



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 104

Mike Brownback of Spiral Path Farm Talks about Ethical Wholesale Buyers, Hillside Farming, Salad Mix Production, and the American Dream

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast Episode 104. And this is your host, Chris Blanchard.

Mike Brownback farms at Spiral Path Farm in South Central Pennsylvania with his wife, Terra and sons, Will and Lucas. Spiral Path farms over 70 acres on more than 300 acres of land that they own, serving two farmers' markets, and a 2,000 member CSA, and a substantial wholesale business with Wegmans Grocery Store. They farm all of their acres organically, and they've been certified organic since 1994.

Mike shares the recent history of Spiral Path Farm, and the return of the sons to the operation. We talk about how they've come back to the farm, and how Mike and Terra have integrated them into the operation, including the unconventional details of how they keep the communication channels open, and everyone headed in the right direction.

Mike also shares how he, Terra and his sons have divided up their responsibilities for managing employees, and the guiding philosophy and daily actions that have helped them to retain several employees for over a decade. We dig into the production side of the farming operation, too. Mike digs into his strategies for growing nutrient-dense flavorful foods including the nuts and bolts of the composting and cover cropping techniques that work together on the farm to build carbon and soil life. We also discussed farming on the contours, how they harvest and make use of most of the water that falls on the farm, and their approach to salad mix production and large-scale season extension.

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Mike Brownback, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Mike Brownback: Hey, thanks, Chris. Good to be here.

Chris Blanchard: Thank you. I'm so glad you could join us today. I'd like to start off by having you give us the lay of the land there at Spiral Path Farm.

Mike Brownback: Okay. Well I used to be able to say my wife and I own Spiral Path Farm, but as of the end of the previous year, that's not true anymore. Well, we, Spiral Path Farm as business is run by my wife Terra, myself, our sons, Will and Lucas. And in late 2016 my son Will and his wife Deirdre and family have actually bought the physical property that was our original farmstead. And we are still principals in the business, but we're looking to next generation to, to keep everything going.

Chris Blanchard: Wow! That's really great. That, and that, and not so common on a vegetable farm.

Mike Brownback: It's amazing. Uh, we never really of course, we al-, you always hope your children think enough to stick around. Uh, both our sons went out and worked in, in the industry and in the world and they both decided they wanted to come back. And it was a joyous surprise for both myself and my wife Terra.

Chris Blanchard: Now, Spiral Path Farm is located in South Central Pennsylvania, right?

Mike Brownback: Yes. Uh, we're located in Perry County. That's roughly an hour due Northwest of the Capital City of Harrisburg.

Chris Blanchard: And you guys farm a whole lot of acres, for a vegetable farm.

Mike Brownback: [00:04:00] Oh, that's, that's a ma-, always a matter of opinion. I mean, if we get down to Florida or we go out to California, we're just little guys. Around here, we're looked at as somewhat of a large farm. We, we have roughly 300 acres, but to be realistic, out of that 300 acres, we're farming close to 70 right now, and we'll have another 40 come certifi-, be certifiable by next year. So we are a farm that is growing uh, due to, due to the participation of family members, but we basically kept our gardening principles intact as, as we like to look at it.

Chris Blanchard: Where are you selling your produce?

Mike Brownback: Well, we, when we started the, to, to grow produce particularly certified organic produce back in the early '90s, we were previously actually farrow-to-finish hog operation. We started off with the, at with Spiral Path Farm, and it was named, in the early days, but we bought our farm in 1978.



We have been farming until the '90s with a farrow-to-finish hog operation growing basically corn, soybeans, small grains, a lot of hay crops. And we started reading Acres USA, and that really saved us. I mean, we were just about went broke when interest rates hit 18% there in the early '80s, late '70s.

[00:05:30] And so as of now, when we started and I'd say now as though this, (laughs) the '90s is recent history, we started the, we started CSA pretty much right from the get-go. We had been selling at the local farmers' market in Harrisburg. But we were fort-, fortunate enough that we kept a mailing list, and we had members talk about CSA.

We had gone to the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture Conference that's held in the state college every year, and we were hearing about this community-supported agriculture, and uh, we were naïve enough to think that it looked good. And we bit in, and we've actually been doing the CSA ever since. In addition to that, we've always sold some produce on the wholesale market and some actually at farmers' markets.

Chris Blanchard: And how many CSA shares are you guys servicing now?

Mike Brownback: Well, our CSA, our CSA business has grown. We've started with about 22 members back in the early '90s. It has been as high as 2400 members. Right now, it's right around 2,000 members. You know, I think the CSA concept has run its course in our area as far as being maxed out especially with more and more growers getting involved. But we're quite happy and quite satisfied with, that number, and have grown to be able to service that many customers.

Chris Blanchard: And with a CSA like that, you guys are packing boxes, right, for delivery?

Mike Brownback: Exactly, Chris. We're, we're packing boxes. We, we have kept the uh, generic box concept where we live in Perry County. It's so rural that for us to be able to market right in our little vicinity is out of the question. We might have 20 members that pick up at our farm and the other 1,980 or so are delivered to. So our, our philosophy is basically, you pack your CSA box like it's going to your mother-in-law. You don't have any idea who's pick-, who's getting that box, so you have to, you have to look at the concept as this, as if you have to be on your best every time.

Chris Blanchard: I always, I always told people to pack up for my mom, but, um, maybe I should do the mother-in-law. That would might have been a little bit even fussier. (laughs)

Mike Brownback: Oh, I think both work. I'm glad you, I'm glad you say it the same. (laughs)

Chris Blanchard: And then how many farmers' markets are you guys doing?

Mike Brownback: Uh, currently, we're doing two farmers' markets in the Washington, D.C. area, and we also have, we also have CSA drop-off sites at those markets, so it



works well for us.

Chris Blanchard: And for your wholesale sales, what, where, where are those products going?

Mike Brownback: Well, in our wholesale market, it's been a real adventure. You know, when you first we first started selling to Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative. Uh, the Cooperative is about an hour and a half west of us. We're still members of the Cooperative, although we don't sell to the Cooperative anymore, but it was a great starting place for us to understand packing standards and uniformity, and those, those type of the areas.

We started selling to venues like Whole Foods, to Albert's Organics, a lot of the major wholesalers at our area that were selling that were actually selling to distributors and to retailers. And then about 14 years ago, we started selling to the Wegmans Company. And Wegmans has been a real boon to us because they see the industry very similar to how we see it and it's not, they don't treat us as if they want to be parasitic. In other words, they're not trying to buy for the lowest price. They're looking at the big picture. They want quality and consistency and also be able to tell a story about their growers.

Chris Blanchard: So Wegmans is a name that out here in the Midwest where, where I'm broadcasting from, we, we hear that and I think it always sounds like you all in the Northeast know exactly what you're talking about. Can you tell me a little bit more about Wegmans?

Mike Brownback: Yeah, I, I would love to tell you a little bit more about Wegmans, Chris. Wegmans is a family grocery, grocery chain now. I'm gonna use the word chain. Uh, they basically started in the Rochester area. Probably, I think they just celebrated a hundred years. And it's been a family-run company from the get-go. You can't go buy stock in in Wegmans like you can in Whole Foods or some of these other uh, retailers.

But they have really focused on meeting the needs of their customers, really trying to identify food trends, making food exciting and really having a philosophy that I, that I, that I resonate to, which is you know, you basically, you wanna treat your customer as, as well as you can. And it's okay to make a profit, but in the process, you wanna hold to your values.

Chris Blanchard: And it's my understanding that they've done a lot to support organic farming in your region.

Mike Brownback: Wegmans has, has done r- well to support not only organic but even their conventional growers. They, they were probably one of the first chains to mandate food safety certification, which sounds so onerous if you haven't done it, but I mean, they actually supported all the growers to get, to get the GAP or harmonized GAP certified, and they even send us a check every year to help defray the costs.



So I mean, just instances like that they'll, they are supportive. Uh, those, it's, it's so important for an economy. And I, I mean, I really look at what I call the new economy is for the participants. So if I'm selling directly to my customer then it behooves my integrity exactly to my customer. But if I'm selling to an intermediary who's selling to a customer, the new economy has to take into account that it has to be win-win all the way down the line, and, and it cannot be parasitic.

And I keep using the term parasitic. Parasitic to me is when I want to create a race to the bottom, I wanna pull, pull the plug on prices, I wanna, I wanna bleed my suppliers as much as I can. That, there's no future in that, you know? That's to me, nothing made me happier than to be able to say no to other buyers because I had found a better way to market and uh, it was a, it was a joy for us, and it really ended years of frustration.

Chris Blanchard: And is Wegmans your only wholesale buyer these days?

Mike Brownback: Well, yes. Wegmans is our only buyer and it's somewhat of a, you could say, "Well, geez! Mike, you're putting your eggs in one basket." And I totally realize that and it's funny. You know, I my wife and I had a, had a meal with Danny and Stanze Wegman. And you know, I, I've talked to their top brass, and, and you know, I said, "Hey, Danny. You know, I'm somewhat in a precarious position here." I didn't say it that way. I said it as delicately as possible. And Danny obviously understood exactly what I said. And his comeback was, "If you'd like something in writing," and I, I said, "Danny, your, your handshake is good enough for me," because I just, I wouldn't mind if I have to go ...

You know, it's funny. I just got back from vacation. And you know, we rented bikes. We were down in Florida. We rented bikes and you know, you wanna, you stop the bike and they got locks. And you know, someone looked at me. I didn't lock my bike and they said, "Boy, you're really taking a lot of risk." I said, "Well, you know," I said, "If somebody steals a bike, if I gotta lock my doors, I'm not coming back." I don't wanna live somewhere where I gotta worry about all these, all these things. Uh, and it's just a basic internal philosophy that we have. And if we trust you, we trust you.

Chris Blanchard: Can you tell me a little bit about how those sales break out between the CSA and the, the farmers' markets and, and the wholesale sales?

Mike Brownback: Well, Chris, it's been a real, it's been a real evolving process and there, there were years probably, oh, within the last as recently as 10 years ago, our CSA was, when it was at 2400 members was our, was our leader in sales. Our farmers' markets always been a very small percentage. And the wholesale has, has fluctuated. At the c-, at current time, it's roughly twice. It's over twice of what our CSA sales are. So it's, it's that opportunity in light of the somewhat saturated CSA market has been a real benefit to us.



And really, when you're working with a retail, or the real way to work with a retailer is you sit down at least once a year, you go over sales. And you see what is an oversupply, where did you have opportunity that you might not have filled. Also, there should be some, there should be some transparency about what that retailer is paying for produce from another point. So if they're, if they're bringing in California produce, what are they paying for that? And what's their profit margin?

And if you have a really good relationship, they're not exactly telling you what you can charge, but they're all but telling you. And so that's been a tremendous asset to us as far as being able to price, but also be able to increase sales because we get to see what is your usage in a week.

Chris Blanchard: Right. So you really have the, it gives you the tools you need to know what your potential sales look like.

Mike Brownback: Exactly, and that's, I mean, you know, it's always been said in the produce business sell it before you grow it. Well, you know, well, anyone starting out in the produce business knows that sounds really good. And I'm gonna go talk to a chef. You know, we started selling to chefs or small places like that, and they're like, "Oh, great, great. You know, bring it in as soon as you got it." Well, someone always wants to see what you can do before they're gonna buy it.

So it's somewhat I think of a, of a cruel joke to say, you know, "Have it sold before you grow it." But as you're paying your dues and had been in the, in the business for a while, that is definitely works very well if you have a client that will commit to buying, but at the same end, I can't grow more of any item than a, than a retailer can use or else I'm putting them in a position that's unfavorable for them.

So it's a very delicate dance. And having a CSA and a wholesale outlet works really well for us because we can, we can manage oversupply a lot better that way. Now, what we always, we always put our CSA first and Wegmans doesn't like to hear that, but our comeback is we're paid upfront. You know, we have to. So ...

Chris Blanchard: Yeah. Having that flexibility, you know, as long as you're filling those boxes, I assume to make some changes maybe in what the contents look like from week to week, if, you know, depending on how things are going in, in the different marketplaces.

Mike Brownback: [00:18:00] Well, absolutely. And a case on point is we, we grew, we started we started growing these mini snack pep-, peppers. And they were three colors. And there was one color, the orange little mini pepper in particular were, they were just fantastic. And we always test, we always, we always know what to grow for the future by growing for our CSA. Our CSA is really our real taste



test. And if we can get something that the CSA likes and we have a lot of members like it, we have a very good chance of succeeding with that in, in selling it to a retailer.

Chris Blanchard: And so it's a way that you can also help your retailers keep an eye on trends as well or, or identify opportunities that maybe they didn't even know existed.

Mike Brownback: That's absolutely correct and that is the, that is the, the valuable work in partnership. We'll take something and say, "Hey, taste this," and you'd be surprised if you're really trying to take care of your customers all the way down the line. And you know, the, the listeners that have the farmers' markets and the CSA know, know how important taste is. But when you introduce that concept at, at the retail end, it, it provides opportunity for those of us that are putting the effort in to select the proper, the proper crops and also treat our soil in a such a way that we were enhancing flavor.

Chris Blanchard: So tell me about that 'cause I know that's something that you really emphasize on your farm is, is nutrient-dense food. But I'm assuming when you say emp-, you know, treating your soil in a way that emphasizes flavor that those are two things that go hand-in-hand.

Mike Brownback: I would sure, I would sure like to think so. And I, and it, we've, I've been really fortunate that by sheer chance I was introduced to Acres USA back, you know, as early as 1980, and even when we weren't forming in an, in a total organic way, we were making strides to improve in our soil. And y-, you know, it's been for me, you know, I'm in my 60s now, so I've been doing this for a long time. And it seems like the some, at some viewpoint, it seems like progress in soil improvement is incremental, but I would have to tell you that in the last 10 years, we really come a long way.

And I think the this focus on cover crops that has just burgeoned, I mean, in our state of Pennsylvania, the cover crop revolution extends far beyond organic growers or vegetable growers. And it is, you can come in our state in the winter time and you see a lot of green. If there's not snow on the ground there's a lot more green than you ever saw.

So I mean, that's a, that's the basis. Uh, one of the other key things we did is we, we make our own compost. And we make our compost with about 40 acres of fallow ground on our farm that is not conducive to growing vegetables. We mow it once a year late, either late August or in September. And we use that as the foundation for our compost. So we actually make our own compost on farm.

And one of the other reasons that we do that, Chris, is I really do not wanna support factory farming, particularly in the animal concept. And I, I kinda cringe when I hear growers say they're putting poultry manure on and you know, all these different ingredients that come from a, what I call a failed agriculture. I do not want them to be the inputs to improve my soil. And I



kinda question if they even can improve your soil. I hear stories of people putting large amounts of, of some of these products on and some of them contain GMOs or this and that. And you know, they say they can't detect GMOs out of manure like that, but philosophically, I do not wanna support that industry.

So I don't mean to jump negative about it, but I think making the compost and then taking, taking tests, taking soil test and, and we follow pretty much an all brick method of balancing our cations. You know, if we're, if we're short on calcium, which incidentally we haven't really had to apply calcium for over 20 some years, it seems like my neighbors are always putting calcium on because they apply synthetic nitrogen. But you know, there's areas in the country where you need nitrogen. We, we're in an area where we need potash. So we look for a source of potash that we think comes from a sustainable source, and we go with that.

Chris Blanchard: So you said you have about 40 acres of ground that you're using to create your compost, and you're feeding 70 acres with that. Are you importing organic matter in other ways to your farm?

Mike Brownback: We are not importing organic matter into our farm in other ways. It's really the, we're only making enough compost to probably put on two tons of the acre. We do not consider compost a nutrient. We consider compost a, a life source. So in other words, I'm looking to make the absolute best compost I can. And what we do is we use our packing house waste. We, we pile that during the season when we have an excess amount. We'll start blending that into our chop. And I use a skid loader bucket and build a big pile, a big static pile.

So I'll blend certain parts, put maybe nine buckets full of this brown chop that we've harvested. And it has a little green when you first harvest it. I'll put just a little bit of that vegetable waste. I'll put on some basalt dust, which is a, which is a very high-silica content dust that's considered paramagnetic. It's very important in biodynamics agriculture.

We we'll even put the, we'll put soil on. We'll put really fine clay that we, if we have it around, if not, we'll use some topsoil that we'll get off the farm. We'll blend that in, and then we'll put a little bit like 10% of bio char. And the bio char has been phenomenal of what it does to compost. We'll push that all together, and it blends as push it 'cause when we cut a little bit at a, at a time up on a pile, we'll let that static compost and it will get up to about, oh, 140 degrees easy.

Then we'll use that pile as the mother pile. And anytime we make compost, we'll start. We'll lay the nine buckets of the chop in a line just like you would make conventional compost pile with the, with the long windrow. Then we'll add maybe three buckets of that compost from the mother pile back on that, spread out. Then we'll add these other ingredients. We'll add the, the, a little



bit of the packing house waste. We'll add some clay soil. We'll add the basalt dust. We'll add the bio char again. Then push it all and push it that it blends as we push it. And just keep building that big static pile. That, that becomes the mother pile.

Then once a week, I'll take a, a dump truck load of that pile. I'll take it down to my warm shed. And in the warm shed we call it, I have a 10,000 gallon, an old fuel tank that we actually mounted on tractor trailer axles. It's a little hard to describe without seeing it, but it actually, we, we have it running on a two-horsepower motor and it will tumble this compost.

Chris Blanchard: It's kinda, it actually, I saw some, I saw a video of it online when I was getting ready for the interview.

Mike Brownback: There you go.

Chris Blanchard: And I would say, it's kinda like a big barrow washer almost.

Mike Brownback: It's exactly like a giant barrow washer. And it doesn't have any baffles in it. And it goes in at one end, comes out the other end. And it comes out and it looks finished when it comes out, but it's not finished. We static pile it then, let it reheat, but that, once it reheats, it won't go above 140 degrees, but it will not oxidize.

And the listeners know that if you make a compost pile and you have all this weight inside there, it's typically oxidizing. It will not oxidize after that. So what we do is let it, let it set. We'll have to haul it out and put it in piles. Then we'll cover it with compost covers. And some of it we'll actually screen and we'll screen it because we have rocks or this and that get in it. And what we screened fresh, we'll feed to our worms. And that's another ingredient that we, that we'll make out of the, the compost.

Chris Blanchard: So you're doing vermicomposting on the farm. I assume for your own use. You're not selling the vermicompost, are you?

Mike Brownback: No, no. We're not we're not really interested in selling the, the vermicompost. We use it. We use the most of our vermicompost to make our potting soils. And potting soils just really do great particularly if when we make the, the vermicompost, we're putting the, the screened compost on the top. We have a top-down system that we harvest underneath. Then we'll put something like Azomite on there. We use some we use some uh, clay du-, real fine clay dust. And we let that run, run through. We, you know, we'll keep it the right moisture for the worms. And that, that really works great in potting soil blends.

Chris Blanchard: And you guys are making your own potting soil there on the farm then.

Mike Brownback: Yeah, Chris. We've been making our own potting soil from the get-go. I, I think



it's, I think it's the old pig farmer in me. I'm used to grinding feed and you know, making those kind of things ourselves. And we've just kind of continued on making the potting soil. And we try to make as much of our those kind of items as we can ourselves.

Chris Blanchard: Obviously, with a huge amount of care going into the ingredients that you're putting into them. I mean, what you've described is, is I, I haven't heard of a farm doing a composting operation quite like what you're doing.

Mike Brownback: Well, it's interesting. I would have to say that one of my goals, and this is, I can look back in the early '70s when I actually started the garden with my grandmother and you know, and I'm reading Organic Gardening by Rodale. And you know, this concept of compost was so, I was quite taken with it. And when I had the pigs, I could never make good compost. Pig manure is so wet. I just didn't have the knack. And it seems like all of a sudden, I can make compost. And it's sort of meditative to me.

I get up in the morning and I used to go do the chores and feed the pigs and this and that. I'll go over the farm, and I, I m-, I spend maybe 20 minutes a day. I'll dump the garbage. You know, the owner of the company dumps the garbage and makes the compost. And I, I love doing it because I know it is the backbone of our fertility, that along with the cover crops. And I would have to say if someone said, someone said to me, "You can only do only one thing for soil fertility," the cover crops would be my first preference and the compost, number two.

Chris Blanchard: That's really interesting to me. So tell me about how you're integrating the cover crops into your vegetable operation.

Mike Brownback: Okay. I'd love to. We, it's, it's funny. We're friends with the Klaus and Mary-Howell Marten. They're uh, grain growers up in Penn Yan, New York. And we get together, we see them at conferences here and there. And you know, and Klaus, he said, he said "You're doing compost, yeah." He said "Well, when, when are you applying it?" I said, I said, and this was some years back, I said, well, I'm putting it on before, you know, sort of pre-plant. When we plow down. He said, he said try putting it on your cover crops.

[00:30:30] And I thought about it and I realized, yeah, I'm trying to increase biomass, so what we do is we take that very high quality compost, and we go out in the spring, after the ground is thawed. Of course, this January, the ground is thawed, but, after, after the cover crops come back out of dormancy, and they're starting to actively grow, to the extent that they're covering the, they're covering the ground, is what I like them to do. I like them to cover the ground, so I'll go out there and I use like an old we have an old uh, Stoltzfus wet-lime buggy that we use, that we can put on the two ton to the acre with that, with that, and spread it with two passes on our forty foot wide fields.



And we wanted that, it'll cover that, it'll cover the cover crops, so the sun will not oxidize, the sun will not work on that uh, on that compost. We want it to get in, now obviously you're going to get some that the sun's going to shine on, but, uh, the goal is, that those microbes, those fungi, your bacteria, you want those to be able to be assimilated in the soil. And if you have any kind of worm population, or even the microbes themselves, come up out of the soil to work that down and the next thing, you'll look at your cover crop and you'll think "Geez, the last time I looked at this ..." Say I had say my cover crop was uh, was rye and hairy vetch, what you'll see is that rye becomes less dominant. And your legume, the legume component becomes more and more vigorous.

And you think to yourself, geez, how could this compost possibly do this? And somehow by having a compost and not looking at it, I'm not putting- I'm not trying to add nitrogen to my soil. I'm trying to add in components that stimulate the bacteria, the Rhizobacteria that I'm trying to stimulate the nitrogen fixation. And uh, I have to say it wasn't intentional, but it's something that I discovered, I realized. And I, I take pictures of it, I'm, I'm so amazed at, in the fall, it's grass dominated because really in the fall, you're actually gathering those nutrients that were left in your soil from your previous crop as far as the nitrogen goes. But then it's spring wake up, it's slowly shifting over. And you use your compost to stimulate the, the nitrogen component of your soil. And it works like a charm.

The other thing it does is, increases your biomass so that when you plow this under, where you work it in the ground, you have less weeds because you're not putting us on preplan with something that can stimulate weeds. Now the higher quality compost are not supposed to stimulate weeds, but, timing is everything and I think, putting that on earlier is, is definitely helps with reduction in weeds.

Chris Blanchard: Are you rotating your cover crops with your vegetables, or is it something you're doing as a, as a follow on crop and growing vegetables on every acre every year?

Mike Brownback: We, we attempt to get cover crops on as, on as much of our ground as we possibly can. The exception would be some of the fields that we have in plastic. Some of our late some of our late salad crops that are on plastic. But what we really, the system that we really like is, we like to come in ... If we, if we come in early, and early for us is the end of August, beginning of September, we like to first start out growing uh, something like uh, like oats and a legume. It could be uh, Sun Hemp, it could be peas. It could be uh, oh there's a new one, I'm, that I've, if I could just remember what it was. It was like, some kind of chickpea, that uh, that we really liked, and they winter kill. So we want our, we want our first cover crops are going into crops that we intentionally feed to winter kill. That way, in the spring, you know, I have so many growers say to me, Mike, you know I got these onion maggots. And I say Oh, you plant them under a green cover crop? Uh, yeah, how'd you know?



Well, you know, something like maggots loves decay so you want to, in the spring if you're putting in crops that are sensitive to uh, maggots, you want to reduce your decay. So you want to have it pre-decayed by something that intentionally winter kills. The other, the other type of uh, cover crop scenario that we do, we grow a lot of brassicas in the fall. And we, we grow them on bare ground. We grow those on bare ground because at last cultivation we overseed, and we like to overseed with a blend of crimson clover, a little bit of hairy vetch, and either rye or triticale. Triticale we sort of like, we're sort of starting to like. It's a little less vigorous and let's our legumes become a little more dominant. That's a crop, and we love to let those, we love to harvest those brassicas in a way that we never harvest the top. Now, once in awhile, we'll come in and we might need, you know, need to top, but if we can harvest just leaves and leave, leave the critical growing points stay alive, and they make it through the winter, a winter like this, they will make it in the spring.

And what happens is, we let that grow out. We'll let those crops grow out, we want those brassicas to flower, we want every bit of biodiversity that we can generate. We want to see every kind of bee in there, any kind of uh, bio control. We found that those brassicas, and we do not know why, in the spring when they, when they start taking off again, they do not attract a flea beetle. What is it about these over wintered brassicas that we, that on our farm, we have a reduction of flea beetles. We sort of like that and we, we, we know that it's uh, that becomes a, not quite shoulder tall but very very tall crop. We'll flech off that as we need fields, and then we'll put those in particularly in tomatoes and crops like that that are heavy feeders.

Then the crops that we have that are uh, typically solanaceous crops, like your tomatoes, your peppers, your eggplants, we'll typically take those out in September, October, it's getting a little bit late to uh, do anything but hairy vetch, but we've, we used a rye, the hairy vetch and we've been adding the crimson in. And we found that the more diversity in these cover crop blends the better that they, particularly the crimson clover is more likely to survive because you spin the seed down. I think we had been overseeding it, and we'd get some smothering. Not really winter kill, but actual smothering.

Chris Blanchard: That's really interesting, that, the more diversity in the mix, you get better survival.

Mike Brownback: Oh yeah, that's been, that's been documented, and it's been documented in drought and in, and in cold.

Chris Blanchard: Now you guys aren't farming a whole lot of what I would think of as traditional vegetable land. You're, you're on a lot of hillsides, right?

Mike Brownback: Chris, we're definitely on a hillside. We are definitely on ground that uh, is not, let's face it, let's face it, our generation of farmers that did not inherit farms,



we had to get what we could. And by uh, serendipity, by the grace of God, by whatever, the ground that we got, there was enough on it that, it, it is productive vegetable ground. Even though it's not ideal, even though it's stony, even though it has slope, even though it has clay, it uh, it works for us. So, it behooves us to be real stewards of the land and to do everything that we can to minimize erosion and we learned about that ...

I learned about that the first year I farmed, back in 1978. And I plowed up a bunch of ground. I hadn't a clue what erosion was, I didn't know any of this stuff. I learned it all the hard way, and I think really at the end of the day we all do. And uh, we have land that is challenging and uh, you know I love the earth, I love the land. The last thing I want to do is put it in a position that it uh, that it doesn't prosper.

Chris Blanchard: So tell me about some of the things that you're doing for erosion control. Because I think that's a real challenge for a lot of farmers. Because like you said, we, we have to take what we can get. And especially for vegetables, you're dealing with a lot of soil exposure of the course of a season.

Mike Brownback: We really are. Particularly when you're laying plastic, and you have to, we, I mean we, we even, even in the late season, which we'll call our September October, we'll actually get somebody to walk seed, oat seed, or, or rye seed, in between the plastic just to get it uh, to grow. So we have cover over the winter. And uh, when we put our strawberries out, we, we put strawberries on plastic in uh, early August. We actually grow oats between there and it does look like a little bit of an eye-sore. We weed out the holes, and so the strawberries are clean, but there's, there's uh, oats growing, you know, as tall as oats get, right between the plastic. And uh, we try to do things like that, but we also farm on the contour.

We've done a lot of work with our machinery that we can farm on the contour. For instance, we use uh, we use water wheel transplanters, about everybody does that plants on plastic. We've modified our tractors that we can actually put, we put side shifts on them, that we can actually pull a machine up the hill sideways so we're not crabbing as bad on uh, going around contours. My son, Will, he got a mechanical engineering degree so he has some, some good insight into that and, you know, we've done some trial and error work, but we try to stay on these contours.

Uh, we also subsoil a lot. We probably subsoil more than the average growers do, by opportunity. So if it's a dry year like last year was a very dry year for us. Well, we subsoil, we want infiltration. We want to increase that infiltration layer. We want to build our topsoil depth. Uh, if I were a no till farmer, I would be using more and more uh, tillage radish, the daikons. We use some. I'm a little hesitant to go too wild on daikon radish because of all the brassicas we grow, but uh, they work really well with subsoilers also. Uh, and we also have green, green, in other words sod roadways about every forty feet. So we try to, we try to lay our plastic tight. We lay it on five and a half foot centers



which is very tight, particularly on hills, that's why we need uh, machinery that we can actually adjust as we plant. We can actually slide that transplanter up so we're not drifting down the hill.

And uh, but it allows us to put eight rows in about a forty, about forty foot field. That actually works for our sprayers, that we can cover four rows at a time, and uh, but it gives us a sod roadway every forty feet, so really we're giving up a lot of acreage farming that way. But we feel as if we don't have any option. Uh, we also have diversions. A diversion where you would collect water that would, that would run, it would run into uh, a waterway, a sod waterway. And then a diversion would collect it and then actually let it out.

We've been we have some ponds that we put in so we want our runoff water to actually go in the ponds. Uh, I learned about this reading Acres USA, particularly about the uh, key line farming from Australia where they have such a, a drought. And then, they'll, they might have a drought, deluge cycle. And when they do get the rain, they want it. And since we irrigate our farm out of a well, we find it absolutely imperative that we do everything we can do increase infiltration. Our our motto is, and it might sound a little greedy, but our motto is if it falls on us, that's our water, we want that water. We're not trying to get rid of that water, we want it in the ground, infiltrated in so we can use it because we make a living by that water. So we want to do everything we can to get it to go in, into our land, into our aquaphor.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned the subsoiling and then the key line concept from Australia. Are you using the, the key line or the Yeoman's plow for your sub soiling, or are you using like a more conventional subsoiler?

Mike Brownback: We're using a more conventional subsoiler. I did have a lot of interest in that key line plow back when I saw it in the uh, in the 80's and uh, but I never really got that far. We use a what's called uh, oh my gosh, it's slipping my mind what it is! But it's, we can only pull two shanks with it. It's actually called a slick tiller, or a slot tiller, so we, we have goal, we have aspirations of uh, starting to do some, some slick tillage. Which means you take a deep shank and it has a rule or harrow that follows that so you don't have any quads come up that keeps the subsoil down and, and it covers, it's on thirty and centers. So when we plant bare ground crops, like our brassicas in the fall, they all go on the thirty inch centers, so we like to be able to subsoil those points. Those areas, that thirty, that thirty inch, and then uh, increase the infiltration that way. But I, I should look back into the Yeoman and see what's going on with them. See if they have one scaled to our size and because I know they'd take a lot less horsepower than what we're using.

We're running 125 horsepower to pull two of these shanks, and, in heavy clay soil, it, tractor still grunts even though we subsoil frequently. But we have noticed that doing that has definitely helped us improve the soil.

Chris Blanchard: Now you mentioned water as being important to your farm, and you're



pumping out of a well for, for, sixty or seventy acres. That's not a small amount of water to be applying to keep things growing. Especially, you know, you talked about the drought last year, what are you doing for irrigation?

Mike Brownback:

Okay, our irrigation is uh, I'm laughing because I, I, it makes me remember back in 1997, before that I think we, we had a well pounded out with an old pounder. You know back in the day, they used to pound wells, they didn't drill them. And someone pounded one for us and we got like 28 gallons a minute and we thought, boy, you know, we hit the numbers. Well it didn't take us long to figure out we couldn't go very far with that. So in 1997, I actually hired a hydro geologist, and this hydro geologist he gave me some points, where to drill, and we actually were fortunate enough to hit 300 gallon a minute. So our old, our stony uh, steep limestone soil happened to lay right over top of the uh, Tanalawe [sp?] aquifer, and so with the 300 gallon a minute, you know that was the good side. The bad side is now what do you want to do buddy, do you want to, you willing to go into debt? What do you want to do with this?

And uh, we spent the money and put an underground irrigation system in. Uh, and it, you know with our hills, it took six inch pipe just to get it up the hill, you know so we didn't have too much friction loss. And uh, the company that put it in for us did a decent job, but they did an inadequate job of wiring. We had electric solenoid valves, which if you want to have an automated system, that's what you need. And it wasn't until, probably about seven years ago, my son said, enough of this. And we put in what's called a binary system, that you only need two wires with decoders. You know, it's the modern world now. And we could run a very sophisticated irrigation system with 300 gallon a minute and service the whole farm. And I would really recommend anyone serious in the produce business that is using any type of irrigation system to really consider an automated system. It's a pain in the neck, but I used to be the one that would stay up at night and, you know, fall asleep and then go turn this on, or this off and all that. And an automated system, it's not without its flaws, but it really really helps.

Chris Blanchard:

And with an automated system, it's, it's not a set it and forget it sort of a thing. You're still managing and deciding how long to run that water for, when to turn it on, when to turn it off, it's just a matter of programming that into the system, right?

Mike Brownback:

Absolutely. And if, and, you have to really be willing to monitor. And I keep telling my son that, you know, it's so important that, you know, if you've got this set for one hour, or two times a day in dry weather, you're growing cucumbers, and you know, you've to really, you've got to be checking that ground and uh, making sure that you're putting not too much and not too little.

And one of the challenges we have is we have two distinct soil types. We have an, which is just a real stony, very black soil that's well drained. And then we have a Hagerstown Silt Loam, which is a fairly heavy limestone clay soil. And



the heavier the soil, the more imperative it is not to over water. And uh, invariably, we, we over water every year to some extent, and uh, we're working on our game like everybody else, you know. And that's, to fine tune, and, and, to really get to know what is the, the right amount. You know, the optimum amount is the goal.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned monitoring the water and how wet the soil is, so are you using fancy tools for that or are you just reaching in and grabbing a handful of soil?

Mike Brownback: That's interesting you bring that up. My son, Will has been really wanting to get some kind of gizmos and I said well I fooled around with you know, ten years ago, and I never really got far. I, I, I personally think that it's, if you can't feel it, you're, I don't know if an instrument is going to help you do much. You should, you should learn to know what it is, but it would be great to have the verification of instrumentation.

[00:50:00] I look at instrumentation as teaching you how to, teaching you what your senses should know. I hope I'm conveying what I'm trying to say.

Chris Blanchard: I like that. I think that makes complete sense. Like you say, if you want to go out and you look at an instrument and it says it's time to water and you feel the soil, that tells you when it's time to water, right?

Mike Brownback: Yeah, and then through that, you should learn that you can know without the instrument.

Chris Blanchard: I guess the advantage with the instrumentation is it does give you the ability to delegate some of that monitoring downwards to someone who maybe has less skill or less experience, if and when that's necessary.

Mike Brownback: Well, so what you said about downwards is really important because you know, my hands only going in a couple of inches. And what is going on down there, but one thing we really find, and this is, this is critical to, to our success, particularly in these dry years, say we have a crop like, zucchini, squash or cucumbers, crops that use a lot of water when they're growing. You know, you're pumping water to them, well the day that they are done, if we can we like to chop, we like to lift, and we like to get that plastic out, you know? And everybody's tired, but that's what we like to do because we have all that moisture left, and guess what? We're going to go in there, we'll put a little top dress fertilizer on there, we'll work that ground and then we'll plant or brassicas, and I love putting my brassicas in with a water wheel transplanter, we use a water wheel transplanter, and we space it that it's thirty inch wide, but the other thing we do is we put an inner tube over the punches so that if it's, if they get wet from running the water, the mud doesn't plug everything up, and then we don't water them.

There's enough water left in from that previous crop being irrigated that you get a great rooting system, those crops are going to go down and we find we



have very little flea beetle problems if we follow that. As soon as you start putting water on to those little baby crops, especially in a dry year, here come the flea beetles. Oh, got moisture, got humidity, let's go get some of that. And uh, so we love to, to glean the moisture of a previous crop into those four crops.

Chris Blanchard: I love that, that idea, of being really conscious about, about your water and how you're essentially using the leftovers, or the waste water in that case, it's something that wasn't going to go to growing anything that you were going to turn around and sale, and actually making use of it.

Mike Brownback: We love it, too. We, we call it dry land farming, even though it's obviously it's not dry land because we have irrigation up front of it, but it's funny I've gotten into a few arguments with the boys about it because it looks like those crops, and they would benefit from a little moisture at a certain point, but I like to take it pretty far. Until we put the water to them because it's there's a certain point where how much, how resource intensive do we, are we, are we going to be, you know, okay.

And I mean, I know we use plastic, we use drip irrigation, you know, we use, we use these, these type of methods and they're, they're definitely resource intensive. Wherever we can conserve, I think it behooves us to. Particularly if we're not negatively impacting our yields.

Chris Blanchard: Well, I think there's also something to be said for, for, like you pointed out, training those plants, saying, hey the water is not right here, in the root ball, you're going to have to work for it, because that actually sets them up to have a bigger root system and to be a little bit more robust, and able to handle things for themselves, rather than just having it spoon-fed to them.

Mike Brownback: Well, you're exactly right, Chris, and part, one of the other components to that is, timing those transplants that you have the right age transplant. And I think we've all, you know, we've all had some issues with that over the years. We really are, every year, we go over our schedules and we say, we started measuring days in the flat, and you know, if it's, if it's kale, and it's in the flat over five weeks, I seeded it too early. You know? So what I'm trying to say is, you know, that stresses that plant, and it gets that tight root ball, it takes longer to even get out of that. If you can catch these plants at the right time, and timing, and I know there's weather conditions and everything else happens, but, but, in an oppor- opportune, is to have that transplant at exactly the right stage of production where it takes off with as little stress as possible.

Chris Blanchard: Are you hardening your transplants off before you put them out in the field?

Mike Brownback: We, we harden our transplants for the, for the early part of the season. So if we're putting lettuce out, like we like to put lettuce out the last week of March, the first week of April. That'll be hardened. Once that lettuce, if that lettuce is going out at the end of May, it doesn't really need to be hardened.



Same with tomatoes and peppers, we want those really hardened the first wave, after that it really, that hardening is not, you don't have the weather and you can only harden with water. Well we have irrigation and we're not really going to withhold water, so we want optimum timing as more important. And we found as we've, as our potting soil making has improved, that our transplants take less time to mature. So we had to really modify our days to, you know, days to being able to pull plugs based on the quality of the potting soil and how fast we could grow a transplant.

Chris Blanchard: [00:56:00] So Mike, are, just to pivot back to the irrigation a little bit, ...

Mike Brownback: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Hey, was that a pun intended or not?

Chris Blanchard: That was good actually, wasn't it. Uh, it was unintended, but you know, I'm a Latin student from way back, so I'll take them wherever I can get them, right?

Mike Brownback: There you go!

Chris Blanchard: Okay, so, um, are you doing drip on bare soil, or are you guys, you guys have that automated irrigation system working with overhead irrigation as well?

Mike Brownback: There was a time when we were fooling around with the drip on bare soil and burying it, and it turned into such a nightmare trying to plant on the drip and get the depth just so and then pulling it out and getting it wrapped up, that we've kind of, we went bare ground, so, when I'm saying we're putting broccoli out the last week of July after cucumber crop, it's going to be overhauled, typically uh, sometime in September when it's starting to get up to that size. And we have that on the same system that our drip is automated so it can go on and off automatically.

Now when you do a system like that, particularly if you're using water gate pipe, or aluminum pipes, you got to check them. You can't say well, it rained, you know, I didn't need to use these pipes for ten days and then you're just going to flip the switch and turn it on, that's a great way to create erosion problems. And we've done that, and you know, we've been to the school of hard knocks of not monitoring our uh, overhead irrigation and know that it has to be, you have to keep an eye on it.

But yeah, it's no big deal to have that hooked up to an automated system.

Chris Blanchard: So Mike, with that, we're going to stop here, take a break, get a word from our sponsors and then we'll be right back with Mike Brownback from Spiral Path Farm.

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All right and we're back with Mike Brownback from Spiral Path Farm near the town of Loysville, Pennsylvania, and Mike, I know you, you do a lot of salad greens on your farm, is that, is that something that you guys are selling to Wegmans?

Mike Brownback:

Uh, yeah, and it, it's interesting. Our whole salad green uh, our whole salad green deal has been really a work in progress and has evolved over the years. It's funny, when we first started uh, deciding that we wanted to grow organic, I had uh, our gardens and uh, our gardens had always been organic and we decided to get, let's get our garden certified, you know that way we're used to running through the system, seeing what it's like to get certified. The rest of the farm we had already made the commitment and it was in transition and it wasn't that hard because we hadn't sprayed our hay ground so it was fairly pain free to really, to, to be, become certified organic. Especially because our hearts were totally committed to doing it.

But that being said, that first season I spent, I remember saying I've got to learn how to grow lettuce. That's what I gotta do. I bought some ingredients, you know, in a box store of this peat and perlite and endeavored to make



potting soil. I bought some transplants from uh, someone out of silver seed uh, down in Bivalve Maryland, Jay Morton, and we started growing a little bit of lettuce and uh, we quickly saw that growing head lettuce, you always have head that just, they're just not marketable, you know. And uh, I, I had a local chef, the late Alan Hedrick was a fantastic person and just someone that supported us and in doing this uh, market gardening. And he suggested hey, why don't you make some salads and we'll buy them?

We had our little uh, our little home spinner, and I mean, you know, you wash your lettuce greens and you hand spin it for that, for yourself, and I used to get that thing and spin up enough to make uh, to make his, his restaurant enough salad. And that was the start. We were fortunate enough to go down, I had uh, a new acquaintance that worked for Fertrell that took me down to uh, Silver Seed Greenhouses in Bivalve Maryland, and Jay Morton was down there, and this was about oh, I think probably in the early 90's and he was growing a really nice salad mix. He was actually spin drying it and, and uh, in a washing machine you know? Back in them days, everybody did what they could. And I said, I said, "Hey Jay would you tell me your ingredients in your salad mix, and I'd be glad to pay you for it." He looked at me and he said, "Mike, I don't want any money." He said "If I can't give it away, I don't own it." And, you know, that's really, is the attitude that I love, I love that old hippy attitude, you know, that we've all shared back in the day.

Anyway, you know it was basically the uh, the mesclun mix, you know, with the tatsoi, the mizuna, the uh, the red mustards and the different lettuce blends. So we were growing something similar to that and we started marketing to uh, Tuscarora Organic Growers, and uh, you know, in Tuscarora Organic Growers they had a growers chart, so, not every grower could raise cucumbers, you would get on the chart for cucumbers. You know, I was a new farmer, and I wanted to get on the chart and I'm looking at that, and I'm thinking Boy, there's no room for me. And I thought, well, I'll grow salad mix.

Well, I ended up having the top selling item like right off the bat without even, just by dumb luck you know? It's better to be lucky than good. And uh, so we, but we were growing that traditional salad for a number of years, we were seeding uh, we were seeding with an earthly seeder, seeding lettuce blends, we were seeding the mustard blends, covering it with covers, and I would say we were doing that up until the uh, early 2000's. We were actually selling to Wholefoods, they were actually the first company that wanted us to get through safety certified, if we were going to sell them salad mix. And you know, my wife and I looked at ourselves and we said, geez, do we want to stay in the salad business, and at the time it was still a very viable component of our operation. And we said yes we do want to stay in the salad business, so we did get uh, third party food safety certified and looking back, thank God we did because it really prepared us for, to not have issues.

And there was an issue that came up with Tuscarora Organic Growers way back. Someone, there was a salmonella issue, and of course that first,



whenever there's problems back in them days, they want to go to the organic grower. It's got to be the organic guy, right?

Chris Blanchard: I don't think that's changed one bit, Mike.

Mike Brownback: I don't think that's changed either. So, but the beauty of it was, from the work that I'd had to do on Food safety, I had to send a sample out, I already had a sample. I was like, not this boy! And it ended up, it was in some seafood product or whatever it was, and I might be wrong with the term salmonella, but I'm just using this as an introduction into the salad business so people can see how it's changed.

But what really had happened in the salad business, from when I, from when Jay Morton gave me the ingredients to make a mesclun mix in the early 2000's, is the price of a three pound box of salad went from like \$18 to \$20 down to about \$8.50 to \$10, wholesale. So it was a race to the bottom. And the Californians were, they were leading the charge and winning the race.

Chris Blanchard: That's right.

Mike Brownback: And in those days, TKO, Todd Koons was uh, he was the big salad magnet, and actually Earth Farm was pretty, pretty minor. Uh, my wife and I went out to the Eco Conference back uh, sometime around '95 or '96, and they did workshops and Todd Koons did, did one on salad and so did Drew and Myra Goodman of Earthbound, so that's kind of the days as they were.

So, fast forward to today, or within the last six or seven years, we've totally changed our approach to salads, and we focus more on lettuces because we don't have to fight with the flea beetle, and also uh, Johnny started selling seed that's produced by Rick Swan I believe, that what they are calling their salad Nova, or what in the industry is called multileaf.

So what that's done for us is allowed us to grow our salad mix actually as transplants. So we'll seed, and the seed is quite expensive, I know, but we'll seed the blend, and we'll seed all eight varieties and we'll blend the seed so it's already blended before we seed it. So we'll seed blended seed into trays that are two hundreds, and that current price is, I mean you might have four to five dollars in just one two hundred cell flat, but that's life. The tradeoff for us is the positive part of that is that we have, we can control our production really well, we can grow a transplant, we can get it in the ground, we put it, typically, on different color of plastic, depending on the time of the year. If we start out early in spring, we might put green plastic, and put a cover on top of it, then we might go to black plastic with a cover then we'll go to white plastic, with obviously, with no cover.

And what we can do is, we can, we can go through there, we hand harvest that. And, that's hand harvested, and uh, we take it down, we actually put a really nice salad washing facility in quite some years ago, and it's more than



paid for itself now, with some renovations. But that's how we grow basically the lettuce type salads. Now we also have four acres of high tunnels, and in these four acres of high tunnels, we grow the mustards, if we want to grow uh, like baby kale if we want to grow baby arugula, or spinach, or even we'll grow a uh, a uh, romaine, baby romaine blend. Those crops in the high tunnels we actually use what's called a Firego [sp?] rock burier because we have stony soil. It'll go through, we can, we have uh, thirty-two foot wide green house. These are cold frames and they are up to six hundred feet long. So we can go through and create six beds per house, and then we'll seed that with a Sutton, electric seeder.

So it's all direct seeded, you'll overhead water that, with uh, overhead watering nozzles, like you would typically use in a greenhouse. And then we'll actually harvest that, mechanically with the hydraulic driven uh, a Ortomec Italian harvester that has stainless steel band saw blade in the conveyor. So really, there's two distinct components to how we grow salads, we do not blend the lettuce with the mustards and make a complete blend, and I'd say the main reason that we don't is that we can't guarantee that we'll have all the items for near as long as well have the lettuce blend. But it gives us it gives us a great uh, marketing component for our CSA, and we also uh, clamshell these, we same salads for uh, for Wegmans.

Chris Blanchard: And I just want to double check that I, that I heard you right. You said four acres of high tunnels that you're growing those salad greens in?

Mike Brownback: That is correct. We have, we have nine, we have nine tunnels, and they average about 500 ft long. They are thirty-two, they, they raise from 32 x 620 down to 32 x 450. And yeah, it added, it added up to four acres.

We decided, I had been growing in greenhouses for a number of years, so I've done the TroyBilt rotor tiller, in the high tunnel, the TroyBilt rotor tiller in the, in the high tunnel, the TroyBilt rotor tiller in the half acre greenhouse. And I've, you know, I'm getting in my sixties, so I've been there and done it, and I realize this is, this is the whole thing about labor. Any endeavor, the harder something is to do, the less likely it is to get done. It's just the way it is. When I saw that we could roll up, and we could actually buy frames that could stand up to 30 inch snowfall without heat, I, I said, this is, this has got promise. Now I've got cash flow, because when you're in business, we have 47 employees in the peak of the season, we have some employees that are year round, we have health benefits for the year round employees.

We have cash flow needs, and I think every business does. Let's face it, you get your CSA money and it all comes in at one time, I don't think any CSA farmer would say, well geez, I got a whole pot of gold at the end of the season. You blow it. It goes, you know. You don't blow it, but you know what I'm saying, it goes.

Cash flow is the name of the game, you gotta have cash flow. And these high



tunnels, we typically will seed the first week of February, so we're just getting geared up now. You know, we're making our potting soils, and incidentally we have to make our potting soil at least a month ahead of time because it'll heat. It's so active, it'll actually heats up and we have to turn it a couple of times. But we want to get our houses ready, we have cover crops in some of these high tunnels. We want to get everything broke down and ready to go, and then we'll start in February.

Why don't we go through the winter? Well, we, we could go through the winter, but, there just isn't enough light in our climate to really grow. You could stock, I call it stock pile, which is a grazers term that they have all that, all that grass out that they're not harvesting in the back forty, and then they're letting their stock cattle go out there late in the season which is basically, sometimes we might have a spinach house ...

Which I think we do have a spinach house that we could harvest probably early March, but to do that, you gotta bring all your labor back in. They are collecting on unemployment for a couple of months, there's, there's issues. But for us, the secret is, is to be scalable, that you can stretch your labor for as long a time as possible, in a realistic manner. Now, I'm a produce farmer; by the end of the season, and I'm ready for a break. And I like, you know, we run our CSA because we have these side tunnels, we can start our CSA about the third week in April, and we'd go until the week before Christmas. That's our cycle now, because of these high tunnels. And you think, geez, I want to be done with my season sooner. God bless you, be done with your scene sooner, but that cash flow, especially when you start getting employees. And then these employees, you know, nothing made me prouder that I had an employee, the first employee I had that bought a house I just about had tears in my eyes, I mean, to be a little farmer, and to grow a business and to have an employee, your employee, you're paying an employee enough that they're actually buying a house, having children and providing health coverage. That is the American dream.

And it's not just an American dream, for having an employee, it's an American dream for that employer. And I think we have to, we got to hold that, we gotta make sure that we have a country where that's, that's the possibility.

Chris Blanchard: I think you're really, I mean you talk about, it's a core social justice issue, you know, for all of the, for all of the energy that's going on around that, now in the sustainable agriculture movement, I mean really, social justice comes down to paying your people enough and giving them consistent work. I mean, I think those are the two most important things.

Mike Brownback: Well, they really are, and I, we've really struggled with uh, the apprentice program, with apprenticeships. We've always paid our apprentices, and one of the pitfalls of paying any

And one of the pitfalls of paying an apprentice the same rate as your other



workers is, you expect a lot out of your apprentices, and you expect maybe, at the expense of what you could teach them. And it's a very delicate balance, and I do not know the answer to that. But I know that uh, that there's young people that need to learn and I know that there are businesses that need employees, so uh, you know, I, we're working on it.

Chris Blanchard: So, on the subject of employees, again, leafing through your website, I noticed you have a lot of people who've been with you for a really long time, and of course, you've also got your kids back on the farm. What are you doing right, Mike?

Mike Brownback: I think, I think that my wife Terra and I, and Terra is really the human resource person, you know? I'm the person that really, I don't like people that much. I, I like animals, I like plants, I love the earth, you know, but I really do not like managing people. But because I know my nature, I would rather err on the side of generosity. You know, it's funny, I uh, there was a fellow by the name of Leonard Coleman, just passed away. Leonard Coleman was a musician and uh, you know, Leonard Coleman was a practicing Buddhist, and I read an excerpt I forget who wrote this thing. I think the New Yorker did a big article on Leonard Coleman and I was fortunate enough to read it.

He made this comment, he, you know and he was talking about when he was a monk, and he said, he said, yeah he was a monk, he said, he despised everyone, but he was generous and they believed him. That resonates with me to some extent. I would rather err on the side of generosity in spite of the fact of my weakness in dealing with my fellow man. So, for what it's worth. But my wife has been so fabulous, and human resources. And uh, we actually have always, our philosophy has been to pay a fair rate. And trust that, you know, you'll get a return for that. My mother, bless her, she's not living anymore, but she always taught me it's easier to spread it around, it will come back. The more you hold on to it, you don't have anything to come back.

Chris Blanchard: Okay that's really sound advice. Um, I'm trying to think of a good follow-up question to that Mike, but I think you just said it right there. I mean in some ways that's, that's, you just wrapped up an employment philosophy that clearly works for you guys. How long have the kids been back on the farm?

Mike Brownback: It's interesting, my son Will, he was working as an engineer and he was on the corporate fast track and then he met this, he met the love of his life which is a wonderful thing, and she was from Maine. So they got married, and they moved up to Maine, and he was a carpenter up there, he's a really good timber framer and carpenter. And then, 2008 hit and Maine is really, you know, Maine's got this if you want to talk about disparity in income, you've got these really wealthy people that can afford very high end carpenters and then you've got the ordinary people like us that either do it yourself or it doesn't get done. Well we invited them down to go on vacation with us, we typically try to go the Keys at that time, we were going to the Keys, maybe a week or so, or two in the winter.



And uh, they came down, he helped me put a uh, hot water boiler in the basement to heat the house. Running on a wood stove, one of those gasification boilers and uh, well they left you know, excuse me, we all went to Florida, we went on vacation and we all got along so wonderfully. You know how it is when the sons and fathers, you know, the fathers always too stupid and the sons are always a pain in the neck, well they came back, and they never left. You know? And my wife and I are looking at each other, and we're all getting along so good as a family, they never left. We're like, now what are we going to do, you know?

And I guess my son Will kind of exploring his roots and he basically just said that he wanted to come back. And uh, the same thing sort of happened with Lucas. He was uh, working, he stayed in the area, he did not have a degree, a college degree, but he was working in the area, and you know, it's funny how, you know, the grass looks always greener on the other side, and it's good, the Amish have that time that they call running around. And running around, you're typically, you're 14, you're pretty much allowed to do what you want until you join the church, and uh, I think there's a lot of wisdom in allowing the children to uh, sort of seed their wild oats, you know, and you know, some of us don't get past that and some of us do. For us, to have our children want to come back was just a, was just a wonderful thing.

But it's not like we sat down, and had these uh, beautiful discussions and wrote everything down to minutia. There was pretty much, us being accepting and open and then finding the way as we went along. Now we're far enough down the rabbit hole now, that we actually do have documents, we actually have done real estate transfer, and uh, you know, have worked that into the system.

Chris Blanchard: I'm always interested when kids come back to the farm. Are there structures or systems that you've put in place to make sure that relationship continues to be good?

Mike Brownback: That is, that is such a great question, and, and, you know, earlier in our discussion Chris, we talked about, you know, do we have a CSA, and that we have this uh, account with a retailer, or with the Wegmans family, and basically what we've done is, our son Lucas, he oversees the CSA.

So he's taken the newsletter writing, the making sure that we have the right items the constant uh, the constant attention to that detail, and that's his. And then Will is totally in charge of the Wegmans sales, but he's also in charge, he's also like operations as far as overseeing the running of the farm and the crops. Making sure the crops get... I typically am looking at getting the crops in and he's typically looking at the labor and the harvest. I, my preferences to deal less and less with labor, and uh, let, have that delegated in those two venues. Then we also have a package manager that's been with us for a couple of years and uh, his, he has to deal with everything coming out of



the field as far as getting it packed. But then Lucas is in the packing shed with the uh, CSA component, and you know, making sure that's right.

And when we're really really busy, he might be making sure, you know, getting, getting some help, making sure if we want to put some herbs in or something that's totally not uh, on the grand menu of the day, that we get that accomplished.

But we pack and deliver CSA uh, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. Four days a week, so four of seven days a week, we're actually packing and shipping for CSA. So it's almost full time.

Chris Blanchard: So really just in that process of working together, just keeping the channels of communication open and, do you guys meet every morning to figure out the days plan or is it a weekly sit down to see how things are going?

Mike Brownback: We do a lot of, we do a lot of emailing. Emailing works really well for us, we will have a meeting ...

We have a meeting at least uh, bi-weekly. But we do a lot of emailing. And I would say, that those, you find out what works best with the personalities involved. Um, my son Will and I both, we know everything, you know, so one can't tell the other anything so, if we do an email, we can go back and forth with a fight, and there's not really much emotion expended. But...

Chris Blanchard: As long as you make sure that you read that email, in the right tone of voice. In your head, right?

Mike Brownback: Yeah, that or lock the caps lock on.

But I'm kind of making a joke about it, but it's, you know, the dynamics of family are, they are what they are. And, you know, to me, the more I look at it with maturity, the, what a blessing it is to have passion. I mean, that's, that's the motor running baby.

You want to have it. And the thing of it is, to have your heart working and functioning to a degree that your passion is held in check by the wisdom of your heart.

Chris Blanchard: With that Mike, it's time to turn to our lightning round. We're going to get a quick word from a sponsor and then we'll be right back.

Mike Brownback: Okay, great.

Chris Blanchard: Perennial Support for the podcast and support for this lightning round is provided by BCS America. BCS two wheel tractors are real farming equipment, for real farmers! And with PTO driven attachments, rotor tillers, even a utility trailer and a new water transfer pump, you've got the tools that you need to



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Okay and we're back and we're ready for the lightening round, so Mike, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Mike Brownback: Pencil.

Chris Blanchard: What do you do with it?

Mike Brownback: I cipher, as Jethro would say, on the Beverly Hillbillies. I calculate, I figure, I plan.

Chris Blanchard: Do you do your crop planting on paper? Is that something where you, you turn back to the computer for that?

Mike Brownback: We're, we're quickly moving towards the computer, but it's funny, I still have my notepad. I love, I do better thinking with a pencil personally, but it's just, it's just my age.

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

Mike Brownback: Whatever in the peak of season. I cannot pick a favorite, they are all great when they are in season, I love em when they are at their best.

Chris Blanchard: That sounds like Mike's favorite Jimmy Buffet song, it's whichever one is playing. You know?

Mike Brownback: Yeah, exactly.

Chris Blanchard: What are you going to be doing differently on the farm this year?

Mike Brownback: Woo, well we're tweaking. Here's what we're going to be doing differently. And Chris, my experience when republicans come into power is that they, that they lower taxes at the expense of going in debt, and we're not going to invest as heavily in infrastructure this year, because we have in the past. And sometimes it's for tax avoidance, and we're going to actually try to take profit this year because we think that republicans in their wisdom are going to give tax breaks to business people. And I'm saying that totally tongue and cheek, but I'm thinking I'm going to increase my philanthropic endeavors and uh, decrease my investment in infrastructure.



- Chris Blanchard: And what was it back in 1978 that made you decide to become a farmer?
- Mike Brownback: Well, I actually decided to become a farmer probably about 1973, but what it was was I was an unruly young man, I would take any drug that was offered to me, I would do anything. There was nothing, there was, I lived a Huck Finn life and I thought college was for, was for boneheads. Uh, I did go for a semester, and fought with the professors and when I sunk my hands in the soil and felt that earth, it was like I was totally cleansed. And I realized I knew what I wanted to do.
- Chris Blanchard: And finally, if you could go back in time, and tell your beginning farmer self one thing what would it be?
- Mike Brownback: Oh man! What a question that is! That's a fantastic question, and I'm stalling in the lightening round. But I think, I think if I could go back in time, I would say, dream bigger and bigger not being more money, but bigger being more fertile. More possibility. The movement could have grown faster.
- Chris Blanchard: All right, Mike, with that, thank you so much for being a guest on the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.
- Mike Brownback: Hey, it was fun Chris, I, I enjoyed it, and uh, you know, you got me on pretty much unplugged.
- Chris Blanchard: All right. So wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 104 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast, and you can find the notes for this show at FarmertoFarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for Brownback.

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