



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

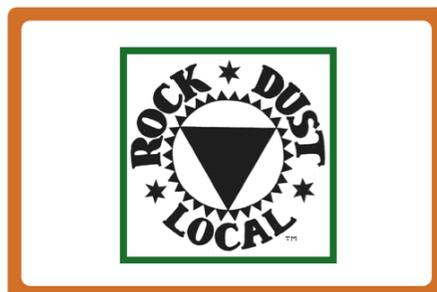
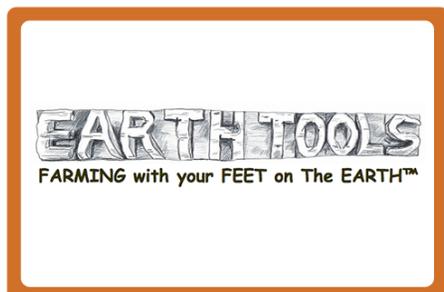


EPISODE 113

Josh Slotnick of Clark Fork Organics and Garden City Harvest on Salad Greens, Short Seasons, and Food as Fuel for a Social Ecology

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Chris Blanchard: It's the "Farmer to Farmer Podcast," Episode 113 and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. My guest today, Josh Slotnick, has farmed at Clark Fork Organics on the outskirts of Missoula, Montana with his wife, Kim Murchison, since 1992. With about eight acres in vegetables and 11 acres of total crop ground, Clark Fork Organics is a pillar in the Missoula local foods community and is well known for their salad green production. They sell at two farmer's markets though a local health food store and to restaurants in the community. In 1996 Josh and a few others founded Garden City Harvest, a nonprofit in Missoula that builds community through agriculture. Garden City Harvest does this by providing community education while managing 10 community garden sites in four neighborhood farms in Missoula. Josh is the Director of Garden City Harvest's largest farm, the PEAS Farm, that's P-E-A-S Farm, which is a partnership between Garden City Harvest and the University of Montana's Environmental Studies Program.

Josh digs deep into how Clark Fork Organics builds and maintains relationships with their restaurant clients, both during the short intense growing season and over the winter, when the farm doesn't operate. We also discuss how these same techniques spill over to the farmers market and how they've used those relationships to keep a marketing edge as the local food scene has grown up around them; and Josh shares the many ways that PEAS Farm and Garden City Harvest have contributed to the overall social ecology of Missoula. We also talk at length about salad mix production at Clark Fork Organics as well as their irrigation tools and strategies, and how Josh juggles two farms, family, and friends. By the way, this episode was recorded on March 9th, which is kind of like a lifetime ago in weather terms, so when you hear us talking about pond hockey, that might provide a little context.

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Josh Slotnick, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Thanks a lot, Chris. I'm glad to be talking with you.

Chris Blanchard: Really glad you could join us today. I'd like to start off with having you set the stage for us, and I normally would say, "I'd like you to set the stage for us at Clark Fork Organics," but then I'd have to say, "I want you to set the stage for us at Clark Fork Organics and Garden City Harvest," and a whole bunch of other things; but maybe just give us the stage for Josh Slotnick.

Josh Slotnick: Sure, thanks. That's a great way to get me going. I am a partner in a couple things. The first one that you mentioned is with Clark Fork Organics Farm, and that's our family farm. We've been in operation for, gosh, 20 some odd years now. I think we started up, our first season was in 1992.

Then, a few years after that was going, in fact, it was going maybe into '96 to '97, it was during that winter, I was part of a small group of people. There were three of us that started a food security nonprofit in Missoula, called Garden City Harvest. Our first big project with Garden City Harvest was to get a farm going in partnership with the university, called the PEAS Farm, P-E-A-S. The farm is a really interesting hybrid in terms of student farms, in that the university supplies me as a teacher and a farm manager, and sends the students, and the students earn credit for being there; but the operating expenses and the lease on the land are held by the nonprofit, Garden City Harvest. Both these things have grown and changed over the years, and really taken on lives that are way larger than I could have ever imagined about 20 some odd years ago. I feel really fortunate that those things have happened.

I'm sitting at my house right now in the seat of Clark Fork Organics, where there is, let me see. We've got two acres behind our house and then a nine acre field around the corner. My wife really runs things, but I work here on Wednesday afternoon in the summer, Friday afternoons and the weekends. So it's pretty much of a seven day a week life; and then the main part of the week I'm working at the PEAS Farm for Garden City Harvest and the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Montana. So I feel like I'm working with people and farming every day, just about. It's a full and rewarding life.

Chris Blanchard: I do want to note, we did ask if your wife, Kim, wanted to be on the show today, and she actually took a pass on that.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. She said she's a fan and listens to the podcast, and is also shy and had no interest in talking, but was excited to listen.

Chris Blanchard: Great. Now, I looked up Clark Fork Organics on the Google Map-



Josh Slotnick: Right.

Chris Blanchard: -and you guys are farming in town there in Missoula, right?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah, it's really, I think, part of our strengths as a business. We are right on the edge of city limits, so close really, that when I go to the PEAS Farm for my other day job, I can ride my bike. It takes 30, 35 minutes, depending on how fast I go. We're really close.

We started this up, like I said, in the early '90s, when local food was just beginning, and we were able to make use of our proximity by basically bringing handfuls of vegetables in to restaurateurs and grocery stores saying, "Would you buy some of this?" Because the idea at that point, of buying locally was brand new. Nobody had really heard of it. It seemed kind of, it was definitely a foreign concept; and this was long before local distributors and growers caught onto an institutional buying, and even really before CSAs were a well-known thing. For us being able to almost go door to door with restaurants and grocery stores saying, "Hey, this is who we are. This is what we're doing. Are you interested?" Our proximity made a lot of that possible.

Chris Blanchard: When you started doing that in 1992, were you intending to grow this into a business, or was this just something that you guys were doing out of your backyard and had some extra vegetables and thought you'd peddle them?

Josh Slotnick: No, we were fully hoping to do this as a business. We met each other at the UC Santa Cruz Farm and Garden Program, where so many people who do this type of work found their start. I had been there the summer before as an apprentice and my wife, Kim, had been there the summer before as a second-year, kind of a teaching assistant, and before that, she had been an apprentice. At the end of my year, and we met there, at the end of my year we were both convinced we wanted to be with each other and be farming.

I had gone to college here in Missoula a handful of years before going to California to work at UCSC Farm. When we were trying to consider where we wanted to go and where we wanted to live, especially after being in Santa Cruz, which is a nice place, but really crowded, I said, "You know, Missoula, Montana is really great. It's beautiful. It doesn't cost that much money to live there, and there's really nobody doing this, so let's try that." We came back. For me, it was coming back; and for Kim it was coming to for the first time. We came here fully with the intention of starting something up.

We didn't have very much money and we ended up, because of that we started really small, which seemed like a good way to go. We didn't have to borrow anything. We just started small, and these things grew over time. Our needs were small when we started, too, which helps a lot.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, no kids makes a big difference with that, doesn't it?



Josh Slotnick: Yeah, no kids and we didn't feel like we needed anything, really, just a farm seemed like the greatest gift. We were very lit up by it; and we were young and full of energy. I think just the act of doing this, and doing it in a way that was so new was really, not just fulfilling, but it was fuel for the fire. I just liked that people were saying, "What are you doing? What is that?" As opposed to, now it might be, I think it might be a little more difficult in that, there's farms everywhere and people have heard of it, and the market is full and it's competitive. This was like we were doing a brand new thing.

It wasn't that we had competition with other farmers. We had competition with food from California or the idea that this wasn't even possible; and I think that was fuel to fire us up. We have very little expectations for what was gonna happen. It was just fully open. I think that made it easy too.

Chris Blanchard: I think that Missoula is known as the Garden City in Montana. Is that right?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it sure is, and really, this is because for Western Montana especially, we have a fairly mild climate, not compared to many places in the United States, but for Montana. Missoula is this beautiful valley ringed in mountains.

There is part of the west, southwest side of the valley, and it has beautiful soil, and we're really rich in ground water; not so much in rainfall. It rains 12 inches or so a year, but we've got a great set of irrigation ditches and rivers and lakes. It's set up for agriculture to some degree, and then not to some degree in that most of the land in Missoula County is steep and it's Federal land and you couldn't grow on it. So land for agriculture is somewhat dear; but way back when that name came about, more than a hundred years ago, there weren't that many people here, and there wasn't much land to farm. A lot of the vegetables that were grown in Missoula and the Bitterroot Valley just south of here were trucked over the mountains to Butte, which at that point was the biggest city in Montana and had this huge thriving population of mine workers that needed to eat good food. This part of the state grew the vegetables for that part of the state, so I think that's where that name came from.

You can still see remnants of this. The part of town that we live in is divided up into these five, ten, and some twenty acre chunks. They were all kind of, as a plan, to be truck farms, market farms, small orchards; but this was the plan in 1900 or so. Now they, for the most part they're all cul-de-sacs and modern houses, but there are still some of these chunks of land around.

The current incarnation of Missoula actually matches up with that name quite well in that now we have two thriving farmers markets, a couple really great food security and local food advocacy organizations, a giant independently owned natural food grocery store, a couple of major public farms, all in a city that has 70, 75 thousand people in it. I think we have a lot of the accoutrements of the local food system that you'd expect to see in a city like Portland, or



something; and we've got them here in Missoula, Montana.

Chris Blanchard: I know a lot of towns in the mountains are somewhat isolated when it comes to the food system. I lived up in Aspen for a couple years back in the, gotta be way early '90s. Well, I guess about the time you guys were getting started, and you just didn't get a lot of fresh food up there. We were at the end of the distribution route. Are you guys in a similar situation there in Missoula, or is there plenty of fresh produce coming into town?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, there is definitely fresh produce. We're on a major interstate and it's getting trucked in every moment, just about. There are big trucks coming into town and bringing all the things you would find anywhere. Though we are a mountain town, we're right on this highway, and here in the lower 48, so I don't feel like we're isolated from all that the giant international food system has to provide. It's all here.

Chris Blanchard: Josh, you said that Missoula is a pretty mild climate for Montana.

Josh Slotnick: Right.

Chris Blanchard: What does that actually mean in terms of your growing conditions there?

Josh Slotnick: Oh, okay. That's a good question. Our last frost is the end of May, early June, and our first frost is a little more variable. For us, it could be anywhere from mid-September to the first week of October. That's not too long of a growing season.

The other, I think, the main defining feature of our climate is our dryness. That's that less than 12 inches of rain a year. What this really means for us is that during the summer time, we could have plenty of days that are in the low 90s or even the mid-90s, sometimes cracking 100, and the nights that correspond with those days could still be in the 50s or even the 40s; because we don't have rain, we have humidity. As you know, humidity holds heat just like a lake effect, but it's a lake in the air. Without that water in the air, we get a climate that's a little more like a desert in that we have really huge temperature swings between day and night.

What this means in terms of growing vegetables is that even though it can be blazing hot during the day, the average temperatures are quite low. That may mean an average temperature of 70, or something, even in the heat of the summer. For us to grow heirloom tomatoes outside is pretty much impossible. On the positive side, we don't have a whole lot of the fungal rots and diseases and pest complexes that you would find in the Northeast or the Northwest or the Southeast or the Midwest. We just don't have them, and that makes growing vegetables in a sense, a little bit easier; but the climactic parameters are pretty tight in terms of how long our seasons are. We have to be super careful about our varietal choices in order to get success. We also do a bunch of stuff with hoop houses too. I don't feel like it's really limiting. I feel like these are



just the parameters we have. Every place has got their own.

Chris Blanchard: I also worked on a farm in Santa Barbara. Again, at about the same time you were in Santa Cruz. Sometimes I've wondered now, living in the Midwest, why I left the avocado farm.

Josh Slotnick: [00:14:30] I know. Yeah. Yeah, I have a distinct memory of walking through some snow towards the end of May and a friend who was driving by our farm, he pulled over and rolled down his window and he said, "You know, you moved here of your own free will. You know that, right?"

"All right, yeah. Okay, I got it." But I like these parameters in that I feel like the weather is often easier to deal with than some of the pests and diseases we might have in a warmer and more humid climate.

Chris Blanchard: [00:15:00] Now, you mentioned you're doing some high tunnel production. Are you using-

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, for sure.

Chris Blanchard: -that for season extension into the winters as well, or is that primarily based around season extension in the summer?

Josh Slotnick: For us, it's just season extension in the summer, though a person could. Really, that's because of the life we want to lead, and it's nice to have the winter break. I did, with some students, we did a trial one year, where we did that type, Eliot Coleman style of late summer early fall feeding of Asian greens. We did it under Reemay in a hoop house; and then they grew, and they looked good, and we made kind of a plastic tent over these beds that had Reemay in them, inside the hoop house, and we were able to harvest these Asian greens well into January. We ate them all before the season crushed, and even when it was zero degrees outside.

A person could do that, but it's not anything we have chosen to do. In the wintertime we really like to ski and play pond hockey, so we do that instead of harvest Asian greens.

Chris Blanchard: Nice. Nice. Tell me how you're marketing your produce there in Missoula.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, so our marketing, we have about a handful of channels that we sell through, and then the marketing corresponds to those channels. So we sell to handful of restaurants right now, I think there's five or six. For marketing in this case, really, it's all about relationships. That means staying in good touch with the chefs who run these restaurants, and being in touch a few times during the winter and letting them know we're ready to go in the spring, intro letters and phone calls saying, "This is what we have to offer." Really, we try and do one good conversation in the winter saying, "Is there anything different you're after this year, anything we can do for you?"



These guys, at this point, these chefs have so many options at their disposal for beautiful local food. We have a really vibrant, super successful growers co-op here and plenty of local farms. It's not like we're the only game in town by any stretch, which we sort of were for selling to small restaurants a long time ago. So marketing for us is also blended in with service. That means really trying to meet the needs of the people we sell to, and lots of personal touch during the season. It's customer service and it's marketing all at the same time.

Then we work with this one major natural food grocery store, called the Good Food Store, which is as big, if not bigger, and more beautiful than any Whole Foods you'd see anywhere; and it's locally owned by a nonprofit that has a strong community commitment. For us, marketing with them really means being in really good touch with the person who runs their deli and the person who runs the produce department and trying to meet their needs. Those guys are accommodating and they have, we're seeing major obligations to meet, given that customer base they have. So it behooves us to work really closely and to listen.

Our other marketing is that we do two farmers markets a week. Like I said, Missoula is rich in local food system stuff, so we have two farmers markets, both on Saturday mornings down the street from each other and both well attended. We set up tables and stands at each of those and there, again, service and marketing are blended, trying to figure out what our customers want; and be chatty and try and be helpful and have a wide array of beautiful food right there. That's it. We don't do advertising, per se. It's really just relationship and staying in good touch, and trying to listen and anticipate what people's needs might be.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me what that actually looks like, when you're dealing with your restaurants and your grocery store accounts; because it's easy to say "communication" and "being in touch" and "providing good service," but how does that actually manifest for you?

Josh Slotnick: For us, really, what that looks like is a couple times during the winter, sitting down at a restaurant with the chef and with a crop list, and asking them, "Is there anything here that you'd want to do differently? Anything you want to experiment with? What do you anticipate for the coming year, and really how can we be part of that?" It's literally sitting across the table from people.

Also, it's trying to be aware of what's going on in terms of trends in other parts of the country. Like, "Oh, everybody is doing X. Well, should we be looking in on that too?" For us, the one that's really jumped up in the recent past is around packaging. This isn't to the restaurants, but it's to the grocery stores, that for years we sold salad mix in bulk and the store would sell it in bulk and then it started arriving in clamshells from California in the wintertime; and another grower was selling things in little bags. I'm like, "Wow. So we need to keep up," in a sense. For us, really, that means trying to stay aware of what's going on in



other places and being as up to date as we can.

On the first part of it, which is way more fun and interesting, it's remaining in contact with people that we share values with and share a town with. It's not difficult, it's pretty pleasant. Missoula is a very community-oriented, fairly self-reflective place, so it's really enjoyable to feel like we're in the same economic and cultural boat with our friends who run restaurants and our produce managers. We are in it together.

Chris Blanchard: How do you actually conduct those communications during the growing season? Are you doing that via phone call, email, fax?

Josh Slotnick: We're on the phone. That's on the phone, yeah; and a little bit in person, too, because we deliver these things. My buddy, Steve Elliot at Lifeline Farms said we may have lived through the Golden Age, in the '90s and early 2000s, of small farming where we could deal very directly. Now, we have this growers co-op that's fantastic and does great work, especially for growers who live farther away, where they can buy from multiple growers who live farther out of town, aggregate the food, and behave much more like a conventional vegetable distributor and be a one-stop shop for restaurants and grocery stores.

Chris Blanchard: That's the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, right?

Josh Slotnick: Western Montana Growers Co-Op, yeah. Yeah. We predate the Growers Co-Op, so we have these longstanding relationships, which is really wonderful in that we get to deliver this food, which can be a hassle; but we're so close to town, it's not a hassle. Really, what that means is you're handing a box, or multiple boxes, hopefully multiple boxes to people, and you can chat with them, even if it's for two or three minutes, just a, "Hello. Hey, what's goin' on? How are you doin'?" There is eye contact, and it's calling somebody by their first name; and you get that sense again, that we are in it together. This is our local economy and our local food system.

There is something to selling it to a distributor where you lose that a little bit. They get that with the reps of the Growers Co-Op, but we don't get that as farmers; and I'm really glad that we started when we did so we can maintain that. Right now, the Growers Co-Op fills that niche so much that if we, you couldn't start and do that right now. I think in lots of cities, this is the way, that in the '90s and early 2000s, people were doing what we were doing, peddling food directly to stores, restaurants; but now the aggregators with a conscience have taken on a larger part of that role. They've done a great job in that they've infiltrated the food system far greater than we ever could, but something was lost there for farmers in that we don't get that really close contact with the people who are buying our food other than at farmers markets.

I'm really glad we still get to do that. Like I said, that's through very old-fashioned, it's talking on the phone, asking what you want, and then interacting when we deliver it. That happens twice a week. We don't even do



much of that over email. It's all on the phone. That isn't because we don't like email; it's just because it's the way we've done it for years.

I think the people we interact with appreciate that. We often find ourselves on the phone saying, "So, do you want the same thing as last week?" Then they'll say, "Well, what else do you have? What's goin' on? The bok choy is beautiful," or, "This latest crop was really great." We sell extra things and then the person who we're selling to knows that they got the latest stuff that was ready. It's not just a stale spreadsheet.

Chris Blanchard: How about at farmers market? You mentioned the importance of that communication and service there as well. What are you doing to stand out? Because I imagine that you've had some of the same pressures. You talk about starting off as the local farmer in the early 1990s, and now two farmers markets; and I've seen pictures of at least one of the farmers markets in Missoula. They are not small markets.

Josh Slotnick: No, these things are boomin'; and you're totally right around the competition. It's huge. I feel like, given reasonable vegetable parameters, a person can get just about whatever they want of the absolute highest quality on any given Saturday during the growing season. The growers here do just a spectacular job, so competition is really stiff; and we have our little niche.

Really, our niche is based on that kind of relationship. I feel like I am personally am part of a handful of people's Saturday morning ritual, where they go down to the market and they buy stuff, and we chat a little bit. You ask them how their week was and it's very genuine. This isn't an affectation or a marketing technique, these are people I know, I don't know super well, but they are part of my Saturday morning and I'm part of theirs. That doesn't happen even at the very best of stores. We get to continue on, I think, because we've become part of people's lives, in a small, but meaningful way. I keep saying this, the sense that we're in it together, but I really feel that at market; and I think some of our customers do, too.

I think the same thing is happening at many of our friends' stands, as well. The city has grown in this same kind of people making, visiting certain specific farms part of their Saturday morning ritual. That's part of the deal. For us, that means having one of the markets and one of our kids at the other markets on somewhat regular basis so that customers see the same face and have a sense of who's there, and a sense that we're in it just like they are.

Chris Blanchard: Just to swing a little bit back to the growing then, you said that you guys have about two acres at home and then a nine acre field around the corner. How much of that are you actually farming vegetables on?

Josh Slotnick: The entire two behind our house, and then, say six to seven acres around the corner. A lot of that is lettuce mix or salad mix. That's one of our main crops; and we do all the other veg- most of the other vegetables you need to sell at



farmers markets, and then a few that we do in larger quantities for the Growers Co-Op or for the Good Food Store.

Chris Blanchard: What kinds of things are you doing in larger quantities for the Growers Cooperative?

Josh Slotnick: Let me think, for the Growers Co-Op we do, let's see, we did larger amounts of chard and kale, celery, fennel, and then lots of lettuce mix for the Growers Co-Op. The Growers Co-Op also has quite a large CSA, and we are part of the set of growers that grow for the Growers Co-Op CSA, as well. I think they have 230 plus members now.

Chris Blanchard: With that salad mix being such an important crop, and especially being something that's hard to grow at a profit, especially when you're talking about selling it to a wholesale distributor like the Growers Co-Op, could we talk a little bit about how you are actually doing that production?

Josh Slotnick: Sure, for the Growers Co-Op we sell a lettuce mix, which for us, we've found is just a lot easier to grow; and really, that's because the baby brassicas that are part of the salad mix, like baby brassicas in most places, are really vulnerable to flea beetle damage. The flea beetles are pretty intense here, so for our baby brassicas we end up keeping the beds covered in Reemay right up until the point of harvest. If there is even a tiny little hole in the Reemay, the flea beetles find their way in. Then you get one cutting, whereas with the lettuce mix, they're not bothered by, they don't have any pests that bother them and they don't have to live their whole lives under Reemay; and we get multiple cuttings.

We do the lettuce mix for the Growers Co-Op and we do the salad mix with the baby brassicas mixed in for a higher price for the Good Food Store and for some of the restaurants; and that's in a smaller quantity. Those are seeded in what looks like, a buddy of mine called it, a salad carpet. We use seeders and coat the bed with, I think there's nine to thirteen lines of seed in a bed, so it really is covered. They start their lives under Reemay and then we cut, sometimes with scissors, and sometimes with that farmers friend, you know, with the drill and the bandsaw blade. Harvest that into totes, weigh them, put them into a cooler next to the field, and then when we get the weight that we're after, we haul them from the cooler next to the field over to the cooler and wash station by our house. Then they get mixed, washed, put in three pound bags and boxes, and then they go back into the cooler and then delivered to where they are supposed to go. That happens three times a week during the season. That takes up the first half of the day, pretty much, the cutting and then washing, and sorting, boxing, and then the deliveries go out.

I've said this to plenty of people who are interviewing to be potential workers that it's a vegetable farm, and they get Wendell Berry-ish images, and it's actually super-fast paced. Our farm lives during the week are really ruled by schedule, and "When does this delivery have to go out?" And "Who's coming to pick up what?" And fast, fast, fast. It's fun and great conversation when I go by



that lettuce-cutting area, there's always people out there chatting, talking. My wife's right in the thick of it going three times as fast as anybody else could imagine. They seem like they are, you know, people are laughing. It's light, but they are moving really fast.

Chris Blanchard: About how many pounds of salad are you producing on any one of those given harvest days?

Josh Slotnick: Oh, my gosh. That's a good question. It's not industrial scale, but for us it's a big deal. It could be 80 pounds; it could be 250 pounds on a Friday.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. Wow.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: A not insignificant amount.

Josh Slotnick: [00:30:00] Yeah, it's not at all. Given the dollar values, we were bigger years ago. Then when this got more and more popular, and then larger industrial machines for cutting, and Earthbound Farms came into existence, the price of these things dropped considerably; but it's still well worth it for us, given two things. One, that we have a small amount of land, and that we're really close to town. I think if you combine those two, the salad mix makes good sense for us.

Chris Blanchard: [00:30:30] Well, and being so close to town makes it pretty easy for you guys to get that three times a week delivery, which really does make it into a premium product.

Josh Slotnick: Exactly. Exactly, you're totally right, where if we had to drive two hours there and back and then spend an hour driving in traffic, a lot of this might not be worth it. We can send somebody and with enough boxes to stuff the Subaru, and they're back in an hour. We do that three times a week. It totally adds up, and dollar wise, it fully works; and it's worth the time.

Chris Blanchard: Now, when you're seeding that lettuce mix, are you seeding that as a blend, or do you seed each of your varieties individually?

Josh Slotnick: No. Each variety individually.

Chris Blanchard: Okay.

Josh Slotnick: Like I said, a series of lettuces and a series of baby brassicas, but that's not a purchased blend. Kim does that, just lettuces and then brassicas.

Chris Blanchard: What are you using to seed those?

Josh Slotnick: She's got a couple, a handful of different seeders that, a Earthway seeder, a kind of Jang seeder, and then a Planet Jr., and she's got this down to a finely honed



science in a way that works for her. I know that every farm and every farmer comes up with some kind of a, the recipe that works for them; and this is what's worked for her, is to use those seeders, and they are divided among crops. I couldn't even tell you, 'cause it's her crop, as to which ones she does with which seeder, but she'll have these seeders all set up next to the bed, and tubs full of seeds and switching in and out, and she basically just about runs, pushing these seeders. It's an amazing thing. She seeds twice a week.

Chris Blanchard: Seeding twice a week?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, seeds twice a week. That schedule is intense. We really have to meet the schedule. This is a positive here in that it doesn't rain, because if it rains, if we got- Yeah, if it rains at an untimely point, and it would be difficult to meet that schedule, three weeks to four weeks later when we are supposed to be harvesting, we wouldn't have what people wanted. For us to remain competitive- At one time that meant with California, and now it means with a very competitive local food market, we have to be able to provide our vendors, who are also our friends, with these greens two or three times a week every week from June through October. We can't stumble, 'cause if we stumble, someone else will crawl over our backs and fill that hole. Maintaining the seeding schedule quite rigorously means that we can maintain that harvest schedule, as well.

Chris Blanchard: What are you doing about weed control in those densely seeded beds?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. What we do, we irrigate with hand lines. These are two inch hand lines. They are 30 foot pipe with a 2 foot riser and a Rain Bird sprinkler on top that shoots 60 feet, in a 60 foot circle. I'm bringing this all up 'cause this ties into how we do weed control. I till up and make beds in a block, a one irrigation block, so it's 60 feet across, and then we irrigate. As soon as we start irrigating, the weeds come up. It happens pretty quickly. As soon as the weeds come up, I go over the block with a flame weeder. I have a flame weeder attached to the back of the tractor, and then go through, and then Kim goes through and seeds. Then, as they're picking, cutting, if they have to weed, they weed; but if all the timing works right, the flame weeder does a really good job. The other factor here is the density of the plantings, which are so tight there is not a lot of room for weeds to get in there.

Chris Blanchard: Right. So if you can get those lettuces up ahead of the weeds, there's not going to be new one coming up underneath as the lettuces are growing.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, yeah. I'll do that block. I'll till up the block, make the beds, and turn the water on before we've planted anything.

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Josh Slotnick: It's pre-seeding, get them to come up. Early in the year it's a little bit more difficult, but then once it gets going, it works pretty well. On the mounted, on



the tractor flame weeder, I really like. I've heard from other growers about, I can't remember the name, but this fabric, kind of a plastic-y fabric that lays down. I just learned about this.

Chris Blanchard: Doing the silage tarps?

Josh Slotnick: Yes, exactly. Thank you, exactly. We haven't done that. We've been doing this flamer, and it works pretty well. It works really well if all the timing is right.

Chris Blanchard: Again, I think you said that one of the advantages you have about farming in a place like Missoula is that having the timing be right is really up to you guys.

Josh Slotnick: Yes, exactly. Since we really don't get much in the way of rain, it's all about having our stuff dialed. For the most part, that works.

Chris Blanchard: You said you guys also do a lot of bunched greens for your wholesale market and for the Western Montana Growers Cooperative.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: What can you tell me about doing those and making that efficient on your scale? Because when you talk about farming and that six to eight acres, you're not big enough that you're taking advantage of huge economies of scale. You're also beyond that point where you're a little tiny farm where you guys are doing a lot of the work yourself and are able to make sure that when Kim's out there working three times as fast as everybody else is, that's actually setting the pace.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, yeah. It's a little bit tricky. We hope to get good workers. What we've told the people who work for us is that quality comes first and speed will come later.

[00:36:30] The people who buy our food do so because it's beautiful. They're into local, they're psyched that it was done in a sustainable way. We're not certified, but we're toying with the idea of getting certified this year. For years, we haven't been certified, which is another interesting thing to talk about, though we don't use any chemicals. We grow in a way that's consistent with certification.

The people who buy our food aren't really interested in any of that. What they want is that it's, they want it to be gorgeous. For us, making kale bunches and collard bunches and chard bunches, they have to be beautiful. We really stress that and model that and look carefully at how the harvests go.

The idea is that as people go, they have learned to go faster. We're trying to teach them the tricks of going faster, that you can put these things under your arms as you go, and you can drag a box. You don't walk back and forth. Keep your rubber bands on your hand, or your twist ties, depending on which way you're doing it. Be efficient. It behooves us to show, to model the right behavior, and to be in the thick of it, and to hire good people. Then, to trust them once



they are on their feet and empower them.

Chris Blanchard: Now, but you guys are a seasonal business. You're not keeping people on-

Josh Slotnick: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: -over the winter.

Josh Slotnick: Right.

Chris Blanchard: You're oftentimes off of the farm, at least off of the-

Josh Slotnick: Right.

Chris Blanchard: -Clark Fork Organics Farm. That must leave a lot on Kim's shoulders, as far as modeling good behavior.

Josh Slotnick: Oh, for sure. For sure, yeah. It does. It does. Yeah, this is her deal. I'm here part of the time; she's here all the time. It definitely does. We end up typically hiring young people who are in college or right out of college. Because of where we are in Montana, we don't have a group of folks who are truly professional farm workers that I think you might have in many other parts of the country. We end up hiring interns or apprentices. These are people who are really interested in doing this type of work, maybe doing this as a livelihood, but maybe they've never, most of them haven't done it before. Our expectations are not that they're gonna be great at it right away; but that they are gonna try really hard, and listen and learn and be open. It does behoove Kim to model and talk through it and teach and mentor. She's done a great job of that.

We're really fortunate. Then we look around the landscape on there and find there are people who worked with us that now have their own farms that are fabulously successful. It's really great to still have them in our lives, and people who have done that and moved to faraway places who are farming. So we've been able to plant the seeds that started other farms. That's another great thing.

Chris Blanchard: Do you feel like there's things that you've done as managers that have helped to plant those seeds?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, I do. The way that we structure the work here, we are all in it together. What I've told people who are applying for jobs, that this isn't a job where you do your work and then you close the door on your work and then you go home, like you would if you were a teacher or a banker, or anything. This isn't a job, really. It's a way of life; and the work, and the farm, and the life inside of our house, all of it are very intertwined. Coming here for the summer is a chance to try on that life and see how it feels.

One of the ways we make that a reality is that we eat together five nights a



week. For our workers, part of their pay is they get dinner. I make them dinner. I come home from the PEAS Farm and join in a little bit, then I come in and make dinner, and then we are all eating. It could be anywhere from seven o'clock to nine o'clock at night. We eat dinner together. I think that really drives it home, that this is our way of life. It's not a job with a cutoff time, where you're punching a clock, or something. For some people, they really become intoxicated with this way of life. Then they want to go do it on their own. For other people, they're like, "That was a cool thing, and I'm gonna go do something else." I feel like the eating together, and eating the food that we've been growing, and all of us being in it together sets a stage.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about eating with your employees at seven o'clock or even nine o'clock at night, what kind of hours are you guys keeping on the farm?

Josh Slotnick: In the summertime, in the heat of the summer, if it's really hot, we're gonna start sometime between seven and seven-thirty. If it's not as hot, we'll start around eight. They've borrowed some of this tolerance from some of our friends. "Is it hard eight or is it soft eight?" Then, we don't end at a specific time, but we end when the certain work is done.

With the Good Food Store, the major natural food grocery store nearby us, we grow a lot of scallions for them. We deliver the scallions to them three times a week, and it's the last thing we do at the end of the day. They get harvested earlier in the day, put in the cooler, and then we bring them out at the end of the day and bundle and wash. The bundling and washing, we're sitting in a semi-circle in the shade. Usually they listen to NPR, or a podcast, or something. That's the last thing we do. If that ends at six o'clock, then we're eating at six. If it ends at eight, then we're eating at eight. We tell people, you're getting a taste of the whole deal, and this is what it is.

Tuesdays we do our restaurant delivery and we're done a bit earlier. Tuesdays is a much more reasonable time. Then, Fridays we're getting ready for market, so it goes on a little bit longer, and it's more intense. The hours are long, but our season is short.

I think that's a really key thing. I first cut my teeth farming in Santa Cruz, and you could do it year round, for sure, and summer style farming, nine months. Right? For us, the heat of the year, the heat of the season is three months long. Though the days are long and super fast-paced, and at times it feels like this is totally insane, just about the time you've digested that and feel like you can't take it anymore, it's over. It's pretty short.

Chris Blanchard: I was gonna comment, because one of the themes that has come out in the podcast, although it's not a universal thing, it has been about people limiting work hours. It's something that's come up a lot. You guys aren't really limiting the work hours as much as you are limiting the work season.

Josh Slotnick: There you go. Exactly. Yeah, the season itself is pretty darn short, and the



intense time of the season is even shorter. During that, it's just like that old farming attitude. You make hay while the sun shines. Well, for us, we've got this, about, I'd say in mid-June to early September, where we're going as fast as possible, and then after that, we don't. Because you can't, the weather, the climate doesn't allow. During that little chunk of time, we're going full on.

Chris Blanchard: You know, I was gonna say, Josh, that whole thing about "making hay while the sun shines."

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: That's a Midwestern statement, where sometimes the sun isn't shining in the summertime. It really wasn't designed for western Montana, where the sun shines-

Josh Slotnick: Right.

Chris Blanchard: -all summer.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: Okay.

Josh Slotnick: You're right. You're right about that.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Just want to be clear about that, there. Okay?

Josh Slotnick: Sure.

Chris Blanchard: All right. You mentioned your irrigation system.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: I liked what you said, because to me, that's how irrigation worked on the vegetable farms that I started farming on. It was with these 30 foot, 2 inch aluminum pipes-

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, yeah. There you go.

Chris Blanchard: -with the risers, you know, a two foot riser, and a Rain Bird sprinkler going tsch-tsch- tsch- tsch-

Josh Slotnick: That's exactly, that's what we got.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah. It's interesting, 'cause you don't see a lot of that out on vegetable farms these days.

Josh Slotnick: Oh, really?



- Chris Blanchard: These hand lines that are getting moved- Yeah, when I go around that's, especially here in the Upper Midwest, it's not what I'm seeing on a regular basis.
- Josh Slotnick: Wow. What are you seeing?
- Chris Blanchard: I see people trying to do all kinds of things with drip and traveling irrigation guns and-
- Josh Slotnick: Wow.
- Chris Blanchard: -various jimmied-together setups. The hand line doesn't seem to be such a popular item as maybe it was 20 years ago, and as maybe as it is-
- Josh Slotnick: Wow.
- Chris Blanchard: -out in the mountains, or as it is out in the Inner Mountain West, where you are using very similar equipment for doing irrigation of hay fields, and you've got the wheel lines out there, and things like that.
- Josh Slotnick: Yeah, you're totally, totally accurate with that. This irrigation is really common out here, not just with vegetable farmers, but with hay fields too. I think one of the reasons we use it and so many other people use it, is because it has a tradition here, so I can get the gear locally. If we need more gaskets, we can run down the road and get some gaskets. It's all readily available.
- I love a bunch of things about irrigating this way, and one of them is that the pipes don't break unless you run over them. They are there for just about forever. Now, though, you can replace the rubber gaskets and the nozzles on the Rain Birds get eroded and hollow out. Every handful of years you can replace them, but for the most part, they are fairly permanent.
- Other things I really like about them is that you can hear if something is wrong; and you can see if something is wrong from quite a distance, unlike with drip, where you really have to go check to find it. I can be walking by the field and I can hear if something is not right. I can be driving by a field and see away in the distance like, "Oh, one of those 'birds is clogged." I also like that repairing these things, they are so simple. There is such a small set of things that can go wrong, they are pretty easy to fix.
- On the downside, though, they shoot water everywhere. You don't necessarily need water everywhere, which makes drip a more desirable thing; but like I was saying earlier, we are really rich in ground water. We have a fantastic network of irrigation ditches and rivers and creeks and lakes, so we are not in a water shortage situation, where drip makes a lot. It isn't imperative.
- Chris Blanchard: Not so concerned about losing a lot of moisture to evaporation?



Josh Slotnick: Well, we put on a lot of water, so we lose some; but it doesn't seem to matter.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah.

Josh Slotnick: I guess another situation where overhead irrigation might be bad is in a place where you've got high humidity. I'm only guessing, 'cause I haven't lived in these places. If high humidity, where fungal rots and diseases are really a problem, and all that excess water would work against you, but for us, like I said, hot sun, wind, and next-to-no humidity, it doesn't really matter. We're not in that situation. Though we do, in our high tunnels, we do drip.

Chris Blanchard: With irrigation being a way of life for you, because-

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: I'm assuming that you never wait for the rain. You are always irrigating, right?

Josh Slotnick: Oh, a hundred percent. You're totally correct. Like I said, we are ruled by these planting schedules. We are also ruled by our irrigation schedules. We're moving pipe all the time. Actually, we don't move pipe as much as we used to. We buy a little bit every year, and we don't have to move it as much as we used to; but we're turning water on and moving open areas and counts of hand line, elbows, or tees, or that sort of thing. It's happening every couple hours, all day, every day, seven days a week, for the heat of the season. It's definitely part of life.

Chris Blanchard: Any tricks or tips that you have found, especially for making the system work for you?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, I think the one thing that's been, and this sounds like a luxury, but over time, we bought a little bit of pipe every year, so we haven't made gigantic purchases all at once, when we didn't have much money. We've got to a point now after doing it for so many years, and continually buying a little bit of pipe, and being on the lookout for used pipe that's decent, that now we don't have to spend so much time moving pipe because a lot of the field is plumbed. Earlier, when we started 20 some odd years ago, we only had a little pipe, and we moved it a lot. I think that was okay. To some degree I miss moving pipe as much as we used to, but I also don't miss it. I guess the tip is to buy a little pipe regularly, if this is your way to go. Eventually you don't have to move it so much.

Chris Blanchard: There is probably some larger lesson in life in there.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, right. Yeah. Yeah. It sort of fits with the trajectory of existence in the sense that we were substituting energy for stuff early on, and now there is not as much energy, and there is more stuff, in terms of more pipe and less of us running around. That seems to work out fine. It's okay. I really like showing people how to move pipe. It's really empowering, especially for young people who are unaccustomed to things that look big and industrial and intimidating,



SHOW NOTES: <http://www.farmertofarmerpodcast.com/episodes/slotnick>

and realizing how it's not intimidating. This is great. Some great lessons in moving irrigation pipe in that it looks like they are gonna be heavy and you have to be strong and carry this burden. It's really about balance; it's not about strength. It's about carrying irrigation pipe. You can put one on each shoulder, and you can move quite efficiently. You just have to use your head. I think there are some good lessons to be learned about all things in that.

Chris Blanchard: All right, Josh. I think this is a great place to stop. We're gonna get a quick word-

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: -from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Josh Slotnick from a lot of different places, but mostly we've been talking about Clark Fork Organics.

Josh Slotnick: Right.

Chris Blanchard: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by BCS America. The BCS two-wheeled tractor is the only power equipment a market gardener will need, with PTO-driven attachments, like the rototiller, the Flail Mower, the Power Hero, the Rotary Plow, the Snow Thrower, the Log Splitter, and more. You name it and you can probably run it with a versatile BCS Two Wheel Tractor. The first time I used a rototiller way back in 1991, it was mounted to a BCS two-wheeled tractor and it spoiled me for life. When you get behind a BCS, you can tell that it's built to the same commercial standards as four wheel farm tractors, and it has many of the same features. I have used other tillers and mowers, and I have spent most that time thinking how much easier this job would be with a BCS. Check out BCSAmerica.com to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments plus videos of BCS in action.

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Chris Blanchard: We're back with Josh Slotnick of a whole lot of different places in Missoula, Montana. Josh, we've been talking about your home farm, Clark Fork Organics, but you also noted in the introduction here that you started in 1996 with Garden City Harvest, which is associated with the University of Montana and has this PEAS Farm that you manage. I want you to sort all that out for us. I'm not



gonna try to do it myself.

Josh Slotnick: Sure, yeah. Thanks, yeah. Thanks for asking. It is a whole mess of things to be unraveled. You're right. In 1996, with a couple of other people, I was able to help start this food security nonprofit here, called Garden City Harvest. Garden City Harvest now operates a network of neighborhood farms. These are farms in city limits who exist to meet a food security need growing high-quality food for low-income people, but also have a role to play in education around ecologically conscious food production. We also use our sites for personal restoration of youth and adults. The interaction with the University, I think, is really powerful and unique in that we, together, the University, the Environmental Studies Program at the University, where I am on the faculty, and Garden City Harvest, team up to run a 10 acre vegetable farm right here in city limits. It's kind of unusual to have a 10 acre farm inside a city.

The work on the farm is done, by the most part, by University students who are taking a class, called the PEAS supervised internship, and I'm the teacher. Garden City Harvest, the nonprofit, covers all the operating expenses for the farm. That means the tractor, the fuel for the tractor, insurance, seeds, everything, all the stuff that's associated with a large-scale vegetable farm. They buy that. The land is owned by the Missoula County Public School District, and then leased to the City of Missoula, on a 40 year lease, and the City has a 40 year lease with the nonprofit, Garden City Harvest. It's definitely a multi-level partnership.

What comes out of this is that we grow tens of thousands of pounds of vegetables for our local food bank. We also host a program for at-risk youth and a program for elementary school kids. We have a hundred member CSA, and we get thousands of children coming up on field trips. This University program is there. Well, actually, there is nearly a hundred University kids a year getting a little bit of experience working on a vegetable farm. The community is, it's part of that feel. It's become part of the fabric of the community over the last 20 years.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about how that farm actually works on a day-to-day basis.

Josh Slotnick: Sure, yeah.

Chris Blanchard: Besides yourself, who's staffing the farm and how are you actually pumping out all those vegetables?

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, for the most part, that's me and the group of University students. We have a few other staff members from Garden City Harvest as well. The students are really doing the brunt of the hard work. We started at the end of February, so we're going right now, even though there is snow on the ground, we are working in our greenhouse and hoop house and pruning in an apple orchard, and we've got other maintenance tasks.



The students are there from this semester, they are here with us until mid-May, and then summer starts. Summer is really the heart of the PEAS Farm, and the heart of the academic program, as well. It's not even really academic, but the school program. We have students there Monday through Thursday working from eight to noon; and then at noon we eat lunch together. I stole this right out of the UC Santa Cruz farm and garden model, where two students make food for everybody else out of the food we've been growing. This way they get to eat what we've been growing and also learn to cook for a group. It's just a great thing to work all morning and then roll into the barn and have lunch laid out for you.

Monday through Thursday we work together in the morning, we eat lunch. On Fridays, I teach a class on bugs or weeds or soil, or something like that, on Friday mornings, and then we go on a field trip to visit a farm in the area. Like I was saying earlier, we have this really rich local food scene now, so there are grain farms, ranches, fruit orchards, vegetable farms, and all kinds of everything else that we get to go see. The students, they do this in a fairly contrived way at the PEAS Farm Monday through Thursday; and then on Fridays we get to go meet people who are doing it as a livelihood. The people we meet are really open and candid. That's really fantastic, so the students get to hear about what, really, this is like, to do it in a real way for your livelihood.

Then, twice a week in the afternoons we have students who stay in the afternoon and help us out getting ready for CSA. Our CSA is super traditional. It's not, you get a box at a drop-off point. It's that people come to our farm and we have all the food laid out for them in our barn on this long beautiful table, and there is a person checking them in, and then a person stocking the table. The customers get to hear from the person who's checking them in and see on a sign, "Oh, today you get to take one bunch of carrots, one bunch of beets, and three pounds of potatoes," or whatever. They go through the line and they fill up their bag. Having those hundred CSA members means we have another hundred advocates in the community, and it also generates a chunk of money that helps keep the farm going each year.

Chris Blanchard: I'm always curious in situations like this. Do you guys worry about the competition that you're presenting to the other farmers in the area?

Josh Slotnick: Oh, that is a great question, and it's in our by-laws that we don't sell at farmers market, that we don't sell to restaurants or grocery stores, that we just do the CSA. Given that there are 75 thousand people in the city, a hundred thousand in the county, our hundred member CSA doesn't really affect much in the way of local competition. We are part of our local farmers group, The Homegrown Group. That's what we're called. I feel like it's really important for us to be part of all that; but competition is a big issue, so we've just steered clear of it. We don't sell to grocery stores, restaurants, or the Growers Co-Op. If we do sell something, it's because nobody else is doing it. If we have an excess of onions, and all the other growers have sold all their onions to the Growers Co-Op and to



the Good Food Store, we'll be the last one in line, and do some providing that way. That's barely anything, for the most part. We just don't sell anything other than our CSA.

Chris Blanchard: About how much of your produce is going to the CSA and how much is heading towards the food banks?

Josh Slotnick: Oh, that's a really good question. I feel like it's, I'm gonna guess, maybe it's 60/40 by weight CSA to food bank. The big difference is the diversity. The CSA gets a lot more diversity.

We've worked pretty closely with our food bank in a similar way that we've worked with the restaurants, that CFO works with. We were in good touch with them and trying to figure out, "So what do food bank clients, food bank customers, what do they want, and what can we provide, and how can we help really work with the food bank?" What we've found is that we can do a handful of crops in large quantity that don't require refrigeration, that people fully understand. We do lots and lots of onions, 'cause the food bank has a warehouse that can stash the onions. After they're cured, we bag them up and give them to the food bank, and then the food bank can give them out all throughout the fall, without having to take up cooler space. We do a similar thing with the food bank in that we provide them with a whole lot of winter squash. Again, it doesn't require refrigeration. Then the other one we do, we do a lot of carrots. That one does require refrigeration, but it's something that everybody knows what to do with.

This was a super sad thing, here. I'm gonna go off on a little bit about food culture and poverty, and that when we started, I was quite naïve in this, and I thought, "Well, if we grow beautiful food like chard and kale, these gorgeous greens that are so good for you, and we give them to the food bank, then we are gonna meet this nutritional need that right now is falling off. That people who don't have a lot of money can't afford to buy fresh kale and chard."

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Josh Slotnick: I found that it's a lot more complicated than that, in that there are, just that there's a sort of generational poverty. With that poverty comes an understanding of what food is. If a person has grown up their whole life eating canned and microwaved food, presenting them chard does not mean they are gonna eat the chard. They're gonna look at it and say, "What is this and how do you eat it, and what am I supposed to do with this?" After you leave they might just throw it in the garbage, 'cause it doesn't look like food. It just flat out doesn't look like food. So for us to work really effectively with the food bank, as a provider, not as in a sort of programmatic way, but as a provider, it behooves us to get people food that they understand is food and they are gonna be excited to eat; so it doesn't end up in the dumpster. So for us that's...

Chris Blanchard: Less radicchio and more carrots. Yeah.



Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: When you started the PEAS Farm in 1996, was that something that it took time to learn, or was that something that was pretty obvious right off the bat?

Josh Slotnick: Man, it took some time to learn. We were really, really naïve. Well, part of our naivete is excusable, in that this sort of thing wasn't happening. Right now, there are fantastic community agriculture and food security organizations in every city in America. It's a great thing. When we started, there wasn't much of this, so there wasn't a whole lot to learn from. We were in uncharted territory. So we made a whole bunch of mistakes. Learning the ropes had to happen. For us, really, that meant that you had to work closely with the food bank and grow food that people would want, and that's helped a lot.

The other thing that I learned, that I sort of knew, but couldn't have put words to back then, was that so much of the good part of what we do isn't in the provision of food, but it's in the act of growing food together, and the community that forms when we're growing food together, and the learning lessons that happen there. I think that's some of the most powerful things that we've stumbled into. This happens with University students, but it also happens with our youth program. Now we have a whole youth farm. It started with the PEAS Farm, but now we have four neighborhood farms, each which occupy a separate type of niche of service. In all of these places, the act of growing food together, the work itself brings people together in ways that don't happen in most other contexts, and we've found to be really special and really can have a profound effect on people.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about the other farms. You talked about four different neighborhood farms, each with a little bit of different programming.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yep, we got four farms. I'm just amazed that this is a period, and I deserved little, very little credit in this. I did my part and other people joined in on this. If I did anything, it was basically get out of their way while they helped create these other things. We have the River Road Farm, which is now our headquarters. We are in the act of building a new office space there. This is a huge multi-million dollar project with offices and barns, and it's really quite amazing; and we own that land. This is the only place that that nonprofit, Garden City Harvest, actually owns.

River Road, I think River Road's main service activity is through a program called Volunteer for Veggies. There's a CSA, and the CSA helps fund it all; but people can come work at River Road and trade their time for vegetables. We get thousands of volunteer hours spent on this. The volunteer hours certainly help us in that we can meet the needs of the CSA, but they really help the people who are volunteering in that folks who come and volunteer walk away with food.



This is different than having a community garden plot, where somebody has to decide, "Okay, I'm gonna be committed and rent this plot; and I'm gonna grow my own food on this plot." This is where somebody says, "You know, I don't know if I can handle that level of a seasonal commitment, but I have two hours I can give on Thursdays," and they come and work at River Road with our farmer there, Greg Price, and trade their time for food. We just said we get hundreds of people putting in thousands of hours from all walks of life, but mostly they are low and moderate income people. They get to trade their time for good food.

When they are there, their idea around food, like I was saying before, there is a culture of food that's attached to poverty, that gets broken down because they're working in it. It's really different to provide someone, "Here, have a bunch of chard." It's another thing to get involved in the growing of that chard, and then you're gonna want to eat it. I feel like we've had a great effect on changing people's food lives through personal interaction with growing that food. That happens at River Road.

In some of the other farms, we have a youth farm that we run in partnership with an organization called Youth Homes, here in Missoula. They provide group homes for kids whose families have, for one reason or another, have kind of imploded and weren't able to take care of the kids. One of the homes, the Tom Roy Youth Guidance Home, has a couple of acres behind it. Garden City Harvest partnered up with Youth Homes to run a farm and employ kids who live in the Tom Roy Youth Home, and these kids work on the farm, meet the needs of the CSA, and they do this amazing thing, possibly one of the best things we do, called Mobile Market.

We do this with our youth program at the PEAS Farm, too, where teenagers harvest vegetables and then take these vegetables in a big panel truck off to low-income housing for senior citizens. Then they set up what look like mock farmers markets in the parking lot of the housing. They open at a specific time, and then the seniors flood out and buy the food. This is really amazing in that it meets such an obvious need. We're talking about low-income older people for whom transportation is difficult, and they don't have a lot of money; and they actually do know what to do with fresh vegetables.

For these folks to have the food land right in their parking lot is spectacular. Then they buy the food, which I feel like, for the people we are talking about, is really important. It's not a donation drop off. It's sold by teenagers at what looks like a farmers market; but because it's our food, we subsidize it. That means we can charge whatever we want for it, so nothing is more than a dollar. In this way, we're circumventing the economically fiery local food market in dealing with low-income older people. They pay a dollar and they walk away with a beautiful bunch of beets. Really importantly, when they are buying these beets, they're buying them from teenagers, who for some of whom, have been in trouble, some of whom don't have high-functioning families, teenagers who have been, basically, in the way of adults to some degree or another, or in a



system.

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Josh Slotnick: So we've got these seniors receiving these teenagers, really, like they are heroes, like they are really special people because the teenagers are bringing these folks, right to their doorstep, really, this gorgeous spectacular food and setting it up in this very welcoming farmers market style environment, where the seniors have to buy the stuff. It's not a drop-off donation. The seniors get to, they buy it, but I just said, it's our food. Our, meaning Garden City Harvest's food, so we subsidize it. We decide, "Oh, we're gonna charge nothing more than a dollar," so the seniors can buy this gorgeous food at really quite reasonable prices; and in so doing, interact with the teenagers in the same way that people interact in a farmers market.

It's really amazing... I've described this in other places before as kind of a social ecology. I use the word ecology 'cause in a biological ecology, the way one organism lives creates a niche for another one. In this social ecology, you've got a similar thing where the needs that these two groups of people have are met beautifully by the other. These seniors need to be tended to, need to be noticed, needed to be reminded that they are vital and alive and worthy of attention; and the teenagers need to be doing something where they are recognized as being meaningful. These two groups fit together perfectly, where the teenagers can provide this service, bring the food, tend to the senior citizens; and the senior citizens, through their responses, are demonstrating to the teenagers how meaningful they are. Both groups just shine because of it.

Chris Blanchard: How many teens are you involving in this program? This is really interesting to me.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, it's super good stuff. I think there are, and this is small scale. At the Youth Farm, I think they're employing between four and six a season; and our Youth Harvest Program at the PEAS Farm, where we also do a mobile market, we're employing eight, let's say eight to ten, is where we land each season. This is definitely a program where it's quality over quantity, where a small group of people undergo a fairly transformative experience.

Chris Blanchard: Is this something that kids are volunteering for? How do you recruit people into a program like this?

Josh Slotnick: Oh, it's a great question. Great question. No, they're paid. They're paid. When we describe this, we call it a therapeutic job training program. For, at least, let's say for the kids who are in our Youth Harvest Program at the PEAS Farm, where some of them come from Missoula Youth Drug Court and some of them don't, for a lot of these kids, there is not a good model of employment. They haven't had a job. They're just kids, and adults in their lives are often not gainfully employed or not employed in a way that we would recognize as such. These kids don't have a model for job experience.



They come to do this thing at the PEAS Farm, they get paid minimum wage, and they work on the farm, and they work side by side with University students, with community members, but they also have a whole bunch of youth development activity that's built into their week. The people that run this program are really experts in positive youth development. All kinds of leadership training and customer service training, and training on how to be in a workplace, and also they get really learned up on our food systems. They become micro experts on our food systems. By the end of the summer, one of our goals is that they can speak articulately about the work they do and how our food system functions. They get paid, but it's more than a job.

In terms of recruitment, we work closely with Missoula Youth Drug Court and with the Youth Homes organization. These entities spread the word and then kids apply for the job; and then our staff interviews and makes choices.

Chris Blanchard: You started doing this work fairly early on in your farming career.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah, so gosh, Kim and I had been farming together for maybe three or four years. No, let me see, our first start into the harvest season was the season of '97, so we started in '92, so I guess five years. When Garden City Harvest started, we didn't have a youth program. When we started we had one two acre farm and two community gardens, and these other programs grew as more people joined on with us. These other people had great ideas and ran with them. That's how we got the youth program and the Mobile Market with the seniors.

One of the latest ones I feel like is super interesting, and this one, I don't have anything to do with; it's just part of our organization. We're working with awesome doctors at the VA and with another hospital here in a program we call Prescription Vegetables, where doctors have basically said, written a prescription, these are mostly for vets and for other people who are suffering from lifestyle diseases; say, "Here's a prescription. You can cash this prescription in at," and this is one of the other four farms that we have, called the Orchard Gardens Farm, which is on the grounds of low-income housing. You can take this prescription to Orchard Gardens twice a week. They have a farm stand and you can trade your prescription in for vegetables, so that you can deal with some of the issues around diabetes, et cetera. This is our second year. Last year was a pilot year, and now we have two sites for this and a set of doctors involved, and it should be poised to take off.

Chris Blanchard: That's fantastic.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah, I feel like one of the real criticisms of the local food movement is that it's kind of elitist and it's only for people who have money. One of the missions of Garden City Harvest is to make sure that everyone, regardless of income, has the access to this high-quality food.



Chris Blanchard: Now, starting this when your farm was still young can't have been easy. It can't be easy to balance all of this, 'cause you've got a lot on your plate.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah, yeah. You're right. You're totally right. I'm in and it's just been my life for a long time. I know, yeah. It's not one in balance. For a good six months out of the year I work every day, which for a lot of people would be insane. It just kind of is for me, and I don't know for how many more years can I keep doing this. I don't know. It's been tremendously rewarding. It's been my life. It hasn't been my job. It's been what my life is, and I feel so fortunate to have had that. It is crazy; but it's good.

Chris Blanchard: Is that something that causes tension at home? You've got a wife, you've got kids. I can't im-

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Oh, for sure. Oh, my gosh. Yeah. Yeah. Yes! Yeah. There is a cost to all of this. There is that classic opportunity cost. If you are in one place, it means you can't be somewhere else. Right?

Our family farm has a certain character and functions a certain way, and part of that is because things I do, I don't do in a timely way as I should because I'm off doing these other things. Doing these other things has provided me a richness to my life that wouldn't otherwise exist, and all these people that I know that have become part of our family farm. Then, really boring, but important things, like health insurance.

Way back when, I never ever would have guessed that Garden City Harvest and the Environmental Studies Program's PEAS Farm would have become as big as they are. I wouldn't have guessed that our family farm would have become this established and as big as it is. All of these things just grew right against this backdrop that was family and children. We have three kids that are almost grown up right now.

They grew up in the thick of all of this. I think it was a great way for them to grow up, in this kind of semi-controlled chaos, seeing through the, we still have a 17-year-old who is around. The other two are off and you can see it in the choices they have made that this kind of, that community and food and being involved and having a conscience about things are really important. It's become who they are and I'd like to think that how they grew up made some of that possible.

Chris Blanchard: You know, a lot of times, when I talk to farmers, and especially people who have, work long hours, have very busy lives, one of the regrets that they bring up is not having the time for the kids; but you're actually talking about the busyness in your life actually being something good for the kids.

Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah, so okay. I would love talking about this, and at the same time, I almost get choked up because it's so in my heart. I remember, this was a long



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time ago, I think it must have been my son was in sixth grade and we were in school. They had poems up on the wall that they had written. He had written a poem about he and I moving irrigation pipe together. Back then we didn't have as much pipe. We had to move pipe a lot. It was this beautiful little poem about us having this conversation while moving pipe. I had been having these thoughts about, "Do we have enough time for the kids?" Other people go on vacations with their children, and I thought, "No, I move pipe with my son." Was I moving pipe or was I parenting? It's all rolled together. It's just life.

We weren't separate from one another, the way, if I had worked at an insurance agency. I don't mean to say bad things about insurance agencies, but if my whole life was outside of our house, we would actually have had less time together than having our kids be part of our family farm, where our kids harvest things. As they got older, they became more a part of the work and the harvest, and working farmers market, and were just in the thick of it with us, and got to learn some of their own value. The times I spent with my kids working were great, were maybe even better than if we'd been on vacation because they got to see their value to our whole family enterprise. That's totally with him, even to this day. My son is about 24 now, and he teaches Pre-K and Kindergarten. I think the work ethic and the care and the part of community all helped him become who he is.

I have another daughter who's a second year in college in Vermont, and then a 17-year-old daughter who is in high school here.

Chris Blanchard: Josh, with that, we're going to turn to our Lightning Round. First we're gonna get a quick word-

Josh Slotnick: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: -from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back.

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- Chris Blanchard: All right, and Josh, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Josh Slotnick: Favorite tool. Geez. Wow. Man, I guess that the tractor is a tool. I could say that, if not, it's a harvest knife.
- Chris Blanchard: Yeah, we'll let the tractor be a tool. What kind of tractor do you guys have?
- Josh Slotnick: A Kubota 4630. It's a moderate-sized tractor, 47 horsepower, roughly, 40 at the PTO. We use a spader as our primary tool. Just too, I really love the hydrostatic transmission and the ability to independently adjust forward speed and the RPMs with the PTO. It's just a brilliant design.
- Chris Blanchard: Great. What's your favorite crop to grow?
- Josh Slotnick: My favorite crop to grow. Man, that's a hard one, too. God, I gotta go with seasonally; there has got to be one for each season. Kim and I were just talking about this the other day. I'm going to say one of my favorite things to harvest is celery, because when you cut it, it looks like chaos; and when you trim it back, it looks beautiful.
- Chris Blanchard: Like that. Because you are so busy, what's the last purely recreational activity you did?
- Josh Slotnick: [01:20:00] Played pond hockey.
- Chris Blanchard: Okay, so that was a while ago. No! That wasn't a while ago.
- Josh Slotnick: Just last weekend.
- Chris Blanchard: Last weekend.
- Josh Slotnick: Yeah, last weekend.
- Chris Blanchard: Right.
- Josh Slotnick: Yeah. Yeah.
- Chris Blanchard: I'm sorry. Things have warmed up exceptionally fast here in Wisconsin this year, and the ice has gone off the lake. I'm thinking pond hockey is not a thing around here, even though it should be, normally.
- Josh Slotnick: No, in fact there was a game at my friends', Steve and Lucy at Lifeline Farm. They have the pond, and I think it was on Tuesday they had a game, but I was working.
- Chris Blanchard: [01:20:30] You were working.



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- Josh Slotnick: We had a long pond hockey season this year.
- Chris Blanchard: All right. What's the best advice you've ever gotten?
- Josh Slotnick: Man, oh, so I'm gonna quote my buddy, Steve at Lifeline Farm, when we're talking about infrastructure and where to put things. I was trying to anticipate, "Oh, we'll put this here, put that there." He said, "Now you should just go slow and let the rhythms of labor tell you where you're gonna put things, rather than try and make labor fit where you put stuff." That's been smart in so many ways. Just go slow and let the rhythms of work determine how you organize yourself.
- Chris Blanchard: Finally, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Josh Slotnick: Maybe I would have said to not worry about it so much, and just keep at it. Things will basically work out. The other one that stuck with me is when in doubt about, "What should I do?" Especially when you feel overwhelmed, there's six things you're supposed to do. Do what you know you're supposed to do and let the other stuff go out of your head. I would have told myself that then.
- Chris Blanchard: Josh, thank you so much for a really rich interview here on the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Josh Slotnick: Wow, thank you, Chris. It's really fun and you asked great questions. It's fun to talk this stuff with someone who understands it right away. I appreciate that.
- Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here. I'll say again, that this is Episode 113 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, and you can find the notes for this show at FarmertoFarmerPodcast.com by looking on the Episodes page, or just searching for Slotnick. That's S-L-O-T-N-I-C-K. The transcript for this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk-behind farming equipment and high-quality garden tools in North America; and by Rock Dust Local, the first company in North America specializing in local sourcing and delivery of the best rock dusts and BioChar for organic farming. Additional funding for transcripts provided by North Central SARE, providing grants in education to advance innovations in sustainable agriculture.

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Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show through the Suggestions form at FarmertoFarmerPodcast.com and I'll do my best to get them on the show. Josh Slotnick is one of the people that was recommended by you, my listeners.

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