



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

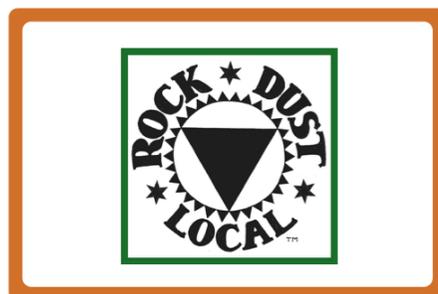
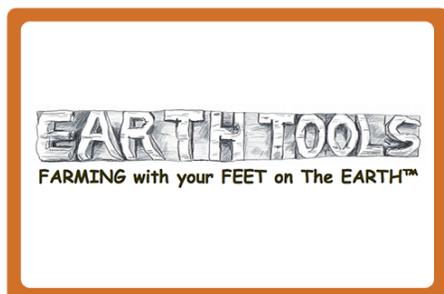


EPISODE 125

Ray Tyler of Rose Creek Farms on Farming in the South and the Journey from Failing as Farmers to Loving Life

July 6, 2017

TRANSCRIPT SPONSORS





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

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 Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast episode 126 and this is your host Chris Blanchard. My guest today, Ray Tyler, raises about an acre of salad greens at Rose Creek Farms in Selmer, Tennessee, about two hours east of Memphis and three hours west of Nashville. He farms with his wife Ashley and his five children as well as employees. Produce is sold at farmers market, through a CSA and to grocery stores in Memphis. Ray tells the story of his farm from its start as a mixed vegetable and livestock operation in 2010 to its current focus on specialty salad greens, baby root vegetables, and tomatoes on a small scale. We discuss the never-ending vicious cycle of failures that Ray encountered in the beginning years of the farm and how a life-threatening illness of a young child resulted in Rose Creek's transition from a failing operation into a thriving, joyful vegetable production machine.

Ray also provides insights into the challenges and opportunities of farming in the South, including a fantastic tutorial on summer lettuce production in that challenging climate. We also dig into how Ray leveraged an intensive education to make his farming transition and the large and small practical changes that make it possible for Rose Creek Farm to gross big dollars on a small acreage.

The Farmer to Farmer podcast is generously supported 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. And by Farmers Web, software for your farm. Farmers Web makes it easier to work with your buyers, saving time, reducing errors, and increasing your capacity to work with more buyers overall. Farmersweb.com. And by Vermont Compost company, founded by organic crop growing professionals committed to meeting the need for high quality compost and compost-based living soil mixes for certified organic plant production. Vermontcompost.com.

Before we get started today I want to say a word about Nigel Walker, who was the founder of Eat Well Farm in Dixon, California. Nigel died on Saturday after a long time living with cancer. I can't say that I knew Nigel well, but his interview on the podcast remains one of my favorites. He was a creative, cheerful, and innovative man and the world is a lesser place without him and better for having had him in it.

Ray Tyler, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Ray Tyler: Chris, it is an honor to be here.



Chris Blanchard: I'm so glad that you could join me today. You and I have been talking for quite some time and since the first time we've been in touch I've been like, "Wow, Ray's up to a lot of really interesting things out there in Selmer, Tennessee." So can you kind of give us the lay of the land and where you're located and what you're doing out there?

Ray Tyler: Yeah. So we're out here, we're about two hours east of Memphis and about three hours west of Nashville so we're kind of like in the middle of nowhere. And when I go to the farmers market up north in Jackson I tell folks that we're from Selmer in McNairy County they always go, "You know, I didn't know anything could grow in Selmer, Tennessee." So we are kind of in this region where there's just not a lot of, well there's really no produce farmers that we know of who are doing anything on any kind of serious scale, just mainly row crops and cattle farmers.

So we've got about a one acre market garden here and we sell a lot of salad greens. We do the whole range between the baby mustards, the arugula, all that stuff, baby root veg, and of course, tomatoes in the spring and summer. And we're taking that to two different markets, a lot of restaurants in Memphis, and some other different wholesale outlets. We're also getting into a lot of grocery stores, which we're really loving. And my wife is with me so she is, what we have recently come to the reality of that, she is actually a full time farmer and a full-time stay at home mom. We're still trying to figure out how those two work at the same time, but she's amazing. We also have five young children who are with us as well. We homeschool them. Yeah, we're just out here trying to beat this mid-south humidity and oppressive heat and we're having a great time doing it.

Chris Blanchard: Now when you talk about an acre of salad greens that's not what you were doing several years ago.

Ray Tyler: No, no. When we first started we were actually mainly in the meat business. 75% of our business was pork, poultry, eggs, turkeys and that was our main, really bread and butter. I would say we had around two acres of produce that we were basically plain and failing doing with a tractor. I think we kind of ... When you first start farming with not a lot of good examples in the area. We were just really taking a lot of stabs at a lot of different things trying to figure out what we enjoy doing, what will sell. I think that's important is we definitely have realized over the years that we can't be too romantic about certain crops or certain products. You know if they're losing money to get rid of them.

But we were just basically trying a bunch of different produce, a bunch of different animal kind of businesses to see what stuck. We end up having a pretty successful animal business. We weren't making very much money at it, but we kind of had some systems down and we finally had this turnover of product that was pretty consistent. We were still definitely struggling a lot on the produce end mainly because I was a terrible tractor operator. I think I was farming with all the wrong tractors and equipment and also, I think the meat and produce, trying to do those two at the same time was a huge challenge for us.



That's kind of what we started out doing before we kind of made some changes to our system. We enjoyed the animals. We really loved seeing the pastures get greener over the years. We loved that whole process. We saw there was a need in west Tennessee for the free range pastured animals so that definitely drove us to do that more, but I think there's this point of scale to really make the animal business really, really work to where it's really generating plenty of income and you don't feel like you're always investing in more infrastructure and trying to find more land, more pasture. We didn't have a lot of pasture to work with so we were definitely fairly limited. Yeah, there was definitely some challenges that we were facing with the whole animal meat business and at the same time trying to figure out how to grow produce and what grows in our climate and what sells and all those different things. Yeah, that's kind of how we got started and what we are doing.

Chris Blanchard: How long ago was it that you guys got started farming?

Ray Tyler: We started in 2010, so that was about 7 years ago. Our second daughter was born. Do you know Paul and Allison Whitaker or know of their name?

Chris Blanchard: Yes.

Ray Tyler: [00:09:00] It's kind of an interesting stream of events. We had found out this guy in northern Mississippi, he was growing some sort of vegetables so we went down and visited him. He had spoken about this guy in Kentucky who was growing just amazing produce year round. He gave us his book, which they wrote called, "Walking into Spring" just a fantastic book for growers in our region. We went up there and visited him and it was November I believe. We went in there and he had these heads of lettuce like nothing I've ever seen before and just how it was November, we had already been through several frosts. When I saw, I think it was like a Skyphos lettuce or some really exotic Bibb that you'll never see in a grocery store. I was like, "I want to grow that." Like, "This is what I want to do." It was just him and Allison at that time. I think Allison was working full time teaching so it was really just him. They weren't really on any kind of big scale, but just the quality of his produce was just really fantastic.

We had invited him to come down to our farm and essentially just get us started because this was back in the time where I had Eliot Coleman's books, which were really fantastic, but I really needed some good, just practical direction for the Southern climate. At that point I had a wife, I had two young children and I guess being young I didn't want to wait 20 years for me to figure this out. I was ready to figure it out now.

Chris Blanchard: Like yesterday?

Ray Tyler: Like yesterday, like let's get this show on the road. We invited him to come down and him and Allison came down for about two days and they got us started in how to set up ... we actually had one high tunnel set up and he helped us lay the whole thing out. The seeds to buy, how to lay out the whole tunnel, from the varieties to the timing, just everything. But that was about as far as we got, but that was much as my brain could handle in one weekend. Then he also



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

got us set up on the pastured poultry because he was like, "Hey, this is something that you guys may want to think about. It's fairly easy to get going, doesn't require a lot of infrastructure and cost. Eight weeks from the time of chicks you can actually have cash flow." We were like, "Let's give that a shot." We did everything Paul had told us to do. We got all of our lettuces done, our tomatoes, and kale in the high tunnel when we did.

[00:12:00] We have this high tunnel in the Spring of 2010 that was just completely loaded with produce. A friend of mine had come by and he was like, "You know Ray, this is nice, but where are you going to sell this?" I said, "Well, I haven't got that far. I'm just too busy growing the stuff." His whole point was it's easy to grow, but it's a lot harder to sell. We had called around to some farmers markets just trying to figure out if there was room. During this time I've got basically a part to full time job doing some land maintenance so this was kind of on the side. We had one market that seemed pretty excited for us to come and just show up so we brought these heads of lettuce there. And those folks were so excited about seeing lettuce that as we were grabbing the boxes of lettuce from the truck they were taking them out of our hands. They'd said they had never seen lettuce like that in 30 years. We just cleaned house. It was our first day at that market. We were obviously very excited and we went, "You know, there may be something here."

We knew that we had a lot to learn as far as succession plantings. This was March and April, which is the easiest part of the year to grow, at least here in the South. We knew that the worst was yet to come. We did that March and April then since we weren't really on top of our game with the succession plantings and the spacing to really plant, come May and June we were basically out of product. We had some stuff, but we really still had no idea what we were doing. Looking back I wish I would've gone to a farm for at least one whole season just to see. There's a lot of things as a beginning farmer you just don't even think about. "Hey, make sure you have your irrigation before June. It all needs to be set up." Make sure that you're switching to your summer varieties in the end of April. "So there's just a lot of these things we just had to learn basically the hard way.

After that experience with Paul just helping set our spring market up I realized the value of pursuing high grade education and really finding folks who knew what they were talking about and really trying to go and basically just asking for more help. I wanted to be the guy who could re-create the wheel for our area, but I just quickly realized that I did not want to wait that long. That whole time was such an exciting time because in 2009 when we were just dreaming about farming my wife and I were like, "Is it even possible for us to even make a living growing food and selling it and actually being on the land?" I wanted to be around for my children.

Previously I was driving four hours a day to Memphis and back I wanted to be done with that life. After us talking in 2009, about this dream and then in March of 2010 just seeing, "Wow, we've got a high tunnel full of products, customers are buying it." We were just thrilled. We were really thrilled. From that point on it was just really a lot of terrible mistakes, a lot of disappointments from ... I think 2010 was a massive heat wave happened to be the year that we started. Paul Whitaker actually told us later on that year, he goes, "Man, that was the



worst year I've ever had farming." And of course that was the first year we started. We got a great introduction to the realities and the not so fun things about farming here in the South.

Chris Blanchard: A little trial by fire.

Ray Tyler: Oh my goodness, almost literally. The ground just baking. At the end of the year we had gotten with Paul again. I actually went up to his farm this time and basically helped him pull a bunch in tomatoes in trade for about two or three hours of just him sitting down with me. I had made some plans based off of previous failures and we kind of had planned the fall and so we actually had a decent fall harvest, which was really encouraging. At the end of that first year I think we only made \$10,000 that first year. Then, mind you, I wasn't depending on that income so it was basically in our spare time, early, early mornings, afternoons, and Saturdays, but it was enough where we felt like ... we took the winter, we did some planning, I think we visited some more farms. I went to the Southern SAWG farming conference down here. Just meeting some other farmers we got encouraged and we were like, "Let's just try this again."

During that time, the church that I'm involved with, we had this young man who had gotten out of prison and he'd been in prison for a while so he needed help transitioning from prison life to the real world. It was definitely not going well for him so they kind of asked if we would essentially take him on hoping that him being connected to the land, at that point we had a few pigs that we'd gotten by accident that someone convinced me to get. One of the worst things that ever happened to us, no. We had said, "Yep, it would be great to have a guy to help anyways, just to do basic chores. I've known this young man for a while since he was a child so if we can be a part of his turning point in life then we're all for it.

He really loved animals a lot. We had gotten a few pigs by mere accident. We had this one patch of ground, which I kind of failed to mention earlier, that was completely infested with Johnson grass and pigweed. I don't know if you have those weeds up north, but down here it'll just devastate you. It's to the point where you just cannot get rid of it. It's these tubers that grow underground. When you dig one up they just reproduce ten more tubers. It's just a nightmare. We get all the leaves from the city of Selmer and they actually dump them on our farm. They were dumping them in the landfill. They were paying the landfill \$15 per load. We were like, "You can dump them on our farm for free." They started doing that and then a friend of mine had this idea. He goes, "Why don't we put some leaves on this field and why don't we get you some pigs." I'm like, "No, I don't want any pigs. No pigs, they stink, I don't have the money to feed them for six months and then where are we going to sell them."

He talked me into it so we end up getting two pigs. I think we had portioned off this one eighth of an acre section and we put some leaves down. We put them down over the winter and over the course of the winter they got every Johnson grass tuber out of that one area. We have yet, since that time, to have any Johnson grass come back. We were like, "Wow, this is incredible. There's actually maybe some hope." That was the other thing I was unprepared for during our first year of farming was the weeds, like the incredible amount. I wish we could find a way to market all these weeds and sell them because it would



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

really change the life of us farmers. But having those pigs that winter really was like, "Wow, what if we did this to all of our fields. We could literally get rid of Johnson grass."

Our friend, who was with us for that winter, he just loved them. He's like, "Hey man, I love these pigs. Can we get more?" He was like a pig whisperer. He just loved pigs, they loved him. They'd follow him around everywhere. They wouldn't come to me with a bucket hardly. He definitely had a gift for animals and seeing how the animals changed him we got more animals, we got more pigs. He was like, "Hey, what about some cows?", so we got some cows and then we got some chickens. Then, next thing you know we got all these animals and we're like, "What are we going to do with all these animals?" So we started getting the word out and then come to find out there's actually a pretty big demand for pastured animals.

Our friend here is doing a great job, he's actually mellowing out as a person and the land is benefiting, just everybody's benefiting. We end up, since we kind of had the demand and I had the space for the animals, we also had some adjoining pastures, we just end up getting more and more animals. We found that we could be a lot more consistent with our meat sales than we could with our produce sales. Whenever you harvest a head of lettuce you've got three days at max to sell it whereas when you have a pork in the freezer it can be there for five months. Anyways, so all those combined, that's how we got really carried away into the whole meat business and in the meantime we started a vegetable CSA.

[00:23:00] I personally have always loved growing vegetables more than I did the actual animals. We had access to a tractor, then I got some really basic cultivating equipment. We got a plastic mulch layer, which really helped with our weeds. We just started growing more and more produce outside. We just started doing a lot more tomatoes, a lot more lettuce, really big fall crops, really big spring crops, a little over winter stuff and it just kind of grew and grew. Our biggest problem with those two things is I felt like I really had nothing under control. I really never had the animals under control to a point where I felt really good about their health, the land's health, not being stressed about how are we going to pay for feed or how are we going to pay this \$1,000 processing bill. Then, at the same time, when I needed to be planting because it was a beautiful day to plant or work in the fields I was processing chickens. I just really struggled with that personally and it was just probably because I wasn't wired to do both.

We found, to keep up with for our product production, which is backwards now. Looking back at it is definitely a foolish way to think, but I just felt like I had to have so much land in cultivation because I was having so much crop loss failures that I had to grow twice as much just to make up for all the losses. It's just like this never ending, vicious cycle of failures just week after week and year after year of going, "What am I doing here?" Yeah, it just got the point where it was just insanity. It was just insanity.

I think a farmer can be really good if all they do is just meat, animals and maybe have a small vegetable garden for their family or a farmer could have just produce and maybe a small flock of chickens for their personal use, but to do both on a scale that is financially successful and that you have some kind of



quality of life, I failed miserably at it. We just could not do it. That was our experience. We have yet to actually meet someone who can do both. I'm sure they're out there, I just haven't met them yet, who actually do both on some kind of substantial scale, who have a good quality of life, and who are making decent money. There is no one in our area.

Chris Blanchard: Well, and I think it's a really challenge unless you get to a scale where you can begin to delegate some of those responsibilities.

Ray Tyler: That's right. You can delegate. There's this hard place of to get good labor you have to pay for it. You have to first find the guy and you have to have the money to take that risk. We just never got there. You know? We just never got there.

Chris Blanchard: Part of that is you have to have that right combination of right markets... to be able to scale up and the capital so that you really can. You can say, you can bring in somebody good, you can afford to bring in somebody good and you can set it to them with enough attention that they can do a good job. One of the mistakes I often see with people when they bring in somebody to "manage" a certain part of the operation is they think, "Well, okay, great so this person's going to be like me right? They're going to just manage it in their spare time like I've been managing the greenhouse in my spare time." But now they're also supposed to be part of the harvest crew and part of the packing crew. Instead of saying, "I'm going to bring this person in and I'm going to dedicate their time to doing a really good job at this one thing." I think that requires a different scale.

Ray Tyler: Absolutely, yes. You are so right. We found out, too that we actually kind of hit this ceiling of how much meat we could actually sell at a price that made financial sense. It was like to this point of do we go national then it just got so complicated. During all that time, around the winter of 2015, we had really sat down and we really made this ... I think the first year that we actually I was full time by then, we were very grateful to be farming full time, not making a very good living, but we were doing what our dream was. We had made this really incredible plan for the animals, for the produce. We were going to scale up our produce CSA. This was going to be the year that we were going to really, hopefully be able to afford to take someone on. We've gotten our processing facility built finally for our chickens and we got the equipment we needed. We still needed a few things for that but it was definitely going smooth. We had a huge demand for our CSA and so we were going to really scale that up. We just really mapped out our plan.

In March of 2015 our greenhouse was just loaded with plants, we're getting ready to get our fields ready, we're fixing to order our first batch of chicks. I was working out in the field by the high tunnel and our daughter had some issues with one of her teeth, got some of her teeth pulled out, but it never healed and it was just getting worse and worse. She took her to the doctor and she came home one day. Mind you, this is early March, greenhouse is loaded, we're fixing to get into the fields, we're really excited about the season and she said, "Are you ready for your life to completely change?" I said, "Come on, we're farmers. Bring it on." She said, "Your daughter has cancer." I was like, "What?" Because yeah, she has squamous cell carcinoma. She was six years old at the time. Since she was one, we've really tried to eat well. It was a huge blow to our family for



sure. Without question the first thing we're going to do is take care of our daughter.

That begun this serious, at least for me personally, really taking a hard look at what I'm doing with my life because now we're faced with this reality of it's stage four. It was basically in the bone just millimeters away from the main vein that was going to go to her brain. Once it got to that main vein, sensory vein, then it was basically nothing you could do at that point. I just had a friend who's my age who died six months earlier from the same cancer. It was definitely not something a parent wants to hear. But we just went, "Okay, we can either be in the pits about this or just find out ..."

It was really interesting Chris, about a week or two after it's just like, "What are we going to do with the farm? How are we going to make a living?" I don't have a savings account. My savings account is in the greenhouse. Every dime is in there and we had already sold a lot of CSA's and their money is in the fertilizer and plastic and plants and potting soil and propane and everything that a farm needs in spring. That's where you need all your money so that was already spent. We had probably 50 CSA members I would say at that point and we were hoping for even more. As a provider I'm just thinking ... it wasn't looking good, on every aspect. On is the farm over for good, do I have to go get a job, is my daughter going to live? That was obviously our first concern was is she going to survive another week and be there for my wife. We had a four month old baby at that time that was nursing so it was crazy.

I remember thinking, it took me a few weeks to get to this place of we were just in and out of the doctor's just trying to figure out what we're going to do. I'm calling every holistic cancer center in the country that I can know of of what to do with this cancer and they're all like, "Do not mess around with this cancer. It's just nasty." I just remember coming to this place of I actually feel like as bad as this whole situation is, and there's nothing good about it whatsoever, that I really felt like something good was going to come. I really did and I just had that belief and hope that God was really in control. He gives and he takes away and we're going to find and look for the best possible outcomes of this situation.

I think when I got to that point I wasn't okay, I'm not going to lie. It was not an easy time, but I had a lot more hope and belief that everything was going to work out no matter what the outcome was going to be we were going to all be better because of it. We were basically sent to St. Jude, which is a major international children's cancer hospital. It just so happened we were two hours away so that was a huge blessing. We basically opted for surgery, which was their recommendation. What they were going to do is her whole lower jaw bone had to be completely removed, the whole thing because the cancer had spread so fast. Even in the two weeks that we had waited between all the doctor visits, so when we first got the diagnosis to the time we actually went in for surgery it had just spread so fast. It was a miracle that we took her in at the time we did.

They took her whole half of her jaw out and took a piece of her lower leg bone, I think it's called the fibula, it was about a six inch piece and they grafted it in there. I don't know how they do what they do. It was a fourteen hour surgery. It was definitely one of the longest days of our life because there was no promise



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

of really any outcome. They told us that she was the youngest person on record to have squamous cell carcinoma. Squamous cell carcinoma, so everyone knows, it's a really common gum and jaw disease that older men get from drinking lots of liquor and smoking tobacco their whole life. It's very common in older men, but they said it was the youngest patient they ever saw so it was actually a reportable case.

We were in the hospital for two weeks. We were in ICU for several days. During that time I just really had a lot of time to just think and just reflect on we have four children now, our life is now over, my wife is fixing to become a full time nurse. Here I was, I'd spent the better part of the previous four years being so consumed with the farm, day and night. In the end of a day most men ... when we're on our deathbed we don't need a successful farm, we don't need lots of land, we don't need a big house, shiny cars, what we desire is our families to be with us. It was a real big wake up call for me of making sure that I'm not just around, but I'm really have the energy and time to be with my family.

Chris Blanchard: To be present.

Ray Tyler: You know, you're so right. Just because you're in the house on the computer emailing, you're not being with your family. Since that time everything came in perspective like, "What is really important?" And yes, we love farming and it's our living and we love it and we want to provide good food to the community, but if I'm not around for my family I've gained absolutely nothing. It just hit home, really, really hard. I knew when we left that hospital that we were going to make some changes.

Chris, it was actually the best thing that ever happened to us. We completely changed our health. We did a pretty radical food turnover. We ended up getting an infrared sauna. We got a really good juicer, so we're doing a lot of juicing. The whole family changed their diet so instead of telling our daughter, "Hey Asha, you can't have this food." The whole family did it together and it really brought us close. My wife and I we're, not old, but we're not 18 anymore so we were starting to have some health issues, just within a matter of months our health just completely turned around. All of sudden I can actually get up early in the morning, I have energy so there's the health aspects that came with that.

To just say something real quick about the whole CSA movement and that family. When we were in the hospital, I think we went in the hospital for the surgery the week or so when our CSA was supposed to start. We told them because we didn't know how long we were going to be in there so we told them that, "Guys, we're going to have to cancel our CSA this spring and we're really sorry. We unfortunately do not have the cash to give your money back, but we will give you a gift card or we'll give you a summer CSA if we do one, but for now we'll just give you at least a gift card that's equal to that amount." 90% of the people said, "Do not worry about it. We don't money back, we don't want no gift card." It was incredible the support that we got.

We ended up doing a fundraiser just to basically to help raise some funds for her actual medical needs and some things that we needed to get for her and just the amazing response that we got from our local and even national farming



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

friends that we've made. There's something to say with the farming community, when a need arises it's pretty incredible. We just felt very blessed to experience that. Lots of time we were on the other giving end and to be on the receiving end is never fun, but I was very humbled and I was very grateful to be a part of such a great community and family.

When we came home from that whole thing we were just like, "Okay, what are we going to do?" First thing is Ashley you're no longer on the farm. There's a lot of needs that our daughter still had for those next few months. It was a pretty traumatic surgery for her and for us. Through that summer we didn't do a CSA, we just did farmers markets. My wife and I talked about should I go get a job? Should we keep farming? We both decided I think that if we were to make some radical changes that we, in the end, we loved the farming lifestyle. We need to not do what we've been doing for the past four years. Yeah, some major changes had to happen.

Around that time I found your podcast and I heard Jean-Martin [Fortier] on there, no tractors, doing really well on an acre and a half. I don't know how many times I listened to that podcast, but we ended up getting the book and I had to listen to more of your podcast. I found the podcast on Curtis Stone and I just remember being out there in June, July by myself waiting for the rain to stop so I can get out in the field with the tractor just going, "You know what?", I was really honest with myself, I went, "I am not cut out for this tractor work. I am not a mechanic, I'm not mechanically inclined. I'm really having a hard time getting all my space." I just wasn't having fun at all.

[00:43:30] Then during that time one of the things we cut out of our diet was pork. Porks don't sweat. Sweating is one of the healthiest things we can do to eliminate toxins. We got on this strict protocol so we're no longer eating pork. Here I am raising these 50 hogs that are getting out, that are stinking and I can't get them to the processing facility and my freezers are breaking and we can't eat the meat and I'm like, "Why am I doing this? This is not fun either."

I had found that podcast on Curtis Stone and really just started doing a lot of research on, "You know what? Maybe you don't have to use a tractor after all." A lot of folks in the South say it's impossible to farm in the mid-south without a tractor so that's kind of what I was led to believe. Here I am hearing other growers, now mind you they're in Canada, but I just went, "This may be possible."

I think it was June or July, I'm out there, it's blasting hot and I just remember going, "I would love to not have to deal with tractors anymore. Is there a way?" I had reached out, I thought, "I would love to get JM down here to the farm and just half a day of ..." I did read the book and that was very good, but there were just some things like, "JM, have you ever seen these weeds in the South? The weed never dies. The bugs never die. It is just brutal down here." I really had some serious doubts about it really working in the South.

I started corresponding back and forth with him about the possibility of him coming down in the fall. He seemed very open to it. I was telling some of my other farmer friends here in the mid-south like, "Dude, the only way you can make that kind of money on one acre is maybe weed." I don't know if you know,



but it's not legal in Tennessee yet. There was just a lot of kickback on that it's impossible, there's no way, those guys up north are just full of baloney. I went, "Well, why don't we get him down here?" We end up hiring JM to come down to do a two day workshop. A lot of it, what kind of stemmed this direction was I just felt like these guys who were farming on just one acre or less had a lot more time to do other things than just farm. That was the very thing that I was really looking for. I was looking for a major change in our family.

I had this hope that this may be possible, but I'm like, "I'm not ready to get rid of the meat. I put too much money into it, too much time, it just ain't happening." We end up getting JM to come down and we end up selling tickets to help cover the cost. Also, a lot of the farms in our area we've lost a lot of family farms. It's a really hard climate to grow in. It's the customers are 20 years behind, say California and New England and there's a lot of things going again. We were really saddened by that and like, "Well, why don't we bring in some outside perspective on maybe we can all change our growing systems and maybe become better farmers and have better lives."

So we end up opening tickets so that they would come, but we end up having more of a national, people coming from all over the country instead. It's very interesting how that all kind of works. After that time, seeing him on the farm, and was really, really, helpful. Then I also was talking back and forth to Curtis Stone and finally started doing some consulting with him. Then during that time we realized, like Curtis had asked us, "Hey, is it possible that you guys are doing too much." And Ashley's over there like nodding her head, "Yes, we are." I'm like, "I don't know, I think we can handle it." But after that phone call we both just went, "What if we just did produce? That's all we eat anyway. We hardly eat any meat anymore. We love growing greens. We can never grow enough greens so the market is there. We're not having fun doing meat. We just need to sell it."

It just so happened that Caleb Curlin, who was one of Joel Salatin's managers for two years, he was moving back home to Jackson, about an hour away north and we had befriended him a few years past. We called him and said, "Hey, we have a market, we have the animals, we have infrastructure, do you want the business?" And he said yes. We just hand the whole thing to him. When we did that, Chris, I had this weight off of me that I just cannot explain. It felt so good to let something go.

Chris Blanchard: I remember the day that the sheep left my farm. It was sad, but it was also just a tremendous feeling of relief, that I just wasn't going to have to deal with that tomorrow.

Ray Tyler: It was amazing. The fact that I don't have to keep the pigs water from freezing in the winter anymore, man, it was incredible. Last year, 2016 was our first year of just doing produce. It was a risk. We basically sold 75% of our income, like gone.

Chris Blanchard: 75% of your gross income right?

Ray Tyler: Of our gross, not net, gross.

Chris Blanchard: And so what? Right? And so what?



Ray Tyler: Exactly. We made some hard things of going, "Okay, this year we're going to get rid of half the crops we grow. We're going to only grow on one acre. We're getting rid of the tractor and we're going to set time. We are done at 4:00, we're done no matter what." Unless, obviously we're packing orders and we have a few more heads to package, which only happened twice last year. But in general, we're going to set really strict perimeters on our work week. It changed our life. In August of last year we actually took a week of for vacation. We went up north and cooled off in Minnesota. We actually had money to do it. We didn't have to worry about what if the pigs get overheated? What if our help doesn't water the chickens? It was incredible.

[00:51:30] We had such a fun time last year, made the most money we ever made in our life. My wife really enjoyed just doing the vegetables, our kids enjoyed it. It's a lot safer than being around tractors and you're wondering, "Okay, is my two year old going to be underneath my wheel?" So many things changed last year that just made it very, very enjoyable. And our lives, they'll never be the same.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome.

Ray Tyler: That's kind of a long story of to go it was definitely a tragedy that happened, but I think human nature, it's very easy to get caught up in the woe is me and why did this happen to me and just start going downhill. It's tough to get out of that place. When we did and we knew that something was going to change and we were looking for it. Once we saw the changes and we embraced the change, we'll never go back. We don't even own a cat, just no animals. We're just like, can go hardcore. I'm sure as our kids get old they're going to want some more animals. We had a good time last year, we're having a great time this year. That's kind of our short story of how we got from failing as farmers to actually loving life.

Chris Blanchard: Ray, right now I think is a good time for us to take a break, get a couple words from our sponsor. When we come back I really want to talk to you about the nuts and bolts about how you made this work. This is a big journey and a lot of changes and I really want to dig into some of the details about how you actually transformed your farm and your life right down at the runway level.

Ray Tyler: Sounds great.

Chris Blanchard: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company. Hey Ray, I noticed on Instagram that you use Vermont Compost Company's potting soil. Is there something about their product that works especially well for you and makes you want to use it in your lettuce production?

Ray Tyler: I love Vermont Compost and all their products. We went from one year to having the hardest time getting out lettuce transplants coming out of our plugs, the moment we switched every plug popped out with ease and it completely changed our lettuce production system. We love Vermont Compost and would really highly recommend every farmer to consider trying it out.



Chris Blanchard: That's awesome and I couldn't say it better myself. Vermont Compost Company, taking care of growers by taking care of transplants since 1992. Vermontcompost.com

And 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, even a utility trailer and a new water transfer pump, you've 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 a BCS. Even though we owned a four wheel tractor to manage our 20 acres of vegetables BCS tackled jobs we couldn't do with the larger machine. From mowing steep slopes and around trees to working in our high tunnels. Plus they're gear driven for years of dependable service. Check out BCSAmerica.com to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments plus videos of BCS in action.

All right, and we're back with Ray Tyler from Rosecreek Farms in Selmer, Tennessee. During the first part of the show you really described this incredible journey of going from A, not farming to then farming and going kind of crazy with it, and then really, prompted by this health crisis with your daughter, turning things around and getting control of your farm. I always love to talk about management and the things that aren't managed tend towards chaos. I don't care whether it's your teenagers bedroom or your farm or your bank account, you got to manage.

Ray Tyler: Absolutely.

Chris Blanchard: Otherwise things ... you know, entropy. Right?

Ray Tyler: That's right.

Chris Blanchard: What I want to dig into here in the second half of the show is how did you guys go about actually making these changes because it's one thing to say, "Oh yeah, we're not going to work after 4:00 in the afternoon.", and "We're going to get rid of all the tractors." But how? How does that actually work to go from being a crazy farmer in 2015 to running a BCS instead of tractors and quitting work at 4:00? I guess the specific question I want to start with is just talk to me about the production methods. You went from doing things with the tractor on a couple acres, having cultivating tractors, and then you did what? What kind of equipment did you switch to and how did you make that change?

Ray Tyler: [00:57:00] So what we ended up doing is, to kind of go back a little bit, we spent about 10 hours with Curtis Stone around there somewhere because I had a lot of questions. I'm very skeptical so if you're going to say something I want to see it work. I want to hear it really explained and I want to challenge what you're saying in my context because everybody has different context of their farms. We've never seen, at least in our area, this kind of farming and all my farmer friends are telling me this is impossible and I have a lot of doubts. So we did spend about 10 hours with Curtis just really talking about the nuts and bolts of what we're doing and then also going ...



In our context I kind of have really heavy soil so I wanted to go the BCS route. I actually had a BCS that I just never used so I like the BCS. Our beds do not drain very well so I wanted to have the actual raised beds to get my crops out of the water. We just talked a lot about that. We also talked about our sales. We talked about what I thought was possible as far as numbers and so we just kind of worked that way. So what we did is we got, I already had a BCS tractor so I bought the whole BCS flail mower, the Berta plow, which we don't really use anymore, the power harrow, which is an incredible fast, efficient tool. We ended up buying that through ... I think BCS has some kind of credit program that you can do with them so we were able to finance that.

We also, one of the other practical things, too is I was really getting tired of laying plastic with the tractor. The plastic gets stuck in the soil and you leave plastic behind. Again, since I was a terrible tractor farmer I can never get it all up so we talked about landscape fabric, with I'm a big user of landscape fabric, probably won't always be, but what had happened with the weeds ... actually I think weeds are the number one cause for farms to fail. That and not having the right sales. Down here it's so hard to control. And then the last four years of farming I just could not tell you how many flushes of pig weed I went to see and literally it was just doomsday out here. It was hopeless cause of even getting a start. We invested-

Chris Blanchard: I actually want to weigh in on that a little bit, just on the weeds because this actually one of my pet peeves on farms is I don't think a lot of people understand, especially beginning farmers, just how devastating the weeds are.

Ray Tyler: Oh it'll kill you.

Chris Blanchard: Right, because not only is it going to reduce your airflow, which increases your crop disease and it's robbing your nutrients and it's robbing the water that's in the soil, but it just makes everything hard. The harvest just gets hard.

Ray Tyler: Yes, like everything, walking. We used to, when we did tomatoes, when we would harvest tomatoes the weeds in the paths were like two feet tall. You're out there in the morning, your legs are soaked. Listen, if you want to enjoy life on a farm get rid of all your weeds. Whatever that takes, you can't have any. This is one thing that we really hit on with Curtis was the whole weed pressure so where we came to for the first couple years, while we get the handle on everything else, and I don't like pulling weeds. If it was a transplanted crop we were doing landscape fabric, halves, everything. I think we spent 20 hours last year weeding.

Chris Blanchard: Really?

Ray Tyler: Listen I don't know how many hours we weeded the year before and how many crops we lost to the weeds. I just cannot tell you the night and day difference. I think we will get our seed bank under control in the next year or two, maybe less. We're already seeing a dramatic different just by not letting last year's weeds go to seed, tremendous difference. By doing landscape fabric, and we did a lot of bed prep, tarping, then getting the tarp off, we'd let the seeds come up even more and then flame weed that, just really being aggressive about that.



The landscape fabric is what changed the game for us. I'll mind you it is a hassle to lay down and to take up, but in between, there's just no weeds. There will be a few weeds that will go up around your plant, but it's not nothing compared to being out there with a hoe at 4:00 in the afternoon when you get all your work done, when it's almost 100 degrees and 85% humidity in August. That is not fun. So for us putting that landscape fabric was very enjoyable compared to what we were doing in years past. That was a big nut and bold and difference and we had tremendous yield. Matter of fact I couldn't even sell all the crop that I grew, which was kind of another problem that we're-

Chris Blanchard: Really? So-

Ray Tyler: It was unbelievable.

Chris Blanchard: So wait, so you guys cut the amount of vegetables that you were growing, the amount of acres that you were growing on in half and you had more vegetables than you can sell even... the year before?

Ray Tyler: 2015 on two acres with a tractor we grossed, just on the produce alone, around \$40,000. Last year, by getting the weeds under control and having more product because it didn't go to weeds and we were in control of the situation. We grossed \$120,000 last year on half the amount of land.

Chris Blanchard: I'm sorry. That's where the transcript's going to read, "stunned silence."

Ray Tyler: Right. We were stunned. And we're no longer working 12, 16 hours a day. We left the farm for a week in August. It was a life-changing year for us. Mind you, there's still lots of problems, mainly on overproducing and so what are we going to do with all those products or some of the problems we had is they bought kale in 2015, but why isn't anyone buying it in 2016? Some of those things it's just part of the business.

Chris Blanchard: Part of any business.

Ray Tyler: Yeah, really. If a farmer isn't looking for his next sale it's just a matter of time before he's going to go out of business. You got to be on top of it. The weeds was, for us, was number one, getting that under control. Another thing that really helped our cash flow was in our area it's very saturated with peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, okra, squash, zucchini, and there's no way that we could really compete on one acre with all those farmers here who have 25 acres of the stuff. So we decided to do the one thing that no one wanted to do in the summer and that was lettuce.

We have a really good market for lettuce because no one grows it in the summer so we really put a lot of time and effort and thought in how can we pick the varieties for lettuces, the spacing, the water, the shade? How can we keep this stuff cranking all through July and August? That really helped because we had really solid cash flow through those months, which July, August, and September are one of the lean months down here in the South because the only stuff that can really grow well is a lot of your common, very cheap to grow



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

vegetables. By entering into the salad business, doing the one thing that no farmer in our area is willing to do or try, we made it happen.

Chris Blanchard: How are you growing lettuce in the middle of the summer then? What are you doing to make that work? Because are you talking about salad mix or are you talking about head lettuce?

Ray Tyler: [01:06:30] Both, both.

Chris Blanchard: Okay.

Ray Tyler: Yep, yep, both. We had this one restaurant account that wants 100 pounds of salad mix a week all year round. Another wholesale group, last year they wanted 425 heads of head lettuce every single week all summer. That's good at \$2.00 to \$2.50 a head it's not as good as retail, but it's every week that was nice paycheck that helped with our infrastructure and labor and all that. Yeah, so what I can do is I'll just walk through the basic steps of what we do in the summer. Number one is germination of lettuce seed. Very hard to do in the summer because of the heat so we pick heat tolerant varieties and then we're seeding the greenhouse. It goes in a walk-in cooler for 48 hours, it comes out in the afternoon, evening and that we can almost have just about 85 to 90% germination rate, which is really good because we used to get like 30.

Chris Blanchard: So you're seeding in flats, watering them in, and then putting them in your walk-in cooler?

Ray Tyler: That's right, that's right. Yes, it does sound excessive amount of work, but it's probably 60 to 70% of our income is lettuce so when that is the bulk of your income you'll do whatever it takes to make it happen.

Then, that goes in a shaded greenhouse for about two to three weeks. Then the last five days we put them outside to kind of get hardened off to the heat so to speak. I know it's common to do that in the early spring, but believe it or not there's a better survival if you can put those transplants in the sun because you're fixing to put them out in the field where it's relentless. Having that three to four day period, that really helps, kind of gets them immune and ready for the heat.

Then, we use drip tape and overhead both so what we're doing is we're turning on the drip tape, we're getting the bed completely soaked. The lettuce just goes right in there. Mind you, down here come 8:00, 9:00 it's pushing 90 degrees already and the sun is just blasting. It's important that it gets water as soon as possible. By planting in a wet bed really helps for the water and then as soon as we're done we have overhead irrigation, which we have on a timer. Three cycles a day at 15 minutes per cycle. One of those we tried to aim for early in the night, which helps cool off the plants and the beds. I feel like it's important for lettuce, it needs to cool down for three to four hours at least without the sun to really help to recover from the heat stress.

Now, I'm not a scientist so I'm just telling you from experience what seems to really work for us. When we started doing that three cycles a day and doing one



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

in the evening just to cool off the lettuce and the ground we really had much better success with the lettuce not going bitter.

Chris Blanchard: Are you doing that throughout the growth cycle or is that just what you're doing when you're establishing the plants?

Ray Tyler: Yeah, the growth cycle. We'll actually probably start that ... I mean, it's been hot here, but not like the crazy 90 degrees at 10:00 in the morning hot so we'll start in the next week or two. We'll actually start that rotation of water till the end of August. Another thing that we have found too is that lettuce, if you can get lettuce, if it can survive the first seven to ten days of its growing life than half the battle is won. What we've also started to do is for the first two weeks after we plant is we'll put shade cloth, like 50% shade cloth over it and that just helps. That, with the water and all the things that I mentioned, it just helps really get it off to a good start.

And then for the last week and a half two weeks of its time, because in the summer in four weeks a transplant will actually yield a whole head of lettuce ready to sell, then we'll take of the shade cloth because I feel like the lettuce under the shade cloth for the whole life tends to not be as dense, like it's stretching to get more light. What we found is as long as you keep the water to it and you're doing heat varieties and all those things are happening it does just fine. Last summer was a nasty summer. Again, I'll give you a perspective like, last September we tracked it. There was not one single day in the month of September that was under 90 degrees.

Chris Blanchard: You're kidding me?

Ray Tyler: It was insane. Normally by the second week of September we're in the 70s and then it climbs on down to the 60s. It was insane. It was just really, really bad. It works for us. I'm not saying that this is going to work for everyone else. Everyone else's context is different, their soil type, but that really works for us really, really well on the farm. That's huge. We were doing Salanova, which is not as big of a yielder as the other seasons, but when you have a high paying customer, it's worth the effort.

[01:12:30] We just started last week, we're going to actually start doing salad mix. We've got a certain mixture of salad mix we're going to actually do in paper pots because what we found when you plant greens like arugula and baby mustard and those things in the paper pot. There's like the two inch cell, really heavy, six to seven rows per bed of the paper pot. From the time you transplant to the time you harvest is like a two week window. It's really quick so you can do a lot of rapid turnovers. It's not in the field as long so we just have a much better germination rate and also it's not as bitter and tough because it hadn't been in the field as long. We've been really excited about implementing that so that's really worked for us in greens this early summer and we're fixing to scale up really heavy for our salad mix.

Chris Blanchard: When you're doing that with those paper pot transplants and they're growing for a couple weeks out in the field and you're pulling them back out again, are you pulling the paper out as well before you put in the next succession?



Ray Tyler: We're going to start doing that. We were lightly using the power harrow and then we would just rake it all up. Now mind you, whenever we seed in the paper pots, we're seeding them in the greenhouse.

Chris Blanchard: Right, you're seeding indoors and then doing the paper chain transplanters outdoors. Right?

Ray Tyler: That's right, that's right, yep, yep, yep. For greens, now mind you, if you're in a cooler climate and you can germinate those greens seeds fine, then it's not worth the trouble. It's just only in our context because we have such a demand for greens that we're willing to take the cost of the paper pot and the greenhouse space for very consistent, reliable stands of greens.

Chris Blanchard: Of course with the kinds of weed control challenges that you guys have as well, being able to have a crop in the ground for two weeks instead of four, that actually makes a big difference.

Ray Tyler: Huge, it's huge. These are the small things that applied on a very small farm can really make a huge difference in the efficiency, in how much time you're out there pulling out weeds. Yeah, for us this is the practical things, like these small changes that really ... instead of competing with squash, I mean with the other farmers who are almost giving them away, why don't we put a little bit of extra thought, streamline our systems, really start analyzing and criticizing how we're doing things and trying to grow things in a way that really just make financial sense.

Chris Blanchard: I think growing those things that the other people aren't growing is such an important idea right? You show up at market and instead of what's there, you look at what's not there.

Ray Tyler: Right. Mind you, I'm sure the time, competition is coming, which I'm a big fan of competition. It keeps us on our toes, but if you're in an area who has no one who's doing greens that's a huge opportunity, just huge. Everybody is eating salads right now. Everybody loves a salad.

Chris Blanchard: How many people do you have working on the farm with you Ray?

Ray Tyler: After last year it was just mainly my wife and I, actually it was just mainly me and we had some other part time, like high school help, which were great folks, but we saw the need for reliable, really driven labor. People who really care, not that they didn't care, but there is a difference between a 28 year old and 16 year old, believe it or not. This year, because last year we could've done way better on our sales if we would've had someone who could've really done the plantings, the bed prep. I'm delivering our product to Memphis, it's two hours away so I'm doing a lot more delivering than I would like to be. I'm hoping too, once we get a few more staff, I'm hoping that we can hire a driver, which is definitely in the works.

We came to realize that paying someone, even \$15 an hour, to do some of these succession plantings would've made us a lot of money. It was a hard step so this year we actually got a full time helper, he works 40 hours and then I have



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

another guy, work 30 hours. Ben, who's our full time help, his wife actually comes and helps my wife this year do the actual pack set because we're getting into a lot of grocery stores now, which pays really well, but it is a lot more packing and labeling and all that stuff. She comes in on Tuesday and Thursday morning and help us wash and pack and get all that stuff out. Our goal is to be done harvesting and packing by lunchtime. Yeah, and then that's basically it.

Chris Blanchard: Now, so getting into grocery stores, is that something where you guys have, especially considering that you're talking about salad greens, have you guys needed to go through a GAPS audit or anything like that to be able to service that marketplace?

Ray Tyler: Yes and no. The way we got into grocery stores is we had a big account that was going to be just huge for us and management changed two days before our first delivery went out and it didn't work out like it was planned, which is part of farming. I started really hustling because I'm sitting on a lot of product last spring. I just happened to go in a small grocery store and saw that they had some local products and it was locally owned. I talked to the owner and they were like, "Yeah, we'd love to have your stuff." That's where that got started. He didn't need for it to be GAP certified because the owner worked in the store. It wasn't a chain. But we've approached folks like Whole Foods, they do want you to be GAP certified and certified organic.

Yeah, but on the grocery store, I feel like that is one market ... like if you're in a market and your farmers market's flooded, there's no room. You try to go hit up all the grocery stores, but there's several farmers dominating that sector, again, do the thing that no one else is willing to do and that's pack all your greens in clamshells. Yes, it does take some more labor, but you can still get paid really well and make a good level without having to go set up at the farmers markets and go from chef to chef and figure out what they want this week and what they want next week. Grocery stores are such a pleasure to deal with. They're easy, they order on time, they're very consistent, they pay on time so that's something we're definitely ... We just picked up another grocery store last week, pretty excited about. We are planning on getting GAP and organic certified to really go after the big stores because we're definitely seeing a lot of new competition in other markets.

I don't know if it's just the mid-south but the mid-south farmers markets scene is dwindling rapidly. The Memphis Farmers Market, there's been a few that's closed. I think they're attendees are in half. Even my local farmers market in Jackson, three years ago there was 2,000 people there a day. You could barely walk. Now, it's got to be less than half in attendance. The reality is though not everybody shops at a farmers market. It's not convenient. They don't want to give up their Saturday mornings, but every American, whether you're a big farmers market fan or not, you're going to go to a grocery store to shop. Those folks who do go to a grocery store and they see, "Oh wow, here's a locally grown clamshell of salad mix. Here's some spinach or whatever green or herbs and I'm going to buy them because it looks just as good as the stuff from California. It lasts way longer."

I feel like there's a huge opportunity for beginning farmers, who are really struggling to find their place in the ecosystem, so to speak. It's tough to get into



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

a farmers market that's had the vendors that's been there for 20 years. If you're not selling a lot it's not that your product is bad, it's just there's a lot of vendors who've really developed a lot of loyal clientele that aren't just going to switch on a whim.

Chris Blanchard: Right. I think that's the other things with the retail stores especially, we sold a lot of product through retail stores on my farm. I loved it because you could stop off and you could drop off \$1,000 worth of product in 20 minutes.

Ray Tyler: Easy, easy.

Chris Blanchard: You've really cut down on your marketing costs. So yeah, you're taking a lower price, but what it takes to actually make that sale is so much less and the volume it so much more. It does introduce some risk factors because if you're dealing one or two big stores having one of them stop buying your stuff can really throw you for a loop.

Ray Tyler: Absolutely.

Chris Blanchard: But man, it was nice and it was fun. You know what? I also say there's nothing cooler than walking into a grocery store and seeing your produce on the shelf.

Ray Tyler: You know how awesome that is? It is such a great feeling, it really is. It really is.

Chris Blanchard: I used to stand in there and I wanted to say to the people that were next to me, I'm like, "Hey, those are my herbs. You see that? I grew that. I did that."

Ray Tyler: That's right. "Buy some." You know? Yeah, not it's great. It's amazing how many more people now who go to the farmers market and they don't buy salad mix, but they'll go, "Oh you know what, I'm not going to get any today because I buy your stuff at the grocery store." It's been fascinating to watch over the last few years. Another thing is I really do think, just at least here in the Mid-South, there's a big push to change our local food economy and get food in places where, talking about all these food deserts, and I just feel like getting your product in a grocery store is such a great way to really make an impact on that local food economy. I just think it's a great thing for really beginning farmers to just take a look at. It's not for everybody. You got to move quick and fast. You need to be able to do three or four clamshells a minute, not one. You definitely have to hustle.

Another thing with the grocery stores, again this is within my context, because of how far I have to drive, if I had ten big grocery stores I could essentially hire a driver to drop off a pallet on each store. Where at a farmers market, most farmers know how that is, you're the face of that farm and you can't just hire anybody or else you could really, really hurt your sales or even your reputation as a vendor at that market.

Chris Blanchard: One of things that I think is so important when you're going to grocery stores is quality. It's really getting in there with good stuff because if I'm selling something at a farmers market, I'm handing somebody a head of lettuce they're probably going to use it in the next couple of days, but if I'm taking a clamshell of lettuce to a store it might not even hit the shelf for three, four days



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

depending where they are in their stock rotation. Have you guys made changes in what you're doing from a quality perspective to be able to serve that market better?

Ray Tyler:

Yes, yep. One thing that we have found is it starts at the harvest. It starts at the harvest so we typically like to harvest all of our greens before 8:00 a.m. There's something to harvesting greens when they're still cool and there's dew on it. Once the dew dries and that lettuce gets limp. If you go out into your fields at 4:00 in the afternoon that head of lettuce or that Salanova salad mix, it's not going to be happy. It's really, really sad. The way I look at it as when you go to harvest you can only maintain the condition that it's at. You can really improve it.

If you're harvesting a sad looking lettuce, yeah, you can get it washed and it may like it's a little perking up, but it's just going to be in a sad state until ... It will just go back quick. Where if you're harvesting greens when they're happy and they're crisp and they're fresh and you keep it that way, so you're taking it right from the field right to your walk-in cooler. It's staying cold and you're packaging it in very cool shed or packing house that's not hot so it's never getting wilted. We've had folks tell us that our salad mix has lasted three weeks. It's just taking those steps from the harvest and keeping it cool. We have a walk-in, a trailer that's insulated with spray foam; we have a CoolBot in there so we can keep that lettuce cool literally from when the time it leaves the farm until the time it goes into the grocery stores. I think that helps a lot.

You're right, it's very important because just because it's local it needs to be better than what California has to offer or no one's going to buy it just because you're local. I think keeping it fresh, keeping your varieties, making sure it's not bitter, watching out for bugs, all the basic quality. Paying attention to all those nuances will really make an impact. One of our grocery stores last year said that our salad mix was one of the top ten selling items in their store. They were really ecstatic about that. Sometimes you just wonder how long is the grocery store going to keep working with a small farm. Sometimes like oops, we didn't have arugula this week because it got too bitter or the germination didn't happen. We haven't quite nailed it perfectly all year round. You wonder, but the fact that it's top selling, it lasts for three weeks, all those things goes a long ways. The proof is in the pudding so as long as the people are going to come back and buy more than I think there's something there.

Chris Blanchard:

Yeah, well I think it's just so important whether you're selling at farmers market or selling anything the grocery store or whether you're picking what crops to grow is to realize that you're not entitled to the business that you want. You've got to find a place where you fit in and you've got to provide a service that people need because nobody's obligated to buy local food.

Ray Tyler:

Right, absolutely. Nope, no, they're not. Grocery stores were not part of our 2016 plan. It was a result of a big contract falling through and me being very, very hungry and very driven and going, "Okay, what is the one thing that farmers aren't doing? No one here is doing grocery stores so baby here I come." That's just the way we've approached that. I think with being a small farm you have that flexibility of just changing on a whim. Now, my wife and I, we're like, "You know what? This is really nice. This is really stable. This is really consistent.



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

We would love to just do grocery stores." It's a lot easier to hire somebody to pack a clamshell than it is to find someone who can really be nuanced enough with a Japanese paper pot transplanter.

Chris Blanchard: That's absolutely right.

Ray Tyler: Anyway, so that's what's worked for us in our context.

Chris Blanchard: With that Ray, we're going to take a quick break, get another word from another sponsor and then we're going to come back and do our lightning round.

This lightning round is brought to you by Farmers Web, software for your farm. Farmers web makes it easy to work with your buyers saving you time, increasing efficiency, reducing mistakes, and streamlining order management from start to finish. No more lost order slips and invoices, know which of your buyers have already paid and which have not, keep your records and download your financial data.

Farmers Web helps you manage orders from buyers who place them online, but also those that order by phone or text or email. Save time and reduce errors by keeping all of your orders in one place, automatically generating harvest and picking lists, product catalogs, and packing slips. Farmers Web helps inform your buyers of delivery routes, pickup locations, lead time, order minimums, all while help you keep track of buyer payment terms, special pricing, and customer information for every one of your buyers. A flat monthly fee and flexible plan types allow you to pause, cancel, or switch plan types from month to month at any time, even during the off season. Farmersweb.com.

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

Ray Tyler: I'm really liking this Japanese paper pot transplanter. I think it's a pretty cool tool and I don't think we've even started on the potential that it can have on a very small farm, especially when it comes to greens and the amount of time that it saves on labor of transplanting. It's pretty cool. I'll have to say that's definitely, right now, that is definitely the most exciting tool that we have so far.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome. What's your favorite crop to grow?

Ray Tyler: Lettuce, I just love it. There's something satisfying. I think the challenges of the crop, working with the varieties of all the seasons and the timing, it's a challenge and just watching a customer's face when you hand them a head of lettuce in August. It's a very rewarding crop to grow.

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

Ray Tyler: It would be to not let any animals on your farm ever. Just stay away. No, I think the number one thing is I wish I could've told myself to go work at a working, successful farm for one season, just one season. There's so much to be said. You know how many nuances of things you just don't think about, a packing shed layout, how your greenhouse should be built in a line to your fields, there's just so many things. Even just a normal farm, maybe not a really crazy



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

productive farm, but just even seeing the things that do not work would've been really helpful just to say, "You know what ..." I think there's a lot to say by beginning farmers going to another farm and just really observing." I really would've done that. It's hard to do with a wife and two kids.

Chris Blanchard: Yes, it is.

Ray Tyler: It is what it is and I'm grateful for our journey regardless.

Chris Blanchard: All right, with that Ray, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.

Ray Tyler: It was a blast Chris.

Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here. I'll say again this is episode 126 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast and that you can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Tyler. That's T-Y-L-E-R.

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

You can go the show notes for every Farmer to Farmer podcast by signing up for my email newsletter at farmertofarmerpodcast.com. Also, please head on over to iTunes, leave us a review if you enjoy the show, or talk to us in the show notes or tell your friends on Facebook. We're at Purple Pitchfork on Facebook. And hey, when you talk to our sponsors please let them know how much you appreciate their support of a resource you value. You can support the show directly by going to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate. I'm working to the 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 show through the suggestions form at farmertofarmerpodcast.com. Ray Tyler is on the show because people kept asking for him. I'll do my best to get your suggestions on the show.

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