



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

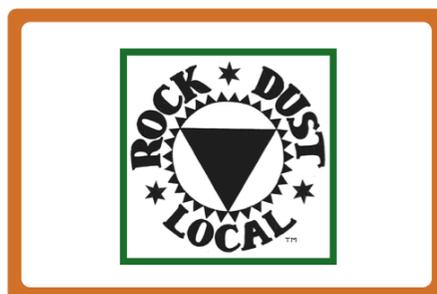
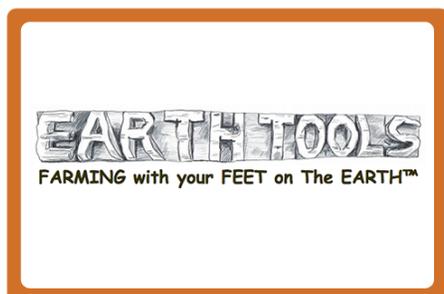


EPISODE 114

Janaki Fisher-Merritt of Food Farm on Root Cellars and Rooting in Community in the Far North

April 13, 2017

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Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 114, and this is your host Chris Blanchard.

Janaki Fisher-Merritt owns Food Farm with his wife Annie Dugan and operates it with his parents, John and Jane Fisher-Merritt, and long-time employee Dave Hanlon. Located in Wrenshall, Minnesota, 25 miles southwest of Duluth, Food Farm raises about 13 acres of vegetables and sells them over an extended season by storing crops in their high tech root cellar. In 2010, they were selected as the Organic Farmers of the Year by the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service.

Food Farm was started by Janaki's parents in the late 1980s. Janaki shares the story of the farm's development in the late 80s and the early 1990s, how they developed the market for local food and CSA in the area, and Janaki's gradual assumption of responsibility and eventual ownership of the farm. In addition to 200 summer CSA shares and a significant amount of wholesale sales, Food Farm packs about 150 CSA shares all winter long.

We dig into Food Farm's amazing root cellar which combines traditional techniques with modern technology to create a facility that is practical and efficient. Janaki walks us through the development of the root cellar, the creation of a second generation version, and the nuts and bolts of how they keep storage crops fresh into March and beyond.

Janaki also explains their wood-heated transplant production system and the steps they've taken to make that energy efficient in a climate where heating bills in March can be much more outrageous than on the average Minnesota vegetable farm. We also delve into Janaki's involvement with his local non-farming community through the school board and a film festival and how having something outside the farm including recently a couple of children has enriched and balanced Janaki's life and the life of his family.

Because time moves fast, it's worth noting that this episode was recorded in mid-March. It's still cold in Wrenshall here in mid-April, just not as cold as it was then.

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[00:02:30] And by Vermont Compost Company, founded by organic crop-growing professionals committed to meeting the need for high quality compost and compost-based living soil mixes for certified organic plant production. Vermontcompost.com.

Janaki Fisher-Merritt, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Janaki: Thanks, Chris. Happy to be here.

Chris: So glad you could join us today. How's the weather up there in just south, southwest of Duluth, Minnesota?

Janaki: It's beautiful today. Actually partly sunny. We just got about 2 inches of snow overnight so everything's bright. It's kind of nice this time of year. I don't like it when the snow goes away too early because then I can see all the things that I need to do. It's nice to keep things covered for an extra couple weeks.

Chris: I like that. Janaki, would you take a couple minutes and kind of give us the lay of the land there at Food Farm in Wrenshall, Minnesota?

Janaki: Sure, yeah, so I grew up on the farm here. I actually was born about 15 minutes south of here in Holyoke, a different farm that my parents moved to in 1975. They moved out from Oregon because they really wanted a farm, and they couldn't afford land out there. It was already just getting too expensive so they saved up a little money, and they bought a 240 acre farm in the middle of the Nemadji State Forest for \$24,000 and had a house on it and outbuildings.

They thought they were all set up to have a little bit of kind of a hippie commune. You know, they had a couple other friends that moved out with them from Oregon, and they were going to have their organic farm. It really didn't work out that way, as many things don't. It turned out that my parents were the only ones that actually wanted to do farmwork.

The other ones kind of all moved away, and they were left, you know, digging in and trying to establish a local foods movement and get the word out about organic in this part of the country which was really just a totally foreign thing at that point. There were not many people growing food up here anymore aside from beef and dairy cattle.

It was many years of kind of a long slog trying to raise awareness and at the same time also figure out how to grow vegetables here. I mean, it's a very different climate than coastal Oregon. It was an interesting journey for them. Part of that journey was moving to the farm we're at now in 1988. It turned out that that beautiful idyllic spot we had there was in a frost pocket. One year they had a 30 day growing season, and it just



became pretty clear that if they wanted to raise vegetables, they were just going to have to leave that place.

It was really hard for my folks. I mean, it was a beautiful place. The original house actually had burned down in '77 just before I was born, and so they rebuilt the house there, all recycled materials. When I say recycled materials, I mean, recycled nails.

Chris: Wow.

Janaki: I mean, this was right down to the nails and the lathe and everything was all recycled just because, you know, they didn't have any money. So anyhow, we moved up to this place in 1988 in Wrenshall, and a big part of the reason was the growing season but also the proximity to Duluth. They really wanted to do kind of a you pick model for marketing vegetables.

Our old place was 45 miles or so from Duluth, and the place we're at now is about 25 miles from downtown. That still wasn't really enough to get people out here. It was still just really difficult. We did, if anybody's familiar with the Booker T. Whatley, his ideas. It was kind of a precursor, I guess, to CSA. You'd buy sort of memberships in the farm, and then you got in exchange for that, you had the opportunity to come and do a you pick situation out on the farm.

But boy, it was really tough to do that in the pre-internet era when you couldn't just at a couple clicks of a button let people know what was ready and what wasn't. You know, trying to grow a whole variety of produce for people but not being able to let them know what was ready. That was really difficult. It was still difficult getting people to drive out here to the farm.

We started doing a modified version where we charged people a bit more, but they could call and order. Then we'd bring stuff into town and drop it off. We had a fair number of members. I don't know for sure, but it was probably at least 30, maybe 40, families, that were doing that on a pretty regular basis. This would have been early '90s. Sometime around that time, I can't remember. It must have been winter of '92, probably. We went down for a meeting at Philadelphia Farm. Dan and Margaret were there from Common Harvest too, and they were telling people about this new idea of CSA. I was a teenager, so I thought anything that my parents were doing was crazy. I thought it was nuts, and nobody would ever go for that.

We came back up here and talked to the folks who'd been buying produce from us, and they were just really excited about it. They said, "We don't have to call you, and stuff just shows up?" A lot of them were motivated by the same values that the CSA movement was promoting. It wasn't just getting good produce. It was supporting family farming and a better relationship with the land. It really made sense.

We had 50 members that first year, and then the farm has just kind of grown steadily since then. I don't remember how many acres we had in production that first year, but we just kind of bit by bit added a little bit most years since then. '94 was our first growing season for CSA. That's when I was just before my senior year of high school.



That really kind of ... It turned the farm into something that was ... that my parents really believed in and were putting so much time and focus and energy into, but it never paid the family's bills.

The farm, it would pay for itself, but it didn't pay for my parents' labor, so they were always working off the farm. They still continued to work part-time off the farm in the early years, but it really was a dramatic change just in that it .. the farm could finally start to provide for the family rather than just the other way around.

It gave me the opportunity to see it as sort of a viable career path. I enjoyed farm work, but I don't know without it seeming like an economically viable enterprise that it would have caught my attention like it did.

Chris: That's something that I think is really interesting about Food Farm is that you guys are, it's not just your folks. You came back to the farm, and you guys worked in partnership for a long time, am I right?

Janaki: Yeah, yep. Yep. So, I mean, really, I was ... Growing up I was pretty as many teenagers are, but we really were able to establish really a pretty good dynamic even when I was ... earlier on in high school because I would have ideas about how things should be, and I didn't like the way my dad did them or my parents were organizing things. Instead of being territorial, they were much more open to my ideas. Not that they would carry out my ideas. It was much more like, oh, that seems like that might work. Why don't you do it?

Then that just kind of continued on through college. By the time I graduated, there were significant parts of the operation that were sort of my thing. It was really hard for me to give ... It would have really hard for me to give that up. I was already so kind of involved in the operation. It had two benefits. It was hard for me to get out of it at that point, and it was also, you know, the farm had developed in a way that made sense to me. I think it's just the stage the farm was at in its development was perfect for the stage I was at in my growing up. That worked out really, really well.

Chris: Tell me about the farm as it sits today. How many acres of vegetables are you guys growing and where are you selling your produce? How is that all situated here in 2017?

Janaki: Yeah, yep, so we have just over 13 acres we're going to have in production for vegetables this year. Then we've got another close to 18 that are in the crop rotation system. We just bought some land across the road here a couple years ago. We're getting that into the vegetable, some of it, into the vegetable program. Normally I try to have about 50/50 so I'm taking most fields out of production and into cover crop every other year. We're a little heavy these next couple years just because we've got this additional land to get up to speed.

Yeah, so 13 acres of vegetables and that's ... Last year our sales were probably about 60% CSA. We had a really pretty decent growing season last year. We had a lot of produce in storage from 2015 which was a really good growing season for us, so that's why our ... Normally I would say that our CSA to wholesale ratio is closer to 70/30, but it



was about 60/40 in 2016.

Then we do raise a lot of storage crops so that's close to half of our income actually was from storage vegetables. We've got a root cellar set up so we're delivering CSA shares until April and delivering to our wholesale customers as long as we can. We're still delivering right now but we're down to just a couple things in there for the wholesale folks. That would be the Whole Foods co-op in Duluth. They have two locations now. The Duluth Grill, Chester Creek Café, Spirit Creek Farm. They make fermented products, so kimchi and sauerkraut and ginger carrots, that type of thing, out in Washburn, Wisconsin. A couple smaller ... There's Mount Royal supermarket in Duluth and a small grocery store in Carlton, and Beaners coffee shop in Duluth also. Those are the main ... our main wholesale outlets.

That's been really good for us. It's been nice to have a mix there between the CSA and the wholesale.

Chris: Is Duluth a pretty food savvy environment? Is this a place where people are eating and valuing local foods on a wide scale?

Janaki: Yeah, I mean there's tons of room for growth. I hear that the number of CSA shares that are available in Madison compared with Duluth, it's like holy smokes, we've got ... Percentage wise, there's a long way to go to get there, but it generally is a ... Duluth is pretty ... It's a pretty active town. It's becoming more so in the last several years, and it's real progressive. I mean, in some ways. There's a lot of outdoor enthusiasts. There's a lot of people who care about the environment and local food has kind of piggybacked on that also.

Chris: About how many CSA shares are you guys doing now with that 13 acres of vegetables?

Janaki: Summer shares we're almost 200. I don't want to quite be 200 just for ... There's a couple little reasons for it, just the way our planting schedules work and everything. We're just under 200 summer shares, and then about 150 winter shares. We do ... That's kind of a full share equivalent of a winter share so it's more like 180, 190 winter shares if you count a half share as 1.

Chris: What are you guys putting in the winter shares? Is it just storage crops?

Janaki: Yep, so we're not doing any winter growing. It's just beets, carrots, cabbage, rutabagas, parsnips, onions, winter squash, and potatoes.

Chris: That is something that your farm is well known for is the root cellar that you guys have and your crop storage and making that work. I think getting those, oftentimes getting those carrots into the Duluth food co-op into March, and again talking about doing the CSA into April ...

Janaki: Yep.

Chris: Tell me about your root cellar setup and how your storage crops work.



Janaki: So originally we kind of had the idea for the root cellar just because we wanted to extend the season. We just had this idea that it was ... We were better off trying to sell more food to the same families than trying to increase the number of families that we were selling to. That was just sort of something that we really wanted to do, just to provide more to the people that we were already taking care of. We had a lot of CSA members at the time complaining that they couldn't get their kids to eat vegetables in the winter.

We had already done a lot of season extension with greenhouses and before really hoophouses were a thing. Down in Holyoke with that tiny short growing season, my dad was already experimenting with all sorts of cold frames and other kind of temporary greenhouse structures before that was really, at least in our world, was really something that anybody knew about.

We had already kind of done that, extending the season as long as really felt practical from kind of an energy standpoint. We decided, well, we'll try and build a root cellar. My dad had built one way back in the early 80s that was a failure. It just got too cold and everything froze in there. We had experimented with many different ways of storing produce just for our own use and then we also were selling some of it wholesale. We were just storing it in the basement of the house here.

There was an old fruit room, it was like 5 feet wide and 9 feet deep, in the corner of the basement. The previous owner had put a dryer vent in through the sill plate of the house as ventilation down there. What we started doing is just putting a little fan in that dryer vent, just a little 4 inch computer fan. We'd plug it in to blow cold air in when it was too warm down there. It worked great. We stored, I don't know, I think it was 1000 pounds of carrots and 1500 pounds of potatoes down there in that tiny little area plus the other beets and parsnips and that type of thing in smaller quantities.

It just seemed like we should be able to do that on a larger scale. That's basically what we did. We put up, this was in 2000, we put up ... It was 24 feet wide and 52 feet deep, and it was basically a basement and then we put a house above it. My mom needed an art studio. She's an artist. It was cheaper just to put up walls and a roof rather than building her a separate building as an art studio. We put up a second layer on it, and the root cellar is basically a drive out basement. We weren't going down stairs or anything like that. It had a packing shed on the end and big doors so that we could get in and out easily. That actually really helped with the transition from me coming back after college because I graduated in '99. We built that the following summer, and the extra income from that really enabled the farm to sort of absorb an extra salary for a longer period of the season.

We used that really successfully for many years and then in 2015 we added on to that. That original building didn't have any refrigeration at all. We had really, really good luck with that, but we could kind of see the writing on the wall climate wise and knew that our ... The ability to get that structure cold enough before we harvested was becoming a little dicey. We had had one year early on where we had it warm up in December. Carrots especially were all wanting to sprout on us. We actually had to pull everything



out of storage, rewash it just to root hairs and sprouts off. Then we put it back into storage that year. That was tons of work, and we were always pushing to the last minute to harvest, just before freeze up because we had to make sure that building's going to stay cool enough.

[00:23:30] The bigger we got, the less practical that was and the more risky it was to kind of wait until second week in November or later to harvest when often we would have freeze up, and it will happen within a couple days.

Chris: I remember talking to you shortly after I bought my FMC Scott Viner root harvester, and you were talking about this last-minute harvest that you guys were doing in early November. I was thinking, you guys are a long ways north where I was farming just south of the Minnesota state line, and you were starting your carrot harvest after my goal had been to get everything out of the field because I was worried about what the weather was going to do. I can't imagine how stressful that must have been for you guys.

Janaki: Yeah, it was really stressful. It was really stressful, yep. Because of course you know at any moment, something can break, and if you only got a couple days' window there, it was ... yeah. It made us awful nervous. Of course, if you push it on the other end, then you have the risk of crops just not storing like they should. This new building we put up has refrigeration in it, and it was just in time. I mean, the fall of 2015 and the fall of 2016, I don't know what we would have done without refrigeration. In order to cool that old building down, you really have to have quite a few nights in the low to mid[00:25:00]-20s to cool that mass of concrete down from 50 degrees or so. It gets up to a peak of close to 60 in the summer, but starting to cool it down in September and October. You got to have some pretty cold nights to cool it down below 40. We didn't have that. It was barely below freezing all the way until early December this year.

At any kind of size, I think for us anyway, it was pretty much a necessity to have that refrigeration now, which I don't like. I mean, it feels crazy to have six months of winter up here and you're still paying for electricity to cool things down.

Chris: Some of that has to do with just ... I mean, that's the basic thermodynamics of a root cellar, right? Is that you're down in the earth. The earth is cooler than everything else in the summertime, but it's warmer than the air temperature and how fast it's going to cool down is going to lag behind what's happening up above the soil.

Janaki: Right, exactly. Yep, yep. You know, for 15 years, it worked really pretty well. Because up here, we'll often have nights, let's see, I think the coldest the earliest I remember it when we were doing storage crops was I think we had like 17 degrees or something for our first frost in September. That was mid-September. That can happen, and that cools off the soil quite a bit. Then that has two advantages. It gives us more time to cool the root cellar down, but then the crop that we're putting in storage is already cold. When you're pulling carrots out of the ground with a quarter inch of ice crust on the top, they're pretty much there where you need to store them long term.

Chris: Right, so you're putting this huge amount of thermal mass into this cooler that's already



cold.

Janaki: Right. You can stand a little warm up if you've already got it stable at a low temperature.

Chris: But the way things have been the last couple years with those warm temperatures, then you're getting a double whammy because you're not being able to pump the cold air into the root cellar to get it cooled down, and you're also not being able to put in really cold roots because it just hasn't gotten that cold.

Janaki: Right. Exactly. So our paranoia sort of paid off there for sure in the last couple years with adding that. I don't know, you've seen some of the design of what we added on I think a little bit, right?

Chris: A little bit, yeah. Yep. I actually visited the farm, what, it's been six years ago this summer, that my now-wife Angie and I came up and you made me a smashed egg sandwich which I had had never had before, but I guess, it's kind of like this Midwest staple.

Janaki: Right.

Chris: Thank you for that, and showed us around. It was really interesting to me how you guys had the storage set up in that original root cellar. I don't know if this is what you did in the new one, but in that old one, you guys were actually storing things in bins that were built into the structure. You'd have like, maybe you can describe it better than I can, but it wasn't ... I've always thought of you carry boxes into the root cellar, but you guys were actually putting the roots into structures that were already there.

Janaki: Right. That's how we did potatoes. We did originally with carrots also, so I don't know, it's hard to describe in not a visual medium, but basically we had bins set up that were modular. We'd have one row along the back that we could build up from the ground with pieces of plywood that were a foot tall. We'd have a bin that was roughly a foot and a half deep, 3 feet wide, and then we'd slide down a plywood bin front on that, that was about a foot tall. We'd dump potatoes in, and then we'd slide the next one down. We'd dump up until it was 2 feet tall, and you'd just keeping going up until we had them a little over 6 feet tall.

That allowed us to store a lot of produce in a really small space because there's no wasted space. It's just packed, 6 feet high and however big the structure was. That worked really well for us especially for potatoes because the ideal storage temp for potatoes is, you know, more or less the ideal storage temp that the earth is around here. It kept them right around 40 to 45 degrees. That worked really slick. It was a lot of work pulling them out again because you'd have to ... We had a little bucket hanger on the front of that plywood bin, and then you got to reach in and pull them all out, put them in buckets, carry them to the scale to dump into whatever box or container you're putting them in. It was a lot of handling, but it was really, really space efficient. They stored really well. We just had great storage especially on potatoes.

We did the same thing with carrots originally, and that really caused problems because



the carrots were constantly in contact with that 45 degree earth temperature coming in. No matter how cold we got the air temperature, the carrots were always warmer than that because they were right against that warmer mass of concrete. We fairly quickly learned after, I think after 2 years of doing it the other way, that we needed a bin with air space around it. We had these pallet bins made up that fit perfectly in the space, and then the space where the skids were, and then had an air gap, and then the space in between bins. We were able to circulate air around those and keep it cold enough.

In that original building we had, even though it was one building, we had three separate temperature zones there. We had where the carrots and parsnips and beets, that type of thing, were stored. We were able to blow cold air in all winter and keep that right just at freezing or just above. In the potato area, we had ventilation in there also, but we just didn't run it nearly as much. We were able to keep that in the 40 degree range. We also stored winter squash in there. We actually had to provide a little bit of supplemental heat to keep it right around 50, but it was pretty minimal.

Chris: What were you using for controlling those temperatures? Obviously you weren't going in and switching fans on and off in there yourselves.

Janaki: No, we had a company here in Duluth called Conservation Technology that we worked with that was really helpful. They kind of came up with this digital control box that they programmed with us that had temp sensors outside and then one in each of the three rooms. It would turn those ventilation fans on when it was colder outside than it was inside, and it was too warm inside. Then if the sun comes up and it gets warm outside, it would shut that off, or if the temperature got to the right level on the inside, it would shut off. It would also control that little heater for the squash room too. It was really slick. It worked really, really well.

Again, our timing for building the new thing came along just perfectly because at that point it was 15 years old, and that kind of equipment tends to have some sort of a lifecycle. It was at the end. It was pretty buggy the last year. I kind of had to reset it half a dozen times to get it to work. Then it doesn't work at all anymore. It was fairly simple and really served the purpose well. The amount of electricity we used was really minimal. We probably used as much in the last 2 years as we did in the 15 years before that.

Chris: Wow. That's a huge difference. Tell me what changes you made when you guys built this new root cellar. Was it a new root cellar or was this is an expansion of what you already had?

Janaki: We expanded onto it. We added on to the side of it. We debated putting it somewhere else because we didn't have a lot of room where we were at, so it made the expansion a little tricky from a design standpoint, but we decided concrete and wheels are the best inventions ever, and to have everything on one level all connected just seemed like a huge efficiency benefit to us. Instead of building, abandoning the old one completely, and building a larger structure somewhere else, we wanted to take advantage of what we already had. We added onto the side of it, expanded the pack shed area quite a bit so we now had room to actually wash, set up our barrel washer and bin dumper and



conveyors and stuff in the winter. Then we added on to the actually new root cellar part, the storage part, is 36 by 36, and then it's got a 12 foot side wall. The ceiling height at the peak is 18 feet. We used sit panels for the roof structure as well as the divider walls on the inside.

Chris: Yeah, that structural insulated panels, right?

Janaki: Right, yep. It's basically the roof is 12 inches of foam with OSB glue adhered to either side of it so it's just a solid piece of foam basically. So that means on the inside we have an 18 foot ceiling height in the middle, so I can stack ... We used the macro bin, the shuttle bins, which they're probably 33 inches high or something, and a regular pallet size, 48 by 48. We can stack five of them high in the middle of the building and four high along the walls. That's allowed us to have just so much more space. It's really great.

Half of that new part, well, a little over half, is refrigerated, and so the design difference there since that's a refrigerated space, we insulated under the floor, and we insulated the walls also. I mean, it's still earth sheltered, but we wanted to ... we needed some insulation. Otherwise we'd just be constantly using electricity to take heat out of the earth, which didn't make a lot of sense.

We still have the benefit of the earth sheltering because it is cooler in the summer. It's really easy to keep it cool in the summer, and it doesn't take any heat at all in the winter, but we did insulate to buffer it from the earth temperature. The back room, all the way in back, is where we store potatoes though. That doesn't have ... It's just like the old one. It has no artificial refrigeration. We use that ventilation, just regular fan ventilation, with duct work to keep the temperature where it needs to be. We don't store in that same old plywood bin though because we can't reach that high.

Chris: Right.

Janaki: We use the shuttle bins for that too.

Chris: In your refrigerated space, are you still pumping cold air into that from outside as well when you can?

Janaki: I'm not. Part of the reason for that is just I haven't taken the time to do it. The system, the computer box that we had in the old setup, they don't make that anymore. It's super clunky anyway from a modern standpoint. It was an old DOS-based programming thing that you can't even really use it anymore, and they don't make them. I'd have to figure out something else, and I haven't done that. It has to be a little more complicated because I want to make sure it doesn't interfere with the refrigeration, and so ... you know, I just have to make sure that it would turn the refrigeration off when that system is going. It's a little more complicated, and I haven't gotten around to it. It would totally work, and it would save me money on a warm winter especially because the refrigeration runs all winter, so anyhow.

I haven't gotten around to doing that and doing all the ductwork and everything else. The other advantage of the refrigeration actually is that it does keep the humidity higher



with the refrigeration because 10 degree or 10-below air in the winter is really dry. When you put that into an environment where it is being heated up basically to freezing, it ends up lowering your humidity quite a bit, which isn't ... That's not a huge issue for us. We store everything in plastic so those bins have plastic in them or around them depending on what it is.

Humidity, the air humidity, isn't as critical as it would be if they were just in open bins, but it's still nice to have a little bit high humidity in there.

Chris: Back with your original root cellar system, you were washing all of your produce before it went in to storage, and then you were just taking it out, boxing it up, and shipping it, are you guys still storing everything clean?

Janaki: No, partly because we don't have time and partly because it's nicer to store things dirty later in the season. Early season that always worked great. I mean, until late January really we didn't have any issues with storage quality. It really worked good, but at that point we were delivering until March with the winter shares instead of April. Often the February and March, like the carrots and parsnips and the rutabagas to a certain extent, would start to sprout a little bit. Then you got all these judgment calls to make about what's too many sprouts and is this something we have to deal with or is it okay just to send it? It's much nicer to take stuff out of storage if it has happened to sprout a little bit, it goes through the washing process and it knocks all that stuff off and it looks nice.

The other piece of it is we just don't have time to wash everything going into storage. We still wash all the potatoes going in, but we wash probably a fourth of the carrots, and then just enough of parsnips and rutabagas and beets to get us through. I don't like to wash until beginning of January. It's just nice to ... Our deliveries are big enough and take enough time around the holiday season that it's nice just to take a break from the washing end of things until early January. That's what I shoot for is having enough supply that's all clean that we don't really have to get that stuff fired up until January. By that time our supply has reduced a little bit, and there's a little more wiggle room to move stuff around so I can early in the season I just leave the barrel washer and all the equipment outside. It's in an open shed that's covered, but it's not taking up valuable heated real estate. Then once things are cleaned out a little bit, I bring all that in and get it set up in January.

Chris: With that, Janaki, I think this is a good spot for us to stop, take a break, get a quick word from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Janaki Fisher-Merritt from Food Farm in Wrenshall, Minnesota.

Janaki: Okay.

Chris: The Farmer to Farmer podcast is brought to you by Store It Cold's CoolBot. Way back in 2000, the year I started Rockspring Farm, the manager of the local food co-op complained that the lettuce from local producers lasted for days in her cooler while the lettuce from California lasted for weeks. What's that, about 2000 miles fresher? I later found out that none of the local growers had a walk-in cooler at that time. Seventeen years later, this is still the number-one complaint I hear from produce buyers. You have



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We're back with Janaki Fisher-Merritt from Food Farm way, way up north in Wrenshall, Minnesota, just south of Duluth. Janaki, just to switch to the other end of the season to where we are now, you guys ... you're way up there, and you talked about how cold it can get. You were talking about 17 degrees in September. It must stay really cold up there in the spring as well, and I remember when I came up and visited your farm how much you guys were doing to make sure that you were really making that transplant system efficient because if you were just pumping propane up there, I think you guys would be spending a whale of a lot of money on that.

Janaki: Yeah, right. We actually don't use any propane right now. I did finally just buy a greenhouse heater for our transplant greenhouse, but I haven't put it in yet, so the last three nights of being below zero up here, I was getting up in the middle of the night to put wood on the fire. We have just an old wood furnace in there. It works really well. It's just I don't like getting up in the middle of the night and up until this year it's something that my dad ... That's one of the things that he has continued to do. He doesn't want to do it anymore which makes sense. He's always had the advantage on me that his house ... We both live on the farm here, and his house is probably, oh, 50 feet closer to the greenhouse. That's been my excuse. Oh, yeah, you should keep doing that because you're, you know, 16 steps closer.

He also falls back asleep really easily, and once I'm up I can't turn my brain off usually. That's been his deal. I did buy a propane boiler. We'll continue to use the wood, but I'll just stack it full at night and have the propane kick on in the middle of the night if it needs to.

Chris: With that wood furnace, is that ... are you using a boiler or is that just something that's where you've got essentially a wood stove sitting in the greenhouse? Or are you pumping water around?

Janaki: It's basically just a wood stove. I mean, it's a wood furnace. It's like if you go to Fleet



Farm or whatever, they have the add on wood furnaces. It's one of those, you know. We got it off of Craigslist or out of the newspaper used for a couple hundred bucks. That's what we have in the transplant greenhouse. We have two, one at each end, of our big hoophouse, and one in the smaller hoophouse.

Chris: That's a lot of fires to stoke in the middle of the night.

Janaki: It is. I mean, we don't plant in the ground in the hoophouses until third week in April, but still, we can have some cold weather so yeah. If it's really cold, it can be a lot of work. Usually we only plant in one of those real early on. It would be very rare to have to do four fires a night, but it does happen from time to time.

Chris: What other steps have you taken in your transplant house for energy efficiency?

Janaki: The transplant house, it's a 30 by 60, I don't know how you describe it. It's like a commercial truss style greenhouse with gutters on it. We got it used from a neighbor of ours. It seemed like a good deal. It's one of those ... It didn't cost money, it just cost a lot of time. But it's a really nice structure because it's real tall, it's got 8 foot side walls. It does work really well. Then behind that we have a 20 by 30 potting shed connected to it that's totally open. It's only three sides so the front side is completely open to the greenhouse.

[00:48:00] But the first bay, the first 12-foot bay of that greenhouse, we have a curtain we can draw across at 8 feet, and then we have one we drop down horizontally. For the early season, all we have to heat is the shed part which is a nice insulated building and then out 12 feet into that greenhouse structure that extra plastic layer holds a lot of that heat in close. That works really well because at this early point in the season we don't have that many transplants. It's enough to fit in that 12 by 30 feet wide section.

Then later on as the season progresses, we'll start, once the onions are up and nice and we have more transplants to keep warm, we'll move the onions out to the section that's not heated as well because they can handle getting fairly cold overnight and not having a fire right on them. Then we'll move the out there once we have tomatoes potted up into larger pots and need the room. Then towards mid May, then it's just a sea of tomatoes and peppers and the second and third plantings will all be out there. We'll just have the whole thing opened up.

Chris: With that plastic that you can draw across the top at the 8 foot level, is that something that you're pulling back during the day to maximize light transmission?

Janaki: Right, yep, unless it's really cold. Like yesterday it was kind of breezy and it only got up to 12 degrees or something. I just left it closed all day because we weren't getting that much light anyway. Onions are all that we have out there right now, and they're up half an inch or so. It's not really going to affect them that much. Generally we'll pull that cover back in the morning and then close it in the evening. Dave and my dad rigged up a pretty neat little system for that. The axle off an old self-propelled lawnmower that's connected to a pipe that rolls up the cord that pulls that back. Then you can chuck a half inch drill into the input side of that, the axle shaft, and it works pretty slick to open and



close that thing without a whole lot of work. You can open and close it really fast.

Chris: That's the kind of thing that makes ... when you got a manual system like that having something that makes the work just a little bit easier, a little bit more, even if it's not fully automated, at least semi-automated. I think it'd make a real difference in just how much of a pain in the ass it feels like it is to go out and do it.

Janaki: Oh, yeah. Right. Especially because it's one thing if you're out in the greenhouse all day, but I'm almost never out there. It's not my department. Dave is out there most of the day on days he's here, but he's only here three days a week at this point in the season, and nobody else is really here. For me to be going out and opening and closing and all that stuff just kind of feels like a hassle and a distraction from the things that I'm normally trying to focus on. All those little things out there in the greenhouse really, really make a difference.

Chris: Tell me about Dave. You mentioned his name a couple of times here talking about the greenhouse. Who is that?

Janaki: His name is Dave Hanlon. He lives in Duluth, and he has worked for us. This is his 25th season on the farm here. He's just really one of a kind, indispensable here on the farm. He runs most of our greenhouse production and then we call him Miscellaneous Man a little bit because he takes on all the smaller crops that are kind of more finicky. When I say smaller crops, I mean most of things that end up in the CSA box that people actually like.

He does the snap peas and green beans and the lettuce mix, the herbs, the basil and cilantro. All those crops are things that Dave manages. Then I manage the bigger field crops, carrots, potatoes, winter squash. The once they're in the field, he does the transplant production for the most part, but I handle them once they're in the field and field work and all that type of thing. He's handling all the other really complex and time consuming aspects of running a CSA that come with being a really diverse farm.

Doing what we do takes a lot of management and being able to divide up those management tasks efficiently and in a way that makes sense and kind of plays to everybody's skills is really ... It's been really important for us. Between him and myself and my dad, it took us a couple years to figure it out after I got out of college and try to figure out who's doing what and so people aren't fighting against each other's systems and stepping on each other's toes and all that stuff. Once we figured it out, it just worked really, really well. Not having my dad, he's cut back quite a bit here, but Dave and I kind of between the two of us, picked up most of those duties and then other ones we try and figure out how to push down on employees as best we can. It's been a really great partnership.

Chris: I would think it must have been a really interesting dynamic to go from having Dave be working for John to now really having him working for you.

Janaki: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It has been. Yeah, it's been really interesting. Dave and I are very different in the way that we approach managing crops and how we come at solving



problems. He is much more kind of gut driven and instinct driven, and I'm much more, I want to experiment with things and write them down, and get the data on it sort of. So that's caused friction from time to time because it's really hard to have a discussion with somebody when the things that you used to arrive at your decision are just completely different for each of you. When I say, well, it's 50% faster and Dave says, well, it feels like it's slower. Where do you go from there?

Chris: Right.

Janaki: [00:55:30] But, at the same time, it's really ... I think there's a lot to be said for having those. If you realize where the other person is coming from, you can, I don't know how to put this exactly. I think a farm really benefits from having a diversity of perspective even when that comes to decision making and how to approach problems. I don't know how to describe it any better than that.

Chris: You've talked about your role on the farm and Dave's role on the farm. You've talked a little bit about your dad, John. Is your mom involved in the farm?

Janaki: She is. She still does quite a bit of the bookkeeping. I do financial management and everything, but she enters checks, balances the checkbook. Takes care of some of the basic office work. The amount of time she spends varies between, I don't know, 5 hours a week and maybe 20 at the most I think. When I first bought the farm, she was still kind of managing the pack shed on delivery days. She doesn't do that anymore, but she still does a lot of the office work.

Chris: And your wife, Annie, is she involved in the farm operation?

Janaki: She's not officially involved. I mean, any spouse who lives on a farm is involved whether they want to or not. That's I think a difficult dynamic just that the farm sort of is all consuming. It's really hard for it not to be. You can do your best at setting boundaries and valuing family time and everything, but when you work where you live, it's difficult to have a lot of separation there. She also does ... I mean, like spouses do with most jobs is a sounding board for things that are ideas you're having and the direction you want to see things go. It's just much more of a focus because she's right here and living on the farm. That's ... I don't know.

Chris: It's a little more personal.

Janaki: I would love for her to be more involved just because things that she is good at are either things that I don't want to do or am not really as good at. But at the same time, it's also really nice to have her working off the farm, getting us involved in things that normally I wouldn't be or we wouldn't be if she wasn't working in town. That brings a lot to what we do having that connection. That community connection.

Chris: Then you've brought a couple of kids onto the farm recently as well.

Janaki: Yeah. We have a 2-1/2-year-old and a newborn just born just over a month ago. That's been interesting. It's been really fun actually. It has been ... You kind of hate to say it,



but it's been kind of nice for Annie and I to have a project together because before we had kids it was we both ... The amount of work we were doing just kept ratcheting up. We're both kind of ambitious and competitive, and so when one of us was working late, the other one would figure, well, I might as well work late because Annie's not home yet, and then Annie wouldn't like getting home and having the house cold and dark and hang around by herself, and so she would work late if I was working late. After a while you sort of just keep ratcheting things up to a level that ... We still got along great and everything, but we were doing less together.

Having kids has made us ... We do way more together, and I think we're much happier for it just because it feels like we're a family now, and we were sort of instead of being a couple we were sort of turning into roommates after a while.

Anyway, that's been really great, and I've never been much of a baby person, but I like kids. It turns out that I was fine with babies as long as they're mine.

Chris: It does make a difference, doesn't it?

Janaki: Yeah.

Chris: Have you changed? You talked a little bit about you and Annie being involved in the same project now and how that's kind of brought you guys closer together. Has having kids changed how you relate to the farm?

Janaki: It is. I mean, it's made me less motivated. It's really hard now to make myself work as late as I used to and work as hard as I used to just because it's not the thing that I care the most about anymore. It's hard to be excited about working on the weekend. Before it was ... I loved doing farm work. There's nothing ever that I've done that's been as exciting to me, just constantly being able to picture what the field that I'm working on is going to look like in a few weeks or a few months or how much the farm can improve if I just put that extra hour in. Also the level of paranoia that I always have about, well, if I don't get this done and it rains for three days, this field is going to be a nightmare. That has been tempered a little bit in probably a really good way because another 5 or 10 years of that, and it probably would have been pretty ugly even though it hadn't gotten to a bad place yet, but I could have seen that happening.

Chris: How many employees do you guys have on the farm? You mentioned that you're pushing some responsibilities delegating those downwards.

Janaki: I'm trying to. I'm trying to get better about that. Part of what I'm learning and trying to be more disciplined about although I haven't had a lot of success doing this, but part of what I really need to do is stop changing things. I'm always trying to push and refine systems and make things better. That's really good, but at a certain point it's also nice to have sort of an efficient system that you just do every year because then you can describe that system to other people, and they can just do it. It doesn't matter if it's not as perfect as it could be, but if there's a system there, and you know it works and you just do the same damn thing every year, there's a benefit to that. I've always had a really hard time with that, and that's part of the reason that I became involved in the farm is I



just didn't ... I thought that some of things that my parents were doing were inefficient.

I was always trying to fix that stuff. I think at a certain point I need to stop fixing some things just so that I don't have to be the one doing them all the time. Anyway, that's something that I'm working on. But as far as number of employees, last year, we had 12 employees. A lot of them were part-time and for part of the season. This year I kind of gotten away from having very much part-time help at all, and I think I'll just have, so I can count real quick, I think I'll have 6, maybe 7, this year.

Chris: Are there other people on the farm besides Dave who've come back for multiple years?

Janaki: This year, we've got our kind of crew manager person. This will be her third year on the farm, but she didn't work for me last year, so she worked full-time 3 years ago, part-time 2 years ago, she didn't work at all last year, and now she'll be full-time again. Then my mom obviously and then my sister-in-law Terri, my brother's wife, has worked with us. She started as an intern back in, boy, her first year must have been probably 2002 maybe? It might have been 2003. I think probably 2002, and then she's worked on and off.

She worked for several years and then they had their first kid 10 years ago and so she was home with him. Then she was working part-time. Then she started driving our delivery van. My dad always used to do all the deliveries, all the delivery routes, both CSA and wholesale. That was four days a week. Then I brought Terri on to start to doing that, and so she was just a delivery driver. She doesn't work on the farm, but then once their younger daughter is old enough to start kindergarten now she's back working full-time on the farm here again. I don't know how many years in all she's worked here, but it's ... over 10, probably, if you count all the part-time and here and there.

Having people like that is just such a huge asset for the farm because they know the drill, and they're kind of ... They show up. The season changes so fast here. I assume it does everywhere, but our season is so short that you go from April to May and you're doing completely different things, and May to June is totally different than July. It just all changes so fast so to have those people who can come back and at least sort of ... They're as invested in it as I am, and they're maybe not projecting out what's going to happen next week, but they're used to it, and they're sort of ready for that switch to happen every time it does, and that's really, just that mental preparedness is really huge.

Then, as far as experienced help, we also have a farm member, Patricia who's, she's been here on the farm for at least 5 years now. I think 2012 was the first year she started coming out regularly, and she comes out at least two days a week. Again, just a huge help. She comes out year round. I mean, she's here doing all the winter deliveries. She's here today. She'll be helping in the greenhouse, and having people like that who are kind of engaged and thoughtful and really buy into the vision are awesome. Patricia also, she and another farm member, helped me buy that land across the road. They were instrumental in kind of making that financially viable.

It's a pretty amazing support group that surrounds this farm and allows it all to happen.



It's pretty fun when we're all in it together and firing on all cylinders, and the weather behaves.

Chris: I mean, I know you guys say right on your website, it's Food Farm, rooted in community since 1975, and that seems to be ... doesn't seem to be. That's clearly a very important value for you guys, and you're pretty involved in your community outwards as well as having people be involved in the farm.

Janaki: Yeah. I joined the Wrenshall School Board. I mean, I'm on various committees and stuff, but my most formal community involvement thing out here is being on the school board. I've done that since 2004 when I got on the board. That's been really interesting. I didn't really intend to do it. Small towns, you're always short on people who are willing to volunteer to do things. There were three open seats on the board and only one person running. Another guy I was in high school with who is 2 or 3 years older than me and I, we just decided, well, we'll do it. We were write-in candidates, which for someone with a weird name like me is something. People had to spell it right. To get a couple hundred people to actually write your name correctly on the ballot, it was kind of fun.

Chris: No kidding. I misspell your name at least two times out of three.

Janaki: You're right.

We joined in 2004 and I thought, well, I'll be on for one four year term. That's all the time I really wanted to put into it, but I really enjoy it. There are hard times of course when you got ornery employee issues or parents who are unhappy or financial difficulties or stuff like that. We're a really small district. We're at just under 350 kids K through 12, one building, but it's made me be involved in a way that I wouldn't ... that I might intend to be. I might intend to volunteer and stuff like that, but I just get too wrapped up in farm stuff. Unless I've got meeting dates and people reminding me that I have to be there, I probably wouldn't do it. I would just get too busy. Instead I'm kind of obligated and committed to it.

I've really valued being active in the school even though I didn't have any kids. Kids were a long way off at that point. I think that's been helpful in some ways for the board is actually to have a board member who doesn't have any kids in school and it's made it a little bit easier to kind of maybe get past some of the tough decisions that are made and be a little bit more neutral about it.

Chris: Makes sense. You talk about being busy in the farm, but you've also got this other project that you do. This Free Range Film Festival which you plop down in the middle of the growing season.

Janaki: Yeah. Last week in July. It's a nice relaxing time here in the country. Yeah, so we started that in 2003, 2004. I think maybe it was the first year for that too actually. That was a big year. Anyway, so I graduated from college in '99. Annie moved up here after she graduated, lived in Duluth for a year or so. Then she got a job at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis for a year or so. Then when I wasn't with her in Duluth, I was living in a little loft ... We'll call it a loft apartment, but it was just a room in the machine shed.



Annie didn't really like that a whole lot when she was up here visiting so I had heard from my old bus driver that there's this kind of neat place about a mile away from here that was going to be for sale.

I had always... this big, beautiful, old barn, and I was always curious about that barn. Annie was up for the weekend and we sort of looked at it mostly just to snoop around a little bit, and just totally fell in love with it. I mean, it was such an amazing space. It's 36 by 72 and just the hay loft is 30 feet from the floor to the ceiling. For this part of the country, it's pretty big. Maybe not lengthwise, but height-wise it was pretty substantial. Then the main floor has 10 foot ceilings. It's not an old barn you're kind of crouching down in walking into it. I

t was a pretty neat structure, and Annie managed to find a job up in Duluth, and we sort of made the old guy who lived there an offer he could refuse and he didn't. We bought the place, and it was really great for us to kind of have a home base that wasn't right on the farm and made it possible for Annie and I again to kind of have a little separation from farm stuff and have things that are just ours, the two of us. As young farmers, especially when one person isn't involved in farming is really necessary I think.

Anyway, we didn't know what to do with that building, but I've always kind of liked messing around with AV equipment. My brother was living with us at that point, and his work had just bought a little digital projector that they used for board meetings and stuff. He'd bring it home on the weekends, and I bought a new receiver and I cobbled together some DVD player and bigger speakers and stuff like that. We made a little theater up there. That first screen we made out of Tyvek, house wrap, a 16 foot 2 x 4, and screwed some wood onto it to at the top and weighted it down on the bottom. It's 9 feet high. There you go, we got a movie theater.

Then the following year I had, that was the first summer we lived there, and the following year, a friend of mine was kind of an amateur filmmaker, and she was making a movie, and we were like, oh, we'll do a movie premiere, and then they all just decided, Annie, and these three friends of mine, just decided, we should have a film festival. They put up a website, and it was just amazing. We got 200 entries that first year. We just got to watch all this cool stuff. I mean, there's all this creativity out there that you never get to see unless you go to a festival because some of them are 3 minutes long, some of them are 5 minutes long, some are 20 minutes long.

There's not really an outlet for that stuff unless you're kind of doing the festival thing. We got to sift through those, and we just decided, we're not going to do categories. We're just going to pick whatever we like. We showed about 30 films, and we just kept doing the same thing. There's so many people that showed up that first weekend. We had a Friday night showing, a Saturday afternoon, and a Saturday night. On Saturday morning I got up, and I rigged up a second screen on the main floor just so that we'd have enough space for all the people that showed up. I've added a third screen in a lean to since then.

It's definitely ... It's farmer made. The tech is not super high tech although it's not bad. The main screen now we salvaged out of a movie theater that was closing in Duluth, so



that's like a legit screen. The one in the lean to and the smaller one downstairs, those are both Tyvek stuff, and they work great.

Chris: I love that. I love that you're putting that kind of energy into just a completely off the wall creative pursuit. What a fantastic break from the farm.

Janaki: It really is, you know, it really is. It's nice to, farm tours and stuff are fine. It's nice to do that stuff, but it's also really good to have a non ... a way for people to relate to the country and to kind of ... I don't know, to have activities that are sort of agriculture adjacent, I guess, rather than just every time you go to the farm it has to always be about just the farm stuff. Like it can be about other things. The farm can be a platform for other people's creative outlets that aren't just growing food. I really like that.

We also did last spring just over a year ago we had a friend of ours who's a musician, did this really cool multimedia installation concert thing in the root cellar. It was after our last winter share delivery in April so pretty much everything was cleaned out of there. We still had some bins stacked up in there. She had all these, she had probably 10 projectors set up down there, and it's all white steel liner panel walls that actually worked pretty well to project against. Then we had this group from the Twin Cities come up that does really interesting kind of odd instrumental music. I don't know, that sort of thing is just really fun. It's good as farmers, I think, to kind of break ourselves out of just farm stuff all the time and have something that is related to what we're doing but using our farms in a different way as outlets for other people's creativity.

My creativity is through agriculture but I think the farm can sort of foster other forms of community and creativity that aren't directly connected to that. That's something that I really value with the way Annie and I kind of relate to being participants in farming itself is that we can kind of bring some of those other aspects to it.

Chris: Love that. Thank you, Janaki.

With that, we're going to stop here, take another quick break before we come back for our lightning round.

This lightning round and perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company, makers of Fort Vee and Forth Light potting mixes. Vermont Compost potting soils are a really special product. I used Vermont Compost both as a blocking mix and as a potting soil for over 12 years on my farm. We grew great transplants with it. I mean, really great transplants year after year after year. Vermont Compost is a reminder of the art and the craft of making potting soil. They mix an incredible diversity of ingredients into the compost that forms the basis of their potting soil, incorporating many kinds of manures along with plant materials and food waste to foster structure and aeration in the compost. I love that their Fort V mix even has chips of ocean blue granite in it and kelp for just a little smell of the ocean. One thing I have always appreciated about Vermont Compost is their ability consistent and excellent product year after year, and in something that's subject to as many variables as market farming, it's nice to have something you can count on. Vermontcompost.com.



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

Janaki: You know, Chris, you would think that after the number of your podcasts that I've listened to I would have actually thought ahead about, but I haven't really. But you know, I think I might have to channel my dad a little bit here and I don't know if it's my favorite tool, but it's definitely the one that's gotten us out of the most scrapes over the years. Probably my favorite tool is a pair of vise grips. Locking pliers. It's just amazing the number of things that we've done with those, and you can carry them in your pocket. Especially growing up on the farm when everything was old and broke all the time, but just having something handy that can clamp two things together and get you down the road a little ways is huge.

Probably the last time I used a pair of vise grips in a really important way was I had a brake line go out on a delivery van. I was able to crimp it with a pair of vise grips and kind of limp home without losing brakes during rush hour, so that was pretty handy.

Chris: That's an awesome farmer fix. I love it. What's your favorite crop to grow?

Janaki: Oh, boy. I think, I mean, I really love growing carrots because they're ... because people love them so much. I mean, it's one of those things where the difference between a carrot we grow and a carrot you get in the supermarket is just unbelievable. The first time people taste it they're just kind of blown away. It makes a lot of converts. It's also super challenging because carrots can absorb an insane amount of labor or not, depending on how you're able to manage things. Yeah, I think carrots. I also really love growing potatoes. There's something about the way ... carrots are fun when you use the harvester just because they add up so fast, but there's something about looking back from the tractor when you harvest potatoes where they just sort of emerge out of the soil, as the soil sifts through on the digger. I just love the way that looks.

I do almost all the work except for cutting seed of potatoes, and so it's one of those things where sort of from a selfish perspective, it gives me a lot of satisfaction because other crops other people are weeding. At this point now, other people are weeding or hoeing or doing a lot of the harvest work, and I'm still obviously not doing a lot of the harvest work. To get the crop to grow and be weed free, that's my deal, and if I don't do it right, you know, it's hard to have enough labor to weed a potato crop that I missed cultivation on or didn't till right. It's, I don't know, there's something really satisfying just about seeing them come out of the earth and almost everything that went into them was something that I did. It's, I don't know, that's really enjoyable. But I think carrots I like more.

That wasn't very lightning, was it?

Chris: No, that's okay though. We call it the lightning round but it sometimes takes a little time to warm up to the strike, you know?

What's your favorite farming book to read to your 2-1/2-year-old?



Janaki: Oh, man. He loves farming. He loves tractors a lot. Favorite farming book. What's the one he likes the most now? The one he likes the most right now is this old book from the 70s that we got that the library was getting rid of, and it's called The Milk Makers. I love reading it to him because he knows the names of the dairy cow breeds which is such a bizarre thing for a kid to know about.

Chris: Love that.

Janaki: Ayrshire and that sort of thing. He knows them, and he just, I don't know. It's really fun. It's fun to read to him partly because I like that he's learning that stuff but also partly because the old 70s illustrations are so awesome it kind of brings me back to my own childhood.

Chris: That's great. What's your favorite film from the 2016 Free Range Film Festival?

Janaki: [01:26:00] Oh, man. You know, I ... boy. I can't remember any of them. It is so much fun doing that festival, but it turns into such a blur because I'm so tired already at that point in the season. I really like, there's one about the world of competitive stone skipping that just had some really neat characters in it. These guys who are like trying to go for the Guinness Book of World Record for the most skips for skipping rocks. That one was really, really great.

My favorite probably was this one called Pickle which is this real short documentary. There's no explanation to it. It's just this interview with this couple who saves animals. They have this kind of little hobby farmy homestead thing, but what's great about it is it's not ... you can tell that they love doing it, but they have sort of a twist to it that they know these animals are all just going to die. You hear about like how they found it, and the husband will kind of be rolling his eyes that his wife found this thing and made them bring it home, but then he's got a soft spot too.

They talked about this possum they found. He's like, oh my God, I can't believe she brought this home. It was lame. Its back legs didn't work, but he makes this whole little cart so it can carry itself around. Just a sweet story about this couple that does kind of this goofy thing, and they know it's silly and kind of ridiculous. They really kind of ... you know. It's just a nice short film about people who are creative and interesting in their own way and not shy about it. That was super, super touching.

Chris: I love it. Finally, Janaki, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?

Janaki: Oof. I'd probably just tell myself that it would all be okay, and it wouldn't have made any difference at all. I put myself under a lot of pressure, and it's not ... I don't need to. It's all going to ... everything has worked out great. But yeah, I don't know. I don't know what I would have. Honestly, there's of course all sorts of little things that I would have changed, but you know, it's sort of the opposite of my first instinct would be to say that it's okay that you're overthinking everything. That it actually helped.



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[01:29:30] We bought our first brand new tractor in 2006, and I had myself so going around in circles trying to figure out what to get, but it was totally worth it. I mean, all the time I spent doing that, like I love that tractor. It does exactly what I need it to do. The little things that I spent extra money on were definitely worth it. The little things that I didn't spend extra money would not have been worth it. I think that may be that it's okay that the process that I use is a process I use, and if it seems ridiculous that you're indecisive and it takes too long to figure things out, it might seem that way, but it also probably is just the way that you operate.

I don't know if that's clear at all, but I think that's what I would tell myself that you decide things the way you decide them, and you should just go with that because it works.

Chris: Great. Makes complete sense, Janaki. Thank you so much for being my guest today on the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Janaki: You bet, Chris. I'm happy to do it.

Chris: All right, so wrapping things up here. I'll say again that this is episode 114 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 Food Farm. 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 dust and biochar for organic farming.

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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. I'll do my best to get them on the show.

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