



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



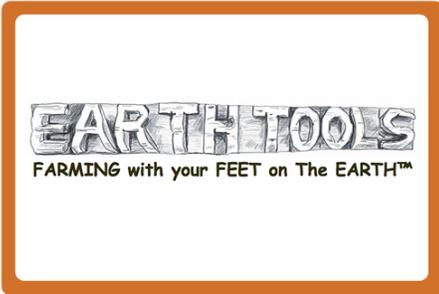
## **EPISODE 127**

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

**July 13, 2017**



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Chris Blanchard:

It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast, episode 127, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Brendan Grant raises six acres of vegetables plus laying hens, Highland cattle, and a hundred acres of hay with his wife Marcelle Paulin at Sleepy G Farm, just east of Thunder Bay, Ontario on the north shore of Lake Superior. One of my favorite places, it's so beautiful up there. The only certified organic farm for 500 miles around in Canada, Sleepy G's produce is marketed through a 150 member CSA, grocery stores, a farmer's market, and a small on-farm store.

Brendan shares his techniques for bringing new land into production and delves into the ins and outs of tillage and mechanical weed control on raised beds. We also dig into marketing in Thunder Bay, which is an isolated city about eight hours from any other metropolitan areas with no history of market farming, as well as the impact of their isolation and their extreme climate on production and input choices. We also discuss how the farm survived a serious accident two years ago, the impact that accident had on the farm, and on Brendan, and how



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they managed their way through the crisis. We also discuss the pieces that Brendan and Marcelle had in place that helped the farm survive.

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[00:02:00] Brendan Grant, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Brendan Grant: Thanks, Chris, I'm really excited to be here. I kind of feel like a minor league baseball player that just got his major league call-up. So I'm a big fan, and it's a pretty big deal, where do you go to from here?

Chris Blanchard: Thank you. Okay so now I'm blushing. Okay, we're going to throw the ball back to you here and say let's get started by just having you tell us about Sleepy G Farm, where you guys are located, and what you're doing there, and how you're selling what you're doing.

Brendan Grant: Great, so our farm is just outside of Thunder Bay, Ontario and Thunder Bay is right at the head of Lake Superior, I think at about 48.3 degrees north. We're 45 minutes north of the Minnesota border, right up on Lake Superior. Thunder Bay's a city of 110,000, and it's very much a city in the middle of nowhere. From Thunder Bay, it's eight hours to the next city center, so we are very much an island in the middle of the north.

Chris Blanchard: Right, 'cause going south isn't an option for you guys, 'cause you run into the border.

Brendan Grant: Right, and even there, you're in northern Minnesota, which is kind of the hinterland and the next population center down there would be Duluth at I think 80,000 and that would be about a five-hour drive directly south from our farm. We are very much, Thunder Bay is very much a city in the middle of the bush, and our farm is out on the Sibley Peninsula, and the Sibley Peninsula is this giant land mass that juts into Lake Superior and actually creates Thunder Bay, the body of water. About 90% of the peninsula is a protected provincial park called Sleeping Giant Provincial Park, and that park is about 70,000 acres and so we've actually kind of named the farm, you know, we used to refer to the park as "Sleepy G", and we're literally on the doorstep of Sleepy G Park.

We farm on a peninsula that is 10 kilometers wide at the base, that's about seven miles or so, so that means that we're five kilometers, either way, east and west would put us into Lake Superior.

Chris Blanchard: Do you get a bit of a lake effect out of that?



- Brendan Grant: Yeah, so our Springs are later. In a nutshell, our Springs are later because Lake Superior's cold, even in the Summer it's cold, so relative to the rest of the area, our Spring is probably 10 or 14 days later. However, at the other end of the season, we generally benefit from a little bit of a moderating effect that the lake creates, so especially on those August and September days, where it's nice and sunny and warm, but then the sun drops below the horizon, and things get real frigid real quick. The surface of Lake Superior will radiate the day's heat and very often will mitigate ... we won't get our first frost until into October when maybe other farms in the area have already had three or four by that point. It's a foe in the Spring, but a friend in the Fall as a general rule.
- Chris Blanchard: You're actually not the furthest north farm that we've interviewed, 'cause we talked a few weeks ago to Jason Weston at Joe's Garden in Bellingham, Washington, which is like two-tenths of a degree north of Thunder Bay.
- Brendan Grant: Okay.
- Chris Blanchard: But your climate is a lot more severe up there in general.
- Brendan Grant: It is. You know, if you open the page in your agricultural textbook and you look at the zone classification map, we're basically right where you're supposed to not be able to grow anything. We're zone 2B officially. If you're lucky enough to have a little bit of a microclimate, you might claim to brag to your friends that you're in zone 3A, but we're firmly in 2B. Our local seed saver group, their motto is 2B or not 2B, 'cause they're always trying to push the limits of what's possible in this area.
- That said, we grow pretty well everything. We grow sweet corn and squash and melons. we'll use the help of black plastic, but most crops are do-able. We can't grow sweet potatoes, and we can't and don't really want to grow okra or luffa. We tried growing luffa sponge, and it just didn't work.
- Chris Blanchard: I guess food sovereignty is one thing, and luffa sovereignty is another, right?
- Brendan Grant: Totally, totally. It's somewhat inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. I don't feel particularly disadvantaged despite the fact that we officially shouldn't be able to grow much here, but we do. I should mention that the Thunder Bay region is dominated by dairy production, so there's a lot of cows to be milked in the area around Thunder Bay and so forage crops do well. They're growing soybeans up here and corn silage and some of those more modern forages, but there's not a lot of vegetable production up here. Thunder Bay just doesn't have a strong history of market farming, and so that's actually been part of the difficulty in accessing equipment for our operation is that there just isn't that old Allis G sitting in someone's hedgerow. There just isn't that small scale cultivator or disks or whatever you might be looking for. It's been difficult getting equipment for that reason.
- Chris Blanchard: So just to go back and make sure that we're touching on the pertinent details of your farm, how many acres of vegetables do you guys have?



Brendan Grant: The farm's 160 acres, a quarter section, about 90 of that's bush, the rest is our hay and grazing land. We have eight acres cultivated, and six of which would be in vegetables at any given year. We also have a flock of 100 laying hens that we maintain year round and we raise their replacements for that. We have a small herd of about 25 Shorthorn and Highland cattle, and that's growing each year. I harvest about 100 plus acres of hay across three different properties around the farm, and we have another 100 acres of grazing land on another farm that we manage down the road.

We run 150-member CSA that runs for 13 weeks starting in the beginning of July and finishing in the beginning of October. We attend one Farmer's Market, but we only attend that market from September 1st until Christmas, and we work with two small independent grocery stores, and we're the only certified organic farm for 800 kilometers, or 500 miles. We employ three full-time staff from the beginning of May until the beginning of November.

Chris Blanchard: You're the only certified organic farm, does that include all of the other dairy farms and all of that, you guys are it for that area.

Brendan Grant: Yeah, unfortunately we are. It's nice to be able to say you're the only whatever of anything, but it really is not something we're real happy about because we don't have the organic infrastructure here. We don't have opportunities to collaborate. We don't have access to feed and inputs that we could benefit from bulk buying for instance. For our herd of cattle for instance, we buy straw to bed the cows in the winter and I would love to have certified organic straw, but it's just not here, it's not even anywhere close to here. I would literally have to drive 10 hours from this farm into Manitoba, the next province over, to access certified organic straw.

Chris Blanchard: So you guys are certified organic for the vegetables, but not for the livestock.

Brendan Grant: That's right, yeah. So our layer ration that we feed is not certified organic, so our eggs are for all intents and purposes conventional. Our beef, we're trying to move that way. There's three obstacles to certify the beef. The first being to get us off grain altogether, which we've made steps towards by making silage bales, and just kind of weaning ourselves off of malt, sprout and the crushed corn is what we've been using as a supplement for lactating and gestating cows. That's an easy one to solve.

This straw bedding is a bit more difficult one that would involve us either producing our own grain or switching to a different type of bedding like sawdust or something of the like. And then the third obstacle would be because we don't have a certified organic processing facility, we have just one abattoir or slaughterhouse in the region, we would have to get them to slaughter our animals first on each kill day before anything else. That poses a significant problem because they're a small facility, they process about 30 head per week, and I know that they always start with hogs. So each day they want to start with the hogs and they finish with steers, so that would be a challenge.



None of these problems are, it's not like you couldn't overcome them, but they are a challenge. They're something that we really would have to put a lot of work towards overcoming.

Chris Blanchard: I've been to Thunder Bay a couple of times, and taught some classes up there. In fact, I think that was where you and I first met, was when I came up there, probably four or five years ago now.

Brendan Grant: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: There were a lot of people showing up for classes about vegetable farming, even about organic vegetable farming. It's interesting to me that you guys are the only certified organic farm up there. Is that something that the market is not demanding or is it just something that there's resistance to among the growers.

Brendan Grant: It's both. The market, people of Thunder Bay and Farmer's Market goers are just so enthusiastic to have anything that's growing local, that whether your certified or you're claiming to be organic or natural or even conventional, they just want it. It's fresh, it's local, and most importantly it's produced in Thunder Bay, which you touched on the idea of food sovereignty. People in Thunder Bay are fiercely proud of Thunder Bay. Guess what, we're all we have. We've got to take care of each other because we are this island city in the bush, so the market's not demanding the certified organic. Some of the other growers use or follow organic practices, but haven't taken the step to certify. Even for the first few years of our farm and our marketing, we didn't certify. In fact even in our logo, the slogan is "Ecologically Raised Food". We chose that because we really wanted to stimulate conversation with our customers about what is ecologically raised even mean? And that would be my segue into the way that we grow food "organically" is ecological. That was the founding principle of the organic movement was ecological stewardship.

Since that time, we decided that as leaders in this community, as organic leaders, that we really ought to put our money where our mouths are and certify. Take the extra cost, undertake the extra burden and administrative and record keeping and we're strong proponents of the organic movement. I have to say that Marcelle and I really strengthened our resolve as organic farmers after our first trip down to the MOSES Organic Conference. Sitting in a room among 3,500 other organic farmers and just being overwhelmed with the sense of community and the movement, it really made us come home and say you know what? I don't care what it costs, I don't care what it takes, we're going to certify because it's the right thing to do, and not just the right thing for us.

Chris Blanchard: How much does that cost a year?

Brendan Grant: Put it to you this way, the certifier that flies up from southern Ontario, which is 1000 miles away or 800 kilometers would be the next closest farm. They lose money on us because they come up, I think it costs just under a thousand dollars a year for us to be certified, and in addition to the other costs of having certified organic feed and that type of thing. I have to say that we're better farmers for having done it. Our record keeping was always good, but now it's really good. I actually like having someone look over my shoulder. I kind of look



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forward to the organic inspection each summer because it's a bit of an affirmation that we're on the right track. I just like having that check and balance and that control and it's really easy to think that you're doing a great job at something if there's no one to tell you otherwise.

I just felt like me saying that we're organic or ecologically raised food or whatever it was in the past, was just me talking, and they were just words. Having that stamp, you know, having that third party I feel adds a lot of legitimacy to what we do.

Chris Blanchard: Just to kind of turn here a little bit more towards the actual production that you're doing. You said that you've got about eight acres that you're cultivating. Is any of that under plastic? Are you doing hoop houses and high tunnels and all that or are you guys rolling pretty strictly outdoors?

Brendan Grant: Mostly outdoors. We have two 100 by 24 foot unheated hoop houses and a 50 by 30 double-walled propagating greenhouse. So a little bit of cover. We don't use a lot of mulch. I never wanted to get into the routine of putting down black plastic mulch and then tearing it up at the end of the season and having to bring that to the landfill or use a biodegradable, which was previously permitted in the organic system in Canada but now is not, or at least most of those products are not.

Our soil's not biologically active for a long enough period each calendar year, that you could be real sure that that BioTelo or life product would be gone by the following season. So instead, we in the beginning, I got the idea to buy a big sheet of black plastic silage tarp, and we plant all of our cucurbits on that. We have two blocks of this, we have actually about half acre under these black tarps that we grow our squash, melons, cucumbers, zucchini, that type of thing, and we put drip lines under that.

We fold those up and move them around the farm each year. That silage plastic was a great tool for us to help establish new growing areas as we grew the farm. I would plow in the fall and then that spring I would plow in the Fall and then that Spring, I would cover it with this black plastic tarp, which is 200 feet by 50 feet, and the first year I could get a crop, and it would be a crop. Then we would really deliver a devastating blow to a lot of those perennial weeds as well as the sod that was still breaking down and the following year, then we could grow a different crop, and that plastic would move on to pave the way for the expansion of the farm. So currently we have two 200 by 50-foot sections of black plastic that we use within our rotation.

Chris Blanchard: It's interesting to me that you wouldn't go in for the black plastic. I see where you come from on the ecological perspective on that, but just dealing with growing in zone 2B, I would think that black plastic would be the first tool that you would look to.

Brendan Grant: Yeah, not everything we do makes sense, Chris. It would have been a lot easier to go and get a job in town too, so we didn't do that. Actually, we did, but then we quit those jobs.



Another product we use, we use a paper mulch product called Weed Guard that comes from a mill in Colorado I believe, and we've been using that for a lot of years. It comes on rolls of 500 feet, they're four feet wide. They are compatible, paper mulch is compatible with mechanical mulch layers. We use that paper mulch for a lot of our brassica crops and kale for instance, which is a full-season crop, we use it for our chard. We used to use a lot for head lettuce. But we do use that paper mulch for weed suppression on some of those full season crops, but we've been using a little less of it the last few years.

What's nice about the paper mulch product is that it will completely and totally break down by the end of the season. Sometimes a little too soon, but ... and it doesn't provide the soil warming, that black plastic would, but it does do the soil moisture retention and weed suppression that you're looking for.

Chris Blanchard: You said earlier that you guys weren't using the biodegradable mulches. I guess I'm confused, what's the difference between those two? The two products, when you talk about the BioTelo versus just a paper mulch.

Brendan Grant: The BioTelo and the paper are both biodegradable, but the BioTelo's going to give you the soil warming, and the paper mulch won't. For our certifier in Canada here, as of last year, I think BioTelo was not permitted because there's an ingredient in there that I think is derived from a GMO, so ... we've just not gone down that road. For right or for wrong, we haven't gone down the road of mulching all of our beds. What we have done instead is just said well, our climate doesn't really want to grow those crops anyway, so why don't we focus more on the things that we're better suited to which are root vegetables. We do grow all of our squash, winter and summer squash, and most years they're pretty good, some years they're awesome, but a lot of years they're crappy. But our root vegetables are pretty consistent, so we've really focused heavily on the root vegetables in those fall storage crop.

Chris Blanchard: Are you guys using raised bed production?

Brendan Grant: We are, yeah. That was a very intentional decision. We have cool, wet springs, and so raising the soil helps drain out the soil, it helps warm a bit, we also don't have really deep topsoil, so it helps to deepen the root zone. We've got a really nice sandy silt wall that we grow on but our topsoil is only about 12 inches, and then that topsoil is sitting on another 10 or 12 inches of pure sand. Then that whole mess is sitting on pure clay. Not too far down, and you're into solid clay, and so by using raised beds, we really do turn that 11 or 12 inches of topsoil into 15, 16, maybe 18 inches.

Chris Blanchard: Can you talk a little bit about how you set up and manage those raised beds?

Brendan Grant: Yeah, our main production area is organized into 10 equal sized fields lettered A to J, or Afghanistan to Jamaica. We use country names, just for fun and because I'm a bit of a nerd, we use agriculturally significant countries to identify each of our fields. Then K is a double field and that would of course be Kenya.

Each of these fields is 400 feet long by 65 feet wide, so they're .65 of an acre or a quarter of a hectare. We have 10-foot roadways, grass roadways between



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each field, and 40-foot headland at the end of the fields for turning tractors around. Each country or field has 12 raised beds. Our raised beds are 48 inches, and then there's an 18-inch wheel track, so we're essentially 66 inches center to center. The bed tops at 36 inches, and they're planted either two, three, or five rows of crop. We have a four inch buried water main with hydrant at the head of every other road, for irrigation. The whole thing is enclosed with seven strands of high-tensile electric slant deer fence, which keeps out the many deer that live on the peninsula.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, I guess that's a disadvantage to being next to a state park, right?

Brendan Grant: [00:23:30] Totally, totally. But you know, I put up that fence, I don't know when, a lot of years, when we started growing in that field I put up that fence right away, and we've never had one single breach of security. I can't say enough good things about that fence. Very economical to put up as well.

Chris Blanchard: You said it's a seven strand slanted electric fence, right?

Brendan Grant: That's right. I'd gotten the idea, I had taken a course, a workshop with Richard Wiswall a bunch of years ago, and I grabbed him at the end of the course and said, okay look you think you've got deer in Vermont, I'm sitting on the doorstep of 70,000 acres of parkland, we got deer. He had recommended using little polywire with step-ins, and he said he would enclose one acre at a time when the crop was vulnerable. I just wasn't comfortable with a temporary or moveable type fencing solution, so I took that principle and I sunk wood posts in on 40 inch, 40-foot centers and then erected seven strands of high-tensile. So the corners of the fence are rounded 'cause you need to go gradually around those corners, and each of the seven strands is electrified. The top strand is only 65 inches of height, so clearly not enough to deter a deer from jumping over, but the whole 3D effect of the slant fence is, it's like a seven-foot barrier. A deer can't jump both high and far at the same time. So it works amazingly.

Chris Blanchard: They've also got the eyes on the sides of their heads, which makes it so they don't have good depth perception, so things like that are really confusing to them as well.

Brendan Grant: Totally. Also confusing to the many neighbors that were driving by slowly as we were putting up that fence because it was clearly the strangest fence that had gone up there in all past history.

Chris Blanchard: How do you manage the weeds underneath that slanted fence?

Brendan Grant: I brush hog, I brush hog on the inside as close as I can, and on the outside as close as I can and then about twice a season, we'll send someone in there with the weed wacker, it's like half a day to go and weed whack the fence line. Not a big deal. One day of labor for one person once a year, done.

Chris Blanchard: Is that a high-tensile fence or is that just regular electric wire?

Brendan Grant: No, it's high-tensile. We also have wolves and bear, all manner of horse creatures that are roaming the farm, and neighbor's dogs and what not. It



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doesn't just keep out deer, it does keep out the bear, which would otherwise find our corn and squash and things like that in the Fall.

Chris Blanchard: I didn't even think about that, of course, you guys have bear up there. You guys deal with moose too?

Brendan Grant: No. No moose, it's all deer right now, but you know, these things are cyclical. The deer will die back, and the moose population will rise, but it's mostly white-tailed deer.

Chris Blanchard: Just to go back to the beds then, how are you making your raised beds?

Brendan Grant: I have the Lesche bed former that I purchased off Market Farm Implements. I selected that one because it was the most simple bed former that required the least amount of horsepower. That might be the single best piece of equipment that I ever bought. What that piece of equipment did for us, it forced us to standardize our growing areas and to take a really intentional approach to laying out all of our growing spaces. That's kind of the precursor to being able to do really good crop planning and accurate harvest prediction.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of tractor are you using to pull the Lesche bed former?

Brendan Grant: We have a 2013 Case Farmall 75A that we bought pretty well new and that's our heavy tractor for our heavy field work. I used to use my little Ferguson TE20 to do all of my farm work, but we've since upgraded. I do use the big Case four-wheel drive tractor to form the bed. The rear wheels on that tractor are 18 inches, which is exactly what our wheel tracks are. Once the beds are formed, we mechanically cultivate the bed tops with a Tuff-bilt tractor. In 2014, we bought a Tuff-bilt cultivating tractor, which folks may or may not have seen, it's a replica Allis Chalmers G, it has the difference being is that it has a hydrostatic transmission and hydraulic three point hitch mid mount and rear, and ours runs on an 18 horse gas Kohler engine, but they're now making them with electric versions and diesel versions.

Chris Blanchard: Why did you go out and buy a Tuff-bilt instead of searching out a G?

Brendan Grant: I just finally reached a threshold with old farm equipment. It's quaint, and it's nice, and it makes you feel warm and fuzzy inside to resurrect something from someone's hedgerow, but the reality is that stuff is worn out generally speaking. It's more hassle than it's worth. To get a good, quality G today and get it in running condition and some new weeding tools on it, you're not going to have any change I think out of three, four thousand dollars. At this point in my career, I'm not really interested in spending four thousand dollars on an antique piece of equipment. I could spend 10 thousand dollars, or even 15 thousand dollars and have something that's brand new. As I said the hydrostatic transmission is a huge improvement over the G and it has a little bit more clearance, and it's just yeah, it's just a better.

I took a weed management course at MOSES Conference Jeff Moyer a few years ago. I saw this weird looking tractor in the background of one of his slides, and at the end of the presentation I went up to him and got him to go back in the presentation and zoom in on that picture. It was a Saukville, which is no longer



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in production, but it looks an awful lot like the Tuff-bilt that we ended up buying. Then I went through the internet looking for a Saukville, and then I stumbled across Tuff-bilt, and that was that.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of cultivating equipment are you using on that Tuff- bilt, do you have a bunch of fancy weed control equipment or are you pretty basic?

Brendan Grant: Sweeps and shovels for now on S-tines and this is where, we've had this tractor for a few years now, and we're starting to learn how to use it and admittedly we're not using it to its fullest potential, partly because we just don't know, and partly because we jus don't have the tools. The next step for us is to get basket weeders for those newly emerged seedlings that in wet soil in cool Spring where when things are going slowly, and we just need to get in right close without throwing too much soil. I hear a lot of your guests talk about finger weeders and how life-changing they are and that's definitely on my radar. If we were to have this conversation a year or two from now, I'd hopefully tell you that I've got a real solid arsenal of tools for that Tuff-Bilt. But for now, sweeps and shovels. It's done a pretty good job, but I know there's a lot of room for improvement.

One thing I did do, I built an 8-torch flame weeder for the rear of that tractor, so I bought just the flame weeding manifolds from a guy who sells them on [flameweeder.com](http://flameweeder.com) or whatever and I built a three point hitch mounted flame weeder for that Tuff-bilt tractor, and so we do pre-emergence flame weeding on our carrot and beet crops especially with the Tuff-bilt. Being able to creep along at 60 feet per minute or whatever speed I want to go and just roast all those weeds is pretty satisfying.

Yeah, and that's really the biggest advantage of the over Allis G's or the Super-8 Farm Hoes or any of those, those are gear transmissions, and I think that even in low gear at low throttle, sometimes it's going faster than you want. The hydrostatic transmission is ... I'm not a big fan of hydrostatic transmissions for most tractor applications, but for cultivating, it's pretty hard to beat. I have a lot of good things to say about it.

Chris Blanchard: In a short season like you guys have, I'm sure that transplants are a really important part of your production. How are you guys doing your transplant production?

Brendan Grant: Transplants are huge. We continue to propagate all the way through the month of July. Marcelle, that's one of her big responsibilities on the farm she's the chief propagator and she does a great job of producing really nice transplants in a soil block system. We transplant out by hand. We don't have a mechanical transplanter. I've looked at it so many times that I'm done looking. Until we either specialize in one crop or another or one spacing in a big way, then there's not really a transplanter out there that will fit our needs really well and it's really not a big deal to slam in 1200 heads of lettuce on a 400 foot bed. It really isn't.

I mark all those beds, I dibble them with the Tuff-Bilt, we had a custom made row marker with dibles on it, so before any transplanting or direct feeding occurs, we'll run across the bed with the Tuff-Bilt and mark out the rows and dibble the holes and then we just go off of that. It's not the most efficient, but it's pretty efficient for the investment and the time spent in that operation.



- Chris Blanchard: One of the things that I've seen with raised beds and weed control is, especially on farms where things are being done without a guidance system for the edge of those beds, which it sounds like you're kind of free-handing it with your row marker. If that row marker isn't just dead centered on the bed, then when you come along to cultivate, you might be trying to stay centered on your rows as your cultivating, but if they wander a little bit to one side or the other, it's easy to have a place where either you're cutting way deep into the edge of the bed of the shoulders of the bed, or where your cultivators actually get entirely off of the bed. It's one of the things I hate about raised beds. How are you guys dealing with that?
- Brendan Grant: That's something that was an unexpected problem when we started using the Tuff-Bilt, like this isn't really getting the shoulders very well. Something that is a bit of an issue. First thing is our beds are really straight. I'm the guy with the tape measure and all the tool boxes on the tractors, and I'm splitting hairs out there when I'm doing my field work. We don't have GPS guided tractors, but we do employ SPF, which is a much low-tech system, it's spatial positioning system as I like to call it, and it consists of a wheel marker and those little fluorescent flags that you plug into the field. You can get into it for about \$110 bucks.
- That's how I do my field work when I'm either casting or gathering that first furrow, I'm always using those little flags and my wheel marker and I get things just perfect. Then as I form my bed, I mean they're good, they're real good. Now, they're not perfect, 'cause nothing is, and the Tuff-Bilt when it comes in on its first try or first time over the bed, we've got the Tuff-Bilt wheels set so that the inside width of both the front and rear wheels on that tractor are actually squishing the shoulders of my raised bed by about an inch on either side. So that said, when we're straddling that row for our cultivation operation, it's basically like you're on a track and if the bed bends or veers a little bit, it follows it. It's actually kind of locked in there pretty well.
- Chris Blanchard: Nice.
- Brendan Grant: Now the shoulders are still a bit of an issue. Right now, we found the best thing is the rear sweeps behind the wheels, behind the rear wheels, if you've got a good enough speed you can kind of throw soil from the wheel track up onto the side or the shoulder. This is where I think that I could really benefit from exploring a custom set up of finger weeders or something of the like on the rear to get those shoulders.
- Chris Blanchard: Tell me about your soil block set up, I mean you guys, six acres of vegetables on soil blocks, that's a lot of blocks.
- Brendan Grant: Yeah, it is. We use a mini block, we use 10-20's, so the blocks are in 10-20's and germinate en masse, we'll use the little mini blocks and then a lot of times, we'll just transplant mini blocks straight in the field, for lettuces would be a great example. We do use 288's for our onion and leeks, I think that's the only thing that we do kind of in a more conventional way, and then the rest of our soil blocks for our brassicas and most everything else would be not the two inch blocks, but I think they're one and five-eighths.



- Chris Blanchard: Are you doing those by hand with just a floor blocker or do you guys have a machine that's kicking them out?
- Brendan Grant: We do them by hand. We bought the standup model one and then I ended up at Marcelle's request cutting the handle in half and re-welding it and shortening it up so it can be used at table height. The problem is you know with soil blocks that they're really heavy, so it's nice to be able to stand to block it out but then you've got to bend over to pick up that tray.
- Chris Blanchard: Okay, that's brilliant. Props to Marcelle on that one. I wish somebody told me that idea in 2001.
- Brendan Grant: I just do what I'm told.
- Chris Blanchard: And then are you guys making your own mix or are you guys buying that in?
- Brendan Grant: After listening to your podcast, I sure would love to bring some Vermont Compost Company potting mix into the farm, but ... we use OMRI-listed medium that we then fortify with our own fertilizer and then we did, we went through the stage of making our own, you know, compost, garden soil the Eliot Coleman recipe that we tweaked, but we've since just kind of gone with a good mix that we then fortify.
- Chris Blanchard: Because I know that you like your machinery, are you using any harvest aids then?
- Brendan Grant: The only thing we mechanically harvest is the potatoes. I have a nice one-row McCormick-Deering potato planter that helps in the beginning of the season, and then I've got an International, like a 1970's era single-row digger. Then for the rest of the harvest, we've got a Keyline plow that we use for sub-soiling on the farm as well as pasture, rehabilitation, and reseeding. I will use that Keyline plow as kind of a bed lifter for parsnips and storage carrots and things like that.
- Chris Blanchard: So loosen them up and pull them out by hand.
- Brendan Grant: That's right. As I said, we've got nice sandy loam soil, so if the soil moisture's correct, a lot of times you can just pull those carrots and they're nice big long straight carrots, and you don't even need to fork them at all. If the soil is ... if conditions aren't quite right, then I'll go through in the Fall with the Keyline plow and lift everything, and we can just go along and pull carrots, and pull carrots, and pull carrots until almost Christmas.
- Chris Blanchard: Really, you guys are actually in the fields until almost Christmas?
- Brendan Grant: Sorry, we'll be selling them until Christmas, but last two seasons we've actually been harvesting carrots up until the middle of November and they are good and sweet by that point, boy. Last couple of years, Marcelle and I and our staff finished at the beginning of November, and they're flogging it out, and there's still money there. Last year we just called it, we were like you know what? We're done. There was a bed of carrots that we just didn't get to and whatever. But that was the middle of November. And then we will continue to mark it, those



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carrots and parsnips and whatnot into the new year. At the Farmer's Market, until Christmas, and then we'll just maintain our wholesale accounts as deep into the new year as we can.

Chris Blanchard: What are you using for storage on those, do you guys have a walk-in cooler?

Brendan Grant: Yeah, so in 2012, I built a 30- by 60-foot story and a half pack house, which is kind of like a multi-function building. The majority of it is our pack house with 150 square foot cooler. It also has a garage on the back end for parking a tractor. It's got a bunkhouse upstairs for staff for living quarters as well as a staff kitchen and meeting room. Then on the very front of it, facing the farm entrance is a little self-serve farm store that we have a double door glass cooler and small deep freeze that we stock year round with eggs and meat and whatever vegetables we have. It was a great building, it was a big project for me to build from scratch. It was my first real big building project, and it was probably the best investment to date on the farm.

Chris Blanchard: I'm looking at where you guys are located, you talked about having a little farm store. Is that a significant part of your business?

Brendan Grant: This time of year it is. Not significant, but it's steady, and for instance yesterday we brought in \$160 in the farm store, and we didn't do anything, that's just people stopping by. That adds up over the month of July and August. Because of our proximity to Sleeping Giant Provincial Park, and there's lots of cottages in the township, there's a lot of seasonal residents, so most of our farm traffic this time of year is seasonal people, but then we have our regulars throughout the whole rest of the year who come every week for their eggs and their meat or whatever. At a time of year when we're not actually marketing, and we're not at a Farmer's Market and CSA hasn't started, it's an easy sale. For instance, right now we're selling carrots in our farm store today that are last year's carrots that we found in our root cellar that are still good and we bagged them up.

Chris Blanchard: Nice. Very nice.

Brendan Grant: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: You said you guys have a root cellar is the root cellar part of your commercial operation or is that more of a home base thing and you found some extra carrots in it?

Brendan Grant: The latter, but it's quickly shifting to the former. We've just finished construction on a new house on the farm, we've been living in an old kind of cabin you might say for a lot of years since we bought the farm in 2006. We put up a new house, and we are just about to move in in the next month or so. What we're going to do with the old house is we're going to convert the whole basement, which is just a block foundation into a proper root storage facility. That will enable us to pursue what we think we really want to do, which is strengthen our CSA by going longer, deeper into the year and kind of doing that winter CSA model. As for the old house that we're currently living in, that might become living quarters for staff, it might become some sort of barn, we're not sure. It's a real small house anyway, there's not a lot to be saved.



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Chris Blanchard: [00:44:00] On the subject of your CSA you said you guys have 150 member CSA, based I assume in Thunder Bay, right?

Brendan Grant: That's right.

Chris Blanchard: Well like I say, are you guys packing boxes for that CSA or are you doing something else as far as the distribution?

Brendan Grant: Nope, we've got 150 members, we do one box size. Ninety percent of our members pick up in town, we do a Farmer's Market distribution style at one drop site on Wednesdays from 4:00 to 6:30 p.m. you get 1135 people coming through there in a two and a half hour window, it's pretty busy, and then the other 15 members or 10% roughly pick up at the farm. We use member assembler to manage CSA logistics, something we've used for the last few years. A bit pricey, but at the same time, we feel it's still worthwhile for us because some members do decide to change their pickup location. One week they're out at their camp or whatever and they want to pick up at the farm, that's easy for them to do.

Then we produce a newsletter that we call Well Vittled, or well fed. Our newsletter is something we take a lot of pride in and it's intended to create a window into our lives as farmers, as well as the bigger picture of agriculture for our members. Each issue of Well Vittled features roughly thousand word essay or article that talks about food or farming from a personal or political or sometimes philosophical point of view. It's a real highlight for our CSA members. In fact I think a lot of our members like the newsletter more than they like the food.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, I remember finding that too with some of our members. It's a lot of work to put together a good newsletter, especially in the middle of the season.

Brendan Grant: Yeah it is, it takes about four or five hours of work to publish it each week, and that's kind of fallen into my lap for the most part. I enjoy doing it, but to me, it's a real investment in the community that is our CSA membership. Those are our people, and they really need to understand what our lives as farmers are like, the greatest extent they're able, because in understanding our lives and understanding the buggeries and challenges and realities of food production, they're going to be that much more committed to us. Us as people and us as a farm business and I think that's where our security in the future lies, is within our CSA membership. Not farmer's market, not wholesale accounts, not fickle chefs, but with our down to earth, everyday regular people that are our community.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome. Brendan, we're going to stop there, take a break, get a word from a couple of sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Brendan Grant with Sleepy G Farm, just east of Thunder Bay, Ontario on the north shore of Lake Superior.

The Farmer to Farmer podcast is brought to you by Store It Cold's CoolBot. Way back in 2000, the year I started Rock Spring Farm, the manager of the local food coop complained that the lettuce from local producers lasted for days in her cooler, while the lettuce from California lasted for weeks. What was all that



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about 2000 miles fresher? I later found out that one 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 to get your produce cold. The difference between now and then is 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% in upfront costs and up to 42% a month in electrical bills, compared to conventional cooling units. Use the code FTF at checkout to double your CoolBot warranty at no charge. [StoreItCold.com](http://StoreItCold.com).

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Chris Blanchard: And we're back with Brendan Grant from Sleepy G Farm, just east of Thunder Bay, Ontario on the north shore of Lake Superior. Thunder Bay, Ontario, I've been there a couple of times and I'm really attracted to that area and it's not a big town, and I'm kind of curious how the marketing has gone there because it's clear there's some cool things going on there, but it's also clear that it's ... you know, it's not an upper-class community, it's not like Rochester, Minnesota where you have a city full of doctors. It's a pretty working class town.

Brendan Grant: That's true, but one thing the doctors and mill workers all have in common is that they eat. Every day, hopefully three times a day, and because of that, everyone is interested in food. Everyone wants good quality food, and food's not a big part of everyone's life, but there's enough people year after year I think that are moving toward that. I look at our CSA membership, and some of the people in there, you're surprised when they sign back up the next year because you know they're not foodies, and you know that a lot of times they don't even know how to cook, 'cause they're asking questions like, "What's this? What's a yellow zucchini? How do you cook it?" Just like a green zucchini. But they like the CSA, they like the freshness of food. I don't think that's a fad, I think that's the trend.

Our focus on our farm is our CSA more so than just growing for the general public and I think that's where we're continuing to go in the future. People aren't going to stop eating, and if you can give them food that is well priced, and is good flavored and comes with a face and a story. If it's not that much more than a grocery store or if it's the same price, why wouldn't you? I think that's true of all towns and small cities in North America or anywhere. People are



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going to eat, and if you're not overtly letting them down, then they're kind of your customer to lose.

Chris Blanchard: Do you find that you actually have some advantages because of the isolation of Thunder Bay? When I lived in Maine, we were at the very end of the produce distribution chain. Stuff had to go, if it was coming from California or Arizona or southern Ontario, it was going through the big city, and then it was going to Portland, Maine, and then it was coming to us. By the time it got to us, it was pretty tired. It made it having, you know, we had fresh food, and that made for a pretty easy marketing pitch.

Brendan Grant: Right, and a couple of things we've got going for us. One is what I mentioned earlier is this kind of fierce pride of the region because we are on this island in the bush together, but food travels a really long way to Thunder Bay, and the same kind of example you just gave. Because of that, the cost of food at our grocery stores is higher in Thunder Bay than say other areas of Ontario. In southern Ontario, where bigger population and bigger city centers, and so that said if the price of green beans for instance at the grocery store is three dollars a pound, and the farmer is bringing beans or beans to the Farmer's Market at three or even four dollars a pound, if it's about the same price, you're going to get that sale based solely on the fact that those beans don't look like they were in a bar fight last night, which they do when they're in the grocery store and they've come that long way.

We definitely have the advantage of already people in our community are used to paying a higher price for their food, so us, as small-scale producers, which we're able to compete a little bit better. Ten years ago when we started with the farm, there was a big gap between the grocery store food and then what we were producing and today, honestly Chris, a lot of our stuff is marginally more expensive. We're talking 10% more or sometimes even less. So yeah, that's an advantage to us.

Chris Blanchard: You said, just talking about prices, just to shift into economics a little bit, you said that you and Marcelle both use to work off the farm and now you're both full-time on the farm?

Brendan Grant: Yeah, that's right. We both used to work for the provincial government, I worked at a tourism site in Thunder Bay, I ran the farm at a fur trade post. A recreated fur trade post, and I worked that job for almost five years. That was a regular person's job with pension and benefits and all those types of things. At the same time, Marcelle worked at Sleeping Giant Park, which is part of the Ontario park system and she worked seasonally as did I. I worked 10 months a year, and she had a six-months-a-year contract. Those are good jobs, those are jobs that we could potentially retire in, but for me at least, I didn't have to take a step away from farming to build my farm dream. I was still farming, kind of in the year 1815 at a historic fur trade post. But at the same time, my learning curve was still rising, as it always is, and I was engaged in my work.

We got to the point where it was just too hectic. Both working off the farm, I was driving two hours a day to go to that job and we, in fact, ran our CSA for the first two seasons while both working off the farm. Because we both worked in tourism, our weekends were Wednesday and Thursday. It just so happened that



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there's a Wednesday Farmer's Market in Thunder Bay, so that became our CSA day and we would drop off our CSA boxes and Market at the same time. Then Thursday was our day off, also known as our day to do everything, like weeding and making hay, and everything else. It got too hectic, so I quit my job first, and a couple of years later, Marcelle quit her job, and it's been a few years since she's been out of her job and yeah.

Chris Blanchard: [00:55:30] You guys are making a living on the farm?

Brendan Grant: Yeah we are, yeah. We're making it happen. I think that I always feel like things are tenuous, that it could all come apart at any time, but one of your guests recently said something about if you're planning is working, and it's proven to work, then take the leap and just trust that it's going to keep on working and I think there's some wisdom to those sentiments.

Chris Blanchard: Okay so speaking of feeling like things are going to fall apart at any time, I happen to know that you had a pretty serious accident years ago.

Brendan Grant: Yeah, that's right. Actually it was just two years ago a few days ago. It was July 5th, July 5th, 2015, and I took a fall from the top of our cow barn, which is a 35-foot tall building and I fell and broke both my heels and didn't walk for four months. When I did start walking it was with walking casts, and it was a lot of months before I was moving and getting stuff done. Yeah, that was a really difficult scene for us. It continues to be a bit difficult in that I'm still recovering and I still have pain, and I've got a bit of a limp. Days are tough on my feet for me. Things are continuing to improve, but that was a pretty scary time for us.

Chris Blanchard: I know that you and Marcelle have been involved in the volunteer fire department there. I mean, I assume you guys have a pretty strong safety focus on your farm. Can you talk a little bit about what happened?

Brendan Grant: Yeah. That's been part of my coming to terms with my accident has been how did I let that happen, you know? This is a good lesson I think for all of us farmers who tend to go 100 miles an hour for a good portion of the year. The day of my accident, it was a Sunday evening, and I had come into the house at around six p.m., and I said to Marcelle, I said, "I am absolutely exhausted. I am mentally and physically exhausted, we have been going 100 miles an hour since April, and I need a break." And she concurred that we had been run ragged, and together we said you know what, let's take next Sunday off. But for now, tonight, I need to go back up onto the barn roof to finish the job I had started early in the week, which was replacing the ridge cap, you know, the steel ridge cap on the cow barn.

So I took a quick power nap. I set the alarm on my phone for 20 minutes, and I fell asleep sitting up, like full dreaming sleep in that 20-minute span, and the timer went off, and I popped out of that chair and walked out of the house. I walked to the packhouse and I grabbed a handful of gummy bears, or whatever was in there, and I started stumbling across the yard putting on my climbing harness. I put on my harness, and I got up on the barn roof, and I clipped in, and 45 minutes later, there's a helicopter landing behind my barn, and it's... It was another five months before I could walk properly.



What had happened, I had unclipped my rope to grab something, and I was groggy, and I was overtired, and my head wasn't in the game, and I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing with that level of risk at that time. It was a function of what we always do. We all fall into our routines of our old habits, which is go, go, go, go, go, you know? It was a tough lesson. The silver lining is that I didn't break my brain or my back or I didn't get dead, which could have very easily happened. Instead, I got off real easy, and I will recover, maybe not 100%, but I will recover, and I will continue to farm.

Lessons learned there. I think lots of lessons and I think lots of personal growth that came from laying in bed for the rest of that year, that season, and watching everyone around me work their butts off to compensate for my lack of ability to work alongside them. I think that sometimes you've got to know when to say enough is enough, and to know when to take a break and to recognize that when you get tired, either mentally or physically then that's when bad things are likely to happen.

Chris Blanchard: How did you guys deal with this as a farm? You're a major part of the labor force on the farm, and you are a ... It's been obvious from the times that I've talked to you in person, and the conversations that we had on the phone previously, you're a hard worker and you really identify strongly with your ability to do that physical work. How did you handle that personally and how did you guys handle that as a farm?

Brendan Grant: The accident happened three days before the first CSA delivery, and of course I spent a number of days in the hospital, in fact, I wrote the first CSA newsletter from my hospital bed. Perfectly cheerful, like nothing had happened. You don't want to break the news to your membership that a key player just went down after they anted up for the CSA season. Marcelle, she executed that first CSA delivery perfectly, with the help of the great staff we had that year.

I think the real thing we had done that helped us through was that we had good equipment that worked. We had a couple of brand new tractors that even an experienced person might stumble with them a bit, but I know that the tractor's going to work. We'd been farming long enough at that point that we had really clear systems and processes for everything that we do on the farm, from bunching kale to watering the greenhouse. We had those processes in place, and because of that, we were able to take on a lot of volunteers. Random community members and friends, you can imagine the type of people that come out of the woodwork in those times, and we were able to take those people on and put them to great use. We normally don't take on a lot of volunteers because a lot of your listeners know, it's a lot of work to manage someone who doesn't really know what they're doing.

[01:02:30] Before the accident, I thought that I was indispensable, like I was the most important person on the farm and that if the captain of the ship was asleep at the wheel, the ship would go down, and that didn't happen. It was really humbling to see that it didn't happen, but it was also really relieving to realize that it didn't happen. It really took a little bit of a load off me, I thought okay, well not only is Marcelle more than capable of running this farm, but we



as a couple, we as a business are able to withstand something as drastic and tragic as this.

Chris Blanchard: Did you guys make changes in how your operation worked as a result of your accident? Have you adjusted your schedule or-

Brendan Grant: Well, you know, I did all the administration and emailing, newsletter, and all the stuff that I could do from my bed with two casts on my legs. After 50 days from the accident, that was my return to work date, and that looked like me crawling around in the fields with two fiberglass casts on and crawling to the fields, harvesting where I could. I had one of those electric scooters that you often see people around town zipping around in. I could get around the farm on my electric scooter and then I could lower myself down to the ground. I was non-weight bearing on both feet, so it was really difficult to ... you couldn't limp or use crutches or anything like that, so I would literally crawl everywhere.

I'd work in the pack house from my scooter and I could wash stuff, then it would have to go in the walk-in cooler. I was only working at about a third or a quarter of my regular Brendan-type capacity, but it made me feel good, it kept me engaged, and I was pitching in, just like everyone else. It was tough. It was tough, and you know, last season we started our season on a different footing, a better footing. We made zero changes to our crop plan from 2015 to 2016, it was kind of like a retake, let's try this again, this time with all hands on deck.

Last Spring I was still recovering and I had to go 100 miles an hour to try and catch up on all of my equipment that had gotten broken in that year that I wasn't able to run it or maintain it and last year was a real struggle for me also physically, could be on my feet until about one o'clock each day before my feet really started to hurt. Things are a lot better this year, and I think that next year will be even better. I did struggle, especially after the accident, I kind of lost my mojo, you know? I just couldn't get engaged in the farm the way I used to be. Part of that was not really knowing my place anymore. I kind of felt a little bit irrelevant, or I just didn't know where I fit in. That was tricky. For the first time in my life, I experienced a little bit of depression. Feeling sad and grief and worried for the future. Last season was tough for me.

Things are a lot better now, and as a result of my injury, the jobs that Marcelle and I do on the farm are now a lot better defined, and I think we're on a better path as managers. As an example, as you mentioned, Marcelle and I are both on the fire department in Pass Lake and at a fire, everything that happens, happens on one of three levels. The task level, the tactical level, or the strategic level. The fire chief is the one who's working on the strategic level, figure out what's going to happen, what we're going to do. The officers, the captains are working on the tactical level figuring out how we're going to do that, and then the firefighters are the ones who are actually doing the actual task.

So now on the farm, I find myself, I work mostly in the tactical level. I am doing the field work and the bed prep and setting up and making sure the crew's got the tools to do the job, and then I move on ahead of them and leave them behind to accomplish that. I'm kind of the one step ahead type guy. Whereas Marcelle, she's working more on the strategic level. The bigger picture. Because we have a high turnover of staff every year, she's also working on the task level



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as kind of the field supervisor and crew leader. Our jobs are a bit better defined now, and I think that's actually a good thing.

Chris Blanchard: Has your injury and not being to operate at 100% physically force you to change how you do that tactical level of work?

Brendan Grant: Yeah, I mean if I'm pushing myself real hard and I'm on my feet, uneven ground for a long day, then I'm happy to get on the truck and the next day and take a little bit of a load off. But I think more than anything, I just don't push as hard as I used to. 'Cause you know what? It's not worth it. We all believe strongly in what we're doing and we're really passionate about it, but it's not worth dying for and sometimes it's okay to just say you know what? I'm going to take the night off. Or I'm going to take the weekend off. Or you know what? One more rainstorm on this old barn without the ridge cap protecting its roof isn't going to be the demise of this old barn, you know? I think that I'm learning to have a little bit better perspective on life.

I have to say to qualify that though, it's because Marcelle and I have always kind of pushed the limits of what's humanly possible. That work ethic I really think the equipment, and the infrastructure, and the processes in place on the farm, that kept us afloat when I went down, so I think that if I took a more cavalier approach from the beginning to my work, then we would have been in a lot worse shape when I did go down, but because we're so hardcore for so long, it kind of put us in a position where okay, the farm can float. The farm can take care of itself here.

Chris Blanchard: I guess one of the things that's really important to recognize I think is the different seasons of the farm, right? I mean, in the beginning of a farm, so much of what you're doing is sweat equity and you can't pay for labor with sweat equity. You can't pay for tractors with sweat equity. You gotta put that in to start to get the momentum to be able to get the tractors and get the workers, then kind of how you shift from that, but also how you stay safe in that time when it is sweat equity in that every extra hour is really an hour of investment in your farm, and it does make a big difference down the road. Kind of to the point where you guys gets you to the point where you are right now, where you can ... you really do have the ability to step back from that a little bit.

Brendan Grant: Absolutely. There were lots and lots of days and years where we'd come home from work, from our off-farm jobs, we'd put on a dirty shirt, take off the clean one, head out to the field and we'd come in six hours later. We put in pretty well a full day's work with headlamps on. Weeding with headlamps, that was common. That's what we did, that's how we made it happen. That's how we ran the CSA while we both worked off farm for that first couple years. I don't regret it, I definitely don't regret it, it's character building, and I think it was necessary, but I also wouldn't do it again now.

I'm older now and I'm not as ... I'm getting tired man.

Chris Blanchard: It happens.

Brendan Grant: I still got lots in me, but I got a little less in me.



- Chris Blanchard: Do you and Marcelle have kids?
- Brendan Grant: We don't. We've focused on building the farm and having calves and other things, but no kids so far.
- Chris Blanchard: Which actually, I'm going to make a funny transition from kids to calves, but both being additional enterprises on the farm really, how do you guys integrate the management of livestock with the management of the vegetables. We actually just heard from Ray Tyler down at Rose Creek Farms saying he hasn't seen very many good examples of people doing a successful job of managing vegetables and a successful job of managing livestock on the same farm. How are you guys pulling that off?
- Brendan Grant: It's really difficult, and there's a really good reason why you don't see a lot of market farms also have livestock in a big way, and certainly a lot of times they're bringing in feed rather than making their own. There's good reason for that, it's really challenging. I breed all of our cows with artificial insemination. So I breed in the winter months, so starting in February, March, April is my breeding season, which means that we then have November, December, January- ish. Once CSA wraps up, then we start calving, and because we bought an old dairy farm, we've got a nice little tie stall cow barn that we tie stall our cows in the winter months in the barn. They're in at night, and they're outside during the day. It's great because we get to spend time with the animals that we love, but most importantly, we're able to capture all that poop, which then goes to the barn cleaner, out to the compost pile. Then I compost it quite vigorously over 24 months, before it gets to the vegetable fields. With that system, we're able to generate about 30 ton of well-aged, 24-month-old compost through that system.
- Because of our geography, being in the middle of nowhere and having no other organic infrastructure, I feel like that's our best ... that fertility input, that seems like the only way to go for us. I often joke that we're vegetable farmers in the summer and we're poop farmers in the winter. It's a bit of a juggling act. Making hay is a big deal. We've got a lot of money and equipment for doing that and starting in another week or so, I'll be on the hay train for the next foreseeable couple of weeks to try and put away enough feed to feed those cows through the winter.
- It's a challenge Chris, we do it because we believe in it. It seems for us to be the only way that we can feed our soil in the way we think we ought to. We do buy in some other inputs, like alfalfa pellets is one we've been using a lot lately. As an example, we bought alfalfa pellets this year, certified organic pellets, and they were \$400 dollars a ton, but the shipping on each ton was like \$330.
- Chris Blanchard: Right.
- Brendan Grant: Fertility is a big deal. I don't see us being able to economically import it. Unfortunately, our farm isn't big enough that I could put 50% of my land in plow-down or green manure each year and rotate back and forth. I would love to do that. I can't. I can put in about a third into green manure and then another third of the fields will get that nice compost, and then the other third will either



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get those alfalfa pellets or something similar, or you'll get nothing, and that will be the residual. We'll just ride the residual fertility for that next crop.

Chris Blanchard: Brendan I think this is a good spot for us to pivot and go to the lightning round. I've got to get a word from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back.

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

Brendan Grant: We have an irrigation traveler and hose reel, it's a Cadman 1500 and that thing is ... watching that thing irrigate our crops is just a wonder to me, I love it. It's so awesome.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about how those hose reels work.

Brendan Grant: It's basically a coil of pipe that's wound up on a drum, and it's attached to a cart, and I use an ATV or a small tractor to spool out the reel and you spool it out, on the one end it's got a sprinkler, just an impulse sprinkler on wheels. For us, that sprinkler runs along our harvest roadways between each of our fields and we've got 400-foot fields, and so I spool this thing out 400 feet and then back at the other end, we plug in the water. We've got a four-inch water main to feed the reel, and it sprinkles, you know, irrigates both directions, in circle, or you can move the socks and just do one side or the other, and it retrieves or coils itself back up under its own power. You can adjust that quite finely, how quickly it retrieves. Between the retrieval rate and the nozzle that you use, you can put down a pretty precise amount of water.

Chris Blanchard: Did you size your equipment to fit the 400-foot beds or did you size the beds to fit a 400-foot hose reel?

Brendan Grant: [01:18:00] I sized the equipment to what I had because that came years after I'd established my growing space, but I think the one thing I had the foresight to do was to really think through our growing space. It's all very modular, there's a lot of symmetry, there's no 200-foot beds, they're all 400, and our roadways are the same. It was easy to add a quick irrigation system in that setup. We've gone through the evolution of using lots of drip tape on the farm, and then also swearing a lot while using said drip tape. And now we only use drip tape where it's absolutely necessary, and that's under some sort of mulch or in our hoop houses. Overhead sprinkler for everything else. Overhead has got its downside, but boy to be able to put that much water that quickly on crops when they need



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it is the real big upside. One thing I've learned is that there's a big difference between watering your crops to see your plants survive and watering your crops to see them thrive.

Chris Blanchard: Talk about that a little bit. How do you decide how much water you're going to put down on a given crop?

Brendan Grant: We, of course, run those raised beds, which dry out more quickly, so we do have to irrigate. If it's hot out, we need to be irrigating each crop maybe a couple times a week even. I like to go down to my wrist. I dig down, and it should be sufficiently moist, not soggy, but good and damp right up to about my wrist. That's the main part of your rooting zone, and if it's not good and moist, that's when we bring out the irrigation reel, and we make sure that it gets good and moist. It's also been really great to be able to give crops like potatoes for instance, water when you need to give them water. When they're flowering, hammer the water to them. It makes all the difference.

If you're trying to keep up on your successions of your carrots and beets and lettuce and everything else, it's one thing to put the feed in the ground on the date you had hoped, but if it sits there, doesn't do anything because no water comes for five or 15 days, that throws that whole plant off. To be able to put the seed in the ground and then make sure it gets water right away, we're getting more consistent results with our germination, keeping us on track better with our cropping plan.

Chris Blanchard: We haven't talked a lot about your wife and farming partner, Marcelle. We talked a little about her role on the farm, but what's Marcelle's farming superpower?

Brendan Grant: Marcelle's farming superpower, well, she carries her clipboard around with her religiously. Her clippie, even to bed, she's still organizing the next day's work. She's extremely organized and me being a man, and being who I am, I'm not that, and so I love that about her. I think in terms of an actual superpower, she's got a real good sense of seeing things for what they are, whether that's personal interactions or she can look at a plant and see its stress when the rest of us would not even notice. She's got a really innate ability to see things for what they are in a real, unbiased, noble kind of way. Because of that, she's an awesome farmer, 'cause she just has an intuition about with plants and with animals that the rest of us really wish we had. I think that's a big one, I love her for it, or for lots of reasons, but that's a big one.

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

Brendan Grant: Me? Celery. No question. I love celery. We grow a lot of carrots, carrots are number one crop, we grow over an acre of carrots, but celery is where it's at for me.

Chris Blanchard: What about celery 'cause that's a weird one Brendan.

Brendan Grant: You're not calling me weird, are you?



Chris Blanchard: I'm not calling you weird, I'm calling your choice of a favorite crop weird. There's a difference.

Brendan Grant: Think about it celery, it's a tough crop to grow. I mean, just to get that stuff to germinate consistently is the first feat, and then it's a needy crop. It needs lots of food, it needs lots of water, it's also quite vulnerable to a lot of pests. It's a really challenging crop, and when you nail it and you end up with those huge big celery stalks that are crispy and crunchy and they're not stringy, and their sweet like sweet that you don't get in industrially grown celery. It's life-changing for people who are really into food, in the same way that we've all had those customers come up to us and say, "Wow, your carrots are so awesome, I just can't store bought carrots anymore, you spoiled me for life." I get the same kind of comments about celery and the difference between good, organically grown celery and the other stuff, it's starch. Every time I pull off a celery crop of that quality, I'm just so proud of my ... I'm the only one at the market who notices, I should say that 'cause no one else you know?

And I'm standing there behind the table, and I'm just beaming with pride for what I'm able to accomplish, and no one cares. This is strictly for me, but celery also is a potentially very lucrative crop. We put a lot into it, we grow our celery with lots of compost and alfalfa pellets, we put it on that paper mulch I talked about so it never dries out. We use quick hoops and then we hoop it off with row cover and we pin it down and we walk away and we make sure that we irrigate it. And we come back in September when it's ready. But we put a lot of labor and expense up front, but when we go to harvest, all of our beds are 400 feet, we put three rows of celery on that bed, so that's 1,200 plants in a 400-foot bed. At worst, if it's a salvage mission, you're going to be cutting four celery plants and bunch them together for a stalk and sell them for four bucks. That's a \$1,200 dollar bed. At best, each of those plants grows to be a \$4 dollar plant, and now we're talking about a \$4,800 dollar 400-foot bed.

Chris Blanchard: Nice.

Brendan Grant: Which I did the math on last night, it's \$96,000 dollars an acre. So-

Chris Blanchard: Not bad.

Brendan Grant: That's pretty good.

Chris Blanchard: Not bad.

Brendan Grant: Who needs micro-greens when you've got celery. The problem, of course, is there's only so much of it you can sell. So, that's the trick. I want to learn how to be able to hold celery over in the fall to feed into a winter CSA down the road. I know it's possible to hold it for several weeks if not approaching two months, but I just don't know exactly how to make that happen at this point.

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



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Brendan Grant: I'd tell myself to think bigger. I didn't scale the farm appropriately from the beginning. I had too narrow, I was thinking five acres, 100-member CSA, \$50,000 dollar gross sales, there's my life, which is a joke. I mean \$50,000 gross sales is not going to cut it for us and for the overhead and what we're doing. I think that I would say don't limit yourself to some arbitrary number, but rather define that number by what your financial needs are, which by the way, is a lot more than you might think. To that end, I would also say borrow money if you're able. I know lots of people are phobic of taking on debt. For me, I look at it this way. There's very few of us in this world that are privileged enough to be able to take on a mortgage or a loan. That's a privilege. Why not exercise that privilege. Leverage that privilege to help you acquire the equipment needed to make more money off the farm more quickly and put yourself into a better position for the future. Those would be my sage words of wisdom to my former self.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome. Brendan, thank you so much for being on the podcast today.

Brendan Grant: Thanks Chris, it's been a lot of fun and I'm also flattered that you invited me, so thanks very much.

Chris Blanchard: Alright, so wrapping things up here. I'll say again that this episode 127 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast. You can find the notes for this show at [FarmertoFarmerPodcast.com](http://FarmertoFarmerPodcast.com), by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Grant. That's G-R-A-N-T.

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Thank you for listening, be really safe out there. Keep the tractor running.