



FARMER TO FARMER

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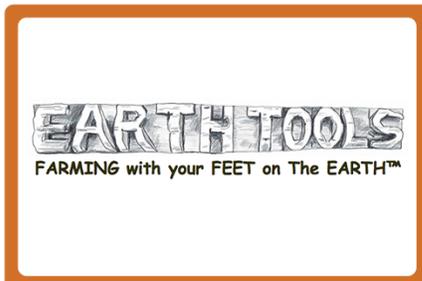


EPISODE 112

Landis and Steven Spickerman on Creating a Farm from a Homestead in Far Northern Wisconsin

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Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 112, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Landis and Steven Spickerman own and operate Hermit Creek Farm, 15 miles south of Lake Superior in far northern Wisconsin, a challenging place to farm, lots of woods, and lots of water. With about 10 acres in vegetables and another six in cover crop, Landis and Steven sell their produce through a combination of wholesale and a 200-member CSA. We discuss their long, slow, and roundabout journey through homesteading and small-scale production, having Landis full time on the farm.

Landis and Steven share how they made the decision to acquire new land a few miles from their home farm, and the challenges they experienced in making the change from growing on one small piece of land, to growing on two very different pieces of farmland with two very different farming systems. Landis and Steven also share the whys and the hows of expanding to a larger marketplace, and how that drove their pursuit of scale. We also dive into how they've expanded their CSA through the expansion of seasons and products, rather than raw member numbers.

Hermit Creek Farm has also integrated hogs, and now sheep into their vegetable and cover crop rotations, and they use native prairie strips for pollinator and biodiversity inoculation in the vegetable fields. Landis and Steven share details about how they make this work, why it matters to them, and why it matters to the farm overall.

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Landis and Steven Spickerman, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Steven: It's really good to be here.



- Landis: It's our pleasure. We really have been looking forward to this.
- Chris: We were talking before I hit the record button, and it sounds like we got a really good day to be recording somebody in northern Wisconsin.
- Landis: Yes, March Madness and cold sleet, such a cool month.
- Steven: When you live as far north as we do in the middle of the continent, we can have winter, it seems like, about seven months out of the year, and today looks like winter.
- Chris: I think that would be a good place to start. As far north as you guys are, in the middle of the continent, can you give us the lay of the land and situate your farm geographically, and in time, and in terms of your marketplace?
- Steven: We are in northern Wisconsin, about 15 miles from Lake Superior, and about 600 feet above the lake. We are in a really challenging place for farming. It's a place with a lot of wood and a lot of water. Lake Superior dominates our landscape, and it creates weather for us. We're in a place that was heavily glaciated so the soil changed rapidly from one little valley to the next little valley, one place is rock, the next place is clay. It's a challenge. It's in an area that's very rural. We live within the Chequamegon National Forest, so that's a large area of forest that not a lot of people live in.
- Towns tend to be small, they tend to be rural, self-sufficient. It's our geographic location. Being mid-continent is also kind of interesting, when you live ... we live about 46 degrees latitude, when you live on the coast at 46 degrees, it's pretty temperate, but here in the middle of the continent above 46 degrees and it can be challenging weather-wise. We just got done with a week of overnight lows below zero, and daytime highs not much above that. The week before that, we were in the 60s so it's a challenging place.
- Chris: Yeah, it's been kind of a, I feel like an exceptionally crazy spring in Wisconsin. Is this out of the norm for your guys' experience?
- Landis: Yes, it's definitely getting warmer and we've had spikes in our weather all winter actually. We get really cold which is normal and then it gets ... We've actually, we've had three thaws this winter, which is not normal. We do maple sugaring in the spring and we've actually decided this year not to do it because of the weather. You can see a little bit of die back on our maple trees over the years and just feel on shaky ground as far as prognosis of weather.
- Chris: Feeling like you need to give those trees a little bit of a rest this year.
- Landis: Yeah, for sure, yeah.
- Steven: It was a hard decision to make. We've been making maple syrup for 28 years now, and to take a spring off from that what was the traditional start of our farming season was a big decision but with the weather the way it's been, we could've start tapping trees over



a month ago and people I know making syrup, the sap hasn't run now in several weeks because it's been so cold and those tap holes only have a certain life so if we were going to take a year off, this was probably the year to do it.

Chris: How many acres is Hermit Creek Farm? I guess I'll ask how many in vegetables and then how many overall are you guys managing?

Landis: Hermit Creek Farm is 140 total acres. We have two sites, our home site, which we originally purchased in the '80s and moved here and started farming in 1993 and it's mostly wood and that's where our sugar bush is and our homestead and then we own another 60 acres about 2½ miles away and that's all ag land, and that was purchased about seven years ago with the idea of ramping up. I think when we first looked at farming, we weren't interested in farming. We were interested in homesteading and we were accidental farmers really, coming at it in a long, slow roundabout way. We really weren't farmers at the get-go.

Steven: Sure, I can jump in. Chris, where we got our start, we both grew up rural. I grew up in northern Illinois. Landis grew up in Florida in rural situations but not farms. I think both of our families really felt strongly about producing their own food. This was in the '60s and early '70s and that time period. We both had a lot of experience with farm animals, with large vegetable gardens. I had the added experience of growing up working on neighbor farms and also for Green Giant Corporation and so I had the, got a lot of experience with tractors and with larger-scale operations and then we're both interested separately growing up in natural resources and biology and went to school for that, both found ourselves out West working for natural resource agencies where we met.

We both had this inkling of wanting to, as Landis put it, homestead and maybe give back to how our parents were raising us, and that led us here to Wisconsin and put that us on that original piece of ground, that 80 acres that when you look at it, wouldn't lend itself really to farming. It wasn't farmed in the 1900s but it only has about 10 acres of open ground. The rest is woods, 70 acres of woods, which is great for a homestead but not really great from a production farm perspective, especially a vegetable farm.

Landis: Yeah. Steven and I are competitive gardeners. We can't help but grow and then get bigger and race each other on who can do the most, so we did still start out with the idea of planting an orchard, raising sheep. This piece of land is, again, as we said, it was in the national forest. Steven had an apprentice with a small sugar bush operation just before we moved here. It had great sugar bush, just perfect, but we wanted to grow our own vegetables but we, just for our home use, and of course, it just went wild and I guess we can't just grow a vegetable garden.

It always kept getting and bigger and literally, we just walked into our local cooperative, the Chequamegon Food Co-Op, and I have a friend who was the manager there and asked her if she wanted some vegetables, and at that time, they didn't even have a cooler. They just had a dry bin that was a tiny little co-op and she said yep, and that's how we started, literally, in 1993, just bringing a carload of produce and then just building, you know, each year, incrementally, increasing our production. Both Steve and



I worked off the farm for ... Steven still works off the farm full time and I worked always winters for 22 years, so it's been a slow growth for us.

About seven years ago when we purchased that other piece of land, I quit my job completely and became the full-time farmer and when you choose a piece of land for homesteading, you make a ton of mistakes. We have no markets at all. We didn't have running water. We still don't have indoor plumbing. We live on solar. The land is rocky. It's fertile but it's rocky and rolling and so I think we learned a lot from our mistakes, and so when we looked for land, we tried to do a better job of looking for something that would be conducive to agriculture and we found this beautiful piece of land with sandy loam soil and great drainage and

Chris: Flat ground and good soil can make a mediocre farm a good farm in a hurry.

Landis: It's true. I just watched our bottom line keep bouncing up once in that seven. I just met with our farm service agency loan officer and we also, at that time, got a couple of small loans from FSA and to help with the ramping up and see like you've done a good job, like building. Look at your incremental and then all of a sudden, boom, boom, boom. It's like a stair step and it's like yeah. No duh. It just becomes easier when you don't hamstring yourself so.

Chris: On that new land then, you've got all of those things like running water, electricity, all those things that make life easy here in the 21st century.

Steven: Yeah, that was part of our selection of that land besides the fact that it's a great piece of agricultural land. There's a power line that runs along the road and it was easy to put a well in and easy to build on. It's sort of like our Doctor Jekyll/Mr. Hyde kind of farm. We come here to our homestead farm where it's solar panels and as Landis said, we don't have running water in our house, then we go over to the other piece property where we have electricity and we can just flip a switch and turn a cooler on or turn a cooler off. We have water. It made things a lot easier. It also makes us very much appreciate that I think. Every time we walk in and open up a cooler that we don't have to worry about our battery being discharged by running the cooler too much, it's a revelation in many ways. It's made things a lot easier. I think that said, I don't think we would do anything either. We certainly enjoyed this homestead farm that we've lived on now for about 27 years.

Landis: Yeah, and just to put that part in perspective. It's like I maybe sounded like I was complaining about it but we always get to the end of thinking those our story and it's like, yeah, but we wouldn't change anything. Last summer we had, we were transplanting lettuce I think and it was a foggy morning and literally, just on the end of the woods, we had a small pup and three adult wolves talking, serenading us, just coursing back, and the beauty of that is heart-stopping so I'll take woods and water and some issues any day in the end. We wouldn't change it, so.

Chris: You guys are still producing at the home farm as well as on your new grade A land.

Landis: Yes, yes, so and I think this is some of those things listening to podcasts, the Farmer to



Farmer Podcast, we, went over the years, have evolved the homestead farm, is we have nine coop houses on it plus a greenhouse and a small tight fields that have not much head land so it's real hard to turn tractors around and shorter field blanks in general, so we've downsized that to more of a micro farm, modeling after a lot of the young people that we hear doing urban on an acre, smaller rows, try to get rid of using the tractor here.

2½ miles away is still a 15-minute tractor drive so try to do the homestead farm as a micro farm and then our ag land as a kind of low-crop, larger landscape, bigger, doing an acre of potatoes and an acre of beans and versus here we're doing salad greens and herbs and trellis tomatoes and things like that, and it's actually helped a lot to separate rather than try to do everything on both. We can have the scheduled work crews at certain days here or there. It has made a lot better management of the two sites so.

Chris: That's something I remember seeing on a couple of farms that I worked on early on in my career was using different locations for different kinds of crops and oftentimes that was organized around how close something was the homestead or how close was to the marketplace but also based on what the land was like and whether it was suitable for putting in an acre of potatoes or whether that was going to be not the highest use of land that was a little more difficult to farm.

Landis: Yeah, yeah, exactly and I think the biggest learning curve for me was there's that old adage about the best fertilizer's a farmer's footprint and so anything close to the house got great treatment, was paid attention to, scouted for and now I have to drive to work to the other field and I've had to train myself to not forget that, not just get caught up in the small farm here where I live, where I can literally at 6:00 in the morning walk out with my cup of coffee and look at things versus getting in a car and commuting to work so it takes a while to learn the two sites, but it's a better use of tools, time, just way more efficient to have two separate farms basically.

Chris: Tell me a little bit about how you actually do that high-level management of the two different pieces of land because I know when I had rental ground that was 2½ miles away from my home farm, it was easy to forget about it. Now, it's a little bit different. You guys, that's your bigger piece of land, your smaller is at home. Mine was the reverse but it was ... I remember that being a real challenge and it was easy for things get out of control in a hurry when you weren't looking at them every single day. How do you make sure that you keep your finger on the pulse of what's going on at both of these distant pieces of the property?

Landis: For me, what I've had to do is and it's been an evolution, so when we started farming is we still approached it very idealistically and we've learned to treat it more like a business and I think the easiest way for me to manage it is to just treat it like a job so that like at 8 a.m., I'm over there like I, you know, to show up for work and I schedule, you know, we work till noon and we take a lunch break and I've had to be very scheduled versus I think the 10 years of here, we, I might feel like starting to work at 5:00 in the morning and I might work till 8 p.m. and I think just getting it on a schedule has helped. It took a couple years.



Steven: I think part of it is this is mostly Landis. I've been dragged into this begrudgingly but Landis is a meticulous record keeper and I think keeping those records on a day-to-day basis, keeping them up to date has allowed us to create that schedule so we know when we ... a field needs to get turned over and put into the next crop, when a cover crop needs to get terminated, when we need to be cultivating or doing tillage or transplanting and because we have those great records, we can create a really tight schedule.

We just follow the schedule. If it's time to cultivate, well, it's time to cultivate. We don't need to necessarily remember to go over and take a look at it. It's just oh, field A needs to be cultivated in the next two days. The weather window looks good. Somebody goes and does it and so I think that's a really big part of it and I think it's also just that interest level, knowing that we have it over there and having a really good crew that we can give them their marching orders. They're going to be at our ... we call it our Beaver Brook property, our other property. You're going to be there from noon until 4:00 and this is what you're going to do and that's where they're at. That's what they're doing.

Chris: How did you know that you were ready to take on this farm at such an expanded level? I mean buying 60 acres of ag land, that's not a small purchase. That's not something you just do on a whim, and clearly, again, managing a couple of acres at home and now, all of a sudden, managing a lot of acres at a distance from the farm, what and then you said you quit your job at the same time, Landis. Why? What was it that said now is the time?

Landis: That's a really great question and so in simplest way is because we do keep great records and we always have, we could see a progression of sale receipts and gross profits and we were definitely making great progress but we also felt that we were hamstrung because we were cropping too much early and we weren't actually giving it good breaks. We were growing cover crops like rye and buckwheat but we weren't really doing what we desired and maybe when we'll look back later talking about, 'cause we really wanna talk about biodiversity and some of our unique cover cropping systems we have over at ag land but for us, it was we were just too tight here and, again, back to that competitive just wanting to grow bigger. We weren't satisfied with a market garden.

It just felt like we were bumping into our fence and into trees and into each other and so that was easy to think about ag land but the financial end of it, I had gone to the MOSES Farm Conference and seeing John Hendrickson, who I think you've interviewed and he had in 2005 produced a booklet or a research project and you may have also been part of that research project, "Grower to grower: Creating a livelihood on a fresh market vegetable farm," and it was really eye-opening to me because there seemed to be this middle-sized farm, if you're under three acres, you had low overhead, and so your growth profit per acre was high, and you could usually see a good income but it would be a supplemental income because there are biological limitations to how much you can earn on an acre of land or whatever, and then I went over, and I don't remember if it was 20 acres.

There was a huge efficiency of you needed less labor to grow the same number of acres



but there was this middle spot of five or 15 acres that we were at this farm, homestead farm, and we needed to push through that 'cause we asked ourselves did we want to get smaller and again, 'cause we're very rural, we have really almost no markets locally. They're very small and though we have a vibrant supportive community, they're still just so many people that are going to buy organic vegetables and so to fill a car and drive an hour or fill a van, it's just the efficiency of size and scale made more sense for us here 'cause we knew we would have to market outside of a smaller local area.

Anyhow, that research really underlined what we were feeling, which is this weird middle ground where you're just, you're too small to be efficient. You don't have the big, like there's lots of great tools for cultivation for small farms like cultivation and ground prep but there's almost no reasonably priced small tools for harvesting, we just ... Maybe you jump in here. We just purchased that's bean picker and it's expensive and you need to have an acre to pick beans. You can't just pick a bed's worth of beans with it. Go ahead, Steven, if you wanna ...

Steven: I think where Landis is going is what we saw was we knew we wanted to get there and to get bigger, we needed more land and that's where the new purchase of land came in. We gave ourselves, I think it was five years to make the transition to purchase the tools that we knew we were going to need, and we actually started buying some of the tools before we even needed them.

We bought our first transplanter before we really even needed it 'cause we knew it was going to take us a while to figure out how to use to its full utilization, but and then we were also ready when that land, when we purchased the land, we were able to immediately start production on it. We didn't have to think about locating. Now we've got the land, what are we going to do? It was pretty quick to map out fields and start putting them into a usable rotation, and I think where Landis was just going, we're still at that area of building. We just purchased, actually it was getting loaded today at Ohio onto a trailer, a bean picker.

We're been ramping up our green bean production to keep up with our CSA and with other demands and we were at a point where we couldn't keep up with picking beans by hand. A really good harvester can do about 25 pounds an hour and that's the first hour and maybe the second hour but you get into the third hour of picking beans, fourth hour of picking beans, you know how it is, Chris, those numbers go down.

Chris: Well aware.

Steven: If you need 200 or 300 pounds of beans for a delivery, you either need a whole lot of people or you need a bean picker and so that was a purchase we just literally just made and it'll be kind of exciting to see what that does this summer. I know our crew is pretty excited about it because of that thought of spending four or five hours in a green bean field bent over a bucket isn't a whole lot of fun.

Landis: We have this rule. It's kind of a rule that if we hear five complaints over a period of time or either five different complaints about the same thing or five complaints about the process, that it's time to address that, and beans, particularly last summer, it hurts



people's backs. It hurts their knees. There's no way to do it standing up and yeah, that's a really good indication that we either need to stop growing beans or we need to just plow through and get the tool that makes it happen so.

Chris: You guys had been marketing just locally there so I assume going up to Ashland, Wisconsin, a town of about 8,000 people and then it sounds like maybe marketing to some of the other smaller communities around you and then so then now you guys have jumped outside of that marketplace now, right?

Steven: Yeah, we owe we made the jump about five years ago to Duluth. Duluth is a city of about 90, 95,000 people, maybe 110,000 when you add in Superior, Wisconsin and some of the other outlying communities, and it's a city between Duluth and Superior, there are three colleges, two universities and a college. There's a large medical, three medical facilities there. It's a very vibrant community and very food oriented and so about an hour and a half away. We made the jump there and now roughly, I'm going to guess 50% of all of our sales, maybe more are in Duluth between the CSA sales there, co-op sales, restaurant sales. It's really become a go-to market for us.

There's something I heard long ago. A good friend of ours, Lee Stadnick, who was a organic farmer, he's now retired and is no longer farming but he always had a rule of thumb that 1% of any given population gets the idea of local fresh food and that it's very hard to bump above that 1%. There might be those magic spots like Madison, Wisconsin, where maybe 5% or 10% of the population gets it. Those places are far and few between, and so when we start looking at our local population of 1%, that's really not very many people and so that was I think what helped drive us to move further on and to go to Duluth.

1% of 100,000's a few more people than 1% of 8,000 so and I think Duluth is maybe not quite Madison, but it's a little bit more vibrant than our very local community as far as purchasable food. Not to say that our local community isn't great. We have a wonderful food co-op for the size town that we have. It's the envy of many other towns and a very active people but that said, it's still a very tight market.

Chris: How far of a drive is it to get to Duluth? And how many days a week are you going there?

Landis: We're just going one day a week at this point, although that might change, and it's just under two hours one direction so it's a four-hour round trip, so it's one of those ... a lot of things that make it challenging. It's an added cost but you just, you either decide you're going to go full steam ahead and complete the picture of the farm-

Steven: I think it's really you got to look at your markets and make decisions. I think in hindsight, if we had thought all of this out 20, 25 years ago, we maybe would've farmed in a different spot. This market drove where we wanted to farm at, and in some ways, it should drive a little bit of those thoughts but this is where we're at. That's where we have to go, which brings up another thought, what I've always called the dollar rule, and if you think of what's, you know, we mostly grow fresh produce.



USDA says that you should eat about six cups of vegetables a day. Well, if we look at what our local sales are, if everybody ate what USDA says you should eat, we probably wouldn't have to market more than about 10 miles from our house. There's enough people living here who aren't growing their own food that we could probably just market to that but the real, the sort of the tragedy is most people don't eat the way you probably should eat.

Even most co-ops, if you look at what is spent on local produce, I think our co-op is probably under a dollar a day per member household is spent on local food, and you start doing those numbers and there's a lot more that we can be doing as a population in general. In reality, if people ate the way we probably should eat, which is more fresh food, more local food, we wouldn't have to market that far out of our farms area.

Chris: I did some number-crunching a while back and came up with that the average American buys about \$43 worth of fresh vegetables a year. If you take the grocery store sales and then put that in with population, that's about what you get.

Steven: Right, yep.

Chris: Yeah, like you said, there's nobody eating six cups of vegetables out there and if you are, you're a weird vegetable hippie farmer freak.

Landis: You're a CSA member.

Chris: You're a CSA member, and even that, if you think about your average CSA box, six cups of vegetables per person per day, there probably aren't enough vegetables in there to do that, even for a CSA member.

Landis: That's true.

Steven: That's very correct, Chris. We laugh. A lot of our customers are ... one complaint we seem to get back from CSA members is that we give them too many vegetables and we scratch your heads because I think Landis and I, we eat about the equivalent of two or maybe three CSA share a week ourselves, just the two of us, and we wonder what people are eating but you lead a horse to water but hard to get them to drink.

Chris: Now how many CSA members do you have now?

Landis: Last year, we had just over 200, and this year, our projection is for 250. One other strategy we had with our CSA is so we are rural and we don't have a never-ending supply of people. We have to go get them but we also have a really vibrant food community here and what we noticed, we've had ... This is our 24th year of doing CSA and we've had a core group of people who've been with us 24 years and some almost that long, and so what our strategy has been to go deeper so we don't have just the traditional 18-week, which is the tradition up here CSA.

We actually do 25 consecutive weeks and then once a month in the winter so they are ...



we do an 11-month season, and then we've, over the years have added to meat shares as well with, just trying to go with the idea of going deeper into our customers rather than broader 'cause broader was not an option for us. We're couldn't get more customers so we had to find ways to keep our customers longer and it made a lot of sense because if you've got that person who's already a local foodie kind of person, why not give them more or provide more of that?

Even recently, we started adding dried beans and we're really excited by that because there's something that's shelf stable and it really takes, once you harvest it and dry it, it takes no energy to store it really, and for us, living off grid, that is something that's always important to us to 'cause we're always trying to look for energy savings, so it's hard to compare 200 shares. A lot of those are long year-round shares and I feel really happy that they have stuck with us over the years and very satisfied with that relationship with them, so.

Chris: The dried beans and the meant, is that coming from your own farm or you guys buying that in?

Landis: It's coming from our own farm so.

Steven: We're producing dried beans as part of our rotation and so they're our own. We're expanding that part of our operation, in fact, and then we do hogs in pasture as part of our, we actually, the hogs are part of our vegetable rotation. We take vegetable ground out of production for a year, raise pasture that the hogs are rotated on for about five months, and then they're butchered and gone so then they become a self-stable product as well.

We've just added sheep to the operation about a year ago all and that isn't in the part of the CSA share yet but hopefully this next fall it will be. We will start lambing in the next couple of weeks and we're growing that flock and we're also going to be using sheep as part of our rotation too. Yeah, those are exciting parts of what we're doing. The feedback we get back from her customers is that it's an important direction for us to go.

Chris: With that, I think we're at a good spot to take a quick break, get a word from our sponsors and then when we come back, I do want to talk you about the cover cropping system that you guys have put in place and how've got the biodiversity and the animals all working into that.

Steven: Great.

Chris: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farm Podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company. Vermont Compost potting soils are a really special product. I used Vermont Compost Fort Vee as a blocking mix in potting soil for over 12 years on my part and we grew great transplants with it. I mean really great transplants year after year after year and we save time, money, and management hassles compared to mixing our own. At a time in the organic movement when we're seeing more and more companies jumping on the organic bandwagon, Vermont Compost is a reminder of the art and the craft of making a great organic potting soil. One thing I've always appreciated about Vermont



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All right, and we're back with Landis and Steven Spickerman from Hermit Creek Farm up in the Chequamegon National Forest of northern Wisconsin. I should say extreme northern Wisconsin.

Steven: You can't get much further north.

Chris: That's right. Before we went on break, you were talking about meat, the livestock and how you've got them worked into your crop rotations and you had also mentioned earlier the importance of the cover crops in your rotation, especially at your new ground. Can you talk to us about how that works?

Landis: [00:40:30] We, about 10 years ago, started bringing hogs into our homestead farm and we actually grow pasture for them, so we take a piece of our vegetable ground out of vegetable production and put in a buffer strip around their area and intentionally grow strips of, Steven calls it a succotash mix of I think it's oats and peas and other leftover vegetable seeds we have and he just literally plants it and then we let it get up to a certain height and then with using electric fencing, just move them into that and then start the next piece and rotate them like the spokes of a wheel from there.

They have a kind of portable house and so they're just living in this old vegetable ground that now they're eating and pooping and we supplement some of what they get greens with whole grain and they're there for that growing season and we don't raise our own sows. We buy in weaners and then grow them to slaughter size, so they're there just for that summer, then that winter, that ground is just over winter.

Usually we try to put a last bit of oat down and get a little green flush just to hold that soil in place and the manure that they've done and then the next year, that brought back into production, and part of our food safety and organic certification require us to document what we're growing there but just for our own health and safety sake, we grow the next year crops that are harvested from above the ground, like sweet corn and usually sweet corn or brassica, both of which are heavy feeders and so we enjoy that fertile ground now and so we just moved that. That is part of our rotation.



Steven: One of the things we've done at our, over at our other property, our Beaver Brook property, is we've standardized all of our fields that are at 2½ acres and we will have X number of fields in vegetable production. The fields that aren't in vegetable production, I think this last year, that was six acres worth or thereabouts, was in long-term legume rotation but what we'll do is we'll take a pasture. Our hope is after three or four years, depending how the field is playing out, we'll pull that field fully out of the vegetable production. We'll put it into a cover crop, usually over winter rye or barley that was under snow and with a mix of several types of alfalfa and two or three different cultivars of clover, so then we'll take the barley or the winter rye off, use that as mulch, really good high-quality wheat-free mulch that we can use all around the farm. Never can have enough mulch.

We then have that nice crop of legumes, the alfalfa and the clover coming up underneath it. That alfalfa and clover will sit on that field for two or three years fixing nitrogen. It also gives us forage for our sheep. We don't take a lot of hay off of it. We'll probably take one cutting off of it a year right at bloom time and so you're getting the blooms for bee forage. You take it off. It regrows. You get a second later bloom for bee forage. We let that sit for the winter so we'll get two or three years of growth. That last year and this year, we'll be just starting that.

The last year that in that legume cover, we'll then use electric fence and run sheep on it for the last half of that last year, probably August and October so then its last days, it's getting manured by the sheep. It's getting the ... There's something magic that happens when you put animals on the ground, the symbiosis of what goes on in a ruminant's gut is I think pretty magic and then the plan is then that that following year it will be rotating back into our vegetable production.

That's really our long-range rotation with cover crops and we also ... we still use short-term cover crops like oats and winter peas and all the other cover crops that are in the toolbox, buckwheat as placeholders, and fields that are in active production but I think the really interesting thing that we're doing, that we're excited about is taking ground out of production for longer periods of time, allowing it to rest, allowing it maybe to have some of the fungal growth that goes on in the soil to return.

When you're in an annual crop process, you really burn that mycorrhizal system out. You start to replace that fungal system with a bacterial system. By resting that piece of ground for several years, you can allow it that fungal system to start to reestablish itself. We're very interested to see what that begins to do.

Landis: You know the other really exciting thing for me that I get really excited about it is when we first purchased that piece of land, it was GMO corn and it was really sterile and you could walk literally across that field, that 60 acres and not find a single bug even. It was just kind of amazing after living on this homestead that never had chemicals on it to just see the difference and the first few years, we would start to just, oh, we see. Oh, there's a toad. Two years ago, it was our snake and last year we had our first bobolinks nesting and a Harrier hawk was nesting and just watching that growth and something that Steven has implemented about three years ago, these prairie strips that he's ... they're



like permanent ... Maybe you describe them, Steven.

Steven: Sure, those 2½-acre fields. We separated each of those fields by a 50-foot strip of a polyculture of about 60 native prairie species that we're allowing to grow, and we still use that strip for driving on if we need to get from one side of the field to the other, from one to the other side, and we use it as a headland but that doesn't seem to really bother those species that are growing in there, the native prairie plants, and it's been about three years that we started instituting, putting those in and the amount of pollinators that we're seeing coming out of the ... We had our best concurrent crop we've ever had. It was about a two-acre field of melons and winter squash.

Even though it was a very wet year last year for us, and typically when we have a wet year with a lot of rain, we were getting rain every two days, every three days, you don't get a lot of good bee flight and so you don't have great pollination in that type of crop. Yet, even with that, we had, because that field was bounded by native prairie plants that were blooming all summer, the amount of bee activity was just tremendous and we had unbelievable pollination in that concurrent crop. I'm really convinced that providing that beneficial insect in pollinator habitat has been a huge benefit.

Landis: Not only that, but we've also noted so that permanent strip is now a refuge for the fungal activity that we can have in our permanent or semi-permanent alfalfa crop that we have, that it becomes an easier inoculate into that field and then we did a late winter. We had a bit of a thaw and so we did a farm walk over there and those prairie strips had so much more soil, I mean not soil.

Steven: Snow.

Landis: Snow, yeah, that you could just see they become this trap of, besides if we messed up our, so for erosional purposes but just for snow, they become this snow fence, and there was a ton of old seeds from those prairie flowers on top of the snow, and we were seeing horn lark or were they snow buntings? I can't remember, feeding on them, juncos, things like that, which then provide food to keep them there that might eat weed-seeds, say, or they just become this huge, important, even though we're not ... We're taking crop ground out of production as far as commercial production but it becomes this value-added piece to the farm. It's hard to quantify but it's hugely exciting to see it in action.

Chris: I always think one of the challenges for, and obviously you don't do this just, I mean you're taking ground and putting it in prairie just for the money, but it is one of the things that distinguishes what a lot of us do as local producers and local organic growers that we're taking very active measures and we're taking land literally out of production. We're assuming extra costs to manage that land but there's no economic return for doing that. Do you guys do any marketing around the ecosystem services that you're providing in the ways that you've just described?

Landis: No. Go ahead, Steven.

Steven: I should say I think many of our customers know how we farm and I think that's



important to them, and I think that occasionally can attract, say, CSA members. They're excited about what we're doing. They like to come out on farm tours and see what we're doing and that's exciting for them-

Landis: You had the NRCS guys out last summer. I guess we've been approached to do research projects and things like that.

Steven: It's also, because we are certified organic, we obviously follow the national organic program and it was probably about five or six years ago, I remember being in a workshop at the MOSES Conference in La Crosse and Jeff Moyer from Rodale was giving a talk and at that time, he was on the NOP board and he said that we, as farmers, needed to be paying more attention to biodiversity that it's written into an NOP. There's very strong language about biodiversity and that he suggested at that time that we would start to getting, we'd be getting asked questions by our certifying agencies about what we were doing for biodiversity, and we've always been working with biodiversity. Landis' and my background is ecology, biology, botany, from an education point of view so it was always an interest of ours, but we took that to heart.

It's kind of odd. We still have not been ever asked the question about biodiversity by our certifying agency, but we're doing the work. NOP says you should be doing it, that all organic farms should be doing it, so we've taken that to heart. Another interesting thing is those strips, we've bounded our entire property, that entire 60-acre property by either prairie strips or by tree planting and we've done that because we're still, that piece of property is surrounded by a GMO dairy farm, and so we have worries with drift and whatnot. Those buffers are actively protecting us, hopefully, from our neighbor. It's kind of sad to think that you have to do that in today's world.

It's not that he's not a good guy. He's actually a very good farmer for the type of farming, conventional farming that he does, but it's still something that we have to worry about. I've always found it interesting that he's a farmer, can farm right up to the fence line between us, and that we then have to take land out of production, a pretty sizable chunk of land when you figure out the acres, to protect our investment from what he's doing on his land. That obviously happens on all organic farms because I don't know too many organic farms that are embedded within many acres of other organic farms. We all have those issues and what's going on on a neighboring farm and what's going on downstream or upstream, you know, up land.

Chris: Yeah, it is one of the frustrating things about farm law, the way it sits. You would think that people would be responsible for keeping their pollutants to themselves but that's clearly not how it works.

Steven: It doesn't work that way.

Landis: No. We did tree planting over a three-year ... it was an EQIP grant program and so we did get some compensation to establish those, and that was really helpful. It was a little bit cumbersome to work through the NRCS for us, and so the prairie strips we're doing on our own. I guess in the end when I think about it is that it's just like moving here. I wouldn't do it any other way. It's not that I'm being forced to do this. It's I wish to do



this and I hope that we are oftentimes, in our fields at the same time, our neighbor dairy farmer's in his field, and I'm sure there's puzzlement sometimes but what I ... Maybe it's a little smug of me to think that over time, he's watching us progress, and he, it feels to me, does the same thing over and over again and has to work harder.

I know milk prices were down the past year and he just seems to have to ... he's cutting fence rows now to farm right up to the fence line, and we're taking land out and almost tithing and we're flourishing. We're building new buildings and getting equipment and it just feels like maybe through example, I don't ever think I could ever change the world or even much of my community, but if I can just make my neighbor think a little bit more and all our neighbors, I mean, they don't shop at our farm. They probably think we're weird but over time we watched them be like, "Huh. Oh, whatcha got there? Oh, that's pretty cool," and we just dug a pond.

Part of that original GMO 60 acres was they plowed right through a wetland and we got some 1920s photos, Steven. I don't remember the aerial photo date but it showed an intermittent stream and a shallow wetland that was now obliterated and taken off of soil maps even in the '70s, so we've restored that and we tried to get NRCS interested but they didn't think it was wetland habitat, so we just went ahead and did it and it's amazing to just watch how that having a restored wetland, and it's still raw ground, starts adding more habitat to that system. Yeah, I'm curious what our neighbors think, but you know.

Steven: Not to mention that added almost a million gallons of irrigation water to the system.

Landis: Yeah, that too.

Chris: Not a bad side benefit there.

Steven: Yeah.

Chris: Now you mention that you're on sandy soil. Is most your irrigation water coming from surface water or do you guys also use a well?

Steven: No, we're all surface water so it's the sandy loam. It's a pretty good soil. It holds moisture really well. We're on bedrock here. You can go anywhere from 10 to 20 feet down, you're the hit bedrock and the bedrock just keeps going, so water is hard to find and it's at a premium. We own three wells. Those wells all produce in the one- to three-gallon-a-minute range so there's is no way you can run irrigation off of it. We have enough water to wash vegetable but that's about it. We try to rely on surface water. We've now dug two ponds. We have one here in the home farm and then the new pond over on the other property and we pray for rain a lot. It's what we have to live with. We've learn to-

Landis: Well, we've been dry-land farming, I mean that's we do stir-tillage and increased our organic matter and we do have good soils in general and live with that.

Steven: We use a lot of mulch.



Landis: Yeah.

Chris: Just to go back a little bit to the process of expanding the farm, what kind of challenges did you guys run into moving from being a five-acre farm just on the home place to now 10 acres of vegetables and a whole bunch of cover crops?

Landis: A lot of systems haven't changed, so I think we really realized that we had to standardize everything we do, so besides we bought tools, like a water wheel transplanter and basket weeders and things like that. We standardized our fields. We standardized our bed links. We standardized just our planting schemes so that everything fit in because up until that time, it was more like what they recommend in book, 18 inches apart for this crop and 12 inches apart for that and six inches for that, and we just like, "No, we're just, everything's on 12. Or 24."

We had to change our thought. We did soil blocks for years and years and we just went to soil plugs, trays, and so it's been ... We've had to basically radically change everything. We used to customize our CSA shares and put people's names on them. Now, they're all packed the same. It's a little more assembly line and that's been a hard, again, we started out in the idealistic way of wanting to farm and how to think about farming more of a business, which wasn't hard do it. It just was a change for us. Planning to where tools are, for me, a big shift was I thought having one or two tractors was like a lot and Steven was always like, "No, we need more tractors. No, we need more tractors," and sure enough, we need more tractors. You need to have two sets of tools and two places and we had coolers in two places. We have wash areas in two places and yeah.

Steven: One of the things that for me it was standardization, making sure that, like Landis said, all the fields are the same, the bed links are the same, the row spacing is the same, so you can jump from one piece of equipment to another piece of equipment and not have to change the setup at all. I think that was huge. I think having a crew that is willing and able and ready to work and well trained was really big. We aren't doing this alone. As much as we like to think that we are, we really have been blessed over the last decade or more of having really, really great people work with us and-

Landis: And stick with us, you know.

Steven: Yeah, and that's been huge. When somebody new comes onto the crew, you've got older crew members there who train them in. That's been really big, I think, and just training ourselves to think of it that way. I think people, when they start farming, they like to think of it ... You come into almost with sort of a nostalgic romanticized view and in reality, a farm is a business and it's not a lot different than any other business. You're producing a product and you live and die by that production. I think getting in the mindset that while we can still be a very idyllic place, that we are really a business and that there are, you know, we've got production schedules and you've got to have so many units come out of a space if you're going to be successful. I think thinking it like that was really a big part of it coming to grips with that.



Chris: Steven, you mentioned the importance of those long-term employees. I know that's a really hard thing to do on a vegetable farm and you guys have a pretty limited growing season up there. How have you managed to get people to stay year after year after year?

Steven: Part of it is we pay well. We don't look at our ... I think a lot of farm use employees as interns and as an educational experience and right from the get-go, I decided that our employees were employees, that we will pay them a good wage. It's not the best wage. They can make more elsewhere probably but for this area, it's a good wage and that in return, they come and they work hard, and I think that's part of it. I think we're lucky that we have a small liberal arts college in Ashland which produces a lot of our employees. They arrived and usually they aren't working for us as students. They may spend their junior or senior year with us, but then they stick around the area and they want to learn how to farm and so they work for us for two, three, four more years, which is really important to get that longevity out of people.

I think as we move forward, employees are hard to find. It's not an easy thing and a little bit of it's been luck and I think a little bit of it has been the way we treat our employees. We treat them as equals. They're as important to the farm as we are and they know that, and I think that empowers them a little bit. I think that's important to empower your employees, to give them some ability to stretch their legs a little bit on your own farm.

Landis: I think also you... We've learned to connect the dots. I think the most probably ... the first moment they come on the farm, they're very enthusiastic and they're going to farm and it's so exciting for them, and then you give them this lecture about no, we're producing product and we gotta do it, so many units per hour and it's kind of shocking to their system, to their idea, and then you have to reconnect that enthusiasm again. Oh, but remember, you're feeding people. You're making people healthy. It's really important. You do have to tell them that no, you actually have to work hard and produce a unit so much per hour 'cause for them, they get a hourly rate but I don't get paid but by the piece, so it's important that you help me stay in business, but then you try to keep over, you know, we work with them. They literally ... we do everything with them.

We're not top-downward. We're all on the same level so they see us dirty and sweaty and tired and then you connect, again, the reason why you're growing food, why this is important to remember these things and to, you know, if that knowledge is gone, it's gone forever and then 'cause you're working, you often have great conversations and I think if you can connect, reconnect them to why they originally had that impulse, they fall in love with it again. Yeah, I think that is what's really important. We've been lucky.

Chris: Landis, you mentioned you get paid according to how well the farm produces. Are you making a full-time living on the farm now?

Landis: [01:06:30] I'm earning a full-time wage for myself but we ... so Steven works still full time off the farm and so he earns, he kind of our health insurance and our retirement



fund. I'm a contributing factor to the farm. We've been I think it was a choice to do it that way because we've been building equity in our farm. It would be hard to do both. It would be hard to live and we raised a child and pay all the normal off of this farm, and to build buildings and buy equipment and put up fencing and big wells and ponds and things like that.

We made the choice that we would both work and contribute to the household, so our farm doesn't quite yet sustain us that way, and that's a real, it's a heartbreaker in a way. I wish, you know, I think he's said it before, if that the model of working and living completely from the farm probably never existed or rarely, that it was more somebody was a farmer and somebody worked, whether it was in the grocery store in town or whatever it was, and that's how we've been doing it so.

Steven: If I could jump in real quick, Chris, with what Landis just said, where I grew up in northern Illinois, our small homestead farm was surrounded by prototypical northern Illinois farms in the '60s and '70s of small dairies, row crops, that type of thing. When I think about it, just about every one of those farms, even back in the '60s, somebody worked off the farm. Usually the wife would have a part-time job in town, but sometimes I know the farm just north of our farm, the farmer Harold, he worked the night shift at a Chrysler plant, and then he came home in the daytime and farmed, he ran about a 40-cow dairy.

I look back at that and wonder exactly how he did that but I think, yeah, like Landis just said, it's probably always really been the model, that idea that you're going to make all of your livelihood off of your farm, it doesn't happen that often. It can happen. I know farmers here in this area, dairy farmers who are both husband and wife are working on the dairy farm, but I also know that they struggle, so for us, it was a conscious choice.

I'm at a point in my career. I worked for the U.S. Forest Service. I have for pretty much ever since college. It would be a hard decision to leave that career right now to work on the farm, in part, because I still work five days, six days a week on the farm. It's just at a little bit different schedule, not quite as many hours as I would if I was here full time but in today's reality of health insurance and whatnot, having that job off the farm has been huge for us. Landis is also, quite honestly, the better farmer. She's the true farmer and I've got the strong back and I know how to work on the equipment... I know how to fix tractors.

Landis: Oh, that's not really true. We are a good team for sure.

Chris: One of the things that you guys put right on the front page of your webpage is the words "quality of life" and how important that is to you, and I'm hearing what you're talking about going through this expansion, raising kids, having an off-farm job, and still coming home and farming. How do you guys make all of that work?

Steven: It's a good question. I-

Landis: You know, I'm going to jump in really quick, and you can finish it, Steven, but when I think about it, we have an obsession with farming. We were really plain spoken about it.



We can't help ourselves. When I was six years old, I kind of brow-beat my dad into giving me part of his garden, and Steven had similar stories. It's like we can't help ourselves and that our favorite thing to do is actually grow things, and so we oftentimes, like we used to do farmers market and every week, people would tell us, "You work so hard," and it just kind of doesn't compute to me.

There are definitely times where I need to take a break from thinking about farming. I stress about, I worry about the weather and I worry about sales, and but the actual growing things is I'm so happy when I do it, and I think that though I have to sometimes do paperwork or sometimes I have to do deliveries or stress because it's dry or too wet, I don't ... that's not a problem to me and I don't know how that would translate to other people but I do feel like farming has to be kind of a lifestyle choice.

I don't think it's easy to turn it into a 9-to-5 job that ... 'cause you're dealing with weather and biological systems and so I don't think you can just be done that for if it's about to rain or if it hasn't rained or if the animals are ... it's a lightning storm and the animals are scared and carrying around. You have to understand it's a lifestyle and-

Steven: Yeah, I think Landis said it pretty well. I think for us, quality of life is in part where we live and that comes all the way back to the very beginning of the place that we chose to farm. That story Landis told about transplanting lettuce and having a family of wolves, a pack of wolves literally at the end of the field serenading the crew as they were transplanting, that's for us part of our quality of life. I took our three Border Collies for a walk this morning and I walked out to the end of the driveway, took a right, and I was on national forest, and I spent half an hour walking down a road that literally nobody's driven on in the past week within the national forest, sort of like living in a vacation sometimes. And some vacation where we work hard but I think we would be doing that anyways.

When I wake up on Sunday morning, my first impulse isn't to grab the paper and snuggle into an easy chair. My first impulse is to go take a walk on the farm and see what happened overnight, and that probably leads to the second thing, which is to close the gate that was left open and then the next thing you know, you're doing stuff. I think that's a big part of our quality of life and I think it's just who we are and what we do, but it's important.

There are things that we think about and for a long time, we taught within the Farm Beginnings context of programs through the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, and one of the things that we always told students of that program was to have an exit strategy. Somewhere in the back your mind, have a way to get out if it's not working for you, and we've had frank conversations and both Landis and I, we're in our 50s. At some point in time, we may not be able to farm, so what is that exit strategy?

I think having those honest conversations is part of maintaining quality of life, if you're thinking about it, something that's there and you've got to think about. I think it helps you along the way, and then just enjoying what you're doing. I honestly can think of no better way to spend a summer afternoon than raking hay, probably my favorite thing. It's the first job I did on a farm was raking hay, and still probably my favorite job, and so



when I think of quality of life, that's what I think about.

Chris: With that, we're going to turn to our lightning round and we're going to get a word from a sponsor before we do that and then we'll be right back.

This week, the Lightning Round and the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought you by you, our listeners, and the nice thing about that is I don't need to go on and on about it because the fact that you're here probably means you already think that the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is kind of cool. I've heard from hundreds of you that that's the case, and today I'm asking for your support. Specifically, I'm asking you to go to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate and sign up to provide monthly support for the show. If you'll kick in a buck a show, I'll send you a very cool and very purple Farmer to Farmer Podcast sticker for your water bottle as an extra way to say thanks.

[01:15:30] All right. Landis, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Landis: Well, I would say probably the water wheel transplanter and I say that because it was a paradigm shift when we purchased that. For one thing, everybody who comes on the farm, every employee, every volunteer, every whoever wants to ride it. It's kina cool. It's like you feel like you're farming when you're on it and for me, it was when I stopped being a gardener and started thinking production.

It forces whoever sits on it, you have to keep up with the tractor pace. Everything's planted with regularity and same spacing, and it just shifted. All of a sudden, it was learning about Santa Claus, like oh, Santa Claus and the really, you mean the Easter Bunny, it's the same. It's just like ah, now I have to think about road covers should all be the same and fields should all be the same, and just standardization and so I just really liked that tool.

Chris: Awesome, and Steven, your favorite tool on the farm?

Steven: Landis mentioned a paradigm shift, so my tool changes a lot. I like whatever tool at the time has created a paradigm shift, so we've gotten used to doing things one way. I go to the MOSES Conference and I hear Steve Pinkus say what his favorite tool is. I go out and get one of those and suddenly, yeah, that's my favorite tool. Boy, that was a few tools ago, so each year, it's something new. This year, we're adding a second cultivating tractor on the farm and we'll be belly-mounting a trust finger weeder under that.

We've had that finger weeder for a couple of years but I've been having to pull one implement off of our cultivating tractor and put that on and then back and forth, and I think this year, it'll be the new cultivating tractor and that finger weeder. Who knows what it'll be next year? I'm sure there'll be something. I'm kind of tool centric so can never have enough tools.

Chris: Steven, what's Landis' farming super power?

Steven: That's a great question. I think her farming super power is her unbelievable attention to detail. She remembers things that I don't know where they come from but the



incredible ... she can tell you how many seedlings she started so far and probably how many she started last year and the year before that, and we do around 150,000 transplants out of our greenhouse a year, and she has a clipboard right on the door going into the greenhouse that tells her how many seedlings she's at. That attention to detail is really her superpower.

Chris: Landis, I'll ask the same question of you about Steven. What's Steven's farming super power?

Landis: His humor. He is the funniest guy and he does the most ridiculous things that gets the whole crew laughing. They created one time a whole video of me returning ... they had gotten a job done and then the crew and I was picking broccoli at the other place and bringing the van full and he created a whole video of them waiting for me to return. It was hilarious and I think he makes everybody laugh, and laughter is the best medicine so.

Steven: My favorite joke on the farm is when we have new people on the transplanter. We're using a tractor with a creeper gear on it but they still, when you're brand new on a transplanter, any speed is too fast, but I love to, at some point, jump off the tractor and walk back and walk alongside them and then ask them how they're doing, and they usually look at me, and then they realize aren't you driving? But it's really so slow that the 15 feet that went down the row it didn't get off the row too bad...

Landis: Yeah.

Chris: [01:20:00] Landis, what's your favorite crop to grow?

Landis: I really like the unsung heroes and I think the onion is the most undervalued vegetable. If you think about it, at least in my household, nobody gets excited at the farmers market. They're all, "Oh, the first tomato," and "Oh, the first strawberry," but when I bring onions to the market, nobody even says anything and yet, in my household, we cook with onions every day. I think we eat an onion every day and they're the most ... when you cook them down and caramelize them, they're so sweet and so rich and tasty.

If you don't mind, I just have one story about a lucky man who for whom the undervalued vegetables turned to solid gold. Here's the story as I was told it. The farmer who grew acres and acres of onions became weary of trying to sell his onions at home so he filled a carriage with bags of them and struck out to seek his fortune. After journeying, he reached the country where onions were unknown and when he demonstrated their wonders to the royal court, the king rewarded the farmer by filling all his onion bags with gold.

When the farmer returned home, and told his story to his neighbor, a garlic farmer took the same journey to the same land. The court was again bewitched, this time by garlic, and the night after a great feast where garlic got the pulses quickened, and garlic chicken drove people to ecstasy, the garlic farmer was rewarded. His garlic sacks filled to brimming with treasure. The man drove straight back to his native land, aching to see his riches, and when he finally arrived, he opened his bulging bags to find them full of



the kingdom's most prized possession: onions.

[01:22:00] That's why I like onions.

Chris: Steven, how about you? Your favorite crop to grow?

Steven: Sort of like the paradigm shift with tools, it changes. Right now, my favorite crop is a cover crop called phacelia, the native went to the Western U.S. that I don't think has been grown a lot in North America as an agricultural crop but it's very popular in Europe, mostly as a bee forage. We started playing around with that about three years ago just in some small trials, and I was sometimes I was putting out meter quadrats and finding 30 and 40 bumblebees of four or five, six species all within a single meter.

It was as if the entire planting was moving with bees, and so we've been growing that wide, more of it, and what's really great about it is it's been ... When you start thinking about crop rotation, it's in the family that we grow no other plants than through the forage family and we're not growing any other forage crops, so as far as a cover crop, it's a really good ground smothering cover. It has an unbelievably beautiful flower that's really attractive to pollinators, and we can use it in rotation because it doesn't bump up against any other family that we grow. Right now, that's my favorite.

Chris: Steven, would you spell phacelia?

Steven: Sure, sure, it's P-H-A-C-E-L-I-A.

Chris: Ah, in other words, I was completely mispronouncing it. It's phacelia, okay, great.

Steven: Yeah, it's a really great one, and it's becoming more available. I'm starting to see it in more catalogs now, so I think people are starting to catch on but it's been widely grown in Europe for some reason, even though it's a native North American plant.

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

Steven: Oh boy. I would probably only beginning farmer self to just keep moving forward, to keep positive, and to don't sweat the details too much. Where Landis is incredibly detail oriented, I tend to be more big picture and I think I would myself doing that. I probably also tell myself that I need to do probably a little bit more often than I do. Right now, take a week off in October and go to the Boundary Waters. I try to do that but I don't know always get there and I would probably tell myself, "You know you need to make sure you plan that a little bit better."

Chris: Landis, how about you? If you could go back in time and talk to your beginning farmer self, what would you tell her?

Landis: I would you tell her beware the shotgun effect, and what I mean by that is starting too many things all at once scatters your efforts.



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Chris: Landis and Steven, thank you so much for joining me on the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.

Landis: Thank you, Chris. This has really been a delight.

Steven: It's been a pleasure, Chris.

Chris: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 112 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast and you can find the notes for the show at the farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Spickerman, that's S-P-I-C-K-E-R-M-A-N.

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Don't forget, like I mentioned earlier in the show, you can support the show by going to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate. I'm working to make the best farming podcast in the world and you can help. Finally, please let me know you would like to hear from on the show through the suggestions form at farmertofarmerpodcast.com.

I'll do my best to get them on the show, and while I've known the Spickermans for some time, they're here today because you asked.

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

Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 112, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Landis and Steven Spickerman own and operate Hermit Creek Farm, 15 miles south of Lake Superior in far northern Wisconsin, a challenging place to farm, lots of woods, and lots of water. With about 10 acres in vegetables and another six in cover crop, Landis and Steven sell their produce through a combination of wholesale and a 200-member CSA. We discuss their long, slow, and roundabout journey through homesteading and small-scale production, having Landis full time on the farm.

Landis and Steven share how they made the decision to acquire new land a few miles from their home farm, and the challenges they experienced in making the change from growing on one small piece of land, to growing on two very different pieces of farmland



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with two very different farming systems. Landis and Steven also share the whys and the hows of expanding to a larger marketplace, and how that drove their pursuit of scale. We also dive into how they've expanded their CSA through the expansion of seasons and products, rather than raw member numbers.

Hermit Creek Farm has also integrated hogs, and now sheep into their vegetable and cover crop rotations, and they use native prairie strips for pollinator and biodiversity inoculation in the vegetable fields. Landis and Steven share details about how they make this work, why it matters to them, and why it matters to the farm overall.

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Landis and Steven Spickerman, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Steven: It's really good to be here.

Landis: It's our pleasure. We really have been looking forward to this.

Chris: We were talking before I hit the record button, and it sounds like we got a really good day to be recording somebody in northern Wisconsin.

Landis: Yes, March Madness and cold sleet, such a cool month.

Steven: When you live as far north as we do in the middle of the continent, we can have winter, it seems like, about seven months out of the year, and today looks like winter.

Chris: I think that would be a good place to start. As far north as you guys are, in the middle of the continent, can you give us the lay of the land and situate your farm geographically, and in time, and in terms of your marketplace?

Steven: We are in northern Wisconsin, about 15 miles from Lake Superior, and about 600 feet above the lake. We are in a really challenging place for farming. It's a place with a lot of wood and a lot of water. Lake Superior dominates our landscape, and it creates weather for us. We're in a place that was heavily glaciated so the soil changed rapidly from one little valley to the next little valley, one place is rock, the next place is clay. It's a challenge. It's in an area that's very rural. We live within the Chequamegon National Forest, so that's a large area of forest that not a lot of people live in.



Towns tend to be small, they tend to be rural, self-sufficient. It's our geographic location. Being mid-continent is also kind of interesting, when you live ... we live about 46 degrees latitude, when you live on the coast at 46 degrees, it's pretty temperate, but here in the middle of the continent above 46 degrees and it can be challenging weather-wise. We just got done with a week of overnight lows below zero, and daytime highs not much above that. The week before that, we were in the 60s so it's a challenging place.

Chris: Yeah, it's been kind of a, I feel like an exceptionally crazy spring in Wisconsin. Is this out of the norm for your guys' experience?

Landis: Yes, it's definitely getting warmer and we've had spikes in our weather all winter actually. We get really cold which is normal and then it gets ... We've actually, we've had three thaws this winter, which is not normal. We do maple sugaring in the spring and we've actually decided this year not to do it because of the weather. You can see a little bit of die back on our maple trees over the years and just feel on shaky ground as far as prognosis of weather.

Chris: Feeling like you need to give those trees a little bit of a rest this year.

Landis: Yeah, for sure, yeah.

Steven: It was a hard decision to make. We've been making maple syrup for 28 years now, and to take a spring off from that what was the traditional start of our farming season was a big decision but with the weather the way it's been, we could've start tapping trees over a month ago and people I know making syrup, the sap hasn't run now in several weeks because it's been so cold and those tap holes only have a certain life so if we were going to take a year off, this was probably the year to do it.

Chris: How many acres is Hermit Creek Farm? I guess I'll ask how many in vegetables and then how many overall are you guys managing?

Landis: Hermit Creek Farm is 140 total acres. We have two sites, our home site, which we originally purchased in the '80s and moved here and started farming in 1993 and it's mostly wood and that's where our sugar bush is and our homestead and then we own another 60 acres about 2½ miles away and that's all ag land, and that was purchased about seven years ago with the idea of ramping up. I think when we first looked at farming, we weren't interested in farming. We were interested in homesteading and we were accidental farmers really, coming at it in a long, slow roundabout way. We really weren't farmers at the get-go.

Steven: Sure, I can jump in. Chris, where we got our start, we both grew up rural. I grew up in northern Illinois. Landis grew up in Florida in rural situations but not farms. I think both of our families really felt strongly about producing their own food. This was in the '60s and early '70s and that time period. We both had a lot of experience with farm animals, with large vegetable gardens. I had the added experience of growing up working on neighbor farms and also for Green Giant Corporation and so I had the, got a lot of



experience with tractors and with larger-scale operations and then we're both interested separately growing up in natural resources and biology and went to school for that, both found ourselves out West working for natural resource agencies where we met.

We both had this inkling of wanting to, as Landis put it, homestead and maybe give back to how our parents were raising us, and that led us here to Wisconsin and put that us on that original piece of ground, that 80 acres that when you look at it, wouldn't lend itself really to farming. It wasn't farmed in the 1900s but it only has about 10 acres of open ground. The rest is woods, 70 acres of woods, which is great for a homestead but not really great from a production farm perspective, especially a vegetable farm.

Landis: Yeah. Steven and I are competitive gardeners. We can't help but grow and then get bigger and race each other on who can do the most, so we did still start out with the idea of planting an orchard, raising sheep. This piece of land is, again, as we said, it was in the national forest. Steven had an apprentice with a small sugar bush operation just before we moved here. It had great sugar bush, just perfect, but we wanted to grow our own vegetables but we, just for our home use, and of course, it just went wild and I guess we can't just grow a vegetable garden.

It always kept getting and bigger and literally, we just walked into our local cooperative, the Chequamegon Food Co-Op, and I have a friend who was the manager there and asked her if she wanted some vegetables, and at that time, they didn't even have a cooler. They just had a dry bin that was a tiny little co-op and she said yep, and that's how we started, literally, in 1993, just bringing a carload of produce and then just building, you know, each year, incrementally, increasing our production. Both Steve and I worked off the farm for ... Steven still works off the farm full time and I worked always winters for 22 years, so it's been a slow growth for us.

About seven years ago when we purchased that other piece of land, I quit my job completely and became the full-time farmer and when you choose a piece of land for homesteading, you make a ton of mistakes. We have no markets at all. We didn't have running water. We still don't have indoor plumbing. We live on solar. The land is rocky. It's fertile but it's rocky and rolling and so I think we learned a lot from our mistakes, and so when we looked for land, we tried to do a better job of looking for something that would be conducive to agriculture and we found this beautiful piece of land with sandy loam soil and great drainage and

Chris: Flat ground and good soil can make a mediocre farm a good farm in a hurry.

Landis: It's true. I just watched our bottom line keep bouncing up once in that seven. I just met with our farm service agency loan officer and we also, at that time, got a couple of small loans from FSA and to help with the ramping up and see like you've done a good job, like building. Look at your incremental and then all of a sudden, boom, boom, boom. It's like a stair step and it's like yeah. No duh. It just becomes easier when you don't hamstring yourself so.

Chris: On that new land then, you've got all of those things like running water, electricity, all



those things that make life easy here in the 21st century.

Steven: Yeah, that was part of our selection of that land besides the fact that it's a great piece of agricultural land. There's a power line that runs along the road and it was easy to put a well in and easy to build on. It's sort of like our Doctor Jekyll/Mr. Hyde kind of farm. We come here to our homestead farm where it's solar panels and as Landis said, we don't have running water in our house, then we go over to the other piece property where we have electricity and we can just flip a switch and turn a cooler on or turn a cooler off. We have water. It made things a lot easier. It also makes us very much appreciate that I think. Every time we walk in and open up a cooler that we don't have to worry about our battery being discharged by running the cooler too much, it's a revelation in many ways. It's made things a lot easier. I think that said, I don't think we would do anything either. We certainly enjoyed this homestead farm that we've lived on now for about 27 years.

Landis: Yeah, and just to put that part in perspective. It's like I maybe sounded like I was complaining about it but we always get to the end of thinking those our story and it's like, yeah, but we wouldn't change anything. Last summer we had, we were transplanting lettuce I think and it was a foggy morning and literally, just on the end of the woods, we had a small pup and three adult wolves talking, serenading us, just coursing back, and the beauty of that is heart-stopping so I'll take woods and water and some issues any day in the end. We wouldn't change it, so.

Chris: You guys are still producing at the home farm as well as on your new grade A land.

Landis: Yes, yes, so and I think this is some of those things listening to podcasts, the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, we, went over the years, have evolved the homestead farm, is we have nine coop houses on it plus a greenhouse and a small tight fields that have not much head land so it's real hard to turn tractors around and shorter field blanks in general, so we've downsized that to more of a micro farm, modeling after a lot of the young people that we hear doing urban on an acre, smaller rows, try to get rid of using the tractor here.

2½ miles away is still a 15-minute tractor drive so try to do the homestead farm as a micro farm and then our ag land as a kind of low-crop, larger landscape, bigger, doing an acre of potatoes and an acre of beans and versus here we're doing salad greens and herbs and trellis tomatoes and things like that, and it's actually helped a lot to separate rather than try to do everything on both. We can have the scheduled work crews at certain days here or there. It has made a lot better management of the two sites so.

Chris: That's something I remember seeing on a couple of farms that I worked on early on in my career was using different locations for different kinds of crops and oftentimes that was organized around how close something was the homestead or how close was to the marketplace but also based on what the land was like and whether it was suitable for putting in an acre of potatoes or whether that was going to be not the highest use of land that was a little more difficult to farm.

Landis: Yeah, yeah, exactly and I think the biggest learning curve for me was there's that old



adage about the best fertilizer's a farmer's footprint and so anything close to the house got great treatment, was paid attention to, scouted for and now I have to drive to work to the other field and I've had to train myself to not forget that, not just get caught up in the small farm here where I live, where I can literally at 6:00 in the morning walk out with my cup of coffee and look at things versus getting in a car and commuting to work so it takes a while to learn the two sites, but it's a better use of tools, time, just way more efficient to have two separate farms basically.

Chris: Tell me a little bit about how you actually do that high-level management of the two different pieces of land because I know when I had rental ground that was 2½ miles away from my home farm, it was easy to forget about it. Now, it's a little bit different. You guys, that's your bigger piece of land, your smaller is at home. Mine was the reverse but it was ... I remember that being a real challenge and it was easy for things get out of control in a hurry when you weren't looking at them every single day. How do you make sure that you keep your finger on the pulse of what's going on at both of these distant pieces of the property?

Landis: For me, what I've had to do is and it's been an evolution, so when we started farming is we still approached it very idealistically and we've learned to treat it more like a business and I think the easiest way for me to manage it is to just treat it like a job so that like at 8 a.m., I'm over there like I, you know, to show up for work and I schedule, you know, we work till noon and we take a lunch break and I've had to be very scheduled versus I think the 10 years of here, we, I might feel like starting to work at 5:00 in the morning and I might work till 8 p.m. and I think just getting it on a schedule has helped. It took a couple years.

Steven: I think part of it is this is mostly Landis. I've been dragged into this begrudgingly but Landis is a meticulous record keeper and I think keeping those records on a day-to-day basis, keeping them up to date has allowed us to create that schedule so we know when we ... a field needs to get turned over and put into the next crop, when a cover crop needs to get terminated, when we need to be cultivating or doing tillage or transplanting and because we have those great records, we can create a really tight schedule.

We just follow the schedule. If it's time to cultivate, well, it's time to cultivate. We don't need to necessarily remember to go over and take a look at it. It's just oh, field A needs to be cultivated in the next two days. The weather window looks good. Somebody goes and does it and so I think that's a really big part of it and I think it's also just that interest level, knowing that we have it over there and having a really good crew that we can give them their marching orders. They're going to be at our ... we call it our Beaver Brook property, our other property. You're going to be there from noon until 4:00 and this is what you're going to do and that's where they're at. That's what they're doing.

Chris: How did you know that you were ready to take on this farm at such an expanded level? I mean buying 60 acres of ag land, that's not a small purchase. That's not something you just do on a whim, and clearly, again, managing a couple of acres at home and now, all of a sudden, managing a lot of acres at a distance from the farm, what and then you said you quit your job at the same time, Landis. Why? What was it that said now is the time?



Landis: That's a really great question and so in simplest way is because we do keep great records and we always have, we could see a progression of sale receipts and gross profits and we were definitely making great progress but we also felt that we were hamstrung because we were cropping too much early and we weren't actually giving it good breaks. We were growing cover crops like rye and buckwheat but we weren't really doing what we desired and maybe when we'll look back later talking about, 'cause we really wanna talk about biodiversity and some of our unique cover cropping systems we have over at ag land but for us, it was we were just too tight here and, again, back to that competitive just wanting to grow bigger. We weren't satisfied with a market garden.

It just felt like we were bumping into our fence and into trees and into each other and so that was easy to think about ag land but the financial end of it, I had gone to the MOSES Farm Conference and seeing John Hendrickson, who I think you've interviewed and he had in 2005 produced a booklet or a research project and you may have also been part of that research project, "Grower to grower: Creating a livelihood on a fresh market vegetable farm," and it was really eye-opening to me because there seemed to be this middle-sized farm, if you're under three acres, you had low overhead, and so your growth profit per acre was high, and you could usually see a good income but it would be a supplemental income because there are biological limitations to how much you can earn on an acre of land or whatever, and then I went over, and I don't remember if it was 20 acres.

There was a huge efficiency of you needed less labor to grow the same number of acres but there was this middle spot of five or 15 acres that we were at this farm, homestead farm, and we needed to push through that 'cause we asked ourselves did we want to get smaller and again, 'cause we're very rural, we have really almost no markets locally. They're very small and though we have a vibrant supportive community, they're still just so many people that are going to buy organic vegetables and so to fill a car and drive an hour or fill a van, it's just the efficiency of size and scale made more sense for us here 'cause we knew we would have to market outside of a smaller local area.

Anyhow, that research really underlined what we were feeling, which is this weird middle ground where you're just, you're too small to be efficient. You don't have the big, like there's lots of great tools for cultivation for small farms like cultivation and ground prep but there's almost no reasonably priced small tools for harvesting, we just ... Maybe you jump in here. We just purchased that's bean picker and it's expensive and you need to have an acre to pick beans. You can't just pick a bed's worth of beans with it. Go ahead, Steven, if you wanna ...

Steven: I think where Landis is going is what we saw was we knew we wanted to get there and to get bigger, we needed more land and that's where the new purchase of land came in. We gave ourselves, I think it was five years to make the transition to purchase the tools that we knew we were going to need, and we actually started buying some of the tools before we even needed them.

We bought our first transplanter before we really even needed it 'cause we knew it was



going to take us a while to figure out how to use to its full utilization, but and then we were also ready when that land, when we purchased the land, we were able to immediately start production on it. We didn't have to think about locating. Now we've got the land, what are we going to do? It was pretty quick to map out fields and start putting them into a usable rotation, and I think where Landis was just going, we're still at that area of building. We just purchased, actually it was getting loaded today at Ohio onto a trailer, a bean picker.

We're been ramping up our green bean production to keep up with our CSA and with other demands and we were at a point where we couldn't keep up with picking beans by hand. A really good harvester can do about 25 pounds an hour and that's the first hour and maybe the second hour but you get into the third hour of picking beans, fourth hour of picking beans, you know how it is, Chris, those numbers go down.

Chris: Well aware.

Steven: If you need 200 or 300 pounds of beans for a delivery, you either need a whole lot of people or you need a bean picker and so that was a purchase we just literally just made and it'll be kind of exciting to see what that does this summer. I know our crew is pretty excited about it because of that thought of spending four or five hours in a green bean field bent over a bucket isn't a whole lot of fun.

Landis: We have this rule. It's kind of a rule that if we hear five complaints over a period of time or either five different complaints about the same thing or five complaints about the process, that it's time to address that, and beans, particularly last summer, it hurts people's backs. It hurts their knees. There's no way to do it standing up and yeah, that's a really good indication that we either need to stop growing beans or we need to just plow through and get the tool that makes it happen so.

Chris: You guys had been marketing just locally there so I assume going up to Ashland, Wisconsin, a town of about 8,000 people and then it sounds like maybe marketing to some of the other smaller communities around you and then so then now you guys have jumped outside of that marketplace now, right?

Steven: Yeah, we owe we made the jump about five years ago to Duluth. Duluth is a city of about 90, 95,000 people, maybe 110,000 when you add in Superior, Wisconsin and some of the other outlying communities, and it's a city between Duluth and Superior, there are three colleges, two universities and a college. There's a large medical, three medical facilities there. It's a very vibrant community and very food oriented and so about an hour and a half away. We made the jump there and now roughly, I'm going to guess 50% of all of our sales, maybe more are in Duluth between the CSA sales there, co-op sales, restaurant sales. It's really become a go-to market for us.

There's something I heard long ago. A good friend of ours, Lee Stadnick, who was a organic farmer, he's now retired and is no longer farming but he always had a rule of thumb that 1% of any given population gets the idea of local fresh food and that it's very hard to bump above that 1%. There might be those magic spots like Madison, Wisconsin, where maybe 5% or 10% of the population gets it. Those places are far and



few between, and so when we start looking at our local population of 1%, that's really not very many people and so that was I think what helped drive us to move further on and to go to Duluth.

1% of 100,000's a few more people than 1% of 8,000 so and I think Duluth is maybe not quite Madison, but it's a little bit more vibrant than our very local community as far as purchasable food. Not to say that our local community isn't great. We have a wonderful food co-op for the size town that we have. It's the envy of many other towns and a very active people but that said, it's still a very tight market.

Chris: How far of a drive is it to get to Duluth? And how many days a week are you going there?

Landis: We're just going one day a week at this point, although that might change, and it's just under two hours one direction so it's a four-hour round trip, so it's one of those ... a lot of things that make it challenging. It's an added cost but you just, you either decide you're going to go full steam ahead and complete the picture of the farm-

Steven: I think it's really you got to look at your markets and make decisions. I think in hindsight, if we had thought all of this out 20, 25 years ago, we maybe would've farmed in a different spot. This market drove where we wanted to farm at, and in some ways, it should drive a little bit of those thoughts but this is where we're at. That's where we have to go, which brings up another thought, what I've always called the dollar rule, and if you think of what's, you know, we mostly grow fresh produce.

USDA says that you should eat about six cups of vegetables a day. Well, if we look at what our local sales are, if everybody ate what USDA says you should eat, we probably wouldn't have to market more than about 10 miles from our house. There's enough people living here who aren't growing their own food that we could probably just market to that but the real, the sort of the tragedy is most people don't eat the way you probably should eat.

Even most co-ops, if you look at what is spent on local produce, I think our co-op is probably under a dollar a day per member household is spent on local food, and you start doing those numbers and there's a lot more that we can be doing as a population in general. In reality, if people ate the way we probably should eat, which is more fresh food, more local food, we wouldn't have to market that far out of our farms area.

Chris: I did some number-crunching a while back and came up with that the average American buys about \$43 worth of fresh vegetables a year. If you take the grocery store sales and then put that in with population, that's about what you get.

Steven: Right, yep.

Chris: Yeah, like you said, there's nobody eating six cups of vegetables out there and if you are, you're a weird vegetable hippie farmer freak.

Landis: You're a CSA member.



Chris: You're a CSA member, and even that, if you think about your average CSA box, six cups of vegetables per person per day, there probably aren't enough vegetables in there to do that, even for a CSA member.

Landis: That's true.

Steven: That's very correct, Chris. We laugh. A lot of our customers are ... one complaint we seem to get back from CSA members is that we give them too many vegetables and we scratch your heads because I think Landis and I, we eat about the equivalent of two or maybe three CSA share a week ourselves, just the two of us, and we wonder what people are eating but you lead a horse to water but hard to get them to drink.

Chris: Now how many CSA members do you have now?

Landis: Last year, we had just over 200, and this year, our projection is for 250. One other strategy we had with our CSA is so we are rural and we don't have a never-ending supply of people. We have to go get them but we also have a really vibrant food community here and what we noticed, we've had ... This is our 24th year of doing CSA and we've had a core group of people who've been with us 24 years and some almost that long, and so what our strategy has been to go deeper so we don't have just the traditional 18-week, which is the tradition up here CSA.

We actually do 25 consecutive weeks and then once a month in the winter so they are ... we do an 11-month season, and then we've, over the years have added to meat shares as well with, just trying to go with the idea of going deeper into our customers rather than broader 'cause broader was not an option for us. We're couldn't get more customers so we had to find ways to keep our customers longer and it made a lot of sense because if you've got that person who's already a local foodie kind of person, why not give them more or provide more of that?

Even recently, we started adding dried beans and we're really excited by that because there's something that's shelf stable and it really takes, once you harvest it and dry it, it takes no energy to store it really, and for us, living off grid, that is something that's always important to us to 'cause we're always trying to look for energy savings, so it's hard to compare 200 shares. A lot of those are long year-round shares and I feel really happy that they have stuck with us over the years and very satisfied with that relationship with them, so.

Chris: The dried beans and the meat, is that coming from your own farm or you guys buying that in?

Landis: It's coming from our own farm so.

Steven: We're producing dried beans as part of our rotation and so they're our own. We're expanding that part of our operation, in fact, and then we do hogs in pasture as part of our, we actually, the hogs are part of our vegetable rotation. We take vegetable ground out of production for a year, raise pasture that the hogs are rotated on for about five



months, and then they're butchered and gone so then they become a self-stable product as well.

We've just added sheep to the operation about a year ago all and that isn't in the part of the CSA share yet but hopefully this next fall it will be. We will start lambing in the next couple of weeks and we're growing that flock and we're also going to be using sheep as part of our rotation too. Yeah, those are exciting parts of what we're doing. The feedback we get back from her customers is that it's an important direction for us to go.

Chris: With that, I think we're at a good spot to take a quick break, get a word from our sponsors and then when we come back, I do want to talk you about the cover cropping system that you guys have put in place and how've got the biodiversity and the animals all working into that.

Steven: Great.

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All right, and we're back with Landis and Steven Spickerman from Hermit Creek Farm up in the Chequamegon National Forest of northern Wisconsin. I should say extreme northern Wisconsin.

Steven: You can't get much further north.

Chris: That's right. Before we went on break, you were talking about meat, the livestock and how you've got them worked into your crop rotations and you had also mentioned



earlier the importance of the cover crops in your rotation, especially at your new ground. Can you talk to us about how that works?

Landis: [00:40:30] We, about 10 years ago, started bringing hogs into our homestead farm and we actually grow pasture for them, so we take a piece of our vegetable ground out of vegetable production and put in a buffer strip around their area and intentionally grow strips of, Steven calls it a succotash mix of I think it's oats and peas and other leftover vegetable seeds we have and he just literally plants it and then we let it get up to a certain height and then with using electric fencing, just move them into that and then start the next piece and rotate them like the spokes of a wheel from there.

They have a kind of portable house and so they're just living in this old vegetable ground that now they're eating and pooping and we supplement some of what they get greens with whole grain and they're there for that growing season and we don't raise our own sows. We buy in weaners and then grow them to slaughter size, so they're there just for that summer, then that winter, that ground is just over winter.

Usually we try to put a last bit of oat down and get a little green flush just to hold that soil in place and the manure that they've done and then the next year, that brought back into production, and part of our food safety and organic certification require us to document what we're growing there but just for our own health and safety sake, we grow the next year crops that are harvested from above the ground, like sweet corn and usually sweet corn or brassica, both of which are heavy feeders and so we enjoy that fertile ground now and so we just moved that. That is part of our rotation.

Steven: One of the things we've done at our, over at our other property, our Beaver Brook property, is we've standardized all of our fields that are at 2½ acres and we will have X number of fields in vegetable production. The fields that aren't in vegetable production, I think this last year, that was six acres worth or thereabouts, was in long-term legume rotation but what we'll do is we'll take a pasture. Our hope is after three or four years, depending how the field is playing out, we'll pull that field fully out of the vegetable production. We'll put it into a cover crop, usually over winter rye or barley that was under snow and with a mix of several types of alfalfa and two or three different cultivars of clover, so then we'll take the barley or the winter rye off, use that as mulch, really good high-quality wheat-free mulch that we can use all around the farm. Never can have enough mulch.

We then have that nice crop of legumes, the alfalfa and the clover coming up underneath it. That alfalfa and clover will sit on that field for two or three years fixing nitrogen. It also gives us forage for our sheep. We don't take a lot of hay off of it. We'll probably take one cutting off of it a year right at bloom time and so you're getting the blooms for bee forage. You take it off. It regrows. You get a second later bloom for bee forage. We let that sit for the winter so we'll get two or three years of growth. That last year and this year, we'll be just starting that.

The last year that in that legume cover, we'll then use electric fence and run sheep on it for the last half of that last year, probably August and October so then its last days, it's getting manured by the sheep. It's getting the ... There's something magic that happens



when you put animals on the ground, the symbiosis of what goes on in a ruminant's gut is I think pretty magic and then the plan is then that that following year it will be rotating back into our vegetable production.

That's really our long-range rotation with cover crops and we also ... we still use short-term cover crops like oats and winter peas and all the other cover crops that are in the toolbox, buckwheat as placeholders, and fields that are in active production but I think the really interesting thing that we're doing, that we're excited about is taking ground out of production for longer periods of time, allowing it to rest, allowing it maybe to have some of the fungal growth that goes on in the soil to return.

When you're in an annual crop process, you really burn that mycorrhizal system out. You start to replace that fungal system with a bacterial system. By resting that piece of ground for several years, you can allow it that fungal system to start to reestablish itself. We're very interested to see what that begins to do.

Landis: You know the other really exciting thing for me that I get really excited about it is when we first purchased that piece of land, it was GMO corn and it was really sterile and you could walk literally across that field, that 60 acres and not find a single bug even. It was just kind of amazing after living on this homestead that never had chemicals on it to just see the difference and the first few years, we would start to just, oh, we see. Oh, there's a toad. Two years ago, it was our snake and last year we had our first bobolinks nesting and a Harrier hawk was nesting and just watching that growth and something that Steven has implemented about three years ago, these prairie strips that he's ... they're like permanent ... Maybe you describe them, Steven.

Steven: Sure, those 2½-acre fields. We separated each of those fields by a 50-foot strip of a polyculture of about 60 native prairie species that we're allowing to grow, and we still use that strip for driving on if we need to get from one side of the field to the other, from one to the other side, and we use it as a headland but that doesn't seem to really bother those species that are growing in there, the native prairie plants, and it's been about three years that we started instituting, putting those in and the amount of pollinators that we're seeing coming out of the ... We had our best concurrent crop we've ever had. It was about a two-acre field of melons and winter squash.

Even though it was a very wet year last year for us, and typically when we have a wet year with a lot of rain, we were getting rain every two days, every three days, you don't get a lot of good bee flight and so you don't have great pollination in that type of crop. Yet, even with that, we had, because that field was bounded by native prairie plants that were blooming all summer, the amount of bee activity was just tremendous and we had unbelievable pollination in that concurrent crop. I'm really convinced that providing that beneficial insect in pollinator habitat has been a huge benefit.

Landis: Not only that, but we've also noted so that permanent strip is now a refuge for the fungal activity that we can have in our permanent or semi-permanent alfalfa crop that we have, that it becomes an easier inoculate into that field and then we did a late winter. We had a bit of a thaw and so we did a farm walk over there and those prairie strips had so much more soil, I mean not soil.



Steven: Snow.

Landis: Snow, yeah, that you could just see they become this trap of, besides if we messed up our, so for erosional purposes but just for snow, they become this snow fence, and there was a ton of old seeds from those prairie flowers on top of the snow, and we were seeing horn lark or were they snow buntings? I can't remember, feeding on them, juncos, things like that, which then provide food to keep them there that might eat weed-seeds, say, or they just become this huge, important, even though we're not ... We're taking crop ground out of production as far as commercial production but it becomes this value-added piece to the farm. It's hard to quantify but it's hugely exciting to see it in action.

Chris: I always think one of the challenges for, and obviously you don't do this just, I mean you're taking ground and putting it in prairie just for the money, but it is one of the things that distinguishes what a lot of us do as local producers and local organic growers that we're taking very active measures and we're taking land literally out of production. We're assuming extra costs to manage that land but there's no economic return for doing that. Do you guys do any marketing around the ecosystem services that you're providing in the ways that you've just described?

Landis: No. Go ahead, Steven.

Steven: I should say I think many of our customers know how we farm and I think that's important to them, and I think that occasionally can attract, say, CSA members. They're excited about what we're doing. They like to come out on farm tours and see what we're doing and that's exciting for them-

Landis: You had the NRCS guys out last summer. I guess we've been approached to do research projects and things like that.

Steven: It's also, because we are certified organic, we obviously follow the national organic program and it was probably about five or six years ago, I remember being in a workshop at the MOSES Conference in La Crosse and Jeff Moyer from Rodale was giving a talk and at that time, he was on the NOP board and he said that we, as farmers, needed to be paying more attention to biodiversity that it's written into an NOP. There's very strong language about biodiversity and that he suggested at that time that we would start to getting, we'd be getting asked questions by our certifying agencies about what we were doing for biodiversity, and we've always been working with biodiversity. Landis' and my background is ecology, biology, botany, from an education point of view so it was always an interest of ours, but we took that to heart.

It's kind of odd. We still have not been ever asked the question about biodiversity by our certifying agency, but we're doing the work. NOP says you should be doing it, that all organic farms should be doing it, so we've taken that to heart. Another interesting thing is those strips, we've bounded our entire property, that entire 60-acre property by either prairie strips or by tree planting and we've done that because we're still, that piece of property is surrounded by a GMO dairy farm, and so we have worries with drift



and whatnot. Those buffers are actively protecting us, hopefully, from our neighbor. It's kind of sad to think that you have to do that in today's world.

It's not that he's not a good guy. He's actually a very good farmer for the type of farming, conventional farming that he does, but it's still something that we have to worry about. I've always found it interesting that he's a farmer, can farm right up to the fence line between us, and that we then have to take land out of production, a pretty sizable chunk of land when you figure out the acres, to protect our investment from what he's doing on his land. That obviously happens on all organic farms because I don't know too many organic farms that are embedded within many acres of other organic farms. We all have those issues and what's going on on a neighboring farm and what's going on downstream or upstream, you know, up land.

Chris: Yeah, it is one of the frustrating things about farm law, the way it sits. You would think that people would be responsible for keeping their pollutants to themselves but that's clearly not how it works.

Steven: It doesn't work that way.

Landis: No. We did tree planting over a three-year ... it was an EQIP grant program and so we did get some compensation to establish those, and that was really helpful. It was a little bit cumbersome to work through the NRCS for us, and so the prairie strips we're doing on our own. I guess in the end when I think about it is that it's just like moving here. I wouldn't do it any other way. It's not that I'm being forced to do this. It's I wish to do this and I hope that we are oftentimes, in our fields at the same time, our neighbor dairy farmer's in his field, and I'm sure there's puzzlement sometimes but what I ... Maybe it's a little smug of me to think that over time, he's watching us progress, and he, it feels to me, does the same thing over and over again and has to work harder.

I know milk prices were down the past year and he just seems to have to ... he's cutting fence rows now to farm right up to the fence line, and we're taking land out and almost tithing and we're flourishing. We're building new buildings and getting equipment and it just feels like maybe through example, I don't ever think I could ever change the world or even much of my community, but if I can just make my neighbor think a little bit more and all our neighbors, I mean, they don't shop at our farm. They probably think we're weird but over time we watched them be like, "Huh. Oh, whatcha got there? Oh, that's pretty cool," and we just dug a pond.

Part of that original GMO 60 acres was they plowed right through a wetland and we got some 1920s photos, Steven. I don't remember the aerial photo date but it showed an intermittent stream and a shallow wetland that was now obliterated and taken off of soil maps even in the '70s, so we've restored that and we tried to get NRCS interested but they didn't think it was wetland habitat, so we just went ahead and did it and it's amazing to just watch how that having a restored wetland, and it's still raw ground, starts adding more habitat to that system. Yeah, I'm curious what our neighbors think, but you know.

Steven: Not to mention that added almost a million gallons of irrigation water to the system.



Landis: Yeah, that too.

Chris: Not a bad side benefit there.

Steven: Yeah.

Chris: Now you mention that you're on sandy soil. Is most your irrigation water coming from surface water or do you guys also use a well?

Steven: No, we're all surface water so it's the sandy loam. It's a pretty good soil. It holds moisture really well. We're on bedrock here. You can go anywhere from 10 to 20 feet down, you're the hit bedrock and the bedrock just keeps going, so water is hard to find and it's at a premium. We own three wells. Those wells all produce in the one- to three-gallon-a-minute range so there's is no way you can run irrigation off of it. We have enough water to wash vegetable but that's about it. We try to rely on surface water. We've now dug two ponds. We have one here in the home farm and then the new pond over on the other property and we pray for rain a lot. It's what we have to live with. We've learn to-

Landis: Well, we've been dry-land farming, I mean that's we do stir-tillage and increased our organic matter and we do have good soils in general and live with that.

Steven: We use a lot of mulch.

Landis: Yeah.

Chris: Just to go back a little bit to the process of expanding the farm, what kind of challenges did you guys run into moving from being a five-acre farm just on the home place to now 10 acres of vegetables and a whole bunch of cover crops?

Landis: A lot of systems haven't changed, so I think we really realized that we had to standardize everything we do, so besides we bought tools, like a water wheel transplanter and basket weeders and things like that. We standardized our fields. We standardized our bed links. We standardized just our planting schemes so that everything fit in because up until that time, it was more like what they recommend in book, 18 inches apart for this crop and 12 inches apart for that and six inches for that, and we just like, "No, we're just, everything's on 12. Or 24."

We had to change our thought. We did soil blocks for years and years and we just went to soil plugs, trays, and so it's been ... We've had to basically radically change everything. We used to customize our CSA shares and put people's names on them. Now, they're all packed the same. It's a little more assembly line and that's been a hard, again, we started out in the idealistic way of wanting to farm and how to think about farming more of a business, which wasn't hard do it. It just was a change for us. Planning to where tools are, for me, a big shift was I thought having one or two tractors was like a lot and Steven was always like, "No, we need more tractors. No, we need more tractors," and sure enough, we need more tractors. You need to have two sets of tools



and two places and we had coolers in two places. We have wash areas in two places and yeah.

Steven: One of the things that for me it was standardization, making sure that, like Landis said, all the fields are the same, the bed links are the same, the row spacing is the same, so you can jump from one piece of equipment to another piece of equipment and not have to change the setup at all. I think that was huge. I think having a crew that is willing and able and ready to work and well trained was really big. We aren't doing this alone. As much as we like to think that we are, we really have been blessed over the last decade or more of having really, really great people work with us and-

Landis: And stick with us, you know.

Steven: Yeah, and that's been huge. When somebody new comes onto the crew, you've got older crew members there who train them in. That's been really big, I think, and just training ourselves to think of it that way. I think people, when they start farming, they like to think of it ... You come into almost with sort of a nostalgic romanticized view and in reality, a farm is a business and it's not a lot different than any other business. You're producing a product and you live and die by that production. I think getting in the mindset that while we can still be a very idyllic place, that we are really a business and that there are, you know, we've got production schedules and you've got to have so many units come out of a space if you're going to be successful. I think thinking it like that was really a big part of it coming to grips with that.

Chris: Steven, you mentioned the importance of those long-term employees. I know that's a really hard thing to do on a vegetable farm and you guys have a pretty limited growing season up there. How have you managed to get people to stay year after year after year?

Steven: Part of it is we pay well. We don't look at our ... I think a lot of farm use employees as interns and as an educational experience and right from the get-go, I decided that our employees were employees, that we will pay them a good wage. It's not the best wage. They can make more elsewhere probably but for this area, it's a good wage and that in return, they come and they work hard, and I think that's part of it. I think we're lucky that we have a small liberal arts college in Ashland which produces a lot of our employees. They arrived and usually they aren't working for us as students. They may spend their junior or senior year with us, but then they stick around the area and they want to learn how to farm and so they work for us for two, three, four more years, which is really important to get that longevity out of people.

I think as we move forward, employees are hard to find. It's not an easy thing and a little bit of it's been luck and I think a little bit of it has been the way we treat our employees. We treat them as equals. They're as important to the farm as we are and they know that, and I think that empowers them a little bit. I think that's important to empower your employees, to give them some ability to stretch their legs a little bit on your own farm.

Landis: I think also you... We've learned to connect the dots. I think the most probably ... the



first moment they come on the farm, they're very enthusiastic and they're going to farm and it's so exciting for them, and then you give them this lecture about no, we're producing product and we gotta do it, so many units per hour and it's kind of shocking to their system, to their idea, and then you have to reconnect that enthusiasm again. Oh, but remember, you're feeding people. You're making people healthy. It's really important. You do have to tell them that no, you actually have to work hard and produce a unit so much per hour 'cause for them, they get a hourly rate but I don't get paid but by the piece, so it's important that you help me stay in business, but then you try to keep over, you know, we work with them. They literally ... we do everything with them.

We're not top-downward. We're all on the same level so they see us dirty and sweaty and tired and then you connect, again, the reason why you're growing food, why this is important to remember these things and to, you know, if that knowledge is gone, it's gone forever and then 'cause you're working, you often have great conversations and I think if you can connect, reconnect them to why they originally had that impulse, they fall in love with it again. Yeah, I think that is what's really important. We've been lucky.

Chris: Landis, you mentioned you get paid according to how well the farm produces. Are you making a full-time living on the farm now?

Landis: [01:06:30] I'm earning a full-time wage for myself but we ... so Steven works still full time off the farm and so he earns, he kind of our health insurance and our retirement fund. I'm a contributing factor to the farm. We've been I think it was a choice to do it that way because we've been building equity in our farm. It would be hard to do both. It would be hard to live and we raised a child and pay all the normal off of this farm, and to build buildings and buy equipment and put up fencing and big wells and ponds and things like that.

We made the choice that we would both work and contribute to the household, so our farm doesn't quite yet sustain us that way, and that's a real, it's a heartbreaker in a way. I wish, you know, I think he's said it before, if that the model of working and living completely from the farm probably never existed or rarely, that it was more somebody was a farmer and somebody worked, whether it was in the grocery store in town or whatever it was, and that's how we've been doing it so.

Steven: If I could jump in real quick, Chris, with what Landis just said, where I grew up in northern Illinois, our small homestead farm was surrounded by prototypical northern Illinois farms in the '60s and '70s of small dairies, row crops, that type of thing. When I think about it, just about every one of those farms, even back in the '60s, somebody worked off the farm. Usually the wife would have a part-time job in town, but sometimes I know the farm just north of our farm, the farmer Harold, he worked the night shift at a Chrysler plant, and then he came home in the daytime and farmed, he ran about a 40-cow dairy.

I look back at that and wonder exactly how he did that but I think, yeah, like Landis just said, it's probably always really been the model, that idea that you're going to make all of your livelihood off of your farm, it doesn't happen that often. It can happen. I know



farmers here in this area, dairy farmers who are both husband and wife are working on the dairy farm, but I also know that they struggle, so for us, it was a conscious choice.

I'm at a point in my career. I worked for the U.S. Forest Service. I have for pretty much ever since college. It would be a hard decision to leave that career right now to work on the farm, in part, because I still work five days, six days a week on the farm. It's just at a little bit different schedule, not quite as many hours as I would if I was here full time but in today's reality of health insurance and whatnot, having that job off the farm has been huge for us. Landis is also, quite honestly, the better farmer. She's the true farmer and I've got the strong back and I know how to work on the equipment... I know how to fix tractors.

Landis: Oh, that's not really true. We are a good team for sure.

Chris: One of the things that you guys put right on the front page of your webpage is the words "quality of life" and how important that is to you, and I'm hearing what you're talking about going through this expansion, raising kids, having an off-farm job, and still coming home and farming. How do you guys make all of that work?

Steven: It's a good question. I-

Landis: You know, I'm going to jump in really quick, and you can finish it, Steven, but when I think about it, we have an obsession with farming. We were really plain spoken about it. We can't help ourselves. When I was six years old, I kind of brow-beat my dad into giving me part of his garden, and Steven had similar stories. It's like we can't help ourselves and that our favorite thing to do is actually grow things, and so we oftentimes, like we used to do farmers market and every week, people would tell us, "You work so hard," and it just kind of doesn't compute to me.

There are definitely times where I need to take a break from thinking about farming. I stress about, I worry about the weather and I worry about sales, and but the actual growing things is I'm so happy when I do it, and I think that though I have to sometimes do paperwork or sometimes I have to do deliveries or stress because it's dry or too wet, I don't ... that's not a problem to me and I don't know how that would translate to other people but I do feel like farming has to be kind of a lifestyle choice.

I don't think it's easy to turn it into a 9-to-5 job that ... 'cause you're dealing with weather and biological systems and so I don't think you can just be done that for if it's about to rain or if it hasn't rained or if the animals are ... it's a lightning storm and the animals are scared and carrying around. You have to understand it's a lifestyle and-

Steven: Yeah, I think Landis said it pretty well. I think for us, quality of life is in part where we live and that comes all the way back to the very beginning of the place that we chose to farm. That story Landis told about transplanting lettuce and having a family of wolves, a pack of wolves literally at the end of the field serenading the crew as they were transplanting, that's for us part of our quality of life. I took our three Border Collies for a walk this morning and I walked out to the end of the driveway, took a right, and I was on national forest, and I spent half an hour walking down a road that literally nobody's



driven on in the past week within the national forest, sort of like living in a vacation sometimes. And some vacation where we work hard but I think we would be doing that anyways.

When I wake up on Sunday morning, my first impulse isn't to grab the paper and snuggle into an easy chair. My first impulse is to go take a walk on the farm and see what happened overnight, and that probably leads to the second thing, which is to close the gate that was left open and then the next thing you know, you're doing stuff. I think that's a big part of our quality of life and I think it's just who we are and what we do, but it's important.

There are things that we think about and for a long time, we taught within the Farm Beginnings context of programs through the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, and one of the things that we always told students of that program was to have an exit strategy. Somewhere in the back your mind, have a way to get out if it's not working for you, and we've had frank conversations and both Landis and I, we're in our 50s. At some point in time, we may not be able to farm, so what is that exit strategy?

I think having those honest conversations is part of maintaining quality of life, if you're thinking about it, something that's there and you've got to think about. I think it helps you along the way, and then just enjoying what you're doing. I honestly can think of no better way to spend a summer afternoon than raking hay, probably my favorite thing. It's the first job I did on a farm was raking hay, and still probably my favorite job, and so when I think of quality of life, that's what I think about.

Chris: With that, we're going to turn to our lightning round and we're going to get a word from a sponsor before we do that and then we'll be right back.

This week, the Lightning Round and the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought you by you, our listeners, and the nice thing about that is I don't need to go on and on about it because the fact that you're here probably means you already think that the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is kind of cool. I've heard from hundreds of you that that's the case, and today I'm asking for your support. Specifically, I'm asking you to go to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate and sign up to provide monthly support for the show. If you'll kick in a buck a show, I'll send you a very cool and very purple Farmer to Farmer Podcast sticker for your water bottle as an extra way to say thanks.

[01:15:30] All right. Landis, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Landis: Well, I would say probably the water wheel transplanter and I say that because it was a paradigm shift when we purchased that. For one thing, everybody who comes on the farm, every employee, every volunteer, every whoever wants to ride it. It's kina cool. It's like you feel like you're farming when you're on it and for me, it was when I stopped being a gardener and started thinking production.

It forces whoever sits on it, you have to keep up with the tractor pace. Everything's planted with regularity and same spacing, and it just shifted. All of a sudden, it was learning about Santa Claus, like oh, Santa Claus and the really, you mean the Easter



Bunny, it's the same. It's just like ah, now I have to think about road covers should all be the same and fields should all be the same, and just standardization and so I just really liked that tool.

Chris: Awesome, and Steven, your favorite tool on the farm?

Steven: Landis mentioned a paradigm shift, so my tool changes a lot. I like whatever tool at the time has created a paradigm shift, so we've gotten used to doing things one way. I go to the MOSES Conference and I hear Steve Pinkus say what his favorite tool is. I go out and get one of those and suddenly, yeah, that's my favorite tool. Boy, that was a few tools ago, so each year, it's something new. This year, we're adding a second cultivating tractor on the farm and we'll be belly-mounting a trust finger weeder under that.

We've had that finger weeder for a couple of years but I've been having to pull one implement off of our cultivating tractor and put that on and then back and forth, and I think this year, it'll be the new cultivating tractor and that finger weeder. Who knows what it'll be next year? I'm sure there'll be something. I'm kind of tool centric so can never have enough tools.

Chris: Steven, what's Landis' farming super power?

Steven: That's a great question. I think her farming super power is her unbelievable attention to detail. She remembers things that I don't know where they come from but the incredible ... she can tell you how many seedlings she started so far and probably how many she started last year and the year before that, and we do around 150,000 transplants out of our greenhouse a year, and she has a clipboard right on the door going into the greenhouse that tells her how many seedlings she's at. That attention to detail is really her superpower.

Chris: Landis, I'll ask the same question of you about Steven. What's Steven's farming super power?

Landis: His humor. He is the funniest guy and he does the most ridiculous things that gets the whole crew laughing. They created one time a whole video of me returning ... they had gotten a job done and then the crew and I was picking broccoli at the other place and bringing the van full and he created a whole video of them waiting for me to return. It was hilarious and I think he makes everybody laugh, and laughter is the best medicine so.

Steven: My favorite joke on the farm is when we have new people on the transplanter. We're using a tractor with a creeper gear on it but they still, when you're brand new on a transplanter, any speed is too fast, but I love to, at some point, jump off the tractor and walk back and walk alongside them and then ask them how they're doing, and they usually look at me, and then they realize aren't you driving? But it's really so slow that the 15 feet that went down the row it didn't get off the row too bad...

Landis: Yeah.



Chris: [01:20:00] Landis, what's your favorite crop to grow?

Landis: I really like the unsung heroes and I think the onion is the most undervalued vegetable. If you think about it, at least in my household, nobody gets excited at the farmers market. They're all, "Oh, the first tomato," and "Oh, the first strawberry," but when I bring onions to the market, nobody even says anything and yet, in my household, we cook with onions every day. I think we eat an onion every day and they're the most ... when you cook them down and caramelize them, they're so sweet and so rich and tasty.

If you don't mind, I just have one story about a lucky man who for whom the undervalued vegetables turned to solid gold. Here's the story as I was told it. The farmer who grew acres and acres of onions became weary of trying to sell his onions at home so he filled a carriage with bags of them and struck out to seek his fortune. After journeying, he reached the country where onions were unknown and when he demonstrated their wonders to the royal court, the king rewarded the farmer by filling all his onion bags with gold.

When the farmer returned home, and told his story to his neighbor, a garlic farmer took the same journey to the same land. The court was again bewitched, this time by garlic, and the night after a great feast where garlic got the pulses quickened, and garlic chicken drove people to ecstasy, the garlic farmer was rewarded. His garlic sacks filled to brimming with treasure. The man drove straight back to his native land, aching to see his riches, and when he finally arrived, he opened his bulging bags to find them full of the kingdom's most prized possession: onions.

[01:22:00] That's why I like onions.

Chris: Steven, how about you? Your favorite crop to grow?

Steven: Sort of like the paradigm shift with tools, it changes. Right now, my favorite crop is a cover crop called phacelia, the native went to the Western U.S. that I don't think has been grown a lot in North America as an agricultural crop but it's very popular in Europe, mostly as a bee forage. We started playing around with that about three years ago just in some small trials, and I was sometimes I was putting out meter quadrats and finding 30 and 40 bumblebees of four or five, six species all within a single meter.

It was as if the entire planting was moving with bees, and so we've been growing that wide, more of it, and what's really great about it is it's been ... When you start thinking about crop rotation, it's in the family that we grow no other plants than through the forage family and we're not growing any other forage crops, so as far as a cover crop, it's a really good ground smothering cover. It has an unbelievably beautiful flower that's really attractive to pollinators, and we can use it in rotation because it doesn't bump up against any other family that we grow. Right now, that's my favorite.

Chris: Steven, would you spell phacelia?

Steven: Sure, sure, it's P-H-A-C-E-L-I-A.



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- Chris: Ah, in other words, I was completely mispronouncing it. It's phacelia, okay, great.
- Steven: Yeah, it's a really great one, and it's becoming more available. I'm starting to see it in more catalogs now, so I think people are starting to catch on but it's been widely grown in Europe for some reason, even though it's a native North American plant.
- Chris: Steven, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Steven: Oh boy. I would probably only beginning farmer self to just keep moving forward, to keep positive, and to don't sweat the details too much. Where Landis is incredibly detail oriented, I tend to be more big picture and I think I would myself doing that. I probably also tell myself that I need to do probably a little bit more often than I do. Right now, take a week off in October and go to the Boundary Waters. I try to do that but I don't know always get there and I would probably tell myself, "You know you need to make sure you plan that a little bit better."
- Chris: Landis, how about you? If you could go back in time and talk to your beginning farmer self, what would you tell her?
- Landis: I would you tell her beware the shotgun effect, and what I mean by that is starting too many things all at once scatters your efforts.
- Chris: Landis and Steven, thank you so much for joining me on the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Landis: Thank you, Chris. This has really been a delight.
- Steven: It's been a pleasure, Chris.
- Chris: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again tt this is episode 112 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast and you can find the notes for the show at the farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Spickerman, that's S-P-I-C-K-E-R-M-A-N.

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I'll do my best to get them on the show, and while I've known the Spickermans for some time, they're here today because you asked.

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