



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

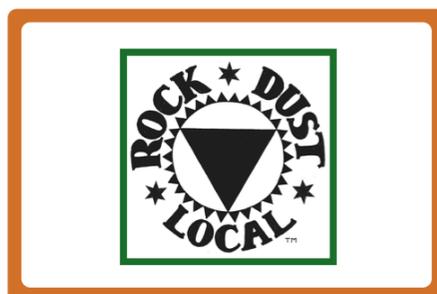
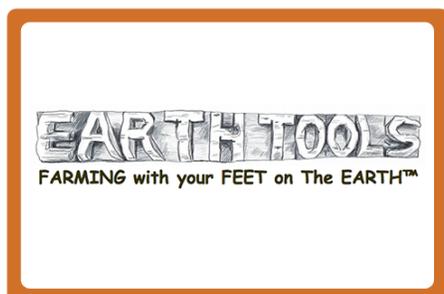


EPISODE 119

119: Jeff and Zach Hawkins of Hawkins Family Farm on Managing Pastured Livestock and Vegetables as a Father-Son Team

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 119. This is your host, Chris Blanchard.

Father-and-son team Jeff and Zach Hawkins raise two acres of vegetables, 20 acres of grain, and a variety of livestock on 60 additional acres of pasture at the J.L. Hawkins Family Farm, outside of North Manchester, Indiana.

About half of their sales go through a CSA with the remainder going through farmers' markets, and local restaurants, as well as an on-farm pizza night.

Jeff shares the story of how the farm was started by his grandparents in the mid-1950s and how he came back, and then changed the farm from a hobby farm to farming in earnest in 2003.

We also dig into Zach's return to the farm in 2013. And the accompanying expansion in markets and management that was made to accommodate an additional person on the farm.

Jeff and Zach also share how they've made the relationships on this small family farm work, including the ways that their respective spouses are and are not involved in the operation.

Zach shares some of the details about how they've integrated the vegetable and livestock operations, including the use of pasture patches, to grow some of the vegetable crops. Zach and Jeff share how they plan their way through the diversity of operations, and the decision-making processes they use to do it.

We also discuss some of the challenges they've faced, including how they overcame regulatory and legislative hurdles to processing their chickens on-farm, and how they approach food safety with livestock and vegetables on the same operation.

Just a note here, this episode was recorded in late March, so keep that in mind when we're discussing field work and such.



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Zach and Jeff Hawkins, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Zach Hawkins: Thanks for having us, Chris. Sure glad to be here. Thank you.

Chris Blanchard: Thank you so much for joining us today. I'd like to start off with having you give us the lay of the land there at J.L. Hawkins Family Farm. Where are you guys located? And how many acres are you farming? What are you growing, and how are you selling it?

Zach Hawkins: Our farm is 99 acres. We're just outside of North Manchester, Indiana. That's in northern Wabash County. The nearest city would be Fort Wayne. That's about 30 miles due east of here.

On our farm, we've got the majority of ground in pasture. Actually, it's probably somewhere between 60 and 65 acres in pasture. We're using that to raise livestock. We've got about 10 acres in feed corn, which goes into the animal feed. We've got another 10 acres or so in small grains, which is acting as a nurse crop for pasture. There's a little five acre wood lot. And then we have a garden space which kind of fluctuates, but there's generally around two acres in vegetable production every season. We can talk about how that breaks down, if you'd like.

We're raising small batches of a variety of things. We're doing plenty of different garden vegetables and herbs. We're raising beef and pork. We've got broiler chickens. We've got layers for eggs. We do Thanksgiving turkeys. And then these grains as well.

Chris Blanchard: That's quite a diversity of products. How are you selling all of that?

Zach Hawkins: We have a number of market streams. The one that we focus on is CSA. I don't know, dad, maybe that's half of our revenue right now. That's packaged in a couple of different ways. We do a vegetable-only CSA, but then we also have this farm share, where we're trying to reflect the diversity of what we're



growing in our marketing approach. So that will include the vegetables, and then also chickens, beef, pork, eggs. They get a Thanksgiving turkey. And in the future, they may be actually getting some of the smaller grains we're producing, too.

Chris Blanchard: Interesting. And then, where else are you selling your product?

Zach Hawkins: We do one farmers' market, which is a recent addition. We're also using that as our CSA pick-up. We sell to a number of local restaurants as well. That's actually been picking up as the farm-to-table way of cooking comes to our part of the country.

Chris Blanchard: When you say, "local restaurants", are you looking in the town of North Manchester, there, or are you guys taking that over to Fort Wayne?

Zach Hawkins: Both. We've got one café here in town that uses a large number of local products, both from our farm and other farms. But then the majority of it is going to Fort Wayne. And then another more populous community is Warsaw, Winona Lake, Indiana area. We're heading there every week as well.

Chris Blanchard: That's quite a distribution run.

Zach Hawkins: [00:05:30] Yeah, we do spend some time traveling during the course of the week. But we're in a pretty rural area, and so, that's been necessary for us. But we do try to package. We're going there for CSA pick-up, but also doing restaurant deliveries, so each trip is accomplishing more than one objective.

Jeff Hawkins: It's kind of a hold-over from earlier times, but we have some customers that continue to buy a quarter of a beef or half of a hog. We have a little on-farm store where we've got ground beef and eggs and so forth. Those are not as significant as they once were, as we've more toward the CSA and wholesale restaurant model. But they still are part of our revenue stream and part of people being involved here, and our farm as well.

Chris Blanchard: How long has your farm been where it is?

Jeff Hawkins: My grandfather and grandmother, Leo and Velma Hawkins purchased this farm in 1957, when they were in their fifties. So they actually rented farm ground for most of their lives, saved their money, bought this place. We are so very blessed by that, because they were pretty fussy and so, it's fine, sandy loam soil, well-situated, well-drained. And so, in the fifties, they were here.

I was born in 1954, the later part of the year. So not long after I was born, they purchased this. I remember visiting here. My dad didn't grow up here, since he was long out of the house. But I remember visiting here very, very frequently. It's been in the family in my lifetime, for all of my life.

We moved to the farm in 1988, after being in Minnesota and Wisconsin and



Michigan. And started to really just piddle at it a little bit. More hobby farming than anything else. We raised some chickens. We had a couple of calves for beef and a large garden, and that sort of thing. Over time, we were able to make every mistake, probably. At least a lot of them, in a small way, as we learned some new ways of doing some things here. And then continued to move forward with it until about 2003.

In 2003, then, really in earnest is when we cast our lot with the farm and started this CSA and decided that it would be not really hobby, but more integral to our lives and livelihood.

Chris Blanchard: What made you decide to make that change?

Jeff Hawkins: It's an unusual story. The reason we came to town was actually in 1987, because I was called to serve as a pastor in town. I'm a Lutheran pastor. That first year, we kind of pretended the farm wasn't here, because we wanted to know we were called to that ministry and so forth.

But we had some housing issues and my dad, on the farm at the time, and was running the farm house. I said to my wife, "Let's rent from my dad. Let's move to the farm." And she said, "Why would we do that?" She was a city girl and didn't know who the kids would play with, since there weren't next-door neighbors and that sort of thing. But we moved here and fell in love with it. It was really good for me because it was a wonderful balance to the hectic nature of parish life, as a parish pastor. It was hectic in its own way, but in kind of a different way. So that's what brought us here.

Zach Hawkins: I was probably six or seven years old when we moved out to the farm. Dad was still going into town every day to work. We were raising a few animals here and there, but I don't think either I or my dad would describe our up-bringing as a real farm up-bringing. I certainly didn't think that I was going to be farming, as I was growing up here. So we both had our own return to the farm.

Jeff Hawkins: That's a really good point. Nor did I. I was born in Detroit, Michigan, actually. But we had an acre of ground. My mother raised rabbits. We had a large garden that ... This farm ethos or culture has always been, you know, have your hands in the soil. But it wasn't really an active, you know, get up and milk cows every day, sort of an upbringing. For me nor for Zach.

So we were away from it, and returned. I think that return gives you a little different sense to about where it fits in your life and its vitality and the privilege it is to do it.

Chris Blanchard: Engaging in such a diversity of enterprises; the livestock and the vegetables, and a lot of different kinds of livestock ... Are all of those integrated into the same rotation? Or are the vegetables just out there on their own, doing their own thing?



Jeff Hawkins: That question presupposes an earlier question, Chris, in that the reason that we have such a diversity stems from a farm philosophy that ... You asked this question first. The question is, "Will what we are doing contribute to the health of the farm?"

We understand health in really wide and deep, wholesome, whole-farm kind of a way. We never make a decision on an enterprise based solely on that enterprise. It really has to do with whether it contributes to the health of the farm. And if it doesn't, we pretty much ignore it. Even if it might prove to be, in the short run, more lucrative economically. But we look at the long-term, we look at the whole farm.

Having said that, how does a whole farm operate in the wholeness of nature and an ecosystem? We recognize that nature never farms without animals, for example, unto health. And so, our livestock and our vegetables, really are all part of this same whole farm diversity. Everything moves on our farm. Everything rotates. Zach will talk a lot more competently about how the animals actually rotate through the garden and fallow times, and so forth. But it really stems from that more philosophical stance.

Zach, why don't you talk about animals in the garden?

Zach Hawkins: Sure. Well, we have basically two gardening approaches that happen every season on the farm. One of those happens out in the pasture. I guess we call them "pasture patches", where we're raising crops that require a little bit more space. So, like sweet corn, winter squash and potatoes. There, we're actually breaking into the pasture for three or four seasons to raise the vegetables, and then returning it back to pasture.

Out there ... Actually, to do the breaking, some seasons we're using hogs to do the initial turning over of the soil. Of course, that ground has been tended by livestock for years and years and years before we come to it to grow vegetables. We're running the cattle over it. We're running the chickens over it. It's pretty healthy, biologically active soil and it's relatively easy to grow vegetables out there.

That's kind of the relationship between the livestock and the vegetables in one sense. But then we also have about an acre and a third in more permanent garden beds, where we're doing more intensive cropping. Lots of greens and roots and things like that.

The way that we use the livestock there, is we follow a system that's heavily inspired by Anne and Eric Nordell of Pennsylvania, of taking a year off of production every year. So part of the garden is growing at least two mature cover crops, usually incorporating a summer bare fallow. That time gives us the opportunity to use laying hens to graze the cover crop, and actually to maybe use them in the bare fallow as well, without having a lot of the concerns that



you would about having livestock in and around vegetables while they're growing.

Chris Blanchard: Right. Tell me some of the details about how you're actually managing the laying hens on those cover crops, right up next to the vegetable crops?

Zach Hawkins: Sure. That's something we continue to develop every year. I certainly wouldn't say we have it completely figured out. But it's a lot of fun to make improvements every year.

One of the pieces of equipment that help us do this approach is electrified poultry netting. I'm not quite sure how we'd be able to do it without the electrified poultry netting. We're using that to contain the birds and to move them around in the cover crops pretty easily. We're also in the process of designing a mobile shelter that works with the birds out in the garden. So it has to be pretty light-weight, to be able to move around. But we get a decent amount of wind out here, so it can't blow over. Putting those elements in place, also being able to easily move feed and water, that's a necessity.

We're only in the fallow parts of the garden with the birds for maybe six to eight weeks during the course of the season. It tends to be a lot to manage during that time, if you're trying to move them quickly. But it also isn't during the entire course of the season. They spend most of their time out on the pasture.

Chris Blanchard: The other livestock that you have on the farm, are they integrated into the vegetable operation as well? Outside of the pasture gardens that you put in place?

Jeff Hawkins: We have found that just using the pigs pre-garden and the laying hens during the bare fallow season, at this point, seems to work pretty well in terms of managing the soil, and keeping bugs and weed seeds and that sort of thing.

There was a time, many years ago that, in the fall, we might run cattle through to clean up some of the left-over stuff from the garden. But we haven't done that in a lot of years. I don't know if that's part of your vision, or plan. I don't think so, Zach, at all. So really it's just those two classes of livestock that integrate in the garden.

Zach Hawkins: Yeah. Pretty much just the laying hens out in the permanent gardens, and then, the rest of the animals, certainly in the pasture patches, are contributing a lot to the garden. But they're separated by a good amount of time and space.

Chris Blanchard: Now, when you talk about putting crops out in the pasture, I'm looking at a map of your farm, and it looks like you guys have a pretty flat 99 acres.

Zach Hawkins: That's right. Yeah, yeah, it is. There's some gently rolling areas, but it's not real hilly, no.



Chris Blanchard: Talk to me a little bit more about how you're actually managing the Nordell-style rotation, in what's really a pretty small spot of vegetables. What kinds of tools are you using to manage the bare fallow and the cover cropping? Are you in there with tractors? Or are you doing all of this with a BCS? Or other tools?

Zach Hawkins: [00:17:00] Yeah. In that acre and third garden area, I may go in there occasionally with our 1959 John Deere 530. Is that right, dad?

Jeff Hawkins: That's right.

Zach Hawkins: My great-grandpa actually bought that tractor new when they got the farm.

I might go in there every so often with the disc, just to reset things. But 90% of the time, we're just using the BCS out there, because it really isn't that much to manage. It's divided into four sections. Each one is about a third of an acre. We're growing vegetables in two of those sections every year.

Over the last couple of years, I've learned a lot from reading Jean-Martin Fortier's book. Of course, we got our start with Eliot Coleman's ideas. I just finished "The Urban Farmer", Curtis Stone's book. We're trying to use some of those style of techniques for the intensive growing. We do the 30 inch, semi-raised bed made with the BCS. We're trying to do close spacing with a four-row pinpoint feeder or an earth way. Doing a lot of transplanting. For the last couple seasons we've really found it a lot of use, great uses for the silage tarps. Which has helped us to keep a pretty minimum till approach. For instance, we just used the rotary power harrow on the BCS. I'm trying to think about where to start, and deciding how we'd do that with the Nordell rotation.

We kind of start in the fall. Last fall, for the area that we're going to be gardening now, we were just coming out of a six-week bare fallow period. You're given a blank slate, right. I went in and shaped beds with the BCS, and a disc hiller bed shaper attachment, from EarthTools.

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Zach Hawkins: Then, sowed down most of those beds to an oat and pea cover crop. That was ... I was a little late. We try to do that toward the end of August, maybe. I think I was in early to mid-September at that point. We had a really mild fall, however, so it worked out well.

A lot of those beds are growing up a pretty good amount of biomass and then winter killing over the course of the winter. Then we just went in, maybe a couple of weeks ago, and tarped all of those winter-killed beds. So they're hanging out now, warming up a little bit. We got a bit of a cold spell here, so it's still kind of chilly. But I think those tarps help them warm up a little bit. But also, it helps germinate a generation of wheat seeds, kill off any of the field peas that



made it through the winter, that sort of thing. And just really mellow out the soil.

The soil underneath those winter-killed oats is already pretty mellow, but we found that when we put those tarps down for a number of weeks, when I pull them back to start planting, it's just a pretty excellent conditions for that early in the spring. Of course, there's really no tractor work to do. We might go over with that power harrow and stir things up just a little bit. But we just get in and start growing.

That's most of the beds for the early season. I do have some beds that are in a rye cover crop, that was sown again back in September, and of course, lives through the winter. I'll let those grow all the way nearly to maturity, before I will go in with a roller crimper, a 30 inch roller crimper and knock all that stuff down, for fall-planted brassicas.

Chris Blanchard: So doing not a really a true no-till system, for those fall-planted brassicas.

Zach Hawkins: Right, right. And that's ... This will be our second or third season, so we've got a lot to figure out there. But it's been very promising to me.

Chris Blanchard: That's an exciting development. I mean, the no-till ... I know there's a lot of interest in no-till vegetables. And there's a lot of different definitions of that, but I think, when we really talk about a no-till crop, that Rodale method of rolling and crimping down an over-wintered rye, I think it's one of the most interesting approaches out there.

Zach Hawkins: It's certainly caught my imagination when I started learning about it, and was trying to get information, and read the Rodale book. Of course, that a lot of field crops. There are some folks in our general area who I think are starting to look at it for their soy beans and stuff. But when I was looking into what options were available for a small-scale vegetable operation, with the BCS there ... There isn't much yet. I hope to see it coming along soon.

But even as I've asked folks that might have a better sense of what kind of tool that we could use ... I'm looking at the no-till planters, where they're cutting through that heavy residue, and sticking seeds in the soil mechanically, and people are telling me, "Well, you just really can't get enough weight to do that," on something that's only 30 inches wide.

We're still looking for the right kind of solutions for easily getting transplants through the mulch into the soil. We're going to try some different stuff out this year, but we haven't found it yet.

Chris Blanchard: With as much cover crop seeding as you're doing, on that small acreage, how are you getting those cover crops in and established?

Zach Hawkins: That was a little bit of of an issue up until last season. We used cover crops out



in those pasture patches, and it works pretty well to use a broadcast seeder, like a hand crank broadcast seeder, and then just disc it in and work it in.

For the beds, I struggled for a while. I was actually out there hand-scattering for a bit, which was kind of poetic for about the first 20 minutes. And then, I could see how many beds you had left to do. It got a lot less poetic.

We tried ganging some of the Earthways together. That sort of worked. But just last season, I got a drop seeder. A hand-push drop seeder, which was the key. It changed that job completely. I found that the 36 inch model fits over the bed nicely. Some of the seed dust will shoulder and into the path ways. I think that's great. Because it's covering even more bare soil. It's adjustable, it's a variable rate. We're still trying to dial in the best numbers for each crop.

But basically, I wanted an easy way to quickly put a lot of seed on these 30 inch beds. That's been the ticket.

Chris Blanchard: It's my understanding that a lot of what you're producing is turning into product for your pizza night, as well.

Jeff Hawkins: [00:24:00] Yeah, that's true. The pizza night really started ... Zach was helping on the farm but he also was working in town, helping to start and manage a coffee shop. He was the bread baker for that, and as a baker wanting to do it in the best way possible, he coveted a brick oven of some sort. And kept talking about that. Over and over again. I started to listen a little, because when I left the parish, I also started a not-for-profit organization. I do clergy continuing education here on our farm. All non-profits are looking for a way to raise revenue. So I thought, well maybe if Zach has this interest and passion, and he always does good research and so forth, that maybe we could marry that energy that he had with this idea of a bread baking oven, but also a pizza oven.

At the time, we were aware of the A to Z Bakery in Wisconsin. They were doing pizzas. We contacted them, and said, "How's this going? And tell us about it." They were encouraging of us. So we ended up ... There's, about a half a mile from our farm, there's an old brick farm house that is falling in. We contacted the farmer, our neighbor, and I said, "Hey, you care if I tear a wall out of that? I'll pay you 10 cents a brick." And he said, "That'd be fine." So we tore a wall out, and reclaimed ... We cleaned bricks and built a brick oven on the farm and started making pizzas, initially as a revenue stream for the not-for-profit.

But what we learned over time was that it distinguished our farm in terms of what we offered. And so people didn't really have that much of a sense that it revenue for a not-for-profit. But "it's oh, that pizza farm." So the farm benefited in terms of marketing quite a bit from it. And of course, we, in order to make it work, I tried to raise some things for it as well. We don't currently raise the wheat for the dough. But it was our basil, our tomatoes, and our pigs for the pepperoni and sausage and that sort of thing. It seemed to really go together pretty nicely, for both enterprises.



- Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about how that pizza night works. Is that a once a week thing for you guys?
- Jeff Hawkins: It is. It's Friday evenings from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. So it's a pretty short window. We only do pizzas. We do nothing else. People will bring other food if they want it. They bring their beverages. They bring a blanket or lawn chairs, and sit out in our side yard. We try to have some of the ... It's really near the garden, so they see that. We try to have maybe some of the livestock. We've got a handful of ducks in our grape arbor that try to keep the weeds down and they're a novelty. The pigs sometimes are out there and they're a novelty for people as well.
- There aren't a whole lot of what I call Old McDonald farms, with a "moo-moo here, and an oink-oink there" around anymore. Part of the benefit to people is not just that it's really good pizza, but they come and get this farm experience. It's very family friendly. We do it just during the season. We start in June and we're done in September. Oftentimes, it's volunteers really, that help us do these pizzas.
- We have happened, in the last couple of years, upon, since we work with restaurants, and there tends to be the better restaurants, we ask if they would come and serve as a guest chef for a pizza night. Nearly every week we have a guest chef from one of the restaurants. They create. We tell them what we have available, and they create some pretty amazing, stunningly different pizzas. That's a novelty for people, too. They tend to sell very well. It happens weekly, which is great. Plus it's really, really good pizza.
- Zach Hawkins: Having those guest chefs come to make their specials has been a great opportunity to deepen our relationship with the folks that are buying our farm products. Number one, it gives them a chance to come out to the farm, which a lot of chefs want to do, but we might be a little far. And they're busy and don't have time. But we're spending a couple of hours making pizza with someone, it gives you a chance to talk a little bit more about what you do, about the farming side of things. I think it deepens their respect for the work and for the food. We have a really good time.
- It's sort of funny, because dad mentioned that I worked in coffee shops and stuff for a while, but I don't really consider myself as someone with a lot of experience in food service. The pizza nights, when it's just our family and volunteer labor, can be a little bit stressful. But for these folks that are doing this every day, it's a walk in the park. It's super easy for them. So they're actually ... They feel like they're relaxing and having fun. They make things go a lot more smoothly, because they know what they're doing. That's been a nice surprise. We started on a whim, but it's something we look forward to every season now.
- Jeff Hawkins: There'll be somewhere ... Anywhere from a hundred to two hundred people here on the farm on a Friday night.



Chris Blanchard: That's a lot of people to accommodate on your farm. I'm looking, because I can spy on you, I'm looking at you on Google Maps here. Where do you park all those people? How do you accommodate that large of a crowd on your farm?

Jeff Hawkins: Yeah, we happened onto this some years ago. We used to do a fancy dinner in the garden event every September. So some of those logistics, we were able to work out at that time, and parking was one of them. People park all the way along our long farm lane, on the south side of the lane. They're perpendicular parking. So we can accommodate dozens of cars parking. Sometimes it'll be the length of the lane, all the way to the road.

Chris Blanchard: Where are most of your customers coming from? Are they coming from North Manchester, which is a pretty small town. I think, about 6,000 people. Or are they coming from further away?

Jeff Hawkins: The pizza customers are ... We have a pretty strong core of people from town, or from Wabash County that come. We have a Manchester University here, so a lot of the faculty tend to really like this kind of thing. But we have people from Fort Wayne, from the Warsaw, Winona Lake area. We have people from Indianapolis that drive up. People from South Bend that will drive down. We've had people come from Chicago before, from into Michigan on a somewhat regular basis ... It's not unusual, I guess, to have people drive a couple of hours. We ... This was a few years ago, but in the Chicago Tribune, there was an article on pizza farms, and we were named, as "close enough to drive to." And people did.

Chris Blanchard: That's pretty cool, to get that kind of a reach.

Jeff Hawkins: Yes, it's true.

Chris Blanchard: How have you guys dealt with regulators on that issue? Have you had to get licensed as a commercial kitchen?

Jeff Hawkins: Well, no. We stumbled upon a lot of things that have been in our favor. Not all of them, of course. But when we started this, it was, and remains, entirely for the purpose of raising revenue for the not-for-profit. All the proceeds go to this 501(c)(3) organization. It's like glorified bake sale. In terms of regulation, even though we have tended a lot of those kind of things, that if we did have a commercial kitchen, or whatever, washable sealing and that sort of thing. We're not officially regulated because it's a not-for-profit organization.

That hasn't been an issue for us. Now, our on-farm store is an official, retail food establishment. So we are inspected and regulated and so forth, by our county health department. You can get a permit every year. But the pizza thing is outside of that.

Chris Blanchard: [00:32:30] You guys have also had some other interesting regulatory



experiences with your on-farm processed poultry, right?

Jeff Hawkins:

Indeed we have. We celebrated our one year anniversary here fairly recently of victory in that department. We're so grateful for that. But yes, we were ... As part of this diversity and ... We have been on quite an expansion over the last few years. From 2003 to 2013, pretty much, this farming was really limited to me. And Zach would come home in summers, because he was away at school or other kinds of things, to help out. But then in 2013, Zach decided that he wanted to come back to the farm full-time. We have been on a, quite an expansion since that time.

We formed a limited partnership, and have widened our markets quite a bit and so on. One of the pieces of that was to figure out how to do on-farm processing, in part for quality control, some for expense. It's less expensive, but not a whole lot less expensive. Then, certainly for the well-being of the animals. The supply chain is so much shorter, when, on a Saturday morning we go out to the field, 150 yards away and get birds and bring them up to the processing facility and process them, and chill them and put them in the freezer. It's a pretty short supply chain.

Anyway, that was a goal, and we investigated what it would take to do that. And discovered that 40-some year old federal law that ... It's called an exemption. It allows farmers who raise their own birds to process their own birds. If it's from a 1,000 to 20,000, there is regulation involved. You have to have an inspected facility that is constructed to their specifications. And proper labeling, and proper sanitation practices, and water tests, and all that. So it is regulated. But it's not official state or USDA inspector who's here when the kill is happening. That's some of the difference.

So that's what we're exempt from, under this federal law. We investigated and talked with our own regulators on that, that "Yes, indeed, that law's recognized in Indiana." We spent plenty of money and built a processing facility and started processing these birds and selling them to everybody, including restaurants, which is allowed under the law.

But we had a state legislator who thought that was unsafe, and proposed legislation to make what we were doing not legal. That at least, we couldn't sell to restaurants. Which, at that time, was about 30% of our chicken business. This started to move through the legislature, and it's hard to investigate a lot of these things. So on the face of it, it could make sense. If you wanted to make a case, and say, "Oh, it's not inspected. It must not be safe."

But when you really look at it, you see that birds that have been produced under this model have actually had a better track record. There's not a single case of food-borne illness over those 40-some years. Now, that's not to say that it hasn't happened. But not a single recorded case, at least. So you'd think if it was unsafe, there should at least be some evidence.



Anyway, that was our argument. That it was indeed safe, and that it was a significant part of our business, and certainly our business plan. And we had a restaurant. Joseph Decuis' Restaurant in Roanoke that really wanted to buy our birds. We're the only ones in the area, at that time, did Freedom Rangers instead of the Cornish-cross bird. He really thought they were superior in terms of flavor and so forth.

Anyway, we had quite an ordeal of spending a whole winter studying the Indiana code, and make trips to the state house, and finally, in the end, got significant enough support, which came in fair measure from a social media campaign #keepchickenonthemenu. We had some of our chefs that were serving our chicken, and telling our story. There was enough interest in it that those voices got through to legislators and they started to listen.

In the end, they weren't sure who was going to win, which side. But it was threatening enough that the Lieutenant-Governor, who is our state agricultural head, got involved and brought all the parties together. He came up with a solution, that essentially mimics what ... The kind of regulation that happens in restaurants, in order to get food safely on a plate. In addition to doing ... The state doing some microbial testing and that sort of thing, which is entirely fair. It's appropriate regulation. We like having this regulation, actually, the scale appropriate because it gives us credibility.

We're really grateful that it went that way, rather than not letting us do it, because somehow we weren't inspected. Which wasn't necessarily the value they thought it was.

Chris Blanchard:

All right, with that, we're going to stop here, take a break. Get a word from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back, with Zach and Jeff Hawkins from J.L. Hawkins Family Farm, in northern Indiana.

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Zach Hawkins: I just started using Fort Vee actually this season. The difference in the quality of the transplants between what I was using before and Fort Vee, is immediately, noticeable visibly. In fact, my dad will walk by the flats, and be like, "The color looks different this year. Now, what's going on?"

I use it because it's a quality product, and it's evident that a lot of care has gone into it. It works really well.

Jeff Hawkins: And it's really right. Chris, it's noticeable to me that the color of those seedlings is deep and rich and elegant. You can see it. It's good stuff.

Chris Blanchard: Taking care of growers by taking care of transplants since 1992. VermontCompost.com.

All right. We're back with Zach and Jeff Hawkins from J.L. Hawkins Family Farm in northern Indiana.

Just before we went on break, Jeff, you were talking about the regulatory hurdles that you guys went through to be able to sell your on-farm processed poultry to restaurants. And how important that was, and how you actually came up with a regulatory solution with the legislature that was ... That makes sense, and that was appropriate.

I'd like to dig in just a little bit more about how you actually do that poultry production on the farm.

Jeff Hawkins: Yeah, we've ... Over the course of time, as I mentioned earlier, we have attempted and experimented in all sorts of different ways to do it. With every model that you choose, there are benefits and there are liabilities. It depends on the balance of those things usually how you go forward.

So when we started, we ... I started doing this a long time ago. Decades ago, when Joel Salatin from Virginia first started to come on the scene. He produced a, I think it was a 14-page mimeographed book on how to build his pasture pens. They were 10 by 12, and they were made out of wood, and chicken wire, and some metal. We built three of those and started doing his model out in the pasture here on the farm.

Actually both my kids ... I had two children Zach and he has a younger sister Sara. So the kids were involved in that, and Zach helped me in the morning, doing chores, moving those pens. Sara did it in the evening. They were able to



save some money and buy that first, old, beater car and all that sort of thing. So there was some incentive for them to do it.

But after a while, we decided that those pens were not ideal for our circumstance. We designed our own pasture pens made out of hog panel that we bent in half with 45 degree corners so they wouldn't pile up. And used a tarp over two-thirds of it. They worked pretty well for us, for about 45 birds in a pen.

But every day, the labor is pretty extensive. You have to move those pens at least once a day, so that they leave their manure behind and get fresh grass and bugs and so forth. And feed and water twice a day. And when you've got 10 or 15 pens, that's not a small enterprise.

As we've now expanded, and we do about 4,000 meat birds a year now, the labor that it took to do that was just ... It was getting out of hand. You spent your whole day with the chickens, is what it felt like. So we moved to a day range system which is where we use this electrified poultry netting. When we started with that, we tried to configure the sections where the birds were in sort of a rectangular, long way. And we had some low shelters that the birds would get under, in case there's rain or with shade, and so on.

We discovered, however, that electrified poultry netting was fairly effective against ground predation, but that aerial predators ... We have some hawks around and that proved to be something of a problem. So we experimented with moving those electric netting. And that was also very time consuming. Finally, last year, halfway through the season, we determined that we could set up ... It's three nets at at 164 feet long each. Three nets in pretty much a square, we could use four of these low shelters. We could put 200 birds in there at a time. We could just move the shelters and not move the netting.

It was much less labor intensive. If we positioned things right, the hawk pressure wasn't too great.

We make feed twice a week. We use 200 pound range feeders, so we didn't have to carry buckets every day to them. We use some automatic waterers that have floats on it. And so, the water issue wasn't so great.

[00:44:30] That's our system now. They go out to the pasture at four weeks old. Before that, they're in a brooder, because, especially this time of year, they need supplemental heat in order to get started. We get 200 birds, male birds, every Friday. They're mailed to us from Pennsylvania. We have an old school bus that is our brooder. It has four sections, and so we put the birds in Section One on a Friday. When a week goes by, we move those birds to Section Two, so there's room in Section One for the new birds. Because Section One has the greatest degree of supplemental heat.

They move from Two to Three, and Three to Four, and by week four, then they're in the back section. And we can drive the bus out to the pasture and just



take them right out.

That works real well, unless you have a wet season. Then it's a little bit of a problem. So there's always fishy. We're going to experiment this year with doing some brooding out in the pasture. When it gets warm enough here, we may not need the supplemental heat, if we can insulate it well enough. So you keep going through different iteration.

The birds stay on the farm about nine to 10 weeks, depending on what time of year it is. They don't grow as quickly when it's super-hot here. So it would take them 10 weeks. And then, they're ... As I said, on Saturday morning, they come up to ... We get up early, and we go out at dawn and round up the birds, bring them up to our butcher facility. And it takes us maybe about three hours, from the time we get them up here until they're done and we're cleaning up, to butcher 200 birds a week. And then, we have a walk-in freezer. We actually keep the birds for a while, and then on Mondays, usually package the birds and freeze them in our walk-in freezer. And then, they're for sale.

We keep some of the birds fresh and deliver early then in the week to some of our restaurants that would prefer to have a fresh than a frozen bird. And then the rest of them are sold as frozen birds to ... They're either part of the meat CSA, the farm shares CSA share, or people can come to our small farm store and buy them.

Chris Blanchard: When you say that they're part of the farm share, with the CSA program, how are you delivering those chickens in a safe way? Alongside the vegetables.

Jeff Hawkins: We have a refrigerated truck. We use that and Zach can maybe explain some about how he sets up there, so that those things are distinct and kept safe, and so forth. And yet, in a reasonable way, so when people move through, there's a good flow to it.

Zach Hawkins: We got this refrigerated Sprinter van last season. And that has allowed us to do the kind of distribution that we're doing now with this farm share. We're transporting them in that. Everything is in separate containers. Then, when we set up, we're doing market-style CSA now. We're putting the vegetables out on tables, but the chickens, which are frozen, are in coolers or insulated containers. And kept separate from those. People go through, and they get their vegetables first.

When you sign up for the CSA, you get a reusable cloth bag for your vegetables and then you get a reusable insulated bag for your meats. In that way, we're even encouraging them to keep them separate as they take them home. That's our basic approach there.

Jeff Hawkins: One of the things, Chris, that we've been working quite steadily toward and very mindful of, has to do with food safety concerns on the farm, and keeping things very separate. In terms of, Zach mentioned, time and space or process. We



don't go do animal chores and then go into the garden, for example, with those boots. We have separate colored containers for livestock, for animal products and vegetable products. Separate areas for things. That's been something that we've really been developing very intentionally here on the farm, from start to finish.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, I think that's so important with a diversified operation. To have that heightened awareness. I think that, I mean, obviously, not having produce and livestock on the same farm is technically the safest thing to do. But if you want to get down to it realistically, I think there are certainly ways it can be managed very safely. And most of that comes down to, I think, an awareness and, like you say, working hard to keep those processes and products separate.

Jeff Hawkins: Right. You have to be very mindful of it. You know, that wasn't the old way of farming. My grandpa wouldn't have thought of that at all. He just did his work and went from one thing, task to another. We're real intentional, too, about working to train our people. When people come to tour the farm, we even try to do a little education. "We're going to go to the garden first, and then we're going to go see the livestock. It's a food safety issue." So we try to educate folks in that regard as well.

Zach Hawkins: It sort of succeeds or fails on the design of the system, too. Dad and I both really like the winter time, to step back and evaluate and plan. We found it more and more necessary to use that time to think through the food safety implications of our work on the farm.

It's been really necessary to get our health on board as well. It used to be just my dad and I, and we'd divide a lot of labor. I spent a lot of time in the gardens. Dad works with the livestock a lot. And as we would bring people in to help us, through an informal internship program and some part-time help ... In some ways, we really wanted to give them that whole farm experience but practically, as we've grown, it's been necessary to assign people to certain areas of the farm, for the most part. By doing that, we're able to think in front of a lot of potential cross-contamination.

Chris Blanchard: Now, the one livestock group that we haven't talked about is the beef production. Can you tell me a little bit more about how that works on your farm?

Jeff Hawkins: We're sort of in evolution there as well. When I started doing this, long ago, I was committed to doing a grass-finished product. And did a fair amount of research and reading and recognized that there were some breeds that finished on grass better than others. And in typical fashion, I stumbled upon Jersey cattle as those that finish quite well on grass. And the way I stumbled upon it was, nobody wanted Jerseys at that time. They were really cheap. So I got them, and then learned that yeah, indeed this meat is, gosh, really, really good just on grass.



So that's been, for some time, the basis of our ... It's a dairy breed but it's been the basis of our beef business. We supplemented that ... Then Jerseys got popular and so, it was a Jersey-Holstein cross or some of whatever I could get my hands on, sometimes. But mostly, it was still that dairy breed kind of stuff.

But now, lately, we are experimenting with some of a more heritage breed. For a couple of reasons. One, the quality of the meat on a Red Poll, for example, is one of the ones that we're favoring at this time. Really like the cattle, like the way they grow. They're not really, really huge. They're a smaller framed animal. Finish well on grass. We have some access to at least some, not a huge amount, but some of those, and know how they've been taken care of. Might at some point, shift from purchasing feeders to moving toward a cow-calf operation, where we have our own cows that calve on the farm.

We're slowly moving toward that. But the cattle enterprise, they're on our farm for two years. That's a long time to keep something, before you can harvest it, before you can sell it. So we can't be extremely nimble with it. We're moving toward these Red Polls, but currently still, the Jerseys seem to be the basis for us.

So this year will be ... And cattle prices were really expensive, not all that long ago. So we resisted. Our herd's pretty small right now. But this year, we'll be getting small, bottle calves and starting them at a very young age. And keeping them on the farm for a couple of years then, before they're able to be harvested as beef.

Chris Blanchard: When you say the herd's pretty small, how small is small?

Jeff Hawkins: I have nine cattle out on the pasture right now.

Zach Hawkins: That's really small. diminished quite a bit. But this year, we'll probably end up getting about 24 to 30 of those bottle calves. And then, do the same thing next year. As well as add some of these Red Polls, if that comes on. So we'll be building the herd pretty quickly. But it will be a while before we're able to harvest those.

Zach Hawkins: Cattle are, like you mentioned, they're not really huge money makers. They're like sweet corn. That's where we want to have enough on the farm to satisfy the desire. Everybody loves getting that part of ground beef in their farm share every week. Thankfully, they're the most hands-off animal that we raise. We did an intensive mock grazing style for a while, although we've backed off that a little bit. Because there's plenty to demand our attention during the course of the day. So you have to set things up for ... If the animal can take care of itself, we'll let it do that until we have to step in.

Jeff Hawkins: [00:55:30] Right. Zach's right. The farm chores, if all goes well, in their respective senses and so on, is a daily fence move. Making sure they have access to water



and so on. It can be an enterprise where they're tending themselves, again, as long as the season is providing adequate grass and those sort of things. We do one cutting of hay every year. Just first cutting and then keep it on the farm, so we can feed it if we need to through the winter. But generally, they graze year-round. The pastures are about 50% fescue. Fescue maintains its nutrition throughout the winter, unlike the other grasses. Of course, they're outside. They're healthier when they're outside. They're keeping ... They're leaving their manure outside, so we're not cleaning the barn, as much as if they were confined.

We've got this little wood lot. As Zach said, it's a pretty sparse wood lot. But enough so that they can get out of the wind. For the first time this year, they have not been in the barn at all. It used to be, we'd bring them in the barn when it was windy. We would use the Salatin system of: put down straw. They would leave their manure on top of that. Then we'd spread corn and put straw on top of that. Then we'd turn pigs in there and the pigs would root and try to find every kernel of corn and aerate that, so it would turn into something of a pre-compost.

It was a pretty good system, but the cattle haven't been in the barn at all this winter. We won't be doing that task with them.

- Chris Blanchard: [00:57:00] With so many livestock species, plus the vegetables to be managed on your farm, and marketing through CSA, farmers' market, restaurants, and a pizza night, that's a whole lot of different, moving pieces to manage. How do you guys keep all those balls in the air?
- Jeff Hawkins: That's an interesting assumption, Chris. That we do keep all those balls in the air.
- Chris Blanchard: If you're still in business, you're doing somewhat of a job of keeping them in the air.
- Jeff Hawkins: Yeah, I'm sorry. I just had to say that.
- Chris Blanchard: That's okay.
- Jeff Hawkins: Zach mentioned earlier that, if all goes well, and we get some breathing room in the winter time, we're pretty committed to laying a fairly detailed plan. And then doing our best to follow it during the course of the growing season. That really is the most valuable tool for us, to know pretty much where we're headed, at least. But again, these are ... We recognize everything on this farm is moving. Everything has a sequence. Everything has a place. If we can figure that sequence out, early on, barring extreme weather events or unforeseen kinds of things ... We always have a Plan B and a Plan C. But generally, that planning assists us a great deal as we try to keep everything moving and in its place.
- Zach Hawkins: It's also been necessary to I guess I hesitate to use the words, "Divide the



labor", because it's a small farm. And we all get pulled into everything. But I think it's still Falcon uses the idea of fiefdoms. I certainly have my little fiefdom on the farm. And dad has his. Where we're the ones who are in charge. People know to come to me if there's a question about the garden or to go to dad if there's a question about the chickens. We do depend on that.

And then our relationship, in bringing everything together, to have the whole farm function successfully.

Chris Blanchard: With regards to the planning, Jeff, it's really easy to say, "We do a really thorough job of planning over the winter." What is ... But it's another thing to actually do that. What does that actually look like on your farm? What are the tools that you're using for making sure that things go from this fuzzy idea in your head to actually ... The cows are going to be here on this day, and the broccoli is going to be here on that day.

Jeff Hawkins: Yeah. Zach and I are great spreadsheet fans. He has insisted that we use the Google Docs, Google Sheets kind of thing. He's really right, because then we have access and we can share it even with our help and so forth. Over these last few weeks, for example, I've mapped out pretty thoroughly the ... What I anticipate. Having pigs come to the farm. We're in the phase now of where we buy feeder pigs. We did a little bit of our own breeding and farrowing up here. But at this stage, it really makes more sense for us to buy feeders than ... Prices are really pretty good on that. And a little less of a management issue at this stage.

I've mapped it out pretty well. When that's going to happen, when those pigs are going to be ready to butcher. Who's going to butcher them. Made many of my appointments so I'm not stuck at the last minute. "Oh, I have pigs that need to be butchered. Sorry, we're full, for four months." That kind of thing. I have that mapped out pretty well and continuing now to work on the location of where my meat birds will be in the field. And what's going to be necessary there.

We have some systems in place where we make feed on Mondays and Thursdays. Because our broilers, generally that's when we need it. They can go through 350 pounds. Feeders will generally last three or four days. Then we'll also add and make feed on one of those days for the hogs. And maybe on another day for the laying hens.

I've mapped out where the field work is going to happen. We have 10 acres of pasture that we're plowing up for our non-GMO corn that we raise and then use as feed for our pigs and chickens. Next to that, is where we had the corn last year. So that will be a small grain. I have all that in place now and the seed here on the farm for when the weather's fit to hit that, to seed it. It's a lot of paperwork. It's a lot of desk work. Where you imagine and envision and lay these things out. Where they're all supposed to go.



And Zach and I work together, too. For example, I'm going to, shortly, as soon as we're convinced that we can keep water flowing to the pasture, and it won't freeze, we'll get that going again. We've got pipes laid on top of the ground. The plastic pipe laid on top of the ground, so we can water out in the fields.

I start my pigs out in the pasture. I'll time it in such a way so they end up where Zach wants to plow the garden for sweet corn. Next year, plow the pasture for a garden for sweet corn, next year. So it's a lot of desk work. Trying to map all these things and how they go on the farm. But we take that pretty seriously in the winter time. Trying to get it laid out.

Zach Hawkins:

For the garden, Google Drive has become pretty indispensable. When I took over the planning of the garden, I came across a spreadsheet developed at Michigan State University. I think it was for their student organic farm. Which had a lot of formulas already plugged in for planning a CSA. I started using that. And then, over the years, I have tweaked it to fit our operation, and the way my mind works, I guess. But that really becomes the heart of the garden plan.

That was an Excel spreadsheet, but I put it into Google sheets, so I always have it at my fingertips with my iPhone, in the field or in the greenhouse, or wherever. I'm pretty constantly looking at that to see what needs to get done. Updating it. Making notes in the spreadsheet, so it's all collected there.

Then we use Google Drive for a number of other things, too. Whether it's signing up people for the CSA, or keeping records. "That's the season." I tried to do this a few years ago and we just couldn't stick with it. But this season, we're going to be trying to use the Veggie Compass system to track our labor and to traffic census, so we can do a better job of analyzing crops at the end of the season. So, the spreadsheets ... We used to call my dad, "chart man" when I was growing up. I guess I got it honestly.

Chris Blanchard:

Nice. I think there's worse skills to have, right Jeff?

Jeff Hawkins:

For me, it's a coping mechanism. My wife says I have a little of ADD. So I got to put it in a chart or I'll just get distracted.

Zach, he is the king of ... I ... Over time, I have come to recognize ... I am coming to recognize ... Let's not give myself that much credit yet. I'm coming to recognize the value of careful record keeping. I've not been particularly wonderful about that. Zach is really taking that to a new level here on the farm. His encouragement will get me there, too, I think. But that's a ... We're a small batch farm. The margin isn't real great. And so, the kinds of things that we have to do to stay in business will be of these particular ... I call them fussy kinds of things.

But there's really a place for it, if you want to stay in business, I think.



Chris Blanchard: Just on the subject of profitability, without going into specific numbers or anything, are you guys making a living on the farm now?

Jeff Hawkins: Well, after a fashion, I would say that the farm, for me, until Zach came back in 2013 or 2014 really ... The farm, for me, was basically a break-even proposition. So my living would come through the not-for-profit, which the farm hosted it, contributed to, and so forth.

But when he came back, it was, "Well, now wait a minute. This farm needs to be some place where both of us make a living then, if we're going to dedicate our time to it."

Currently, Zach is making something of a living, though it's fairly meager at this stage. I don't get an actual paycheck from the farm yet. But I am looking to next year. Nevertheless, there's tons of value from it. We ... The farm is responsible to cover some of the costs, that if we just lived in town, we'd have to cover. So in some sense, that's certainly a paycheck.

Right now, one person is making a living and next year, we anticipate the second one will be.

Chris Blanchard: With the two of you working together on the farm, a father-son dynamic is not always the smoothest and easiest thing. Especially when you've got people both engaged in the same enterprises. Things are pretty high stakes. How do you make that work?

Jeff Hawkins: I'm going to answer that first, if that's okay with you. Because I think the onus of that question is on the old guy more than the young guy. I observed that in these kind of relationships, and especially in farming, it's the old guy that's the stick in the mud and stubborn and all that sort of thing. That really is an impediment to a good relationship.

I have a tremendous amount of respect for Zach and for his wisdom of things. He's a hard worker. Somebody raised him right, I think. So that's a good thing.

I am ever mindful that one of my major jobs here is to listen to him and take him seriously. That doesn't mean we can't disagree. That doesn't at all. We certainly can. And we can work that out. But I've pledged to not be that stick in the mud. I think, I think that's a big responsibility. It really is on the old guy. Having said that, Zach's worthy of respect. That matters a great deal, too.

From my perspective, anyway, I'm really grateful that he wants to come back. And that I am able to continue to turn things over, step by step to him. And super confident that he's well up to the task. It's really kind of nice to get old, because you can say things like, "I'm too old to do that. You guys do it." So there's some little privilege to it.



Chris Blanchard: How about from your perspective, Zach?

Zach Hawkins: I've been really grateful to my dad, for taking that approach. I think another important piece is that we both do have our own spheres of management. Spheres of operations. Dad was gracious in many ways, to give me a lot of responsibility right away, and let me make a lot of my own mistakes. When I'm sure he could have stepped in, to give me some guidance. He gives me lots of guidance, but I think he'll often let me come to him for that. That's been ... Really helped me develop as a farmer.

I think also it ... No one planned this. But I was away from the farm for many years after graduating high school. I think by leaving and gaining some perspective, and then coming back, as a partner in farming, lent something to the nature of our relationship. Where we've been able to work together as equal partners. And to learn a lot from each other.

But I also think that if it's really important, that we both really love working on the farm. We both care for it. We both get a lot of joy from it. We both have a lot of fun, and we're able to keep that as part of the relationship. When we're not trying to figure out a problem or plan the next season, we're usually coming to each other with the next crazy idea or, "What if we tried this?" I don't know. It keeps things a little bit lighter. I think it keeps us both in pretty good spirits.

Jeff Hawkins: Well, we do both have the same temperament, in that farming, to us, is not a job. It's a vocation, if you look at the root of that word. Kind of a calling. We do feel called to it. We're passionate about it. We both see it as something of an adventure. We both would claim, that it's not only our work, but it's our entertainment. We just like doing it. And to share that temperament goes a long way, too, I think.

Chris Blanchard: Do you both live together, there on the farm?

Zach Hawkins: No. That's another key part of keeping the relationship intact. My wife and I live very close. It's actually right across the pasture in a small field. So it's a pretty short commute. But being able to part ways at the end of the day, for a little while, and have our own home places, I think keeps things running smoothly.

Chris Blanchard: Zach, you mentioned your wife, and Jeff, you mentioned your wife earlier. Are they involved in the farm?

Jeff Hawkins: My wife was a public school teacher until last year and she retired from that. And so, when you live on a farm, you're certainly somewhat part of it. But she never saw it really as her calling, necessarily. And that remains to this day. She is more involved, because she's here, in some of the tasks.

One way that, though, she's really involved in this ... She's a formidable presence. Which is needed for somebody who can be fairly bull-headed about



the farm. One of the ways that shows up is, she works pretty hard to get me off of the farm, in one fashion or another. I would just stay here and work all the time. But she's more social, and so, in terms of occasional things like that. Or, most recently, we spent a week in South Carolina on vacation. That doesn't come easy for me, necessarily, to leave for a week. Livestock still need attending and there's always some crisis that happens.

But she just declares it, demands it, and it has to happen. And that's a real gift. That's sort of coming at it from a little different angle. But it really contributes to the health of the farm, because it contributes to the health of this farmer. So yeah, she's involved certainly in that way. But not day to day.

Chris Blanchard: How about your wife, Zach?

Zach Hawkins: With my wife, Keira, she is an actor, so she works at a regional theater in our area, and actually teaches at the university in town, too. But because it is a small family farm, she gets roped in as well. Finds her helping with pizza night, or "You're heading to this town. Can you take these eggs to this restaurant on your way?" That sort of thing. And we had a daughter about five months ago. And so, she's of course ... We're both it. It changes everything, right? Your time gets structure a lot differently. It's nice that we're both not so focused on work at the farm, so it frees us for a lot of those other things.

Jeff Hawkins: Zach, you did mention that, too, Kathy is involved certainly in pizza night. But I think I still ... pretty heavily involved in many of the farm decisions. Run by her. She has really good wisdom on a lot of things. I do need to say that. I didn't want to make it seem like she was not involved, or held it at an arm's length. She doesn't at all. But you don't find her on the tractor, discing that area of the garden for Zach.

Zach Hawkins: Sometimes, I forget. Keira, my wife, is from suburban Minneapolis, so definitely more of a city girl. But she came, when we first started dating, and spent a summer on the farm, with me and my family. Putting pepper plants in the ground, and really ... She's like, "Technically I'm an intern, I suppose. Although, not really." Because she came to be with me.

[01:14:00] But she got, early on in our relationship, she got a true taste of what the rhythms of the farm and what the work is. I think that, because of that, she has a lot of emotional ownership in the farm. And cares for it. And obviously cares for my love for it. I could see, down the line ... I don't think she'll ever be full-time on the farm, but she certainly does love it. I could see her taking on more of a formal role in the future.

Jeff Hawkins: I do want to say one other thing, too, about ... Now that I think about it. I was just thinking ... Kathy washes eggs for us, for example. But what her real responsibility here, and it really is a significant responsibility, with regard to the farm ... She sees this as her home, first, and our home first. And then the farm second. And I can tend to reverse those.



She enforces, pretty strongly, that whole sense of maintaining a sense of home. She cares about its beauty and how it looks. Where boundaries are, like on pizza night. And all that sort of thing. She takes that responsibility seriously. It's a really good thing.

I think that all passionate farmers risk being captured way too mightily by the farm, and by its tasks and its demands and its responsibility. To the detriment, maybe of it being a home. She doesn't let that happen. So that's, again, pretty huge in terms of the success and the health of this farm. I really credit her with that.

Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to turn to the Lighting Round. We're going to get a quick work from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back.

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All right. Zach, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Zach Hawkins: It's hard for me to do favorites. But, I mentioned that drop spreader earlier. If I think over the past season, and one tool that has really changed the nature of a job, I guess I'll go with that drop spreader.

Chris Blanchard: And you about you, Jeff?

Jeff Hawkins: So many tools are so important, but I'm going to go with one of my more recent acquisitions, because of the way that it has helped decrease my anxiety significantly. That is my hog cart. It's a hydraulic hog cart that's a little John Deere 530, can barely lift and we don't have very much on it. But still, trying to load hogs is just a trial often. You know. Pig headed. That phrase comes from somewhere. Having this hog cart, where we can lower it all the way to the ground, and they can walk on, and then hydraulically we can lift it up and take them somewhere and load them on a trailer, has just made me sleep better at night, on the days, the nights before we're supposed to load hogs. I'm going to



say my hog cart.

Chris Blanchard: Zach, I'll ask you, because you're the gardener. What's your favorite crop to grow?

Zach Hawkins: It's probably like, give away where I am in my gardening journey. Who knows, maybe it will make more experience people shake their heads. But I truly love to grow whatever I happen to be experimenting with that season. I've had to limit that, so I give myself some ... Eight 50-foot beds that are right next to our pizza oven. So they're part of the farm where everybody can look, and walk around, and maybe see what's interesting. So that's why I try out new crops, maybe things that I've talked about with chefs. Or something I saw in the seed catalog.

But lately, also where that sense of experimentation has been gathering, has been in the cover crop we're using out in the garden. And especially the small grains. In fact, we're now planting some patches of small grains and harvesting them for human consumption.

But it's kind of tough. I just should love the idea of throwing something that's for a purpose, that's a little bit larger than just harvesting, and selling it, right? It's there for the microbial life in the soil, and it's there to hold things in place, and its effects will be felt on into the future. So, I think I'm most happy when I'm putting those in the ground. It's a great time of year, to be working. I'm putting those in in late summer, and the light's low, and you see the disc. Kind of starting to wind down, and it's a good time to be outside.

Chris Blanchard: Right. And another one for you, Zach. What's your dad's farmer super power?

Zach Hawkins: My dad's farmer super power, I think, is to look risk in the face and just be like, "Oh well."

Chris Blanchard: I like that.

Zach Hawkins: I get a little more worried and anxious about things. But dad's pretty good at managing that.

Chris Blanchard: And how about the vice versa on that, Jeff? What's Zach's farmer super power?

Jeff Hawkins: I'm going to venture two things. One, I think that his super power is his commitment to research and ask all the questions. But secondly, I think Zach has a ... What do I call it? A soil wisdom. A land wisdom. I think he just feels things in his bones. And the way he treats the soil. What he sees there that maybe other people don't see. That's a super power, for sure.

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

Jeff Hawkins: I think it would have made some of this make more sense and been easier, if I



had ... In 2003, I did a farm business planning course through our county extension, called "Tilling the soil of opportunity." I put together ... I almost got put together a business plan. I got close. But then life happened and it never quite got completed. And I think, if I could go back and tell myself something, I would say, "Finish the business plan, and update it annually. Make the plan, and work the plan. Adapt the plan."

[01:21:30] That seems to me that would be a wonderful thing to have enforced early on.

Chris Blanchard: How about you, Zach? If you could go back in time, and tell yourself one thing, when you were really getting into the business, what would it be?

Zach Hawkins: I think I'd actually tell myself to cook more. It's something that I certainly get a lot of joy from now. I spent a lot of time learning how to bake, early on, so if I had to cook, it would be from recipes. I didn't really develop the techniques to take anything and put a meal together.

As I've done that, I have a better sense of the food that we're producing. I get a better sense of what kind of products to offer to our CSA members, and to the chefs. It deepens my relationship with the food when I can start it as a seed and grow it in the garden, but then also take it in the kitchen and prepare it. So yeah, I think I'd say, cook more. It also provides a good sense of boundaries during the work day. I do a lot of the cooking at home, and so if I am responsible for getting a meal on the table, I know I need to back it up in the garden, and get out of there.

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

Jeff Hawkins: Thank you, Chris. This was fun.

Zach Hawkins: It's a real honor to be able to chat with you. We're big fans of the podcast and all it's doing. How it's giving people across the country a starting point for talking. And also how it's telling the story of some of the things that are happening in agriculture right now. So thanks, Chris, for the work you're doing.

Jeff Hawkins: I echo that.

Chris Blanchard: Thank you. All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again, that this is Episode 119 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the Episodes page or just searching for "Hawkins". That's h, a, w, k, i, n, s.

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