



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

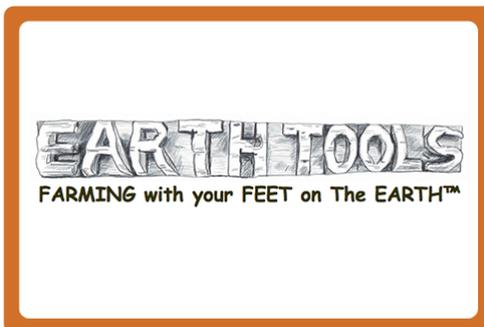


## EPISODE 106

### Josh Volk of Slow Hand Farm on Compact Farms and Part-Time Farming

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast Episode 106, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard.

Josh Volk is most recently the author of *Compact Farms*, a new illustrated guide for anyone dreaming of starting, expanding or perfecting a profitable farm enterprise on five acres or less.

*Compact Farms* includes in-depth interviews with 15 small farms about the systems and tools that make them tick. With over 25 years of experience working on and managing small farms around the country, Josh currently works part time at Cully Neighborhood Farm in Portland, Oregon, as well as providing consulting to farmers, presenting workshops at agricultural conferences, and writing.

In this episode, Josh provides insights into what makes a small farm work. We discuss the importance of automation and good systems, and good systems that manage the automation. Josh also shares his perspective on how limiting hours and scale helps to increase focus and productivity, as well as avoiding burnout.

We also discuss Josh's experience as a part time farmer, his own Slow Hand Farm, where he farmed without any fossil-fueled equipment, and his comprehensive planning and record keeping systems.

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Josh Volk, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Josh Volk: Thanks for having me, Chris. Great to be here.

Chris Blanchard: So great you could join us. I'd like to start out by just having you kind of situate us. Normally I would say, hey, tell us about your farm and where you're located, but I know that you've got your fingers in a lot of different things right now, so I'm just going to throw that out there. Kind of give us a where you are in time and space, and then we'll kind of work our way out from there.

Josh Volk: Yeah. That question of what I do is one of the dinner party questions that I always have a really hard time answering, because there's so many different little pieces. They are all connected from the farming world. The thing that really grounds me, in more ways than one, would be actually doing production farming. Right now I'm doing that on a very small scale.

Slow Hand Farm was the name that I used in the past, and that was kind of my own model. That got folded into another project. For the last season and then this upcoming season, I'm going to be actually working with a friend of mine, Matt Gordon, who has a small farm called Cully Neighborhood Farm. He and I do that as a part time project, so that we both can do other things in our spare time.

What I do for the rest of that time, is I do consulting, and that's kind of a catch-all phrase that I use for a bunch of different things that I do. Some of that is consulting with other small farms, some of it is working with municipalities, or Oregon University kind of doing contract work for some research projects and those types of things.

Then I have another side project which is developing some small farm tools, they're called Farmhand Carts. Then I also have a garden and kind of do some experimental stuff in my backyard living in town. That's most of it. Oh, and then there's the writing. So writing and teaching and speaking, which all kind of falls in ... I put that under the consulting business, so it falls into that as well. So lots and lots of different things.

Chris Blanchard: Just so that we're clear on where you actually are geographically, you're in Portland, Oregon, right?

Josh Volk: Yeah, I live just inside the city limits, kind of as far northwest a neighborhood as you can, and I live ... Portland has this amazing urban growth boundary, and then the State of Oregon has really great land use planning. It's not perfect, but it's allowed a lot of farmlands to continue to exist very close to the urban core.

The reason I live in that part of Portland is I used to farm just a few miles away



on this island that's just on the other side of the river from Portland. But now I actually farm inside Portland, and I live in Portland as well.

Chris Blanchard: Let's talk about the farm a little bit, Cully Neighborhood Farm. Tell us about that operation.

Josh Volk: Cully Neighborhood Farm is a project that a friend of mine, Matt Gordon, started. He started it with another friend of his, Michael. I actually wrote about it in my book, so there's more details on it, but essentially it's an empty lot that used to have a house on it, and that's owned by a church. It's on a dead-end street, so there's not really any traffic that goes by. It backs up against the back of ... The church has a school and then there's playing fields behind the school, and then the lot is behind that, and the dead-end road is kind of on the other side of that. It's this weird island that doesn't see a lot of car traffic, but people do tend to use it as a cut-through in the neighborhood for walking their dogs or whatever. Even though there's a fence, somebody's cut a hole in the fence so everybody sneaks through the hole in the fence.

It's about a 3/4 acre lot, and then we're cultivating about a 1/2 an acre of that lot. The marketing has been different, different years, but last year it was CSA and we did restaurant sales and just a little bit of farmers market. That was kind of a community farmers market, so we weren't actually having to be at the stand, we were just contributing produce to that.

This coming year the plan is to do all CSA and maybe if we have some excess we might go back and do the market and restaurants a little bit, but the main focus is the CSA. I guess the plan for this year, last year we did 52 shares, this coming year we'll do 60 shares to kind of make up the income gap, and we've changed the shares slightly this year again. It's changed the mix as well.

It's done as a part time project, so we're just in it working two days a week, Mondays and Thursdays. Matt lives just down the street from that lot and he has a greenhouse in his yard. He has kind of an oversized lot that he lives on. We do the propagation out of that greenhouse, and he spends a little bit of extra time during the week taking care of the greenhouse starts.

But then really we're just out in the field those two days a week working with the two of us for most of the season and then the peak season, last year we worked with one other person and then hired in other people occasionally.

Chris Blanchard: Both of you are working part time on the operation. Can you talk a little bit more about how that works? It's actually something that I never did. I was always full time on the farm just, I think, because of the nature of how I got started farming. How do you make a part time farm work, and especially when there's two of you? That just seems hard.

Josh Volk: Yeah, actually it's not as hard as it seems. I started out full time farming when I started farming. I worked on a number of different farms in California, here in



Oregon, and then a little bit down the southwest and on the East coast as well, before leaving a farm that I'd been at for seven years, which was here in Oregon.

Actually, the first time I started working part time, let's step back for just a second. Years ago, I read this article, it was not an article, it was a letter, "Growing for Market", which I am a huge fan of and I have been reading for years, they used to publish letters from the readers many years ago.

There was a letter from a reader which was kind of a guy, I don't know who it was, I don't remember anymore, but I definitely remember the content of the letter. He was a little bit upset because people have this tendency to be like, "Oh, well if you're not a full time farmer, you're not a serious farmer. That's not real farming." He was like, "Listen, I used to be a full time farmer and now I'm a part time farmer, and I'm just as serious as I was when I was full time, but I find a lot more balance doing it part time and it, you know, fits in with the other things that I'm doing." That kind of stuck in my head, and I had that idea.

I was like, "Oh, that's a good point, you know. I shouldn't think that just because somebody ... " because I had that same kind of thing. You know, I was like, "Oh, if you're not doing farming full time, you're not a serious farmer." I thought about it, and then when I left this farm that I'd been working on for seven years, this other farm contacted me and they had just had somebody leave in the middle of the season, and then the guy that was running it by himself and he didn't really know what he was doing, had just gotten started. The owner of the farm, it was a farm that was connected to a restaurant, and really the restaurant owners lived on this piece of land and one of the chef's said, "Oh, I'll farm the land for you." Then that didn't really work out.

In the middle of the season, the restaurant owner called, and he was like, "We've got this crazy situation and we don't know what's happening. Can you come and help us out?" So I went up there, and they only had I think a 1/2 an acre or maybe an acre in production at that point, and I said, "Well this isn't a big enough project for me to do full time, and I don't really want to be doing something full time right now, so I'm just going to do this part time." It was big enough that I only wanted to work on it two days a week, but it really needed four days a week, and so I just decided I would hire somebody else to work with me those two days a week, and that would make the labor work out.

It ended up being really fantastic because there were certain things where I had to automate them and I just had to trust the automation, like with the propagation house. We did all of our propagation for ourselves, but we had to automate the propagation house because obviously we weren't going to be up there every single day. We just had to trust that the water was going to water the way that we expected. We only had two days a week to figure that out.

We automated the things that we had to automate. My irrigation schedule



here in Oregon had always been to at most irrigate two days a week. And really, we don't have any rain during the week. We get some rain, but we don't have any rain during the summer, during the growing season, so we do have to irrigate. I found that irrigating two days a week was enough.

We would have to run all of our irrigation on the days that we were there, get all of our harvest, so we'd basically start out the day doing all the harvest. Then we would do any planting or weeding or anything else we needed to do in the afternoon. We'd be running the irrigation all day long and then we would go home, and we would have a day or two doing something else, and then we would come back to the farm a couple days later and we'd be really excited about being back on the farm because we missed it for those few days and hadn't been around.

The conversation out in the field wasn't just all about what was happening on the farm and how crazy things were, it was also about what did we do with our other few days during the week. That brought a lot of energy to the farm, and so it ended up being this very positive experience.

Basically, ever since then, I've been farming part time. So that was in 2008, so that would have been, what, eight years ago, nine years ago, something like that. For me it's worked out really well. It's been a really fantastic balance. Like I said, everything that I do is still farm-related.

The stuff that I'm doing in my other hours is farm-related, but it's not the production stuff. I really focus hard on the production stuff on those two days a week that I'm out on the farm, and then I'm doing other things on the other days of the week and I kind of get a little bit of a break. I found that the burnout that used to happen in end of July, August, September, would be really hard for me full time, it's not there anymore. I can go the full season and it's really no problem at all, and that energy saves my fire. I've really enjoyed part time farming.

Chris Blanchard: Your book's called *Compact Farms* and Cully Neighborhood Farm is one of them that's featured in the book, I think you mentioned that. You interviewed, I think a dozen farmers. How many of them are part time?

Josh Volk: I think there's, if I remember right, including my farm, there's 15 farms in the book. Cully Neighborhood Farm and Slow Hand Farms, I write about my farm when I was just doing it solo. I wrote about Slow Hand Farm. Those two are part time farms.

Actually, Matt, he did do the farm full time for a little bit. He actually started out with me at that farm that I was mentioning that I started part time at. That was called Skyline Farm, and I hired Skyline Farm so I knew him from there. Then he went down and started this other project called Cully Neighborhood Farm. He's gone back and forth between doing that part time and full time, but he's part time now.



Other than that, everybody else is full time. So the rest of the examples in that book are all full time, and there's a wide range. I wanted to try to show that there's not just one way that people are able to make these really small farms work, that there's lots and lots of different ways that they work.

There's the part time example, myself and Matt. Then there's full time, everybody else is full time. Everybody's in this small range of five acres or less, but some of those are under an acre and some of them are kind of pushing, maybe if you take into account all of the space that they're using, they're actually over five acres.

Then there's examples in that book that are farms that are over 30 years old and there's examples of farms that have just been starting out in the last few years. There's urban, there's a rooftop farm, Brooklyn Grange, that I think has been around for, I don't know, at this point it's been a little bit longer than when I first talked to them a couple years ago. But they had been around for a few years. Then there's folks that are out in the middle of nowhere doing it very rural. So lots and lots of different examples, and all across the country.

I was thinking that there wasn't anybody too far south, but I actually do have a farm in Hawaii in the book also, so that's about as far south in the US as we had, and all the way up to Maine. So a really, really, really wide range of different farms in the book.

Chris Blanchard: Did you find anything that the compact farms all had in common, other than being compact farms?

Josh Volk: You know, I think there are a lot of commonalities, but I don't know that they're commonalities across the board. I think the one other thing that might come close being common, besides just being small, is that they all are using some form of direct marketing as their primary outlet.

That's not to say there aren't examples in the book who are trying to do some form of wholesale as well, but the direct marketing where you can kind of tap some more of the dollars per space is another commonality, and that's just a function of if you're small, you don't have a choice. You really do need to pull as much out of the spaces as you can. You've got a limit that you kind of set for yourself or the space sets for you.

Chris Blanchard: Are the farms that you visited economically viable? I mean are these people that are making a profit and being able to put money towards the farm? I know some of them are, some of them we've had on the show. But would you say that that was a theme, or did you see people struggling?

Josh Volk: Yes. That was something that I very intentionally tried to pick farms that I felt were successful in some way, and I wanted them to be economically viable. We can talk about what economically viable mean, because I think that that's



a very loose term.

Chris Blanchard: It's a very loaded term, I would say, as well as being loose.

Josh Volk: Yeah, loaded is another word you could use for it. I think that everybody is making it work. There aren't farm examples in there where people were ... With the exception of kind of intentionally deciding, I'm going to be part time and do other things on the other side of it, there aren't farms in there where people weren't full time at the point that I was writing about them and making enough money from the farm itself to do that.

The definition of success, I do address that a little bit in the book, and I think in talking to all these different farms, everybody has a slightly different definition of what success means specifically for them on their farm. But I think probably across the board, one of the pieces of success for people is that they're doing something that they love to do, and that they are able to sustain that.

It's economically viable in the sense that they are able to sustain what they're doing with the amount of money that they are bringing in. Some of them might not be as economically successful as somebody who would say, "Oh, well they're not making ... " maybe they're not making minimum wage. I'm not sure, I didn't get the numbers from everybody. But even if they're not making minimum wage, if they're making enough that you personally are comfortable living on, as a business owner, you're allowed to make less than minimum wage, which is kind of a funny thing.

Then, if you want to get into all the business terminology like, you as this business owner, it's very complicated what you're making in terms of your income, because you're also building assets. You have this business that you own as well. That's kind of a funny piece when you're a sole proprietor particularly, or LLC.

Chris Blanchard: What about from a production methods standpoint? I noticed that you interviewed people like JM Fortier and Eliot Coleman who do things very, very intensively. I think you interviewed some other people that don't follow those same super-intensive productions models. Did you find that there were any common themes on the production side of things, from how people were going about producing the crops?

Josh Volk: Part of the reason I wanted to have JM and Eliot Coleman in there was because I felt like that would provide a nice baseline. There is a range. I think that everybody in some sense is trying to be fairly intensive. Maybe not intensive to the same level that they are being intensive, but it was quite common for pretty much everybody that ... I'm just thinking off the top of my head here, but I think pretty much everybody is on a bed system.

I was the only example in the book, my farm, when I was running Slow Hand Farm, that was completely worked by hand. There wasn't even a rototiller. No



internal combustion out in the field. It was all hand method. Everybody else in the book ... Well, that's not true. Brooklyn Grange also is not doing that, but they're a rooftop farm, so that was a little bit different there, also. Other than that, everybody else is using internal combustion and kind of on a bed system. No row cropping, nothing like that. That bed system I think is a commonality, and I think that just makes things more simple.

Unfortunately, I hate to burst everybody's bubble, but I didn't have a travel budget with this, so I didn't get to go and actually see all of the farms in the book. I was a little disappointed about that. I was really hoping I would get to go and see all the farms. I had to do some of these through telephone interviews, kind of like you're doing telephone interviews with all these farmers, and actually it's been fun for me because there's a lot of overlap between your interview and what I was writing about. Part of why I wrote the book and was interested in working on the project, is I just love hearing stories about how does everybody else do it.

So to get back to your question about commonality, I think just being on that bed type system is something, and I think everybody is really trying to do it fairly intensively. That's just something that you pretty much have to do in order to make enough money off of that small of a space. You don't really have a choice there.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of a range did you see for numbers on per acre production?

Josh Volk: I didn't get numbers from everybody. Not everybody was willing to share that with me. I give a couple of examples in the book of dollars per acre, and interestingly we were all within I think a fairly close range.

I would say that I heard numbers that were as high as 200,000 an acre, but I think that is really pushing the extreme upper edge and I don't know how consistent that is. The range that I saw that was more typical, or that I was hearing that was more typical, and this is also the range that I fall into, is the probably 55, 60,000 to 75-80,000 range per acre.

I think when I was running my own numbers I actually was calculating them at about 60,000 an acre. I was running intensively in the grand scheme of things, but I wasn't running as intensively as I felt like I would be able to once the farm was more established.

It's a lot more than when I was working on bigger farms. I feel like when I was working on larger farms, we were still doing somewhere between 15 and 25, maybe up to 30,000 an acre. But we're doubling that on these really small scale operations.

Chris Blanchard: One of the things I love about farming is there's a lot to think about in terms of production and the ways of actually going about engaging with the soil. There's also the management element. Did you see ways that these farms



were similar in how they were managing or making decisions on the farm?

Josh Volk:

I think the one thing I would say that I, and I might have a bias towards this because I'm a big planner, but I think there's a lot of thought and planning that went into all these farms. I think on the really small farm in particular, you really have to be on top of analyzing what has just happened, how to improve that in the future, and there's just not much cushion.

In every kind of farming it's probably the same. There's not much cushion for making big mistakes and recovering from those. But if you analyze what you're doing and then turn that into a plan ... All of these farms that I was talking to, they were all doing a lot of planning and putting in place what is it that we're going to have in the ground at a particular point in time, and then spending the winter really getting that in.

Although I, just saying that, the winter thing, I have to mention there's one farm, he's a friend of mine, in the book ... and this was a great example of thinking a different way and how there are all these different examples out there ... He actually does his planting later in the season, and then he takes the summer off. Not the full summer, but then he takes the spring off, starts planting in the summer and doesn't start harvesting until end of October beginning of November, and then harvests through the winter.

The schedule's not the same for everybody, but everybody is putting a lot of time and effort into planning and then kind of tracking what they're doing and then analyzing how that season went, and rolling that information back over into how can we make it better the next year.

When I would ask these farmers for details on how do you do this, they all had, it was like, "Okay, well let me go back and look through my records." Some of them were really great and would actually send me their record sheets, how they were doing this stuff. I was really impressed with the level of planning that went into a lot of these operations.

Chris Blanchard:

Because you and I are birds of a feather when it comes to this planning thing and the record keeping, I can just imagine your glee when you got copies of farms' records. This was like Christmas.

Josh Volk:

Oh yeah.

Chris Blanchard:

I'm imagining that that planning took a lot of different forms. Spreadsheets, paper-based ... Was anybody using anything that was particularly interesting you from a planning perspective?

Josh Volk:

Nobody was using anything particularly high tech. I use Excel for all my planning, and I have some pretty, what I think are fairly sophisticated spreadsheets for automating some of the route calculations that you have to do all the time.



A lot of the planning was just on paper. A lot of the record-keeping was just on paper. One of the farms in there, one of my favorites, Cook's Garden in Ohio, he doesn't even do email. I had to talk to him on the phone. If I ever email with him, his wife always has to email with me. He's been doing it since the early eighties, and he probably had one of the most sophisticated, cleanest looking layouts that I saw in the entire book, and he's definitely doing that all on paper.

Another thing that I thought was wonderful about Stephen was he told me that he went to JM's Workshop just a couple years ago and he was excited because he had all kinds of new ideas after going to JM's Workshop. I love the way everybody is sharing information and still getting ideas even after 30+ years of running a farm.

Chris Blanchard: I think it takes a certain level of humility to be able to go after you've been farming that long and say there's still something to learn.

Josh Volk: Oh, absolutely. I've worked with a lot of different farmers, and I've been very fortunate to have some incredible mentors. Michael Ableman has been one of my mentors, and I have conversations with him all the time because I recognize this happening, and he tells me it only gets worse as you get further into it, is that when I first started out I thought I knew everything.

The more I get into this, the more I realize I don't know. Michael's a few years further into it than I am, so I'm just expecting it to get even worse and I will realize how much I don't know that I don't even know right now. I found that across the board.

It seemed like the guys that had been in it for longer, and women ... Actually the book I think ended up being a 50/50 mix of men and women that were farming. I was really happy to do that, but it didn't actually make extra work to do that. All these folks are very humble and were very willing to share information and were very interested to get information back from other farms as well.

Chris Blanchard: And of course you were gathering this information at the same time that you were farming at Cully Neighborhood Farm. What did you take from people in the book and steal for your own use?

Josh Volk: Yeah, actually the majority of the book got written before I was working with Cully Neighborhood Farm. It was kind of in the last season that I was connected to Our Table Cooperative, which was the farm that absorbed Slow Hand Farm. I was kind of on my way out of that farm at the point that I was really collecting the bulk of the information for the book. Those two things kind of coincided a bit. Also because the book was a lot of work. I didn't realize how much work it was going to be to write a book. It definitely took a lot of time.



I didn't have the opportunity to fold things in right away, but I think I kind of needed to process that information a little bit. At Cully Neighborhood Farm, since I've written the book, we have actually been experimenting a lot with JM's techniques and trying out parts and failing with parts in some situations, and having occasional successes where you kind of see the potential for that. Also Matt decided to change around his BCS set up based on JM's recommendations and so he's been playing with that as well.

I've also been visiting farms and touring farms ever since the beginning. This is something that I've been super interested in since I started farming, like how do people do all this stuff. It's hard for me to separate out which of these things came from the book specifically. A lot of that stuff is just refinement of little, little tweaks here, things that I've been developing on my own farm and farms that I worked on before that for many, many years.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to dig in a little bit more about Cully Neighborhood Farm. You said you guys are doing about a half-acre of production. You mentioned that you got a BCS involved in it. You tell us a little bit more about how that farm's laid out and the production techniques that you're using there?

Josh Volk: Yeah. Actually Cully Neighborhood Farm is very similar in some ways, as I just mentioned to you, to JM's farm. The farm that was more my own model that I might go back and talk about would be the Slow Hand Farm techniques, because I think those are a little bit more different. That was kind of more the expression of the way that I was doing it.

At Cully Neighborhood Farm, I work for Matt and he definitely consults with me and kind of uses me as a consultant in some ways, to help make decisions around the farm, and so I have input there. But I try to largely leave that to him, because it really is his business and I don't have a long-term stake in it at this point.

But Slow Hand Farm was my opportunity. I was working at a farm called Sauvie Island Organics, and I was there for seven years as basically a field manager, so kind of doing a lot of the production end of things, and up through harvest. I left that farm because I wanted to start my own thing. I had gotten started out in farming thinking about urban agriculture, and so urban agriculture was kind of what got me interested.

When I was first starting out in urban agriculture there was this guy, Jac Smit, and he had an organization called the Urban Agriculture Network which was based in Washington DC, and I happened to be in Washington DC. This was back in the days before people looked things up on the internet searching for things, and so I had this great big book of agricultural resources.

I don't know where I got this book or where it came from, but his organization was listed in this book, and I just cold-called him. It turns out he lived about a



mile away from where I lived, and he said, "You know, I don't really have any work for you in urban agriculture. I work on international urban agriculture. I don't work on domestic urban agriculture, but I'd be happy to get together with you and maybe talk about urban agriculture."

I didn't realize who he was, but he'd been around for a long time. He's written books on urban agriculture, I think he has a planning background. He actually died a few years ago. But at the time, he was super generous, and we got together for breakfast. His advice to me was to go and learn farming from farmers and then bring that back to urban spaces.

I was a city kid, I grew up basically in small towns and cities, and I didn't have any farming experience. Gardens were my reference point, and he said, "You know, that's basically what happens in urban agriculture in the US is it's all gardeners trying to make people urban agriculture projects, and they're approaching it from a garden viewpoint."

What happens in international urban agriculture projects, is this migration of farmers into the cities, and then they have the farming background and they start urban agriculture projects in the cities. He was working in Africa and Asia primarily.

So I took that advice and I went and started working on other farms, but at the same time, I had taken some workshops with John Jeavons, and his book "How to Grow More Vegetables" was kind of one of the really early inspirations for me. I always had this idea that after I went and learned from the farmers, I was going to come back to urban agriculture and I was going to use the biointensive methods, the hand scale methods, and so when I started Slow Hand Farm, that was my opportunity to get back to these hand scale methods.

I actually wasn't doing it in town. I was out on Sauvie Island, the same island just outside of Portland, Oregon. But I was on a very small piece of ground and I was just doing it part time. I wanted to see, could I make it work financially, doing everything without a tractor, because I had been using a tractor for the previous ... I think at that point I'd been farming for about 12 or 13 years and it would have been about 10 years at that point, 10 or 11 years, so could I take all this tractor scale knowledge and kind of this knowledge of plants and apply that back to biointensive. It was a little bit of a mix of biointensive kind of tempered with the realities of what I had learned for the particular climate and soil and everything else that I was in at that point.

Chris Blanchard: So from the time that you spent on the farms and trying to translate that into urban agriculture, what were some of the things that you brought back and applied?

Josh Volk: Well, one of the things that I've realized in subsequent years is that most of the farmers that I went and worked with actually were essentially first



generation farmers, meaning they had gotten themselves into farming after essentially growing up urban.

I didn't really realize that at the time, so I don't know how that ... I probably wasn't getting quite what Jac was telling me to get, but I think part of his point, or at least the point that I think he was trying to make, is that there's this difference between just gardening and market gardening or small scale farming, which is that you don't just have to figure out how to grow something.

The first step is knowing how to grow it. Then the second step is figuring out how to sell it. Then you also have to figure out not just how to grow it, but how to grow it very efficiently so that you can make money selling it. Because if you can grow it, but you can't do it efficiently, even if you can sell it you're not going to make any money. If you can't sell it, you're obviously not going to make any money, because the money has to come from somewhere.

It's kind of the combination of those three factors, and I think that is probably the biggest thing that I learned in farming was just that you really have to pay attention to all three of those things. You can't just pay attention to how am I going to grow this or how am I going to sell it. You have to incorporate all three at the same time.

It wasn't necessarily production stuff that I think was the most important piece. I think it was more just that attitude of okay, I have to concentrate on the important things, and the important things are what can I sell, how can I produce it, and how can I do that efficiently? I did learn a lot about production though.

The big benefit I think of starting out full time farming, and I think this is something you wouldn't get if you just started out part time farming, is it's five days a week or six days a week or seven days a week of learning, as opposed to one or two days a week of learning.

The more you do something, the faster you're going to learn it. I'm glad that I started out as a full time farmer, because it definitely made the learning go faster. At the same time, I'm really happy to be part time farming now because I think that it's a really great balance for me.

Chris Blanchard: I think it's an interesting comment about part time farming. It seems obvious if you step back, but it's going to have a slower iteration cycle, if you will. You're just not going to learn as fast. The more you dig in, and the more days a week that you dig in, and the more weeks of the year that you dig in, the faster you're going to learn about farming and be in a position to improve your operation.

Josh Volk: Yeah, and the flip side of that is you do have to balance that, because at some point, when you just get so exhausted, you're not learning anymore. You're



just spending all of your energy trying to keep your head above the water. So you can push that too far. There's only so many hours in the day that have effective learning. Absolutely, if you're only doing it two days a week as opposed to doing it five days a week, it's probably going to take you twice as long or maybe even longer to get some of these lessons.

[00:43:00] I think one of the things that made it possible for me to do part time farming and to do it really effectively right off the bat, was having been completely immersed in it for over a decade at that point, and having explored a lot of options and looked at a lot of different farming systems, and thinking very clearly, "These are all the things that I really have to concentrate on, and these are the places that I can essentially take shortcuts or make compromises that aren't going to kill the business." And maybe wouldn't be the way that I would do it if I were doing it full time, but are going to end up okay. They're going to turn out alright in the end.

Chris Blanchard:

I want you to tell me about that because that's really interesting. One of the things that's come up again and again, I feel like, in the Farmer To Farmer Podcast, or maybe it's just because I have the complete and utter failure to set any limits on my farm regarding how much I was going to work, is people setting some limits and putting up some boundaries.

I think once you do that, you do need some shortcuts. You do need to have some ways of deciding what you're going to cut, what you're going to be okay with not getting done. Because you know when you work 16 hour days, you're not making choices. You're just putting your nose to the grindstone, even if you don't get stuff done.

But if you say, "Hey, I'm going to have a part time farm. I'm gonna work two days a week," all of a sudden you're having to make some decisions.

Josh Volk:

Yeah, and I think that part of that is the same thing with planning. One of the ways that I look at it is everybody is doing planning whether they say they're doing planning or not, and they're just doing planning in different ways. I'm a planner who likes to have things planned out in advance, and then I'll make tweaks at the last minute. I'll change things around at the last minute, but I want to have a plan in place before I go into doing something.

On the other end of the spectrum, I see folks who, they say, "Oh, I'm not going to make a plan. That's just, you know, that takes too much trouble, it takes too much time." All that kind of stuff. But they're making those same decisions I'm making. They're just making them at the last minute. I think with enough experience over time, people get really, really good at knowing what the right decision is to make at any particular moment.

But the advantage to doing the planning up front is that you get practice rounds, essentially. You can make a set of decisions and kind of carry those through and basically make a dry run at something and then realize, "Oh, that



might not have been the right decision." When you don't have a lot of experience, doing those dry runs points out those mistakes in your decisions a lot faster and so allows you a second chance before you actually have to go and do something.

With the part time farming, you don't have as many days in the week, obviously, and so any decision that you screw up on just amplifies whatever problem is going to come out of that mistake, because there's no time to recover from it.

I think being a planner up front is what you kind of have to do. And setting the limit ... Similarly, everybody sets some limit for themselves. Some people set the limit as how many hours can I stay awake during the week and actually do something physical. Then, basically when they fall asleep in their bowl of cereal at 11:00 at night, that's their limit.

Even before I started part time farming, I was very clear about it, "Okay, we're going to start the workday at this particular time and we're going to end the workday at this particular time." Just acknowledge that there's always going to be more work to do, but we are only going to work this many hours in order to do that.

If that's not enough hours, we either have to figure out a way to do it more efficiently, or we need to hire more people to work with us. If we can't afford to hire more people to work with us, and there's still more work and we can't do it more efficiently, then we shouldn't be farming because it's not sustainable. At least it wasn't sustainable for me to work more hours than some of the hours that we set.

I've always been pretty good about setting the limit for myself, and kind of doing that consciously as opposed to doing it unconsciously and just having something else set the limit. There's a lot of compromises that I have to make as a part time farmer, so some of it is just letting go of control. In fact I'd say a lot of it is letting go of control, and leaving the crops out there to just do what they're going to do, and not feeling like I have to check on them all the time.

The reality is that plant's whole goal in life is to grow, and then ultimately, if it's an annual, to flower and set seed. They're going to do everything they can in order to do that, so I just need to set them up in order for them to be able to do that.

It doesn't mean that I have to be there every single day holding their hand. It just means that I have to have everything set in place for them. I have to water at the right time, I have to give them the right fertility up front, and then I need to go in there and harvest them at the right times in order for the market to be satisfied. But it doesn't require being there every single day.

Seedlings in the propagation house is probably the biggest compromise, and



really automation is what makes that possible, and relying on automation heavily. My initial experiences with automation in greenhouses were not good.

When I was apprenticing with a fantastic farmer, we ran a greenhouse on some battery timers. It was a pretty small greenhouse. We were running the irrigation on battery timers and we got busy. Normally we were checking in on those battery timers every day, but there was a week during the summer where we got busy and we weren't in the greenhouse for two or three days, and that happened to be the time when the battery failed. And we lost some plants. We didn't lose everything, but we lost some plants in that greenhouse.

After that, I was like, "Oh, we're not doing this anymore. I'm never going to do that again, I'm always going to be in the greenhouse every single day." But when I decided to do the part time farm, there wasn't any way that that was going to happen. So my initial thought was, "Oh, I'm just going to direct seed everything, because then I don't have to take care of our greenhouse." I did that for one season, and it just didn't give me the results that I wanted.

The next season we had access to the propagation house and the greenhouse, and I put in battery timers. I didn't have a whole lot of backup, but I was very careful about the timers that I chose and kind of setting up the system so that I thought that it would be pretty stable.

I would have to readjust the timers, because things would be getting a little bit too wet or a little bit too dry by the time I came back two or three days later. But we always got decent seedlings out of it, and for five out of the seven days a week, I wasn't doing anything. The battery timers were taking care of it, and the automatic vent openers were taking care of venting.

Other than that, everything was fine. It was nice to see that that actually worked. I did that for three seasons without any problem at all, and I've been totally sold on the automatic water ever since.

Chris Blanchard: It's interesting, because that's a very different experience than I've had with automatic watering systems. I've seen on multiple farms who've installed those, it's been the source of extreme over watering, because people aren't paying attention and aren't managing. It's really interesting to me what you're saying about being able to make those adjustments on just two days a week.

Josh Volk: That's the thing is you can't buy an automatic system and then expect it to just take care of itself forever. I was tweaking it every single day I was there. Those two days a week, I'm tweaking the automatic system and I'm checking on it, and I'm evaluating how it did for the last two or three days, or four days. Then I'm making changes in order to make that work, and I'm looking at what the weather is going to be coming up, and I'm constantly readjusting that on those two days a week. But I found that with two days a week, I could do that and it worked out fine.



I think that part of the problem with a lot of the automatic systems is people put it in and then they just want to forget about it, and they don't ever go back and check. That's one of the things also with planning and record keeping is you can't just make the plan, and then it's like, "Okay, the plan is done and we're all set and this is what we're going to do." You actually have to continuously check back with that plan and make sure that the plan that you have is still the right plan. I'm constantly making tweaks to the plan.

And when I'm collecting data, it's not like you collect the data and then that's done. You're going back and you're looking at that data and you're analyzing it, you're putting it into the next plan. You're going back a year or two later and you're kind of looking back at two or three years worth of data and you're saying, "Oh, does the data that I'm getting right now match that other data?"

All these things take a lot of attention and constant and consistent attention. I shouldn't say constant attention, because you don't have to be paying attention every hour of every day, but consistently coming back to them and paying attention. I think where people get in trouble is when they think, "Oh, I can just put down the money, I'm gonna buy this and then I'm done with it, and it'll take care of itself from thereon."

Chris Blanchard:

All right. With that, we're going to stop here, take a break, and get a quick word from our sponsors and then we'll be right back with Josh Volk.

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And we're back with Josh Volk, the author of the book, *Compact Farms* which just came out, published by Storey Publishing.

Josh, before we went on break, we were talking about record keeping. You were talking about the importance of going back and not just using the records as a place to write things down, but to circle back and actually look at them and make decisions based on those records. I know that's something that I think that a lot of people have a hard time doing. A, it's hard to find the time, and B, sometimes with your records, that information's kind of diffuse.

So how have you seen farmers be successful in going about getting those records back in front of them, so that they actually are analyzing them?

Josh Volk:

I'll just talk about it the way that I use them. I am constantly looking for newer and better ways to do it, so I don't think the way that I'm doing it is perfect by any means. I am able to use a lot of the records that I keep. The only thing I'm constantly kind of evaluating is what records am I keeping and are these records actually going to be useful in the future?

Because in the past, there are some things that I've kept and I've realized after a period of time I never go back and look at that, so that's just not going to be useful. Like I used to keep track of how many inches it rained, and I never went back and looked at it. For the most part, that information was available through the weather service, close enough if I ever did want to go back and use it. But that ended up being a record that I never used, so I just stopped following that record.

I use records in a couple of different ways. My record keeping methods are actually pretty simple. Actually last summer I took a clue from you and I started using an index card. I use it a little bit different than I think the way that you described. We talked about this actually just about a year ago now, how you were using index cards for record keeping and I took notes on that.

My record keeping system is very closely tied to my planning system. Typically, what I'm doing is I'm creating a plan, and then that plan is getting printed out on paper, or I actually even write out ... I make the plan kind of on a week to



week basis, so when I plan in November, I'm saying what am I going to do on the week of ... And I use Monday dates for everything, so it's like what am I going to do on the week of April, like Monday this year is April 10th, for example. Then if I have an April 10th date, that just means sometime in that week it's going to happen.

I make the plan out and then on paper, it's kind of blank spaces for the plan on that week where it's like okay, now fill in what actually happened on that week, or when something actually happened. The record that it happened and how it happened, goes back into the plan from the previous season, and then when I'm making my plan for the following season, I basically go back to the plan for the previous season and I see what changes were made or what changes weren't made and I can then move that into the next plan.

There's a lot of that happening. What I actually found was most convenient was I like to write out my plan for the week in shorthand, I do it out for myself on the index card, and I carry that index card around with me for reference. I will make occasional notes on the index card, but a lot of times it's actually easier for me to make a note in just the "Notes" app that comes with my iPhone. I keep that, and I put the date first, and then I put kind of what the topic on the note is, so if it's cultivation or it's the harvest note, I'll put that right on the top line because that's the one that shows up kind of as the subject when I'm going back through the notes.

Then I keep just shorthand notes in those notes on the phone. Those automatically through the Cloud go to my computer so I can consolidate those into one spot every week or two weeks or three weeks. Usually I try to do it once a week, but a lot of times it takes me, to be realistic, sometimes it takes me a few months to get back to consolidating the notes.

I'm very conscious when I'm writing those notes to myself that I need to write them in a way that somebody else potentially could read them, because if I don't get to them for two or three months, I essentially am somebody else. I'm not going to remember what I meant. So I can use a shorthand, but it has to be a shorthand that I'm going to be able to read two months from now.

Chris Blanchard: [01:01:00] As somebody who has always had a problem with having legible handwriting, I love that. I'm the same way. I could read my note, not even talking shorthand, but just I can usually figure out what something that I wrote yesterday says, but something that I wrote three month ago might be a little sketchy.

Josh Volk: Yeah. That's one of the things that I've learned over time, the older I get the more I realize that I'm not going to remember things that I thought that I was going to remember. Probably to some extent because I write things down, I let myself forget those things, but I think that's a great thing because I think that that helps clear up my mind. So that's my story.



Chris Blanchard: When you say you're using a shorthand system, again I don't get the impression that you're using like a shorthand alphabet, but you're using some notations that mean something to you and are consistently meaningful to you. To write things down without having to write out all of the words, "I seeded the carrots today using hole 53 on the seeder."

Josh Volk: Right. One of the most useful record keeping systems that I have, and I actually have written a article about this in "Growing for Market" and then that article is now on my website, [joshvolk.com](http://joshvolk.com), is Maps and Space and Time. It sounds fancy, and I think other people use this same system, and have just come up with it independently, but basically it's lists of all the beds.

I use Excel as basically, editable graph paper. Then I print out those Excel sheets. Down on the left hand side, it's basically the bed number. When I was doing Slow Hand Farm, lots of different things would go into the same bed, so I actually had the beds kind of broken up into five foot chunks. It was like the first five feet of bed one, the second five feet of bed one, the third five feet of bed one ... Basically just a line for every planting block at a particular spot. Then across the top is the week. There's basically a small square for every single week for every single spot.

Then my shorthand within that is things like I write an "8" for weeks. I'll write the crop name in on the week that it's planted. That's my shorthand that tells me this crop got planted on this particular week. Usually I'm writing in the variety names. If I have the variety name and I know where it is in the field, even though some variety names are the same from one crop type to another, but if I have that variety name in a particular place, then I know okay, that was lettuce. Nevada, that's a lettuce. I know that's a lettuce and it's in the lettuce field, so obviously that was a lettuce. And that was planted on that particular week. So I don't have to do anything there except write "Nevada" on that particular week and I know that that was planted on that week.

Then the week that it gets harvested, I'll write an "8". That just means that that was harvested in that particular week. That's actually one of the most useful notes that I make and that I use consistently is how many weeks to harvest. With lettuce as a great example, because lettuce is a different number of weeks to harvest for the same variety depending on what time of year it is. In the very peak of the season, it's as low as four to five weeks on some varieties for us to full head lettuce from transplanting, but on the shoulder seasons, that same variety could be seven or eight weeks.

When I keep these maps, and I have the planting week and the harvest week in the map, then I can go back and really quickly just look at these squares and is that four squares, or is it seven squares, or is it eight squares to harvest? And I can see when do I need to plant the lettuce next year in order to get the harvest on a particular date.



Then I've got a lot of other little one letter ... Because those squares aren't very big, I'm pretty much limited to one letter in the square. For cultivation I'll write a "C", for tillage I'll write a "T", for mowing I'll write an "M". Sometimes the letters overlap, but based on where the letter is I'll know what that means.

Chris Blanchard: I really like that. That sounds like a really slick system. Again, I love the kind of the interplay that you've got going on between the computer based system and the paper based system.

Josh Volk: Yeah, the computer is great for me in the off season, and for me it really speeds up. Excel has become this extension of kind of the way that I plan and kind of play with where things can go in the field and how long things are going to take and using just some really simple formulas and some spreadsheets, and even just using it as editable graph paper, it's been a really great system for me.

But once I'm out in the field during the season, I don't find the computer useful at all. I find it a real impediment. The iPhone actually is starting to change that a little bit for me because I am starting to use Notes in the iPhone, and I'm definitely starting to use pictures to take a lot of records. I try to remember to take photos of things. Not so much because I think that it's beautiful or whatever, but just because I want a record of what it was, and a date and timestamp so you kind of get that this is what this particular thing looked like at this particular time. I want to start doing more of that.

That's maybe how the computer is coming in on the field, but up to this point, really what I've found is paper is what's most convenient when I'm in the packing shed or even when I'm out in the field doing seeding or any of those kinds of things. Then it's much easier for me to have a piece of paper next to my computer and kind of be looking at the records from the paper. I know that that piece of paper is from a particular time and that it hasn't been edited, because you can't obviously change things the way you can change them on a computer without realizing that you changed them on paper.

Chris Blanchard: So Josh, we're going to make sure that we get those links available on the Show Notes page for this episode on the farmertofarmerpodcast.com website so that people can actually take a deeper dive into the concepts that you're talking about and how you're using those.

Josh Volk: Yeah, I think it'll make a lot more sense if people take a look online.

Chris Blanchard: I want to take a couple minutes here to talk about Slow Hand Farm, and the fact that it's interesting to me that that was a farm that you were running without any fossil fuels. Tell me a little bit about what that looked like, because I did that on my very first piece of land that I worked out at Deep Springs College in 1990, and it was a lot of work.



Josh Volk:

Yeah. One of the things that I'm realizing about myself is process is really important to me. The end product on a farm has to be important also because that's what you're selling, but the process of getting to that end product, how I'm doing it, is also important to me.

Just in terms of, I'm pretty good at tractors, and I'm kind of known as a tool guy, so a lot of people come to me for tractor advice, and I've spent a lot of years on tractor farms. There's aspects of tractors that I enjoy, but sitting on tractors for long periods of time and the noise and the dust and the fumes ... I don't enjoy that part of it. I really love working with the digging fork and doing physical work. I do enjoy that part of it. So I was willing to take a lot of extra time.

Basically, the difference between what I was doing and doing it with a tractor or BCS, a two wheel tractor, is that I had much, much higher bed preparation expenses. Everything else is pretty similar. I think you know, especially on a lot of very very small farms, really all you're using the tractor for is mowing and tilling. You're not using it for planting, you're not using it for harvesting. You might not even be using it for cultivating. The big difference is in how long it takes to prepare a bed. I think the difference in bed preparation time was something like the difference between taking five minutes to prepare a bed and taking an hour to prepare a bed.

I would hand fork every bed. I wasn't double-digging. I did double-dig a few beds, and then realized I just didn't have time to do it. But would hand fork every bed. Depending on the soil conditions, I had two or three different forks that I was rotating through. When you're doing things by hand, having the right tool for the situation, you really notice those differences in how long and how much energy it takes.

I also had two or three different rakes, and then I had this one kind of a little bit like a wheel hoe. Johnny's is actually selling a version of them now where it's got kind of a cage roller on the front with some teeth on it. That almost worked a little bit like a filter in terms of getting the surface tilled up and a little bit more finely broken up. That was the bed preparation.

Then everything else is very similar to the way I would do it on other farms where I was hand transplanting. I was using a Earthway seeder. I was seeding some stuff by hand. I also had a six row seeder that I was using. I was using hoes to do almost all the cultivation. I did almost no hand weeding. Hoeing at the right time, you can get away with little to no hand weeding. I was irrigating both the strip and overhead, but the overhead irrigation was kind of small micro-sprinklers that are more designed for landscape. Then harvest was hand harvest, and pack things up in a barn and little spray down table. Very similar techniques to what you'd do on another farm, with the exception of that bed preparation and mowing around the edges. Those are the two things that took a lot of time.



Chris Blanchard: Why did you choose to continue to do things that way?

Josh Volk: It was really that process thing. It was like I decided this is what I enjoy. This is the way that I enjoy doing it. I'm willing to take a pay-cut, which essentially is what it was. I'm willing to take a pay-cut in order to do it all by hand.

In some ways, I had also set it up where by being part time and by being very small, it was not having expense of a tractor, because there wasn't a tractor available to me already, buying a tractor would have forced me to get bigger in order to maximize the use of that tractor to really make that tractor pay off. I didn't want to get bigger. All those things kind of played in together to make it a little bit easier choice that way.

Then I did some things kind of on the sales and marketing end, to take advantage of what I was already doing in terms of hand scale, and to carve out my own little niche there that was different from what other folks were doing. I was able to capitalize on that a little bit with marketing everything.

Chris Blanchard: Was that actually something that people cared about in the marketplace?

Josh Volk: They didn't care necessarily that I was doing it by hand, but what I did that was kind of unique, and I hadn't seen anybody else do this, was because I was so small, and because I was doing things by hand, I really had to just concentrate on what crops would basically produce enough on a small space.

I didn't grow winter squash, for example, and I grew very few potatoes. I concentrated on growing things that were more the type of thing that you would get out of a garden and less the kind of thing that you would see on a production farm.

Even a small scale production farm, the things that were very delicate and maybe things that weren't as even in terms of their maturity or their ripeness but had unique features or that had interesting back stories to them, so I really concentrated on those kinds of things.

Then I designed a CSA share that I called a Sampler Share, or an Individual Share. What I'd seen working on other CSAs was that a lot of people felt like they were getting too many vegetables and then they felt guilty about not using all those vegetables and a lot of people would split shares with other friends, and then people would be asking us, "Oh, can you find somebody to split a share with, because the shares are too big."

So I designed a share that was too small to split. You just couldn't. I could sit down and eat a share in one to two meals. I eat a lot of vegetables, though. Maybe that's not for everybody. It really wasn't a very big share, but what it allowed was for people who just wanted to be involved with CSA, but didn't want to commit to cooking from scratch five nights a weeks or seven nights a



week just to go through all the vegetables. Or finding two or three other families to split with and who were individuals who maybe were students, or maybe were older people, or just single people, they had access to CSA then in a way that they wouldn't have before.

Or people who wanted to also shop at the farmers market and buy from their other favorite farmers and not just have one farmer be their source of food. So I did these really, really small shares with kind of very special mix of vegetables and then kind of would tell stories around those vegetables also.

Chris Blanchard: Were there things that you took then from Slow Hand Farm, and applied at Cully Neighborhood Farm?

Josh Volk: I'll always carry a certain number of varieties with me, and have preference for those varieties, and there's the timing on cultivation, things like that that are pretty universal. Stepping into Cully Neighborhood Farm, for me, has been another kind of exercise in stepping back a little bit and really letting Matt, as much as I can, say, "You know, listen, this is your operation. I'm coming in to help you out. I'm going to make suggestions. I'm gonna, when you ask for it, I'll give my input." But really trying not to push a lot of things.

There's a lot of little tools and tricks that I've learned from all the different farms that I've worked on that when I see something that fits into a particular spot or that the system isn't as well developed as maybe it could be at Cully, I'll make those suggestions. Or if Matt's looking at a different way to do something. But it's really more his operation and I feel like I'm there as a consultant in some ways. I'm hired help to get things done.

The other thing I'll say about Matt is I largely trained Matt at Skyline Farm, so even though it's his take on it, a lot of the systems that he uses are systems that he got from Skyline Farm, which are systems that I put in place at Skyline Farm, so there's overlap there, too. Because we had both worked on those same systems and he had worked with me before, it was really easy to drop into that situation.

Chris Blanchard: He was already fully indoctrinated into the Josh Volk way of doing things.

Josh Volk: Yes, exactly.

He's made a lot of changes to the systems, and kind of modified that over time. And he's always looking at new ways to do stuff as well.

Chris Blanchard: With that, I think it's time to turn to our Lightning Round. We're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back with Josh Volk.

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All right, and we're back for the Lightning Round.

Josh, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Josh Volk:

I have listened to every single episode of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast that you put out, and usually I do it on my commute to the farm. I ride my bike back and forth to the farm. I can get through about half the podcast on my way to the farm and then I get to the other half on my way home.

The Lightning Round, I should be completely prepared for this question, and I am not prepared for it at all. I think that I'm not going to back out, but just off the top of the head the one that's popping to mind is actually a cart that I have developed.

The Garden Cart I think is an absolutely fantastic cart. Really simple design, super, super utilitarian, but I always felt like there were a few things about it that I could do better. We had a cart that had been used for about probably more than a decade on this one farm, and just totally abused from when I was working at Sauvie Island Organics, and it finally fell apart. The wheels were still salvageable, and the axle was still salvageable, and I had some scrap metal, so I decided I was going to build this other cart.

Basically what I did was I bumped the wheels out so they fit into our pathways, because our beds were four foot centers, and the garden cart I think is probably on about a ... I don't know, it's a 30 some inch center. Then I always wanted the cart to be able to roll over the bed so I bumped the bed of the cart up higher. Then the handle was always too low, so I made the handle the right height for me, and I made it so that when you pick up the handle, the bed stays flat. It doesn't tip as much, so the stuff doesn't all slide off the back end of the cart.

I've worked on refining and developing that cart for a number of years now. For a little bit I had them available for other people to buy. The plans for them are actually up online at [farmhandcarts.com](http://farmhandcarts.com). My plan is to actually start making them available this year if I can find another fabricator to work with.



I would say that hand cart has been my favorite tool. And then it's got a lot of add-ons. Like we use it to mark the beds out also, so there's little attachments that roll over and mark out the planting lines and also mark out the end line spacing. It does that all at once. It doubles as kind of a tool carrier. You can take the box from the cart off, or the flatbed from the cart off and you can pop tools on it as well.

Chris Blanchard: One of the things that I think is really cool is how the platform is completely changeable, that idea, right? You can put tools on it, you can put a platform on it, and it's got a lot of space. That and the fact that it fits over the bed on bed sizes that are even kind of more standard used on farms than what the old style garden carts would have been. It's really cool.

Josh Volk: Originally I was just building two wheel versions, and then a friend of mine wanted one, and she said, "But we want a single wheel one. Can you build a single wheel one so that we can just go down in between trellising or something like that?" So using pretty much the same parts, just a little bit of modification, we built the single wheel one. Then shortly after that, I had a two wheel one for myself, and I built her the single wheel one, she came back to me and she was like, "You know, the crews aren't really using the single wheel one, but I think they would like a double wheel one." So I traded her my double wheel one for the single wheel one. We just happen to have very similar bed spacing. The last season I used that single wheel one every single harvest and it's been fantastic. So it works really well as a single wheel cart as well, kind of the same geometry, just a little different format.

Chris Blanchard: Very cool. Now we didn't talk a lot about your consulting business, Josh, but you do consulting for farms. What one thing could your clients do to make their farms better?

Josh Volk: Hire a consultant right away. That's my joke.

No, the consulting thing for me is a bit of a catch-all phrase. It's really unique from farm to farm. I think that the one thing that a lot of people who are starting out that I talk with, the one thing that they could do other than going to a consultant is really working on networking with their immediate farming community.

For me that's been invaluable, having relationships with other farmers, getting to go and see other farmers' farms, having connections where I can call up, or I can email individual farmers that I know, or even lists of farmers that I'm on, and ask questions and get resources and get answers.

I think the thing that I would tell folks is really developing those networks is going to be the best way to learn. It's basically free. It costs some time and some energy, but it doesn't cost money to develop those networks, and there are a lot of great farmers out there. And they're not just great farmers, they're



really great people too. That's the thing I would tell people.

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

Josh Volk: Oh, man. I think people have said it before, but it's like picking your favorite kid, probably. I don't have kids so I don't know if that's a fair comparison. But I do enjoy, there's a couple of crops that I'm working on right now in terms of doing a little bit of deflection and that kind of thing ... Corn, beans, and squash, even though they're really not very appropriate for small scale, that's one that I've had a lot of fun growing in the last handful of years. And collecting a lot of dry bean varieties, and a couple of dry corn varieties. And hard squash. But I love growing beets and I love growing lettuce – I can't pick just one thing.

Chris Blanchard: If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?

Josh Volk: I think I'd tell myself to be more patient. And to realize that it was going to take me longer to understand. I don't think I really have any regrets about anything, but one of the decisions that I do wonder about is that the farmer that I apprenticed with, wonderful guy, Andy Scott, he's no longer with us unfortunately, but Andy offered me a second season on the farm and I was anxious to see another farm so I left and went, worked on another farm.

That ended up working out great, but I do wonder from time to time what would have happened if I'd stuck around for another season. I thought I had learned everything I was going to learn from Andy in one season. In retrospect, I hadn't learned a fraction of it, I'm sure. So I would tell myself to be more patient.

Chris Blanchard: Being young's hard, isn't it?

Josh Volk: You know it would be fun to go back and do it again knowing everything I know now, but obviously not going to happen.

Chris Blanchard: Josh, thank you so much for being on the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.

Josh Volk: Oh, I really appreciate you having me. I am a huge fan of the podcast. Really love what you're doing, so great to be able to give back a little.

Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is Episode 106 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 Volk, that's V-O-L-K. That was easy.

The transcript for this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk-behind farm equipment and high quality garden tools in North America, and by "Growing for Market", where you can



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