



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



## EPISODE 123

### Jess and Brian Powers of Working Hands Farm on the Tools and Processes that Have Supported Phenomenal Growth

June 15, 2017

#### TRANSCRIPT SPONSORS





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

[Rock Dust Local](#), the first company in North America specializing in local sourcing and delivery of the BEST rock dusts and biochar for organic farming.

Additional funding for transcripts provided by [North Central SARE](#), providing grants and education to advance innovations in Sustainable Agriculture.

Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast episode 123 and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. In this episode, we revisit Jess and Brian Powers at Working Hands Farm 18 months after they were first on the show on episode 40. Since the fall of 2015, Working Hands Farm has gone through some significant changes and phenomenal growth on their property in Hillsboro, Oregon, just outside of Portland on the north end of the Willamette Valley. Jess and Brian have gone from raising four acres of vegetables in 2015 to eight acres now and they've expanded their on-farm CSA to cover 48 weeks of the year, all with just the two of them, plus the recent addition of a part-time employee. In the past year, they've gotten out of the livestock business to focus on their produce business, standardize their farming operations, and made significant investments in machinery and infrastructure on their farm. We dig into all of these changes and the rationale behind them, as well as how the changes are helping them to face the extreme wet weather challenges they've encountered this year.

When I interviewed Jess and Brian the first time, it was clear that, although they were working insane hours, they found ways to emphasize and build their personal relationship, so we also come back to how they continue to nurture their love for each other, alongside their professional and business development.

The Farmer to Farmer podcast is made possible with the generous support of 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](#). And by CoolBot by Store It Cold. You can build an affordable walk-in cooler powered by a CoolBot and a window air-conditioning unit. Save up to 83% on upfront costs and up to 42% on monthly electrical bills compared to conventional cooling systems and by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are versatile, maneuverable in tight spaces, lightweight for less compaction, and easy to maintain and repair on the farm. Gear driven and built to last for decades of dependable service, [BCSAmerica.com](#).

Jess and Brian Powers, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Jess: Hi Chris, thanks for having us back.

Brian: Hey Chris, happy to be here.



- Chris: So glad you guys could join me today. It's actually June 1st so you guys are joining me at a time, I know, even in the Pacific Northwest, this is sort of a critical time in the farming year, so thank you so much for taking this time on a day like today to make this work.
- Jess: [00:02:30] Absolutely.
- Brian: Absolutely. Things are definitely starting to heat up out there, that's for sure.
- Chris: I'd like to start off, now you guys were on the show back in episode 40 and we're going to spend some time talking later in today's show about how your farm has changed over time and why it's changed and what the repercussions of that have been. I'd like to start off today by having you guys talk about your farm and where you're at today. How many acres are you farming? What are you growing and how are you guys moving it off the farm?
- Jess: All right, so currently we have about eight acres in vegetable production in Hillsboro, Oregon. Our whole farm is comprised of 40 acres and for the past three or four years a lot of that has been in pasture, which we're now putting back into vegetable production. Out of those eight acres, that does a 28-week CSA season for spring, summer, and fall, and an 18-week winter CSA season through the months of November to April. We're growing, what is it? 48 weeks out of a 52-week season? We're harvesting that many weeks out of a year for vegetables.
- The spring and summer and fall CSA we're doing 152 households this year and then for the winter we're projecting, the last couple of years we've done about 65 weekly members or households and this year we're hoping to get closer to about 80 households. That should be interesting. We really love the winter CSA. That's been something we were going into the last time we chatted in 2015 as our first season and it's really become, I don't know. We just absolutely love the winter CSA. Every year we try to grow that a little bit more, even with the crazy winters we've been having and just been loving it.
- Chris: You said crazy winters. You guys are located just outside of Portland, Oregon, right?
- Jess: Exactly, yes. For the last, I don't know, four years, we've kind of lucked out with weather in the winter where we've had really mild, maybe a little bit wet, of course, but milder winters and this past winter was just, we got 12 inches of snow. We had freezing rain and windstorms, which we're not really that used to, especially when you're still growing outside in uncovered spaces. We didn't really know what to expect with the winter CSA, but the more and more we do winter CSA, the more we realize how resilient vegetables are and it actually takes a little bit of the stress off during the summer because we trust that things will just work out after experiencing more extreme conditions in the wintertime.
- Chris: How long have you guys been farming there at Working Hands Farm?
- Jess: Brian do you want to ... You started it in 2010, was your first ... He broke ground in 2009,



but his first official season was in 2010. We were just two miles down the road and we were leasing land there and then in 2013 we moved over to this property and we were building infrastructure and we've been here ever since.

Chris: You said you guys are selling to the CSA 48 weeks of the year. Is that your only outlet?

Brian: Yeah. That's currently our only outlet. We focus 100% on CSA and all of that pickup is onsite as well. It's definitely serving a very local community to us.

Jess: Yes, and that wasn't always the case. When we first started, it was a lot of friends, begging them to join the CSA and then doing deliveries into Portland a couple times a week. We also sold to restaurants and would set up popup markets and do the farmer's markets the first few years. We ended up spending a lot more time off the farm than we were on the farm and then so once those priorities started to switch, we were like, "Hey, we want to be farming more, what can we do? Let's have more on-farm pickups," and then from there the community was there for us so we were just able to add more and more farm pickups over the years and then finally we were able to just eliminate those drop offs and stuff like that in order to prioritize just being the best farmers that we could and we were ultimately the most productive when we were here on the farm, so it was just kind of a win-win for everybody.

Chris: How did you guys go about making that change? Because that's ... I mean, that, I think, would be almost every CSA farmer's dream is to have everybody coming and picking up on the farm, instead of having to leave the place. How did you guys make that happen?

Brian: I'm not sure if it was a choice for us. It was one of those things that we were spending so much time, I mean, we even did home delivery for a while in my Subaru and it was one of those things where we were spending so much time off the farm and I was spending so much time driving around town that the quality of life that we were experiencing was just being so severely diminished that a change had to come about. For us, which we're not that far, we're about 17, 18 miles outside of downtown Portland, but my vision for our farm was to spend as much time doing the farming and the least amount of time doing the driving and it was one of those things where, for us, we just had to make a change.

I think doing restaurants and farmer's markets and having drop offs in town can be very fulfilling, but I think Jess and I are both very curious people and we wanted to see what it was like engaging our direct community, the folks that were around us. It was actually Jess' idea to open up a pickup on the farm, because I didn't think there were enough people in our community that would be interested in it. When she did that and it became quickly our most popular pickup and so we started thinking to ourselves, you know, maybe we should double down? Maybe, if we're going to make this work, maybe that's what we have to do.

Jess: It was a little scary, too, because at that point it was like eliminating a third of our CSA members who had been there for the past two or three years and so it was kind of a big leap of faith. We just let everybody know what was going on and the shift in the farm, and some people were a bit sad, because they had grown attached to the vegetables





and that sort of thing, but we do still have a handful of people who commute out from Portland just to pick up the vegetables, but ultimately we're really close to Beaverton and Hillsboro and there's a lot of young techs and young families that are moving to this area and I feel like people are just looking for, you know, we're on a main road and they're just looking for that connection to where they're living and, yeah. Great.

Chris: For the pickup on the farm, how does your distribution system work for that?

Jess: The pickup on the farm, we used to do prepacked crates, which is really adorable because we made the wooden crates and all that and it was really beautiful. Then, when we moved to this farm in 2013, we switched to a market style pickup which gave people the choice of what sized lettuce heads they want and how many. We do like up to two kale bunches sometimes, and anything that's in multiples we give them the options to take as much as the sign says or, if they just are one person eating out of the share, then maybe they only want one.

It just took a little bit of the pressure off for those who were learning to love their vegetables or just had a smaller household that they were feeding and so nobody felt like anything was being wasted and then those people who could utilize that many vegetables would take that. They come and pick up on the farm now. We have a built out CSA pick up area and they just sign in and help themselves. They've got a table in the middle so the kids can kind of help pick out the vegetables. It's pretty nice to see everybody fly through there just with these big old baskets of veggies.

Brian: I think, to add on what Jess is saying, one thing about those adorable cedar crates that we'd make by hand is maybe they were a little too adorable and so they wouldn't always make it back to the farm.

Jess: That's true.

Brian: I think at some point in time we decided that maybe, again, we should get back to the farming and spend less time in the wood shop actually putting together cedar crates. That year when we ... We actually made the transition in the middle of that season and we let all of our members know, "Hey, we're going to try something new for a week." Let's see if it's something you guys enjoy. Give us your feedback." We tried it out and the members absolutely loved it. We said, "Hey, we're going to take all of the cedar crates and then we're going to sell them to you. You have the opportunity to buy them if you want," which is really fun to see, because now that was a few years ago so you can really notice all the old school members because they're really proud to bring their branded Working Hands Farm crate from years past.

Chris: Very cool. I really like that. Tell me a little bit about the land that you're farming. Is Hillsboro flat? Are you guys farming on good farm land? Marginal stuff? How's that going?

Brian: That's a great question.

Jess: That's a great question.



- Brian: Yeah. The Willamette Valley has some of the most amazing soil. It's all that beautiful river bottom and glacial soil, for the most part, and then we do, in the lower kind of river bottom elevations a lot of the soil in our valley looks very similar and it is just, it's exceptional. I think we're blessed.
- Jess: It's like a Quatama loam or something.
- Brian: Yeah. I think we're blessed on our farm especially, because there's never ... If we were to find a stone on our farm it's because we put it there.
- Jess: Yeah.
- Brian: There's not a single rock unless I took a scoop a little too deep with the tractor and added some gravel into that compost, but our land is flat, but it is that kind of classic, we're right along the banks of the Tualatin River, so there's a slight slope to our land or pitch that sort of rolls throughout our farm. This is something that I've become more and more aware of as we're getting more into tractor cultivation. You start to notice those little ebbs and flows of your land a little bit more.
- Chris: Jess, you mentioned that you guys moved the farm, that Brian had actually started farming two miles down the road. What prompted the move?
- Jess: Well, there is a few things. I felt like as we were growing the business together, because my first year with Brian was in 2012 and so we grew that year by a bunch. I can't remember off the top of my head, but I think we had been doing the year before like 50 shares and then we had all of a sudden gone up to like 75 and to 80. The two of us were farming, I think, around two acres there. Just feeling like the lease and everything else, the pressures of, I think the landlord had actually approached us and said that they were thinking about selling the land. We heard that a few times. At some point, Brian was like, "Well, how much would you want for it?" Then it just ended up being way out of our realm of possibility, so we're like, "Oh my gosh. What are we going to do?"
- Looking towards the future, and it was one of those funny things, and we kind of told the story on the first podcast, but to sum it up, we were selling tomatoes because we just had a bumper crop year that year and this older guy stopped by to buy tomatoes and it was just a, you know, help yourself stand, an honor system box, and he wanted 25 cents back or whatever it was. He knocked on our door and he was like, "Do you have change?" and asked us if we leased or owned where were farming and we said we leased and he said, "Well, you know, there's a place that's down the road that just got sold on auction and so if you would be interested to go look at it." Of course, Brian is that type of person that just loves jumping off the edge so he just got in the car with this guy and he goes, "I'll be right back. Don't worry, I got my phone," or whatever. He jumps in the car and Brian went and saw it and, you know.
- Brian: Yeah, for me, it was the dream property. It was two miles down the road. Had a house that was ready to be torn down. I think there was a pit bull breeding operation going on and then so there was a number of intimidating dogs. Once you got past the barn that



had fallen over and the pile of trash up there, it opened up to basically 40 acres of relatively flat land that looked like it had been fallow for a number of years. Gary McCord, the realtor that was buying the tomatoes, basically said, "Hey, a guy bought this with a certified check for \$200,000 just a couple weeks ago, because the property had been foreclosed on." He goes, "It hasn't been listed yet, but I think he'd be willing to make a deal for you guys." We jumped on that pretty fast. It was, I mean, I think it's important to mention, Jess and I we leased for those first few years, but there wasn't a night that we didn't go to bed wondering how-

Jess: It was a month-by-month lease, too. It wasn't a yearly.

Chris: Oh my goodness.

Jess: It was pretty scary, as a renter.

Brian: We weren't aware of how much we should be paying for land and so we were paying a rather exorbitant month-to-month rent for both the house on that property, as well as the land around it. It was one of those situations where we never went to sleeping without thinking, "How in the world are we ever going to afford land? How are we going to make this next transition? What is it going to look like?" The property around us is typical of gentleman farmers and it is, you know, the parcel that we were farming on before was 40 acres and they were asking \$650,000 for it and it had an old house on it and it did have a couple barns, but, I mean, those kind of numbers were so astronomical for us. It was kind of crushing, and I think a lot of farmers feel that way, where you sit there and you go, "What does the future hold? How do we ever get there?"

When we made an offer on this property, it was one of those perfect stories that it was such a fluke. We ended up closing the property at \$320,000 for 40 acres. That was ... I mean, it was just, it's mind blowing that we were able to figure that out, especially considering we could stay inside of our same market. The farm was only two miles down the road, as opposed to having to start over with new members with a new community, having to get your foot in the door. That way, we were able to continue running and we actually farmed both properties at the same time that first year while we were transitioning and moving infrastructure.

Jess: Yeah.

Chris: That's hard core.

Brian: It certainly made some late nights, especially because we had to put some pasture in the back of the property and then so we would do the CSA and then I would drive our little 32 horsepower John Deere tractor over to this property at night.

Jess: Busy road, yeah.

Brian: Down a 55 mile-an-hour road with a little disk on the back. Then I would disk the back about 25 acres with a six-foot disk at night, partially because we just didn't know any better, but the other part of it was during the days we also had to ... I mean, it's a long



story, but yeah, we also had to get all the permits for the property before we could actually get the loan and so it was, yeah. Those were some long days. I look back on it. I'm not sure how we got it done, but we did.

Jess: We did do it. It set a certain pace, that's for sure. We learned a lot, too, I mean, just being a part of the process. A lot of the people down at the county office, since we were doing a lot of the permit stuff, we'd get to play the young farmer roles that didn't really know much about anything so everybody wanted to help us out and our county is pretty notorious for giving a permit for just about anything. We definitely tried our best and, I don't know. That was actually, I look back on it and I'm like, I know we were busy, but it felt new and it felt exciting and I think that's probably what kept propelling us forward to the hold and endless possibilities and all that.

Brian: Yeah, it was ... I'll never forget the inspector coming out as we were both standing six feet deep in the septic test pits. He looked at us and he goes, "Well, I've never seen anybody dig those by hand." I just looked at him and I was like, "You know, the excavator was 250 bucks an hour. I figured the labor was free." We jumped down in the holes and we got them dug right before he showed up, or finished right before he showed up, as they're filling back up with water. Sure enough, he checked off on it and we went to the next permit.

Jess: Yep.

Chris: It's nice to be young, isn't it?

Jess: It is. You get old really quick, though. I'm like, "Holy moly, how'd we do that even five years ago?"

Brian: I'm so glad that no one was there to set an expectation for us, because I'm not sure I would have been brave enough to go forward. When it's brand new and step-by-step you get these things done, it's exciting and it's thrilling. Then you look back at it after a number of years and you go, "Huh. You know, I'm not sure I could do that again."

Chris: Yeah, you look back and you go, "That was a lot of work."

Brian: Oh yeah.

Chris: When we talked last, which was in the fall of 2015. We were getting ready to do episode 40 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast, which, fall of 2015, that even makes me feel old. Back then, you guys were farming just four acres of vegetables. You said today you were up to eight. I wonder if you could kind of set the stage for us back there. Take us back in time to October of 2015 and what was going on on Working Hands Farm?

Brian: [00:23:00] Yeah, so that first year ... Or, let's see, was that the first year at this property, Jess?

Jess: No, it was the third.





Brian: It was the third year. We were basically at a place at that point in time where the front part of our acreage, which is about four acres of vegetables, was one half of our operation, and one half of our income stream. The other half of our operation was all in pasture for both pigs and cattle. Our goal and our hope at that time was to be able to make about 50% of our income in vegetables and 50% of our income from livestock. We always kind of say livestock was the parentheses on the end of our days. It was kind of, you start with them in the morning and you end with them in the evening. Unless there's some sort of emergency, for most of the day, they can be left on their own.

The problem that we ran into is when we adopted the winter CSA, and when we spoke on the podcast, that was the first winter we were going to attempt a winter CSA and we followed through with that. It was wonderful. We loved it. We sold it to our CSA members for a steal of a deal. We set the lowest possible expectations and let them know this would be our first time doing it and if the hard core CSA members really wanted to try out a winter CSA, they were welcome to do so.

Jess: They loved it.

Brian: They absolutely loved it and we loved it, too. I think, for Jess and I, transitioning into the winter and having things slow down a little bit is always a challenge for us. It was one of those things where it was nice to keep your hands in the soil and to continue being out in the field to kind of maintain a pace of normalcy. The issue that arose out of that was in our area, most of the things that we can overwinter outside was brassicas and then so it was your purple sprouting broccoli, it was your overwintering cauliflowers. It was ...

Jess: Kale.

Brian: Definitely all of your kales, because it doesn't get so cold here that in a, whatever a typical season is these days, but in a typical season, you wouldn't lose those crops and you could keep them uncovered outside, which is an amazing gift that nature provides the Pacific Northwest. At that time, we had to make the decision, how do we go forward and expand our winter CSA and continue to grow our current CSA, because, you know ...

Jess: Without rotation.

Brian: This coming year we would have a herd of 16 Angus cows on the farm as well as a, we had two sows, and having any number of piglets. It became an issue of where are we going to put all these brassica crops, because everything's a brassica. We farm a lot of different things, but in the end it always feels like if you want to rotate your crops, you're rotating away from brassicas, especially with the winter production. It became this kind of opposite trajectory where if we expand the cattle operation, there's not that many acres on our farm to be able to do that really well and in a way that we can be really proud of. We had been able to do that up until this time and we even have the soil test to prove it. Our soil, with cattle on it, rotating them in a holistic way, has improved the soil immensely.

We kind of, Jess and I kind of started looking at each other going, "You know, we're



going to have to make a change." Having those first conversations about actually selling our livestock and becoming 100% vegetable farmers, or for the most part vegetable farmers, was a really big question, both for identity, as well as financially.

Jess: Also, too, just the ability to leave the farm and have those outside connections with family, because I felt like, you know, when we first started the farm it was kind of like, "All right. Let's get to year three and see how we feel. Let's see if we're turning a profit. We're just the two of us doing all this stuff." I think that first year we were farming together we were getting real skinny, which led us down the road of how do we afford sustainable meat, or meat that we would like to buy at the store, which just didn't exist at that time, I felt like. When we dove down the raising of livestock, the 50%, that was just kind of like, "Okay, if we can make that work, that would make sense," but at some point we realized the more animals we had the less that was coming to fruition. We were just losing more money on the animals.

We were also just not having as much balance as we had hoped that we would have. Because, you know, with animals you really can't leave and there's less and less people who know how to take care of animals that could stay and watch the animals so you could ... My family lives in the East Coast. In order to go there, you have to have somebody who's able to watch the farm and so that was never a possibility as the animals, as the herds grew.

Brian: It was kind of like an opposite trajectory for us as well. The cash flow of raising livestock, versus the cash flow of CSA, you have two entirely different businesses.

Jess: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brian: With livestock, you're putting that money into grain for feeding the animals. You're putting it into hay or grain for the pigs and hay for the cows to get them through the winter. These are all investments that you're making up front and you're hoping to recoup the costs at the end of the season, which, to a CSA farmer, is terrifying, because we chose actively to do the opposite, to get our money upfront at the beginning of the season so we can make a budget and have the projections that give us the cash flow to get through to the end of the year until the first of January again. Managing those two things is extremely complex, especially when you're watching the vegetable, the CSA portion of the farm, growing so quickly. The money that can be made off of ... This is, of course, in comparison to raising livestock, so it's not ... It's certainly no goldmine, but the money that can be made on an acre of vegetables versus an acre of pasture for cows is incomparable.

It's one of those things that it was becoming more apparent to us that raising livestock was a passion. It was maybe more of a hobby. It was something that we absolutely loved. Having that connection with nature and the land and it was something that we were very proud to offer for our community, because in our area that's something that is not widely available. To answer your question, I guess, in a fairly long-winded way, is that transition started to take place for all those reasons.

Jess: Yeah.



- Brian: Does that make sense?
- Chris: That totally makes sense. I remember on my farm, we went through a similar process of winnowing enterprises. As the farm grew, we simply had less, for us it was less an issue of space, because of the kinds of landscapes that we were rising the livestock on. We had a lot of hillsides. We had the situation in terms of our time and management attention. An hour that we put into the chickens was yielding a lot less than an hour we were putting into the vegetables.
- Brian: Absolutely.
- Chris: You guys started to make this change. Have you completely gotten rid of the livestock on your farm?
- Brian: I don't know if we'd say gotten rid of, but definitely ...
- Jess: Made a transition.
- Brian: We like to say that we transitioned them to another farm. Thankfully, we actually sold all of our livestock to one farm that it's all put together it's like a 1350-acre farm in Washington. It's some beautiful land and there's a great guy up there, Alex Murray from Cascade Farm, that bought all of our critters. We got to see them and it's really fun to be able to follow them on Instagram and see ... I still call him our calves, although they're his calves, kind of going forward, but yeah. We still have some egg layers on the farm and a few goats that we kind of consider our CSA greeters, but yeah that's it.
- Jess: Yeah.
- Chris: Enough livestock to make it look like a farm to people who don't farm.
- Jess: Exactly. I know. It's so funny. It's like you're not a farmer unless you have animals, I think.
- Brian: It's nice and, to be honest, it's kind of changed how we look at our CSA members as well, because it's hard to have that much going on with the livestock and the vegetables on the farm without also viewing it in a sense of liability. I mean, there's a lot of volts going through those fences. When you get a lot of young children out running around, we kept a bull, a beautiful, British White bull on our farm as well, it's hard to relax during CSA day when everybody comes out to see the farm. You're kind of going ... It's hard enough to keep the kids out from underneath the mowers. It's fun at this point in time having made this transition where, with CSA members on the farm, I feel as though we can be that much more relaxed and that much more open letting them roam the farm in a way where they also can feel comfortable. They don't have to wonder whether they can touch a fence or not.
- Chris: Right. That's a big deal.



- Brian: It is a really big deal.
- Jess: All those little things really add up. You don't realize it until you just don't have to do that anymore. It's a whole different ballgame raising animals versus planting plants and whatnot.
- Brian: Especially when you have 300, you know, we're up to 150, 160 households now for our CSA, but each one of those households is typically comprised of more than one person.
- Jess: Two to five, yeah, people.
- Brian: That means on a CSA down on the farm, if you have 3-400 people walking around a property and a bull that's in the mood, that makes you nervous or at least it made me nervous. It's one of those things where being able to focus in on the vegetables and the CSA also relaxes us because ... How would I say that? We feel so much more focused, everywhere from our cashflow projections all the way to when we're meeting and greeting CSA members for the first time.
- Jess: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Brian: I think there was a time where we had to go into self-preservation mode, because it was just Jess and Brian for so many years, working seven days a week, 15 hours a day, and at some point in time I think there could not be any flexibility for us as farmers. I think that's something that is important for the community and I'm so thankful that through that time period, I don't know if Jess feels the same way, but having that flexibility now is incredible to kind of ... You know, if something doesn't work out perfectly with the CSA, you can kind of relax and go, "Oh, you know, it's no big deal." We can kind of ... I don't know how to say that. You know what I'm saying?
- Jess: Yeah, just being a little bit more flexible and understanding of situations that come up ... I don't know how to say that, really.
- Brian: Yeah, be more accommodating. I don't know. Does that make sense to you Chris?
- Chris: It does. I think it's a lot easier, I mean, for other people and for yourselves, to be more accommodating when you're dealing with less complexity.
- Jess: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Chris: In some ways, it feels like, well, "Wow, if I'm juggling 40 different balls and I drop one, no big deal," but if you're juggling 40 different balls and you drop one, you've still got 39 balls in the air, that you have to keep in the air, while you try to pick up that one. That's almost impossible. If you're juggling three balls and you drop one, you pick it up and you go on.
- Jess: Absolutely. Yeah, it's just been really nice to focus on the vegetables and I think with the winter CSA being successful, I mean, since we last talked, every year the growth of the



CSA has gone up 40% the last three years each year. We've actually ... I'm sure that'll taper off at some point, but if you're paying attention, after the last couple of years, wow, really the vegetables are the thing. We are just, people are really passionate about their vegetables and we love growing vegetables and our soil is just ... Like we mentioned before, it couldn't be better and it's something we've really focused on the last few years, too, is just the inputs in the soil and then with being able to seeing the herd off to another place, using that capital to reinvest back into the vegetable production side of things.

Brian: That's also been huge. Kind of lessons learned from having raised livestock is, one, that doing both, raising a variety of different livestock, as well as doing the CSA, has forced Jess and I to become really efficient and to really be ... When it's time to harvest, it's time to harvest. When it's time to plant, it's time to plant. When it's time to cultivate, you get out there and do it and you make sure all of your equipment is ready to go when you need it.

Jess: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brian: Now, having transitioned out of livestock, I feel like we're loaded springs. We're able to take the capital out of the livestock and reinvest it into vegetable production equipment, which has made a huge difference for us.

Jess: Yeah, huge.

Brian: It's another one of those things where you kind of go, "Not only do we have the time back that we're committing into raising livestock, we also have the capital back from some of those investments in order to invest in technology." We put up a new pole building on the farm. We invested in a number of pieces of cultivation equipment. Man, good cultivation equipment. Happiness is found in thorough cultivation.

Jess: It is true.

Brian: [00:38:30] Yeah.

Chris: Let's get a little bit more specific about that, because an acre, when you take an acre out of pasture that's a, I mean, on a relative basis, an acre of pasture is low labor, whereas an acre of vegetables is high labor. Now you're taking land out of pasture, putting it into vegetables, what kinds of things have you done to be able to continue operating as a, well, I guess I should ask. Is it still just you and Jess?

Brian: We are thankful, we hired our first employee this year, Chris.

Jess: Yes. We have our first part-time employee. She works 20 hours a week right now, which has been awesome having a third person on the farm. We finally got a new tractor, so making that investment. We had a John Deere, Brian probably will talk about that. With a creeper, with a water wheel transplanter on the back, so having that second person on the back, we can just fly through planting and things have become a lot ... You know, it's funny. It just forces you to be there 7 a.m., be ready, be prepared. It just forces you to





kind of get it done, because somebody else is there waiting to get it done with you. It's really motivating, I feel like, having a third perspective on the farm and then also somebody who's just here to work and do the best that they can. It's nice. It's a nice energy to feed off of and since it has just been the two of us the last, I don't know, six years or something like that, it's just cool to change up the dynamic a little bit.

Brian: It's a 50% increase in productivity once they get up to speed. Half of two is one, so that's great. That's made a huge difference for us this year. Like Jess is saying, not even just because it's another warm body to get stuff done on the farm, but it's forced us to create new systems. It's forced us to not ... We'll have that tendency to go out and work that first 10-hour day, take a little rest, and then if the sun's still up, go out and work another five or six hours. Now, if you have somebody that's going to be ready to go in the morning, you have to take the time ... If you're going to get the investment back that you put into them, we are learning to create those procedures in the evening so we're ready to go the next morning. That's all brand new lessons that we're learning now. That's fun. It's exciting to learn those new things.

Chris: I think one of the things that's interesting about what we do for employees, oftentimes making things work for them actually makes it easier for us. I think you just talked about it. If you take the time the night before to figure out what and how you're going to do it the next day ...

Jess: Exactly.

Chris: Then you hit the ground running in the morning, rather than having to spend that time figuring it out, even if it's just you and Jess.

Jess: Yeah.

Brian: Absolutely, and you're getting that seven hours of sleep instead of the five hours of sleep you would have because it got windy after you got done weeding at 10:00 at night so you had to put all the Reemay back down. You're staring at each other at 11:30 going, "You know, this has gotta change."

Jess: Yeah.

Chris: That's interesting because when we talked 18 months ago, I think you guys were both very much in the, "Hey, we work 15 hours a day. We love each other and it's great."

Brian: Yeah.

Chris: I'm hearing that maybe some of that's shifted for you, not the love each other part, but the "hey the 15 hour, we work all the time and that's okay."

Jess: Yeah. I feel like we're still working, well, right now we are, 15 hours, but it feels different. Brian and I keep coming back to this year as the year where it really feels like a shift is happening where we're really present and just a lot of the anxieties that we used to have going into each season or even new problems arising and all this stuff, even



when stuff doesn't go completely right, I feel like the anxiety isn't there as much now. It feels really freeing and I think both of us could probably say we feel the best we've ever felt farming this year.

Brian: Yeah.

Jess: Liking it.

Brian: Yeah, I think so. Part of, I think, what Jess and I had discussed in that transition was also really missing, after doing this for eight years, the connection with our family and friends.

Jess: Yeah.

Brian: I think there came a time for us where spending time with family is becoming more and more important to us all the time. I think, out of self-preservation, getting the business up to speed and making sure that we could provide for ourselves and contribute in a meaningful way, it took us learning to say no for a lot of years in order to just focus in on the farm and get this business running and being committed and being 100% committed to it.

Jess: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brian: I think a point, we've now entered the time where we kind of keep saying we're relearning how to say yes.

Jess: Yeah.

Brian: The best example of that was opening night ...

Jess: The Timbers.

Brian: For the Timbers. I went and saw my first professional soccer team in Portland and it was a CSA member, a long-time CSA member, who's also a friend, called me one evening and said, "Hey, you know, my son doesn't want to go to the soccer game with me, do you want to come?" I looked at Jess and I was like ...

Jess: Should I go?

Brian: "I think I can actually go."

Jess: I was like, "Do it."

Brian: There's no animal chores this evening. I don't have to rotate. I don't have to ... I think, and Jess looked at me and she goes, "Say yes," and I was like, "Well, yes." Then he came and picked me up and I watched. It was beautiful. We won. There was like five or six goals scored. It was wonderful. I haven't done that in years.



Jess: Yeah.

Brian: We are still working a lot of long hours.

Jess: We're working smarter, too. There's just so many efficiencies from the last time we talked with you, that it's like hard to know where to really start with that stuff, but, I mean, even just having the same-sized beds with a flatbed chop shaper and uniform spacing and tractors that all match and finger weeding implements and all this stuff where we're like, "Yeah, we're working a similar amount of hours, but we're not doing the laborious hand-weeding of carrots because we forgot to flame or like ..."

Brian: Yeah.

Chris: I'm actually, I'm going to interrupt, I just want to say, let's just start with the basics. You said tractors and bed set up and having all of those things working together. Can you tell me how they weren't working together two years ago and how they are working together now and what changed?

Brian: Yeah. Absolutely. Our first ...

Jess: Tractor.

Brian: Seven seasons on this farm we had a 32-horsepower John Deere 3320 with 16.9-inch wide tires on the back.

Jess: We still have it, it's a great little tractor.

Brian: We still, we love our little tractor, a little subcompact. It's done wonders. That thing's really a workhorse, but it didn't allow for any of the cultivation, the water wheel transplanting that we needed to get to in order to expand our acreage, and so, I guess I should say for a few years as well, we had a little G tractor to help with cultivation as well and, for us, and a lot of this is so new. Thank goodness for Instagram because we're able to reach out to so many farmers who've really both introduced us to new technologies, but gave us an opportunity to ask questions and see if things were worth the investment and how to get them set up and so we ended up buying a John Deere 5075E.

Jess: Last year.

Brian: Last year.

Jess: With no creeper.

Brian: With the promise that, we bought it with the promise that it would have creeper gear so we could use a water-wheel transplanter and John Deere ended up not putting out a creeper gear for that tractor.



- Jess: We ended up with a very fancy bed row marker and then we'd hand transplant into the water wheel marks.
- Brian: Yeah, we'd keep the water wheel as a dibbler and then we bought a little stand in plant, which is a beautiful little hand planter and then we planted all our acreage by hand last year.
- Jess: Yeah, that was ... That was ...
- Brian: We really learned what we didn't want from the 75E and because we were smart and waited to sign the contract for it, we ended up sending the 75E back and ordering a 5085M series tractor, which for John Deere, at that horsepower, you start to get tire width options as well as an option to come with a creeper gear that was factory installed. That started opening up doors. We ended up with a 48-inch bed top, which for us seems to be a really good fit with, I think, somewhere around 75 inches from outside to outside inner tires. We took an old rototiller and built a bed shaper to go along with that and we also made the investment of buying a KULT Kress finger weeder, which is a mind ...
- Jess: Total game changer.
- Brian: Mind blowing piece of equipment that every farmer should have to meet their scale.
- Chris: Okay, so I hate the word game changer.
- Brian: I know you do.
- Chris: Okay.
- Brian: Put it this way, Chris, and I know that's, I also do, and I hate silver bullets. I hate all of these things that are based in mythology. This was our experience for it. When it came, we got it set up and it was a pain in the butt to set up, to get it dialed in just right.
- Jess: It also didn't come with instructions.
- Chris: Of course. Farm equipment rarely does.
- Jess: It's got a lot of pieces on there.
- Brian: And they very rarely come with a receipt. There's some frustrations with equipment there for sure and this is not an exception to that.
- Jess: Yeah.
- Brian: When it did come, we got it set up and it was actually we had this weird like six or seven days of dry weather this winter. This was the wettest winter in 75 years in Oregon. That's another conversation piece. We got it set up and I was like, "Hey, Jess, I know the



sun's about to go down, but I'm so excited about this new toy, can we just take it for a spin through the garlic and see what happens?"

Jess: Yeah.

Brian: The first bed was a little bit frustrating and it took us ...

Jess: Trying to figure out the depth and all that.

Brian: Yeah and cultivation's a little bit new to us on a tractor scale and making sure everything's working properly and safe and we're not murdering our entire garlic crop. The first couple hundred feet maybe took us, I don't know, 15 or 20 minutes, which for us was the fastest we've ever cultivated any piece of ground and it was cultivating in between, in row, as well as all the pathways, as well as all the parallels. It was kind of weeding everything. We felt like we had it set up pretty well and we said, "You know, let's start in B ...

Jess: We'll go faster.

Brian: And see what happens. We cultivated, in that evening, having never used this piece of equipment, we cultivated all of our garlic and we started doing basically a couple hundred feet in about 40 seconds. All, it was cultivating all of the weeds. It was getting everything out. When we stopped, I got off and kind of bounced up and down and shook my hands a couple time kind of thing. What the hell just happened? What's going on and why hasn't anyone made me buy one of these before? We've continued using that piece of equipment and we've continued to get it dialed in and there's definitely been some frustrations and some issues.

Jess: It hasn't been perfect, but when the bed roller came in and then the tires got widened out a bit, all of a sudden you're kind of becoming more one with the machine and I feel like Brian and I have just ... You know, there were some frustrating times like with all new things. We just stuck with it and we were like, "You know what, there's been a few people that we chattered with on the East Coast that got one of these things and they said, honestly, it just changed how they did everything on the farm." I see that on our farm.

Brian: Chris and Jessi from Camporosso and Max from Morningstar Farm back east, they both had one before us and were really open and transparent and gave us pointers in what they thought about them and they had the same experience. I mean, Max, I think used a few expletives more than I have just used and was like, "I've got no idea." It's a total game changer for him as well. I know you don't like those terms, but for Jess and I we have done very little hand weeding this year and especially in such a wet spring, which creates so many challenges for pieces of cultivation and there's times that we use the finger weeder when I didn't feel like it was worth putting a hoe in the ground because it was too wet. I wouldn't have hand hoed, but I felt comfortable using the finger weeder.

Chris: Let's talk about this piece of equipment, because, just kind of lay it out for me. You're talking about running this behind your John Deere tractor. It's a three-point mount





cultivating tool.

Brian: Yeah and I hope ... The guys at KULT Kress are probably going to hate me for what I'm about to do to their piece of equipment. We ordered a three-row version and then so it has on it, I think it must be four parallel, I think they called them parallelograms, and on each parallelogram is either a set of side sweeps or side knives or beat knives, whatever people call them, or you can interchange that with sweeps. All of those sweeps do the pathways and then also the parallels.

Jess: In between the plant.

Brian: Yeah, not in between the horizontal of the plant, but down row in the parallels and each one of those parallelograms have their own gauge wheel and so they are running independent of each other. On a farm like ours, that has some really gentle slopes going one direction or the other, one struggle I had with the G was to keep all the sweeps in the ground at the same time without the other half of the sweeps diving in too deep. That was my big struggle with that piece of equipment. With this, each parallelogram, on the three point, behind the John Deere can follow the ground with those gauge wheels and keep contact. The other part of it has three sets of two finger weeders each, so a total of six finger weeders because we had a three row, and each one of those finger weeders licks out the weeds with these malleable plastic fingers in order to ...

Jess: It goes right around the plant

Brian: To wrap around each individual plant and disturb the weeds that are in the thread stage in row all the way down. It has these hard metal spikes on the other side of those finger weeders that are, there's fewer metal spikes than there are fingers, and so it drives it just like a chain on a bicycle. It actually rotates the fingers faster than you are driving. Each one of those are set on a spring and they don't need a gauge wheel because they act as their own gauge wheel. Each one of those also maintains contact with the ground through that being spring loaded. The other addition to it is there's a rider on the back of it that has a small steering wheel and you leave your chains loose so they can drive back and forth with it up to maybe six inches on each side so the tractor operator doesn't have to pay close attention to what's happening to their cultivation device or put a crick in their neck because they're looking backwards all the time, because they have a rider actually riding the machine through the down row as they make their way down the road. The faster you go, the better it seems to work.

Jess: Yes.

Chris: Wow. Having that rider on the back, then, really does let you go fast because they can be focusing on the precision and really kind of like having it belly mounted on a G, they're able to really see what's going on.

Brian: Exactly.

Jess: Yeah.



Brian: Exactly. I would say, you know, there are some things that it should be coupled with. One, we took an old rototiller and built a bed shaper out of it and then put a heavy steel wheel on the back in order to make perfectly flat 48-inch bed tops, which means when you go through to transplant, you can transplant things so they are as accurate as possible so the depth is controlled as well as that random plant that ends up two inches on the inside of the other ones doesn't end up getting cultivated out. Having things as consistent as possible has been big and has been a challenge for us. It always seems that because we have these just slight hills, that the back tires of the tractor swing in one way or the other, but of course the rider on the back of the finger weeder can deal with that.

Jess: Yeah. We've also, because of all of this equipment, I feel like it's forced us to go into 200-foot rows. We were doing 100-foot rows when we were talking to you a couple years ago. The 200-foot rows are awesome, especially when you're using the finger weeder. All of a sudden, you're thinking, "Oh, should we go longer rows?" It is fun and it goes really fast and you can get a lot weeded when you have longer rows.

Brian: Our farm's really funny right now.

Jess: Yeah, we have like two farms right now.

Brian: The front of our farm is a very small-scale four-acre farm like we had before.

Jess: Pathways, 100-foot beds, hundreds of blocks.

Brian: It's more of a garden. It's very beautiful and I love it because the soil texture is amazing and the improvements that we've made are really worthwhile and so we love it. Where the pasture was and we started reclaiming for vegetable production is these long, beautiful, consistently straight rows of vegetables that are typical for a, whatever is between small- and medium-scale organic vegetable farm. It is fun to see these two differences. We'll have to find out some solutions to make things more consistent going forward. With some of these new investments, it's made a big difference for us, as far as equipment goes.

Chris: With that, we need to stop, take a break, get a quick word from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Jess and Brian Powers from Working Hands Farm in Hillsboro, Oregon.

Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is brought to you by Vermont Compost Company, makers of Fort Vee and Fort Light potting mixes. Here we are, crashing into June's craziness on farms throughout North America. Greenhouses are heating up, the weeds in the field are popping, and the harvest is starting to get underway in a big, big way. It's that time of year when everything needs to work, right? What if you didn't have to worry about wheat transplants and poor germination, meaning that you've got less plants than you thought you were going to have, due to less than great potting soil?



What if you didn't have to worry about getting truly finished compost for your homemade blend? What if you didn't have to worry about making a homemade blend right now? What if you didn't have to worry about making sure that your employees remembered to add the fertilizer charge? That happened to me once. What if you could grow plants up until the roots filled the container without having to worry about supplying extra fertility? What if your potting soil had your back year after year after year after year? That's what Vermont Compost Potting Soil can bring to you. Makers of living media for organic growers since 1992. 1992. [VermontCompost.com](http://VermontCompost.com).

[01:00:30] The podcast is also brought to you by StoreItCold's CoolBot. Way back in 2000, the year I started Rockspring Farm, the manager of 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. In this local food movement, what's all that about 2000 miles fresher? I later found out that none of the local growers had a walk-in cooler. Seventeen years later, this is still the number one complaint I hear from produce buyers. You have got to get your produce cold. The difference between then and now is that now there's CoolBot. You can build an affordable walk-in cooler powered by a CoolBot and a window air-conditioning unit, saving up to 83% on upfront costs and up to 42% a month in electricity bills compared to conventional cooling units. Use the code FTF at checkout and double your CoolBot warranty at no charge. [StoreItCold.com](http://StoreItCold.com).

We're back with Jess and Brian Powers from Working Hands Farm in Hillsboro, Oregon. Before we went on break, we were talking about equipment. I mean, I'm looking at this cultivator and I'm hearing you guys talk about this new tractor and I'm going, "This probably wasn't cheap."

Jess: Nope, it wasn't. You know, with the transition we really, really were kind of thinking, "Okay, if this 5075E isn't going to work out for us, we're going to have to go up in tractor size and what does that mean?" How much do we really want to commit to what we were doing? At that point in time we had built the pole barn up front so we could have winter storage, the CSA pickup, and a big cooler all in the same area so all of a sudden that efficiencies over this past winter, we really kind of doubled down on the farm that we wanted to be and the finance side of it, I think, well, a lot of that came from the capital from the cows. Also, too, Brian will probably touch on this, but able to take a little bit more risk now that we're in year eight or whatever, season eight, and feeling okay about taking on debt like that or having the business take on debt.

Brian: That's been huge for us. I think we're both terrified of debt and have been throughout this process. I think that fear has been founded in some cases and unfounded in others. I believe, after having so many years of meeting financial goals for our farm and having sound financial projections that we feel like are accurate, at some point you have to believe in yourselves and believe that the proof really is in the pudding. If the projections are working, then there's nothing to say they shouldn't work going forward into the next year. That, kind of for us, has taken a real leap of faith. For the new tractor, we took advantage, John Deere in our area, and probably all over the place, does 0% financing ...



Jess: For 60 months.

Brian: For 60 months.

Jess: Yeah.

Brian: So that a 5085M roughly cost us 1000 bucks a month. Since we do have good financial projections, we can fit that into our cash flow and decide whether that is an investment we can make or not. Now, with the pole building, now the next question, it's kind of a chicken or the egg question is now you actually have to fill it up with customers and produce. What kind of equipment do you need in order to fill it up? The sale of the animals, like Jess said, definitely gave us a huge boost, but it's not just the animals. It's also starting to liquidate some of those assets, like the cattle shoots, the cattle panels, the fencing, the waterers, the multitude of things that go along with raising cattle. There's cattle trailers, there's a lot of equipment that goes into a livestock operation and, thankfully, those things hold their value well. We were able to liquidate those things with relative ease, within a three or four month period.

Jess: Yeah, but taking on the debt, too, I think after you get to a certain point in the business where you're doing it going into your eighth season, it feels different. It's not as scary as when you're in year three or whatever when things just either sink or swim. Now it just feels like we're steady. The business is growing by 40% every year. There's customers out there that keep coming back. This year, out of all the other years, we had 70% return rate from all of our customers, so that means way less time educating people on how the CSA works. All of a sudden, you have 70% of the people who have been coming for the last two to six years are coming back and it just creates a different vibe on the farm, I think.

Brian: I think you keep hearing us say that for eight seasons, for eight seasons doing this, I think part of that is because it's out of disbelief.

Jess: Yeah, that's true.

Brian: We're kind of going ...

Jess: Has it been really?

Brian: It feels like we've taken on so many new risks this year, but it feels better than it has ever felt. Our bodies feel better than they've ever felt. We have more confidence in our community and their willingness to support our farm than we've ever felt. It's been a really break ...

Jess: Quality of life.

Brian: Yeah, it's been a break out year for us. That's really exciting. I feel like our members every year just get better and more dedicated. This is one little thing that I think is important to mention is that Jess and I, for all of these years, have always attended all of



our CSA pickups. It's something that we both felt was really important to engage with our community and to be there in person.

Jess: Even after a really long harvest day for three or four hours three days a week right in a row we'd go up there.

Brian: On an August day it's not always easy to keep your eyes open for the three-hour pickup period at the end of a long day.

Jess: Last year was the first year we were like, when that tractor creeper year and all that stuff didn't come through, it's like all of a sudden the herd was 12 cows big and we were rotating cows and we were ... Had less time to manage, to be able to do that. We'd go up every once in a while, but we were like, "Well, we're really going to put it to the test and see if the community is here for the veggies and all that," and we just ended up having a better return rate this year. Like Brian was saying, do you want to, you were talking?

Brian: Oh, it was just incredible. It was amazing because the attitude of our community started to change a little bit. It was, instead of Brian and Jess are here every CSA pickup, they can hold our carrot tops for us, it was the attitude of when they got to see us it was excitement, it was thrilling, it was something that was more rare these days so people wanted to engage in a really amazing level.

Jess: Meaningful way.

Brian: Also, give us the feedback about our product that we're putting out and they're taking home. It was really an exciting change for us. As a result, like Jess just said, we had the highest percentage of return members that we've ever had. We've been slowly creeping up to that 70% mark and I think we can improve upon that. Part of it is knowing that maybe Jess and I don't have to be the center of attention. Maybe it can be the produce, the farm, the engagement with the community, some of these other aspects, and we can step back and respect the life that the farm has become, as its own part of the community.

Jess: Totally.

Chris: Michael Gerber in the E-Myth, he talks about that whole idea of for small businesses, a lot of times it is, it's all about the farmer. It's all about the guy who's making the sandwiches, who owns the businesses, got the passion and everything else. At some point, for the business to be sustainable, ideally you move beyond that. You move to a point where it's Working Hands Farm, not Jess and Brian Powers.

Jess: Thank goodness.

Brian: Yeah, that's a much better name.

Jess: Yeah. Nobody ever really tells you that. If things are going well, like with our business every year it got a little bit better, people would say, "Well, that's the recipe. Don't





change it." Our family would be a little more hesitant to change anything because it was going well. For Brian and I, it was like, well, you know, in order, like you said, to make this sustainable we really need to manage our time a little bit differently and what does the farm look like when we do that, if we do want to just keep it the two of us or with a part-time employee or whatever it is. I think we're figuring that out.

Brian: I don't know that we were really great, you know, the best farmers and people and community members that we could be when we were up there and we were just that exhausted.

Jess: Yeah.

Brian: I think we probably looked a little bit pitiful. People aren't asking us to martyr ourselves. People are asking us to grow really beautiful, high quality produce so that both we and they can be more productive members of society. That's what they're asking. They're not asking you to kill yourself in order to throw some cucumbers on a plate at the end of the day.

Chris: Right, and I would actually say, yeah, they're not asking you to martyr yourself. I actually have always thought, from a marketing perspective, and I always thought maybe on my farm that we even went too far in this direction, was that people don't want to hear about how hard it is. They want to see things as sort of this idealistic idea of a farm, but that is ... I think finding that balance, but certainly showing up to CSA distributions exhausted and dirty is not going to be the way to present your farm as being a really successful operation.

Brian: No, no. I don't think that makes people feel better and I think you're right. I think you have to have an appropriate amount of honesty and just like any aspect of your life and any relationship, there's an appropriate place to share things and time to share things. I think through social media we've been able to hopefully convey some of the hardships and the things that we've struggled with and in an appropriate way that allows people to value the product. There's a lot of mystery and fog and smoke around farms and kind of consumerism and some of these other things. To expect a customer to understand the intricacies of this world is probably too much of an expectation until the farmer invites them into that in an appropriate way. Does that make sense?

Chris: I think that makes 100% sense. I think that's right on.

Brian: It's a balance.

Chris: Tell me about, I mean, we've talked about machinery, we've talked a little bit about debt and financing, we've talked about some of the changes that you made in terms of how you're dealing with your customers. Jess, you said something before the break that was really interesting to me about how you were missing flame weedings. I'm curious, as you guys have gone through this expansion, this pretty dramatic growth over the last 18 months, what have you done to kind of buttress the systems of operation on the farm that don't necessarily have to do with the machinery or the customers?



Jess: Well, it's been really interesting, especially this past winter. I feel like we had all this snow, all the crazy weather, we also had the wettest winter in 75 years, like Brian mentioned, we got all this fancy new equipment, but here we are saying to ourselves, "Oh, great. There's more rain coming." It's the wettest we've ever seen the farm. How do we ... We almost went back to, you know, we were using 6-mm tarps to cover soil, like we would prep soil and cover it so that we were able to have any soil early for our CSA started three weeks ago and so we were sitting there in March being like, "Oh my gosh, this is when we usually plant stuff." We had all these plans laid out. You know, the best laid plans, or whatever they say. We ended up having to be, just hone in on figuring out systems, like literally moving water off the tarps, just physically moving water so it wasn't going into the soil and having areas where we could prepare carrots because for the past three seasons our carrots have just been so weedy, no matter how much flame weeding we were doing.

Really we sat down this winter and were like, "Okay, let's look at these main crops that people always want in the CSA." There's onions, there's carrots, there's sweet potato, there's regular potatoes, and set a goal as to how many weeks of CSA do we want to have those things in the share and what do we need to do to get those things in those shares. With this wet spring it was just a matter of honing down and we really wanted to have good carrots this spring. It was a super goal of ours and so we tilled. We did the tarps. We uncovered. We flamed again. We weeded and then before the carrots came up and germinated the beets came up and we were like, "All right, it's time to flame the carrots again." We're just, we're really purposeful with ... It's not about just get the seeds in the ground, they'll come up and we'll just triage it later. It's being really just, what's the word?

Brian: Determined? Dedicated?

Jess: Yeah, just diligent about following through on things. Before we'd be like, "Well, we'll just seed a couple extra beds of that just in case a couple get taken down by the weeds or something like that." That used to be more of a triage thing that we would do a couple years ago, whereas now it feels really purposeful like let's only seed what we know that we can take really good care of and ...

Brian: Now we have the time to do it as well. That was interesting introducing an employee into our farm this season and when they kind of came to us, we kind of said, "Hey, this is basically a whole new farm from where we were last season." New technology, kind of, in some regards, new land, turning over pasture. New bed shapes. New bed sizes. New widths. Everything. A new packing house. It was, we're in the middle of developing a lot of those systems now again. Part of it is learning to think on your feet, but also we have the time to do that thinking now and we didn't when we had livestock in the same way.

Jess: It was just the two of us. I feel like it was a lot of just get it done type of attitude whereas now if I'm double handling something twice and I only need to be handling it once, I'll look at Brian and say, "What do you think about, instead of doing that we could do this?" From there, it just kind of has snowballed all season long. I feel like we've just been kind of getting stuff done way more efficiently just by paying attention to the little



things. I mean, having a pack shed, cooler, and CSA pickup area all in the same building floors, which we've never experienced before.

Brian: And wheels, Chris.

Jess: Wheels.

Chris: Wheels.

Jess: Carts.

Brian: So many wheels!

Jess: Less picking up, less moving stuff.

Brian: We went through the Uline catalog and we ordered everything that had wheels.

Jess: Not really, but yeah. We were pretty excited about wheels and literally just wheeling stuff from the cooler into the CSA area and it's all in the same building, which we've never experienced before.

Brian: Every time I push these carts that we have in our building, I think of you, Chris. I think of how important wheels are to you and I think, he's right. The greatest invention to serve humankind. You know?

Jess: Yeah.

Chris: I'm honored. Thank you.

Brian: I push them across the farm and I just think, "This is amazing. I used to carry all, you know, a few thousand pounds-

Jess: Multiple times.

Brian: -of vegetables every week from one end of the farm to the other, and now I just push this cart with wheels."

Jess: It's like that Farmer to Farmer where they were talking about just being a materials handler. It really is. If you can just figure out better ways to even move, like this winter we got an electric Gator as well, so we're financing that. That thing has literally changed ... I love that thing. I can just hook up the trailer to it, take out a load of plants, and we are off to the races instead of multiple trips back and forth. Even harvest, it's created just such an easier time to harvest and we can talk to each other because it's electric. We can actually have something on the farm that isn't super loud and noisy and doesn't require gas.

Brian: You never think about, with the size of our farm before, how much long of a walk that is with a farm cart. We built one of these beautiful farm cart that Josh Volk designed and



then put the plans up on his website. It's a wonderful farm cart, but when you have 1000 feet that you need to cross to get to your tomatoes or whatever it is that you have on the other end of the field ...

Jess: It's not efficient.

Brian: Suddenly you have to figure out how to do something else. Jess is right. That electric Gator is kind of competing with that finger weeder this year, because it cost us as much a month to make payments on as a cellphone. It has made a world of difference and it's one less engine that has to be maintained, which is kind of a blessing, as I'm sure you know.

Chris: Yeah, and especially as somebody's who's not good at maintaining engines.

Brian: I hear you.

Chris: Not my native skill. I wanted to circle back, just real quickly, before we move to the lightning round here, one of the things that really struck me last time talked was how much effort you had put into developing and nurturing your personal relationship alongside of your professional relationship. How has the growth of your farm changed or influenced that? What have you done in response?

Jess: Wow.

Brian: My lady. You first.

Jess: Well, it makes me a little teary eyed thinking about it.

Brian: You got her, Chris. Yeah.

Jess: Sorry.

Brian: [01:20:30] I mean, yeah. I think, for us, the act of taking our farm and making really hard decisions in order to facilitate our relationship above all else has been kind of that act. That's what we've done about it. It's, for us, making this transition has in every way both been about the business, because those things are so intertwined, but ultimately, it's Jess and I's relationship. It's how can we do this and love each other and not just get by and not just be two farmers on one farm, it's what can we do to create efficiencies so we can have the time back with each other and with our families? I don't know.

Jess: Just to connect. I feel like, even ... Before it was we were coming together because stuff really just needed to get done and it felt like we were going to figure out this giant puzzle together and it didn't matter what, we were just going to do it no matter what it took. If it was stacking 30 tons of hay every summer together on our Friday day off, that's what we were going to do and we were going to cut it out. Now it just feels like, ahhh. There's just more time to just listen to each other and to figure things out and to champion each other. Not in that aggressive way that I feel like we had to when we just needed to pay the bills and get it done and figure it out.



Now it feels like we're kind of settling into a groove that, there's just more balance and there's more laughter, and there's more systems and it's ultimately just making our lives that much better and we can kind of see each other in that same light that we once saw when we first met each other. That spark. That person that you're working with is capable and all of the positive things that you've learned and grown to love about them. It just really feels like this year you can appreciate that in more moments instead of it just feeling like you have a breakdown or something like this. This year just kind of feels more steady and you can really appreciate that person a bit more.

Brian: I think, in addition to what Jess is saying, the farm feels efficient enough right now that we can also kind of commit time and not just ourselves and our relationship and our farm, but also to lend a hand to other farmers in our community and to reach out to them, even if it's just to commiserate or if it's just to get together and talk about, you know, brainstorm steps forward for them and us. That's something that we get to do together and helping ... I shouldn't say helping, but being there to support the people that we care about and the other farmers in our area that are ...

Jess: We look up to.

Brian: Yeah, that we admire and we look up to and create better connections is something that we can do together. You know, it's like that idea of you don't work on your relationship by looking at each other sitting down and saying, "Hey, let's work on our relationship." You work on your relationship by sitting down and going, "What are we passionate about? What do we believe in? How can we strive to accomplish those things together?" That's how you work on a relationship, or at least that's what works for Jess and I.

Jess: It's a lot to think about where you're like ...

Chris: It is.

Jess: Yeah, life is, yeah.

Brian: Because we still can't believe it's working. That's the thing, right? It's starting to actually work. I don't know what it is. There's this weird conference that we've never been invited to, but we would like to, but we're not in the cool kids club in our area yet. They call it the Naked Farmer Get Together. It's at this hot spring and all the old school organic movement guys in our area, and gals, they go to this and they talk about what's working, what's not working, what's the future and all this other stuff and they brainstorm. One of the takeaways that one of those guys posted to social media was that they all agreed that somewhere around year 10 on a farm, everything gets dramatically easier and it's because you have those systems or that you have that equipment that you've been saving up forever to get your hands on.

Jess: Or you let go of the things that aren't working, too.

Brian: Yeah, that's right. You sort of thin out what's not working. It was interesting, because I think Jess and I are feeling that in spades right now.





- Chris: I've always contended that it's three years, seven years, and 10 years are the big humps for farms. You survive those, you're going to be okay.
- Jess: Yeah. It did feel that ...
- Brian: Maybe we'll get an invitation out of it.
- Jess: That's hilarious. Oh gosh.
- Chris: On that note, we're going to stop here, get a word from our sponsor for the lightning round and then come right back and ask you a few quick questions before the end of the show.
- Jess: All right.
- Chris: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is brought to you by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are real farming equipment for real farmers and with PTO-driven attachments like rototillers, flail mowers, rotary plows, power harrows, log splitters, snow throwers, and even a utility trailer and, check this out, a new water transfer pump, you have got the tools that you need to get the jobs done across the farm and across the homestead. On my own farm, we went through a number of so-called solutions for mowing and tilling before we finally got smart and bought ourselves a BCS. Even though we owned a four-wheeled tractor to manage our 20 acres of vegetables, that BCS tackled jobs that we simply couldn't do with the larger machine, from mowing steep slopes and around trees, to working in our high tunnels. Plus, BCS tractors are gear-driven for years of dependable service. Check out [BCSAmerica.com](http://BCSAmerica.com) to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments, plus videos of BCS in action.
- Jess, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Jess: My favorite tool? I have to say it's that electric Gator this year. It has brought me so much joy and in a winter where we got, I don't even know how many inches it was, but I think we would have ruined all of our grass pathways if we had to drive the tractor around. It has really just been the unsung hero, because it's the a little dorky. Brian, are you going to be dorky, too? What's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Jess: Uh-oh. You do like that new tractor.
- Brian: Yeah, I was going to say, the tractor journey was such a struggle and I think you would identify with this when you ...
- Jess: Yeah, it was like a year to get it here.
- Brian: This is the first time in our lives that we've had something that was brand new. We've never bought new cars. We've never had brand new things. Then when you look at a \$60-70,000 tractor and it's brand new, you really start to have high expectations for those things. We were so disappointed with that 75E.



- Jess: Experience, yeah.
- Brian: Because we had paid for things that John Deere hadn't put together yet. Getting that 5085M, I mean, that tractor, it's still new to us, but having the opportunity to match your tire spacing with your bed shaper, with your cultivation equipment, with your transplanter, I've heard people talk about doing that on your podcast, Chris, in the past, and we're finally making the steps to get to a place where all those layers are starting to work together towards success and our farm has never, ever looked so clean, especially when it's that valuable area of new ... You know, it's that other half of our farm that hasn't been tainted with weeds yet, that we haven't ...
- Jess: Made that many mistakes.
- Brian: Made as many mistakes on. It's a really great timing to have that tractor on the farm to help keep things clean. I'm excited, but we'll see next year.
- Jess: You also like that hydraulic top link for it, too. That's pretty sweet.
- Brian: That, yeah, Jess is right. With that finger weeder and some of the other implements, the hydraulic top link on, we've put one on the tractor, and it's really nice instead of having to drop all your sweeps or make some of those adjustments with a mulch layer or anything like that the ability to just do it from the operator station is kind of a game changer. Aww, I used it again, didn't I?
- Chris: You used the word again. It's okay. I'll just beep it out.
- Brian: That's so good. It's definitely saved me a few steps from getting off and on the tractor, which is always nice.
- Jess: Yeah.
- Chris: Nice. Jess, what's Brian's farmer superpower?
- Jess: Uh, that's a good one. I feel like he sees the positive in everything. He really does. No matter how crappy the germination on something could be or ... His ability to just see the good in all is amazing to me, because if I see empty dibble holes with nothing growing out of it, I see all the holes. I see all the empty spaces and Brian will see all of the growth, all of the possibility, and I think that's something that, yeah, helps me to change my perspective on how, maybe, I've been taught to see the world or maybe how I've learned how to see the world since I was little. Now I am seeing more and more of the positive side of things rather than the negative, so that's definitely a superpower.
- Chris: Brian, how about you? What's Jess' farmer superpower?
- Brian: This one is going to be way less touching.
- Jess: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's pretty straightforward. I know what you're going to say.



Brian: It is a really, it is a superpower, is Jess' ability to see things is incredible. I don't mean just like good eyes, it's like she, and this was something that she had such a gift for with livestock. We'd be standing on one end of the farm and she would see a calf and maybe just it's right ear was drooping, from 100 yards, she would go, "There's something wrong with that calf." Then I'd go, "No, no. It's fine. I just saw it. I just checked on it this morning." She'd be like, "No, there's something wrong." She'd go over there and, sure enough, there'd be something going on. She does that with plants. She does that when I'm trying to look up nerdy pieces of equipment online and I'm struggling, she'll immediately be able to identify the link I should be clicking on or what I'm looking for. I don't know if they call it tracking or what, but Jess has this ability to observe and be aware of everything on the farm.

She has a second superpower and that is her memory. She has the best memory of anybody I've ever encountered in my life. It can drive me up the wall, but it's so amazing when you're sitting there doing the bookkeeping and making sure all the checks are cashed and remembering all the CSA members and everybody's emails and all this other stuff, she does that stuff without even having to think about it and I could never in my life do that. I don't think most people could. That's definitely her second superpower.

Jess: Nice.

Chris: I'm going to ask both of you guys together, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer selves one thing, what would it be?

Brian: What do you think Jess?

Jess: The first thing I think about is just trust yourself. I feel like, even though people have told us not to do things, we still do it anyway. I don't ... That's a hard one. I would tell myself that. Just keep trusting yourself.

Brian: Yeah, because I think there are times where we broke down and we didn't trust ourselves and that ultimately made things more difficult. Perhaps it could have been a smoother journey if we didn't trust ourselves in that way, but I also think it takes time as a couple and as business owners. Like we were saying about the financial projections. At some point in time, if you keep meeting those, you have to start to believe that they are somewhat predictive of the future.

Jess: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brian: I think that's true for our farming experience, if we were to go back in time and do something different or give ourselves a piece of advice, I think it would, Jess is right. I think it would be, trust yourselves.

Jess: Ultimately, I feel like, we were both farming on our own before we met each other and it was coming together that really brought things into focus for, we found each other through farming. I feel like ... I don't know.



- Brian: You know what, I also, I just thought of Jess' third superpower and it's bunching things. When she said that, you know, we had separate farms before we met each other, which was really important and, I think, also allowed us to kind of build that trust because we were coming from a place of individuality of our own power coming together. I'll never, ever be able to catch up to her when she's bunching anything, kale, radishes. It doesn't matter what it is.
- Jess: I love helping you, though.
- Brian: She's twice as fast as me and Chris.
- Jess: I'll take your last 20.
- Brian: It drives me up the wall. I compete with her and she doesn't know I'm competing and she's still twice as fast. It's killing me.
- Chris: It's good to have somebody who can make you humble, Brian.
- Brian: Man. Someday. Someday.
- Jess: Yeah. That's fun.
- Chris: Jess and Brian, thank you so much for being on the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.
- Jess: Yeah, thanks for having us. Yeah. It's nice to sit and reflect and just be a part of what you're doing Chris. What you're doing is great.
- Brian: Yeah, we're humbled and honored by you, Chris. It's such an amazing opportunity to be on your podcast again, as well as to just hopefully in a small way support what you're doing, because I think what you're doing is making big changes. I know it's made a big change in our lives and I'm sure it's made big changes in both consumers, as well as other farmer's lives. Thank you for your work.
- Jess: Yeah, thanks.
- Chris: Thank you so much. All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 123 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast. You can find the notes for the show at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com) by looking on the episodes page or searching for Working Hands.

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. Additional funding for transcripts is provided by North Central SARE, providing grants and education to advance innovations in sustainable agriculture.



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

You can get the show notes for every Farmer to Farmer podcast in your inbox by signing up for my email newsletters at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com).

You can head over to iTunes, leave us a review if you enjoy the show, or talk to us in our show notes. Tell your friends on Facebook. We're at Purple Pitchfork on Facebook if you want to get a notification whenever we come out with new episodes and other exciting things are happening. Hey, when you talk to our sponsors, please let them know how much you appreciate their support of a resource that you value.

You can support the show directly by going to [farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate). I am working to make the best farming podcast in the world and you can help.

Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the farm through the suggestions form at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com). This show happened because somebody contacted me and said, "I want to hear what's going on with Jess and Brian 18 months down the road." I will do my best to get the people that you suggest onto the show.

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