchard: If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Todd Nichols: If I could go back and tell my dad where to buy his farmland, that would be something I'd go back and do. He ended up buying ... We've got a mix of silt-loam, clay-loam, and not much sand around here. That's something I would do.
- Chris Blanchard: Todd, it's been a lot of fun talking to you today. Really, really appreciate you taking the time this morning.
- Todd Nichols: All right, Chris. It's been fun. I appreciate it.
- Chris Blanchard: All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 103 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for this show at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com) by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for Nichols. That's N-I-C-H-O-L-S.

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