



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



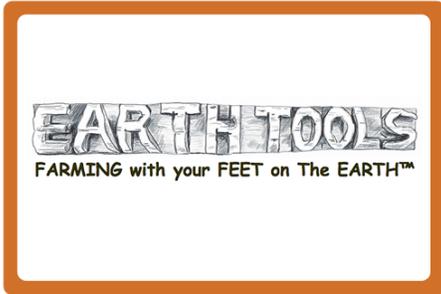
EPISODE 139

Andy and Melissa Dunham of Grinnell Heritage Farm on Growing a Vegetable Farm in a Sea of Corn and Soybeans

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast, episode 140, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Andy and Melissa Dunham own and operate Grinnell Heritage Farm in Grinnell, Iowa. From corn and mean ground and no infrastructure when they started in 2006, Grinnell Heritage Farm has grown to 20 acres of vegetables marketed through a 250-member CSA, natural food stores, multiple farmers markets and new on farm pizza night that they started just this year. Andy and Melissa share how they worked with New Pioneer food Co-Op to develop their skills as market farmers and to learn how to better serve the wholesale marketplace. We also dig into their CSA model, employee management on Grinnell Heritage Farm and how they've changed their CSA to respond to the needs of both customers and employees. We also learn how Andy and Melissa develop their farm infrastructure, created environmental enhancements to change the farm ecology and to benefit the farm overall, about their organic weed control in their asparagus patch, and how they've managed repeated pesticide drift incidents on their central Iowa farm.

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Chris Blanchard: Before we get started today, I'd like to get a quick word from Dru Rivers about an important issue facing organic farmers.

Dru Rivers: Hi, my name is Dru Rivers and I've been a farmer in Northern California for the past 35 years. Our farm is called full belly farm and we have been certified organic since we began farming. When we started, many of the rules for certifying organic farms were just being written. At the heart of all of these rules was the soil. The critically recognized fact that all organic farming is based on healthy fertile soil. We at Full Belly Farm have worked tirelessly all of these years to continuously improve and increase the fertility and health of our soil. There's a dangerous concept afoot that soil less farming can also become certified organic. We at Full Belly Farm are strongly opposed to this idea. We believe that the soul of organic farming will be ripped out if that is allowed and the heart of what we've been doing all of these years will be for naught. Please go to the website, keepthesoilinorganic.org and learn all that you can. We are really committed to making sure that our current NOSD board that does rules and regulations for certifications will not allow soil less organic farming to be certified. Thank you.

Chris Blanchard: Andy and Melissa Dunham, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Andy Dunham: Thanks for the invite Chris.

Melissa Dunham: Yeah, thank you.

Chris Blanchard: So glad that you could join us today. I'd like to start off by having you kind of give us the lay of the land there at Grinnell Heritage Farm. Where are you guys located? How much are you guys farming and how are you getting it to the people who eat the food?

Andy Dunham: I'll give the farm history. The farm has been in my family for 160 years now. I'm the fifth-generation farmer. My great-great-grandfather was Levi Grinnell and he moved here in 1857. It started out as kind of a diverse farm, like almost all of them were back then and gradually contracted down to the corn/soy bean alternation that is pretty much predominant in Iowa now. I was looking for a place to farm, and was actively looking in Northeast Iowa where my folks live and where I grew up. My great-aunt and my aunt were the farm owners at the time. They were having a neighbor come and custom plant and tend to the corn and soy bean crop. It was back before the commodity boom so the prices were pretty low. My great-aunt was approaching older age and she wanted to make sure that the farm stayed in the family so she was going to pass it on. That's how I got my start. My great-Aunt Marion passed on a share of the farm to me. My Aunt Janet was willing to rent the whole farm to the new farm business, Grinnell Heritage Farm.

Andy Dunham: It was originally an 80-acre parcel. We're slightly smaller than that now because of railroads, and road right-of-ways and an old, one-room schoolhouse that was taken off. In the fall of 2006, put up a greenhouse, hauled a mobile home onto the site.



There had never even been a flush toilet on the property before even though it had been in the family for 150 years. Hauled a mobile home in and basically started kind of with a blank corn and soy bean field slate. There was a small alfalfa field, that's kind of where we started. It was relatively flat and that's where we started the produce production in the first year. The first year was 2007. Began the organic transition then, in 2006 and we've been certified by MOSA since 2009.

Andy Dunham: We started out kind of small. I needed to build a packing facility so I built a pole shed in 2007, pretty much all the infrastructure was really old. There was an old barn, a few old sheds, but all the water lines needed to be replaced. Like I said, there wasn't a flush toilet so I had to put in a leeching field. I had to run all new electrical. Even though I had access to the ground, there were quite a few capital improvements that needed to be made.

Andy Dunham: We started out the first year, I started out the first year, this was before Melissa and I got married, with about three acres of produce and sold predominantly to farmers markets and contributed to a small local CSA here. Then, in fall of 2007 or winter of 2007 we got married and 2008 we expanded a little bit. I think we went up to about four or five acres in 2008. That was the flood year so we learned a lot of difficult lessons that year. We kind of have grown in step wise fashion since. It wasn't a linear growth. We were at five acres and then we kind of went to seven and then ten. I remember from going to conferences that we wanted to get out of that middle zone of being small enough that you can do all the work yourself and kind of that weird transition where there's no money to be made. We kind of grew in stepwise fashion to 12 and then we're up around 20 to 25 acres now.

Melissa Dunham: In 2007, we got married and I'm originally from the Twin Cities in Minnesota and moved south four hours and started farming here with my husband. I've always had a real passion for environmental responsibility and things like that so it was kind of a unique match and not something that I could have foreseen. When we first started out, we made the decision to give the farming operation five years with both of us working on the farm without off-farm income to see if we could make a go of it. As you know, it's kind of hard to make your living from the land these days, especially on a small-scale farm enterprise.

Melissa Dunham: We decided to move forward. We made it to year five and we were thankful for that and now we're on year 11. Year 11, what we're looking at is a 250-member CSA. Our CSA is distributed to the Des Moines area, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids and then here in Grinnell. In addition to that, we've got a large amount of our business is wholesale and then a small amount of our business is farmers market. I would say our income, if you looked at it as a pie chart or something, it would go 45% of it is CSA, 45% of it is wholesale and the remainder is miscellaneous income and farmers market.

Chris Blanchard: Grinnell, Iowa is located kind of halfway between Des Moines and Iowa City, right?

Melissa Dunham: Yes, we are almost directly in the middle of Iowa City and Des Moines, which makes it good in some respects and inconvenient in others. It's a little harder for us to get community members from those further distances to the farm, but it also provides us with a centralized location to serve both of those communities.

Chris Blanchard: Both of those, for cities, they're relatively small. They're certainly not a Minneapolis/St. Paul kind of a place.



- Melissa Dunham:** No, definitely not. The environment in Iowa, I would say, is different. We're definitely adapting and learning more about food systems but if you compare us to the Twin Cities or Madison area, I would say we're about 15 to 20 years behind.
- Chris Blanchard:** Growing up to 20 to 25-acre vegetable farm, has it been fairly easy for you guys to find the markets that you needed in Des Moines, Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, or has that been a challenge for you?
- Melissa Dunham:** I think it's been a challenge. We do put a lot of energy into marketing. Maybe not as much as some but it's definitely a struggle to make sure that we can get rid of every last case of wholesale product that we can possibly produce. It kind of contradicts sometimes what you'll see in the newspaper with organic production can't keep up with organic demand. I think it kind of goes back to maybe Iowa just needing more time to catch up, essentially, do what some of these other larger communities are doing, taking that dive and making that commitment to supporting local agriculture. That isn't necessarily always the goal with a lot of our wholesale clients that are available to us. We do have a couple of really great partners in this state. We have Pioneer Food Co-op. It's definitely one of the reasons that our farm is where it is today. They taught us to grow for wholesale success and quality control case sizes. They've been very flexible and they've taught us a lot along the way. I think, as a beginning farm that's only 11 years old, having a community partner like that makes a huge difference.
- Chris Blanchard:** When you say that New Pioneer helped you guys learn how to grow for wholesale markets, what are the things that you guys needed to learn or needed to improve to be able to service that market the way that they wanted you to service it?
- Melissa Dunham:** They gave us guidance on simple things like case sizes and standard, like and eggplant. You can't ship them. I don't know, a gigantic eggplant. Maybe a sweet potato would be a better thought here. Your wholesale customers don't want a nine-pound sweet potato. We can grow that but they don't want them. I feel like they did their part in being open and honest and communicative, which is really what beginning farmer really needs. They were there to provide us guidance and it's made a great difference for us.
- Andy Dunham:** When we made mistakes, it wasn't like the relationship was over. They could say, Steve, in Iowa City might just say, this doesn't look very good. Next time, we need it to look like this. We can issue them a credit and then move on with the relationship and it didn't end the relationship.
- Melissa Dunham:** In addition to that, I think that we believe in their mission statement. They believe in local farmers and that's why their patrons go and they shop there. We didn't know what a standard case of kale cost when we started. We didn't know what that cost was. We had a relationship where we could just pick up the phone and call Steve and say, hey Steve, we're looking to start growing this for wholesale. Can you give us an idea what the case price would be for us? He provided that, which is extremely helpful. Then, as a farmer, you can figure out, hey, can I do this and be financially successful or, maybe that's not a crop that I can afford to grow. Oftentimes, you have to have a pretty decent relationship in order to just pick up the phone and call your customer and ask them that question.



- Chris Blanchard:** How did you go about establishing that relationship in the first place? I'm thinking back and I farmed in Iowa and most of our product went north, instead of heading south to Iowa City, we were heading north up to the Twin Cities. There were already things happening at New Pioneer Coop. They were already dealing with local growers at that time. How did you get them to invest in you?
- Andy Dunham:** I think we just kind of started by doing a few cold calls. As a beginning farmer you end up getting rejected quite a lot and so you have to have a little bit of thick skin and expect to hear no sometimes, and that's all right. We just kept knocking on the door and and said what are you looking for? Usually, at least back then, it might not be quite so open now. Usually there were a few crops that they would tell us, well, no one is doing this. You could try it. Maybe it wasn't the most lucrative thing on our end to do but at least it got our foot in the door and it showed that we could provide quality product and be consistent and make deliveries on time and deliver what was ordered. It was pre-chilled so it had good shelf life and all of those things that you have to tick off in a wholesale order, I guess, in order to make it successful and long-lasting. As we were able to prove ourselves, we said, we could tackle something like this. They said, we have a grower that's leaving this particular crop because they're retiring, would you think about growing that for us and our relationship grew, I think, kind of in that way.
- Chris Blanchard:** It's really interesting to me, Andy, that you started off at the farm by building a packing shed. That that was one of the first investments that you made on the farm. Did that include a cooling facility?
- Andy Dunham:** I put in a 10 by 12 walk in cooler initially. I worked at your farm as an intern for a year, and that was one of the most valuable lessons I learned at Rock Spring Farm, was that you really can't have good quality product unless you get the field heat out of it in an appropriate fashion. We still get comments to this day, at the farmers markets that we do attend. It might be 11:00 and it's 85 degrees and somebody will come and pick up a bundle of leafy greens of some sort and they'll say, hey, this is still cold. Everybody else's stuff is wilted and looks maybe not as good as it could. Our stuff tends to hold up pretty well. Getting that field heat out is so important and it's almost impossible to do without a walk-in cooler.
- Chris Blanchard:** Of course, you didn't seem to learn from me that a 10 by 12 cooler was going to be too small.
- Andy Dunham:** Yeah, but you have to start somewhere. In the initial business plan, I knew that was not the end. That is now our garlic and onion cooler. We have two other coolers now and we kind of new from the start that we'd be adding on. You have to start somewhere.
- Chris Blanchard:** That's right. You talk about that importance of getting the product cold. Are you guys transporting your product in refrigerated vehicles as well?
- Melissa Dunham:** Yes, we sure are. We started off with, well, we didn't have it right off the bat when we first started, but we had an old Isuzu that had a refr unit on it. It was kind of a gas guzzler and a difficult thing to maneuver. A couple years ago we upgraded to a Sprinter with a refrigeration unit on it. We found that that's a lot easier for us, as we're aging to get in and out of because it's lower to the ground and you can stand



up in it. I'm fairly short but I can still raise my entire arm so you're not stopping over in the vehicle, which has been really helpful.

Chris Blanchard: I know when we transitioned to the Sprinter, the other thing is, you could get done with the end of day of deliveries and not feel like you'd been beat up the way that I always did driving the box truck.

Melissa Dunham: Right, yep.

Chris Blanchard: You guys do the CSA, which usually involves growing 40 some odd crops. Are you providing that kind of a diversity to your wholesale markets?

Andy Dunham: Certainly not. We're doing, what would you say, Melissa? We're probably growing about 15 to 20 crops that we feel relatively confident in an average year that will make us money that we'll offer for wholesale. Is that an okay answer, Melissa?

Melissa Dunham: I would say that's fairly accurate. What we've noticed over the years is diversity on every aspect of this business is important. Especially when you're looking at climate change and buying shift changes throughout the community. We've kind of kept this larger number of wholesale crops growing because we've seen changes in purchasing. Because of the climate piece, one year maybe we'll have a terrible sweet potato year but maybe the other crops help us with our cash flow that year, kind of off set that loss. We're fairly fortunate and I think that having that diversity is what attributed to us still being here in year 11. It doesn't make sense. Would I love to only ship out cabbage some days? Yeah. The easiest way isn't necessarily the most sustainable way.

Chris Blanchard: When you say that you're reasonably confident that those crops are making you money, is that a gut check or do you guys have a bunch of paperwork to back that up?

Andy Dunham: We're looking at numbers, it's just that every year is variable. I just listened to your latest podcast, or one of the latest ones, on weeding. You need a bunch of tools to weed because your soil conditions might be drastically different from one year to the next. For example, this year, we're offering a lot of wholesale onions, which, we're in good black Iowa soil, so growing wholesale onions is not necessarily a business model that most people would chase after in central Iowa but the soil conditions were just right. We were really dry and had just enough moisture early on that I was able to cultivate the onions and they were pretty much perfectly clean with only using the co-cultivation, which doesn't always happen for us. This year, we didn't have to spend really any labor on weeding onions and every onion that we planted turned out to be pretty much wholesale quality. We were able to sell them at wholesale prices and make money this year. We'll probably plant about the same number of onions again next year but I don't know if I'd say I'm reasonably confident we'll have the same cleanliness in the onions, I guess.

Chris Blanchard: You guys also do the CSA, you said 250 CSA shares altogether?

Melissa Dunham: Right. I would say about 15 to 20% of our CSA shareholders share their share so that kind of increases the number of families or individuals but our shares tend to be a little bit larger and sometimes an individual can't consume an entire share on their own. Back in the day, we did try and accommodate people by doing the half share,



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but for us logistically, it did not work. We went back to trying to help people find partners and just kind of sticking with what worked for us.

Chris Blanchard: Are you guys doing the CSA model where you're packing boxes and taking those to centralized drop sites?

Melissa Dunham: Yep, I think we have 14 different drop sites in the various communities that we serve and we have a check list and so it's kind of a self-serve operation when we get there. People just kind of take their stuff. We upgraded to reusable plastic boxes, that way, they just stay at the drop site. People just bring reusable bags, they take their share contents out, transfer it to their bag and then our boxes are less likely to get damaged. We can bring them back to the farm and sanitize them so they stay nice and clean for the next use. It's also been cheaper for us, financially over buying a lot of CSAs if you get a box things, they'll use wax boxes and those are expensive. They're very expensive and we use to operate it where our shareholders could take their box and then return it but the return rate was only 60 to 70% and so that's a pretty great loss just by not having it returned. Then, in addition to that, they're wax boxes, you can't really clean them very well. We're pretty happy with this upgraded box system we have.

Chris Blanchard: What kinds of locations are you dropping your CSA shares at? Are you using member's garages?

Melissa Dunham: We deliver to a wide range of places. We've got a front porch in the Cedar Rapids area. We deliver some of our shares to New Pioneer Food Coop in Cedar Rapids, Whole Foods asked if they could be a drop site in the West Des Moines area a few years ago. We try and do it in places that are convenient for people, some place that people will already be going to. Not necessarily something that they'll have to do and go completely out of their way. We try and do this because of retention. Everybody's got a busy life and, I think, the easier you can make it on your shareholders, the better off everybody will be. Anywhere from a front porch, to we do have someone's garage in Iowa City, to grocery stores.

Chris Blanchard: I noticed that you guys offer a spring share, a summer share, a winter share and a student share. I thought that was an interesting twist on the CSA concept, that student share.

Melissa Dunham: Yeah, because we serve a lot of college communities, we've got the Grinnell College, we actually border the Grinnell College property here in Grinnell, and we wanted to be able to find a way to serve the professors and students that would maybe leave for the summer but return in mid-August and want fresh food. This was one way to be able to serve those populations.

Chris Blanchard: How does that work out with your crop production? I would think that it would be hard to have a big jump in the middle of the season in something like how many bags of salad mix you need or how many bunches of kale you're putting in the shares.

Melissa Dunham: It's actually pretty great, just because of the growing season in Iowa, April, May, June, starts off kind of slow. July, you start to pick up, you're losing a lot of your spring crop. Then, come August, we have entirely way too much food and so adding some shareholders on at that point is actually a benefit for our farm.



Chris Blanchard: Are you holding crops over the winter for that spring share?

Andy Dunham: We do some. We might leave some parsnips in the ground or we typically will do, kind of how you did, where you overwintered the carrots [in the walk-in cooler] and then would sell them at the spring farmers market. We do a little bit of that but most of it's coming from outside.

Chris Blanchard: What other kinds of crops are you including in that?

Andy Dunham: In the spring share, so that would be asparagus, and radishes, leafy greens like spinach and lettuce. They would also go. We have a few hoop crops like the parsnips and the carrots. Some years we'll overwinter beets, if we have a really nice beet crop, other leafy greens, things like that. The spring share is pretty light so if you look at the price per week on that, usually, in the month of May, we're mostly concerned with field work and getting transplants in the ground and we try to make it so the share only takes up maybe about a day or a day-and-a-half of the crew time so we can be doing fieldwork for the rest of the time. Mostly for people, it's kind of the get them used to coming to pick up a share or, they really want that, the first asparagus tends to be quite a hit.

Chris Blanchard: Asparagus isn't an easy crop to do organically. You actually helped plant our asparagus field at Rock Spring Farm and I would be embarrassed to admit, well, I guess I am embarrassed to admit, what happened to that. Are you guys successful with your asparagus crop?

Andy Dunham: Yeah, I feel like we've got that down pretty well for the most part. We end up planting a cover crop of soy beans into it just to immediately post-harvest season. I'll go in and I flail mow the patch down by the time you're done picking your mid to late year. We have a few straggly asparagus ferns, basically, sticking up that you missed and then weeds that are out, depending on how many times you float mow it, you've got weeds that are anywhere from ankle to knee high so I'll go in and I'll flail mow that really low to the ground and then I take my rototiller and drop it as low as I dare to, I guess, is how I'd phrase that. I rototill over the top of the bed, mostly trying to know the weed pressure down some. Then I go and I broadcast spread about 400 pounds of soybeans to the acre. Then I'll go through and I'll harrow that relatively aggressively to kind of pull some of that weed material up and lightly bury the soy beans.

Andy Dunham: We'll actually time our last asparagus harvest to when the rain is coming. I want to do that about three to five hours before it starts raining. The idea is, is that the soybeans emerge and they're so thick that the cotyledons of the soybeans actually help to suppress weeds, they're shading out the weeds with the cotyledons. It works pretty well if you get decent rain. This year, it was so dry that they germinated, the soybeans did, and then they didn't do very much because there wasn't much moisture for them to drill down to. Most years it works pretty well. Our patch is now 11 years old and if you go out there and look at it right now, it looks like an asparagus field. There are some weeds in it but it's not too bad.

Chris Blanchard: Nice. The soybeans, obviously, from what you're saying, don't shade out the asparagus ferns, they're able to jump up and compete with that.



- Andy Dunham:** Oh yeah, the asparagus will go ... The nice thing too, with that system, the asparagus will actually put on some nice green growth now. It will put on another foot of lush, green growth, because I'd imagine the soybeans are probably putting, maybe 15 or 20 pounds of nitrogen to the acre in, but the soybeans are stressed enough that they aren't doing all that well because they're being shaded out by the asparagus. You're probably not fixing all that much nitrogen but you're getting some and I think the asparagus does benefit from it.
- Melissa Dunham:** Andy, this was a tip that you learned from the MOSES Conference a few years ago, right?
- Andy Dunham:** Yeah, almost 10 years ago. At the MOSES Conference, I ran into a Michigan grower who was, we just talked after one of the sessions, and I was saying, oh, I'm putting this asparagus patch in, and he gave me this tip and I have no idea who he was. If you're listening, whoever you were, thank you very much.
- Chris Blanchard:** I think it goes without saying, those opportunities at the conferences that the time you spend talking to other growers is as important or even more important than the time you spend in the workshops.
- Melissa Dunham:** Definitely.
- Chris Blanchard:** Are you guys doing much high tunnel production?
- Andy Dunham:** Not too terribly much. We have about a 3,000-square foot heated greenhouse space where we start transplants. We used to do some in ground production in there but now, we're growing enough transplants that that's actually a little on the small side, especially through May and June. That then is where we'll cure garlic and onions with a shade cloth on it and then we'll put sweet potatoes in there and take the shade cloth off and crank the heat up. We do have a 3,000-square foot high tunnel that we typically will do some fall greens in or winter greens in and then maybe cherry tomatoes or something like that in the summer. We just had a micro storm or something that blew the plastic off of that. I think I'm just going to leave it uncovered for the winter, just to hopefully allow the soil in there to get some actual moisture instead of irrigation water.
- Andy Dunham:** We don't do too terribly much covered stuff. We're at the very top of our water shed, which is a blessing and a curse. I've heard other farmers talk about, I believe Dave Perkins said something about making sure you find farmland that is suitable for vegetable production. We have farmland that is very, very well suited for vegetable production but we really don't have a great source of high volume water, so we don't have the ability, anywhere on the farm, to dig a six or seven-acre irrigation pond, because of the lay of the land, it just doesn't work anywhere, and then to drill a well, we did drill an irrigation well last year, but we just can't get the volume to do a walking gun or something like that. We can only get about 30 gallons per minute. We're relying mostly on drip irrigation and so the lay of the land is such that we're at the top of our water shed and we do catch some wind. Doing more high-tunnel is something I might be interested in but I think we have to go with much beefier models than many people get by with just because of where we're situated.



- Chris Blanchard:** 20 acres of ground is a lot of ground to be covering with just drip irrigation. Are you guys laying that on top of the soil or are you burying it down in there so it's not blowing around in those same winds that would cause you trouble with the high tunnels?
- Andy Dunham:** Yeah, so we bury pretty much all of it. The only time we don't is when we're trying to germinate things like carrots or maybe parsnips or something that would be difficult to do with buried drip. We bury it and we can cultivate right over the top of it and then we know we don't have but we have two wells that we can irrigate out of so we can irrigate about two acres at a pop. We don't really have the ability in a drought to irrigate all of the ground that we're doing so at the beginning of the season, we prioritize and there are certain crops that we say, we're not going to irrigate these and if it's really, really dry, we might lose those crops and we know that up front.
- Andy Dunham:** An example, this spring, we had a pretty bad spring cabbage crop because usually you can rely on rainwater to get a good cabbage crop here and this year, we just didn't have it. We had chosen not to irrigate it and by the time we needed to irrigate it, we were already irrigating other things and so it just turned out to be kind of a bad spring cabbage year.
- Chris Blanchard:** Yeah, I would think that would be really hard, again, you talk about climate change, I'm thinking about the drought of 2012 that was so bad across much of the mid-west. How did you guys survive that?
- Andy Dunham:** We were dry and so we were irrigating out of our well and we do have a small farm pond. We basically drained that, that year and we just kind of prioritized and said, these are the crops that are going to get irrigation. We did do some irrigation that was just to keep the plants alive, hoping to get some rain and it never really came. It was one of those things, you win some and you lose some.
- Melissa Dunham:** I think it really stuck to a comment that I made earlier in diversity. Some of the crops fared better with the weather that year over others. If we had not had that diversity, that could have been the year that broke our farm. I do think that diversity is what has kept us going all these years. It's a lot of work, I'm not going to lie to you. Having that many crops is a challenge, but I think, given the current climate that we're seeing, it's really important.
- Chris Blanchard:** When you talk about burying the drip lines out in the field so that you can cultivate over them, this is standard drip tape with the emitters every 12 or 18 or 24 inches and you're actually putting that in the soil and then not covering the soil with plastic? This is actually what you might have under any of your crops?
- Andy Dunham:** Right and we do have a raised bed shaper, plastic mulch layer that we use for some crops. Some of the we'll do that with. In part, that's because of the lessons we learned in 2008. Probably seven or eight acres of our produce ground is like pancake flat and then really, really heavy rain, especially back in 08, before our soils improved, the water, the soil just wasn't able to take as much rain as we got at one time. We had, I think, three different 13-inch rain events over the course of one or two days. We got 13 inches of rain, I think, on three different occasions in 2008. Over the course of 24 hours or so, each event. We had crops standing in water. We



put some raised beds in after that just because we recognized that the ground couldn't ... If we're going to have 13 inches of rain, and we're pancake flat, it just can't absorb or run off fast enough. We are able bury the drip tape in that system and then we have a toolbar on the back of the tractor that we can just drive in road gear, and it puts in one or two lines of drip tape or whatever we want right down wherever we want it. We do that pre-plant.

Chris Blanchard: Are you burying that directly under where you intend to put the crop plants?

Andy Dunham: Typically not. An example might be, say broccoli, we have a 60-inch bed system and so we'll do two rows of broccoli per bed and we'll put it right down the middle. The drip tape might be eight inches or 12 inches away from the plant, kind of depending on what we're doing.

Chris Blanchard: How deeply are you burying the drip tape?

Andy Dunham: We'll usually go about two-and-a-half inches.

Chris Blanchard: That's enough to keep it out of your cultivator knives?

Andy Dunham: Yep. It might be three inches. You'll set it down and just kind of drive.

Chris Blanchard: You said raised bed production on some of your farm but not on all of your farm.

Andy Dunham: No, sweet potatoes would be on raised beds, we do tomatoes on raised beds. Some of the crops that we've identified over the years that seem to perform better with either having a little bit of extra heat, like sweet potatoes. We've done trials where we've done them on flat ground, unraised beds with plastic, unraised beds without plastic, unraised beds with paper mulch. We did a bunch of trials through Practical Farmers of Iowa years ago. The raised on plastic mulch, hands down had the best yield. We just kind of look at yield data and see how the crop looks and make adjustments on the fly. Over the years we've added things to what we've done on plastic culture and we've taken things off that we didn't think was worth it or didn't seem to work.

Chris Blanchard: You talked about having 20 to 25 acres of vegetable crops, are you managing additional land in cover crop acres as well?

Andy Dunham: In cover crop acres, no. The remainder of the farm is planted fruit and nut trees. We have probably about two-and-a-half to three acres of fruit and nut trees, about five acres of wildlife habitat that we planted, and then we have a beef cow herd, a grass-fed beef cow herd, that we mostly manage for fertility in the vegetable production system. They're on pasture right now and they have some hay ground. We have about 20 or 22 acres of pasture, I think, off the top of my head, and then about the same amount of hay ground. We buy, we're fortunate enough that one of the neighbors up the road is also certified organic and she recently sold her beef cow herd and so we've been buying for a few years. We've been buying organic hay from just up the road to supplement our hay field.

Chris Blanchard: When you say that the cattle are a part of the fertility plan for the vegetables, how are you incorporating them into that? Are you rotating them through those fields or



is it just collecting their manure over the winter when you have them in a shed or in a confined area.

Andy Dunham: Yeah, we do them in a meat bedded pack for the winter and then we'll push that up and let it go through a heat and then we'll haul it as manure in the fall. We typically are trying to haul that on living cover crops, they like it on a span of vetch or oats and clover or something like that. Typically, we're able to cover, it depends on the year and how much hay we decide to waste but we usually can cover about half to two thirds of our vegetable ground in a given year. It doesn't work for everything. We still have Kale and Brussels sprouts out in the field at the time that you'd be hauling that so those fields, obviously, don't get it that calendar year so in the rotation we kind of keep note of that. The crops that don't need that preceding manuring, that's typically where they'll go in the rotation. Sweet potatoes, we actually need ground for sweet potatoes that we can give them so we'll follow. The sweet potatoes will go either where we messed up on a wheat control for a year or we'll put it somewhere where we know we don't have the best fertility.

Chris Blanchard: Then, with 25 acres of vegetables, that's a lot of work. Where are you guys getting your employees and how many people do you have working on the farm with you?

Andy Dunham: Mel, you know.

Melissa Dunham: We have, what we call our core six, which is now kind of our core seven. We've got six employees that come back year after year and we really structure our field crew to highlight their strengths and utilize each one of their strengths because each individual brings a lot to the table in a different way, but our core is to try and keep these individuals coming back year after year, because as you know, if you're trying to grow 40 or 50 different crops, it's not the same as growing one or two crops. It's a lot easier to remember what to do every year if you're only doing one or two crops, but 40 or 50 different things takes a while to bring somebody up to speed on. How to harvest it? You start off, actually, how to transplant it? How far apart are they? To, how to harvest it? To, how to wash it and pack it? That takes time and so we've learned that in order for us to be sustainable, we can't keep retraining people.

Melissa Dunham: That's kind of the direction we've gone in so we'll have the core seven on with us from February, mid-March all the way through December and then we kind of dial it back again in January and February when we're just shipping out our roots to wholesale customers. Then, in the peak of the season, June, July, August, we'll pick up some additional labor to kind of help us get through the height of the season.

Chris Blanchard: Your core six, are those locals there in Grinnell?

Melissa Dunham: Yeah, well, four of the six live here in the community and then one couple drives to and from Des Moines.

Chris Blanchard: Is the same thing true of the rest of the crew that kind of rounds that out during the high season? Are those primarily kids coming from Grinnell College or are they coming from away?

Melissa Dunham: Every now and then we get asked to do an internship. This year we had an ISU student come to us. We brought her on board for several weeks. We have had Grinnell College students here for several weeks in the past, but oftentimes, we'll



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get a couple of high school students that are interested in helping and they're all local and from the community. Nobody in that school is really traveling much outside of the town of Grinnell.

Chris Blanchard: It's kind of nice to be located right on the edge of the town for those purposes.

Melissa Dunham: Yeah, we're extremely lucky. We're surrounded by town on three sides so it's kind of good thing and a bad thing all at the same time, but for convenience purposes for our staff, it's pretty great.

Chris Blanchard: You said that you put a real emphasis on keeping the core six, now core seven coming back year after year. What do you do to help ensure that that happens?

Melissa Dunham: We give them titles, like Captain Awesome. I'm not kidding. We don't do that just to make Eric happy, but we've cultivated kind of a community here on the farm where they all like to get along and we have found, through the hiring process of the last 10 or 11 years, that the people who stay and the people who have become our core, are not people who are necessarily just coming here to punch in and punch out. These are individuals who are invested in the type of farming that we're doing. These are people that really like food. They love to share recipes and ideas. They have a genuine concern and appreciation for the environment. It goes beyond the paycheck. These people are invested in the farm itself. I think that, by doing what we're doing, the way that we're doing it, is really what's kept them around.

Andy Dunham: You have also added, though, a number of things, I think, that have made it more retention friendly though, that you should probably share.

Melissa Dunham: We're not offering minimum wage. We can't offer \$40 or \$50 an hour or \$20 an hour at this point. I wish we could because they're well worth it but we do try and compensate them in ways and give them things that maybe on the cash side, we can't. Everybody on our crew gets a CSA share. They're eating the same things we are and there are tons of other leftovers on the farm and they can glean all that they want. Eric and Rach, for example, have probably put away two bushel of eggplant in their freezer for the winter. Daniel and Leticia have probably put away a bushel of habaneros. It's kind of nice to have the unique quality and able to get it from our farm. In addition to that, we've offered paid time off.

Melissa Dunham: Because of the new Food Safety Modernization Act, and the rules that come with it, we felt like it was only fair to offer our employees paid time off, especially with the rules regarding sick employees. They just can't work. We really didn't want people to not feel like they couldn't report that they were sick because it was a financial barrier. We thought that by offering this, it would be a good compromise in hopes that that would keep our food safe, in addition to letting them know, we genuinely care about you. If you're not feeling well, or if you need to go on a vacation or you want to go on a vacation, we support that too.

Melissa Dunham: Another thing that we implemented, it took us a while to figure it out. When you're an entrepreneur, you sometimes forget that you're kind of making up the rules in a lot of ways. I think it wasn't until year four or five that it dawned on me that, hey, we could go on vacation. At the height of the season, it sounds crazy, but we felt like, from a family standpoint, we were missing out on getting our kids out of the state and going and doing things that other normal people might be doing in July or



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something. This last year, we implemented having at least a four-day vacation or time off for each of our core six because we recognize that by time July or August hits, everybody is extremely tired, and so, by having that mini break for everybody, it really, I think it helps.

Chris Blanchard: That break is something that you guys take as well?

Melissa Dunham: Yeah, we learned to appreciate it. We found that our own sustainability and our own drive was reenergized by taking that mid-July break. Now, what we've done is we've worked in a CSA hiatus week. We noticed that a lot of people would be traveling or gone on the fourth of July so our CSA pick up that week would be lower. We noticed that people were out-of-town so we just took it and we said, okay, now we're going to have a break. No CSA shares are delivered the week of the fourth of July. That gives us flexibility to either go camping, or do something with family, or play catch up after June on the farm. We realized that by us doing this break, it rejuvenates us and we're hoping that, by giving that to our crew members it's also giving them the same opportunity.

Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to stop here and get a quick word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Andy and Melissa Dunham from Grinnell Heritage Farm.

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Chris Blanchard: All right and we're back with Andy and Melissa Dunham from Grinnell Heritage Farm right on the edge of Grinnell, Iowa. Andy, when you were telling us about getting the farm started, you mentioned that that packing shed was one of the first things



that you built. Can you tell us more about what you built at that time and how that's developed into the present?

Andy Dunham: Yeah, the packing shed I put up was just a simple pole shed. It was a 30 by 45-foot pole shed with a 12-foot side wall. We just put an insulated pad in the corner where the 10 by 12 walk in cooler went. We had a garage door on each side of it so we had kind of an ingoing door and an outgoing door. It kind of serves as storage and a wash station, pack station and all that kind of stuff for the most part for the first few years. We knew from the get go that we wanted to scale up so we sort of situated the packing shed in such a way that I thought we could just build off the west and either knock a wall out. We made it so that it's a pole shed so the one wall isn't structural so we thought we could knock a wall out and maybe expand in that direction if we wanted to. Before we expanded we decided, well, we better prove to ourselves that we actually need to expand and we can actually grow as much produce as we can. For a couple of years, we would rent refrigerated semi-trailers in the fall and fill those and use that as an expanded cooler up until about Christmas. Then, by Christmas time, hopefully we'd sold enough stuff that we could cram everything into the 10 by 12 and then get by.

Andy Dunham: Then, we decided to make the leap in 2011. We built the first shed in 07 and by 2011, we'd expanded. We decided that we needed to learn more about other farms that had undergone expansion before and other farms that were kind of the same size that we were hoping to become. We made some phone calls and emails, or Melissa did and we went up and took a little extended weekend trip up into Wisconsin and we visited, was it four farms north?

Melissa Dunham: I think it was five but they were all pretty much larger than we are, so I would say if we have anywhere to this is definitely one of them that I would look back on the last 11 years, again, and say why are you still standing? This would be one of them. This experience and just seeing some of these larger farms and soaking up what they had going on. We learned a lot on that trip.

Andy Dunham: We went late enough in the season that we knew that we weren't going to be crimping, or at least we hoped we weren't going to be crimping their style, I guess. It was late fall. All of the farms were very open and willing to share with us, more time than we expected them to give us. They kind of all let us know what some of the pitfalls were that they'd encountered and gave us words of wisdom. We incorporated an awful lot of what they had to say into designing our packing house.

Chris Blanchard: What were some of the pitfalls that you avoided and the solutions that you came up with for avoiding them?

Andy Dunham: One of the easiest ones to think about would be, you'd go into a lot of packing houses and you'll see hoses and/or electrical cords kind of strewn all over. We did an overhead water line and just dropped down connectors that we can hook up a barrel washer or a brush line if we want to run the power washer somewhere. We don't have to navigate around hoses because they're all above our head. Same with the electrical. We can plug stuff in from above and not have to worry about tripping over electrical cords or those kinds of things. That'd be one pretty good example.

Andy Dunham: Another one is having adequate floor drainage. A lot of the packing sheds that you see oftentimes will have water pool in them, because their drain either is too large



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enough to handle the volume of water, or just because of the dirt and debris and plant matter that comes off during a normal wash, might plug a smaller floor drain up. We ended up putting in a floor drain that was adequate for the volume of water that we needed, and then we had that go out into a settling basin where we could reclaim all of the soil and plant debris and stuff. We just drop a sump pump into it and then drive in. We made it big enough that the tractor motor can fit in there so I can just drive the tractor right down in and scoop it out and clean out a couple times every summer, whatever, and then we put that on the vegetative compost pile. Other things Melis, that we picked up?

- Melissa Dunham:** You know, I think it's simple things. When I look at the packing shed and the function of it, it's really about organization and efficiency. You've got to really put that hat on and find the very small ways that can improve both of those things and the things that Andy just spoke about are definitely true, but even how you're accessing your coolers and how the doors open and which way they open, where your doors are to get into the shed and exit the shed, all of those little things really add up. There isn't a huge profit margin in this type of farming, which is fine, but you've got to try and make up those little pieces everywhere you can. I think, if you're not into designing or efficiency and function, find somebody that can do that for you or definitely visit other farms, because we have seen that that has greatly helped us over the last several years since we built this new shed. Are there things we would change? Sure. I wish we had twice the amount of cooler space already, but you kind of got to grow with what you have available to you, I guess.
- Chris Blanchard:** When I asked Dan Gunther how big of a cooler I should build on my farm, he told me that when he had asked an experienced farmer when he was getting started, the answer was 100 by 200, because you really just can't build it big enough.
- Melissa Dunham:** No, I mean, one of the farms that we went to visit in the Madison area was Harmony Valley. Richard was kind. He gave us a couple hours of his time and I just remember my jaw dropping with every cooler he showed us. I was like, this is awesome. Even just his box storage facility was a beautiful big shed. It would be ideal to have multiple sheds for multiple things but you've got to get there. Richard's been doing it for a number of years, but he clearly has it figured out.
- Chris Blanchard:** You talked about quality being really important for your operation and the importance of removing the field heat and maintaining that cold chain. What kinds of equipment and tools are you guys using to get the produce ready for market?
- Andy Dunham:** For the most part, if it's the leafy green or something, it's being bunched in the field and then we'll run it through a dunk tank to help hydro cool and then we'll put it into the cooler so some of the evaporative cooling will happen in the cooler. For roots and things like that, we run them through a barrel washer. For things like eggplant and peppers and other things like that, we have a brush wash line. We really don't have tons and tons of equipment. A relatively standard fair for a mid-western packing shed, I would say.
- Chris Blanchard:** I'm really curious because you said that you guys are sanitizing all of those CSA totes when you bring them back to the farm. That ends up being a lot of tote sanitizing, especially if you add in your harvest containers and your packing containers. How are you guys getting that job done?



- Andy Dunham:** We'll set up a wash line and have hoses and brushes and stuff and we'll kind of hose out and scrub out and then we rinse it with santidate. It's definitely not my favorite thing to do, and this year especially because that typically becomes a rainy-day job and we've had almost no rainy days this year. There have been many CSA box packing mornings where I'm out there, kind of frantically with the crew trying to wash up 200 boxes because we're short. It gets done but definitely, it does add to the work.
- Chris Blanchard:** How many of those reusable CSA boxes do you guys have to service 250 shares?
- Melissa Dunham:** We bought 750 of a larger container and then another 750 of the smaller container because the season, as it progresses, you graduate from a smaller box to a bigger box depending on the time of the year. We got some advice from other farmers that use this type of box. They suggested having at least two, if not three for every shareholder. We went a little on the high side when we ordered them but we didn't want to be forced to reorder more if our CSA grew in a year or two. We kind of just took that initial leap and purchased a whole bunch at once.
- Chris Blanchard:** You guys also have this year, a new enterprise on the farm, right?
- Andy Dunham:** We certainly do.
- Chris Blanchard:** Tell us about that.
- Melissa Dunham:** AS you know, Trump has been elected President of the United States. It really was the tipping point that made us jump in and really start heavily researching the wood-fired pizza oven enterprise. We had listened to a couple of speakers up at the MOSES Conference a few years back and it kind of sewed a seed in our minds. It really wasn't until after this last election cycle, when we saw in our small rural community, the divide. As you know, you can only get so many people to come to your farm by luring beets and chard and farm field days. It only draws so many people there.
- Melissa Dunham:** What we wanted to do was kind of reunite our community. We've got a really liberal college as a neighbor, but we've also got a lot of other people who are on the conservative side of things, and we've got a lot of corn and soybeans around us and a lot of conventional farming. It's not that we are against any of these people, it's just that I think that the way our community kind of came through this election, it was very divided. I recognize that I think we all have a lot more in common than we think we do and so, with this enterprise, we were hoping to open the doors to our community members, and we were like, how do we do that? Not everybody eats beets and chard but everybody likes pizza. We decided to go forward, and we did some research. We went to Northern California, to Mugnaini and took a pizza making class.
- Melissa Dunham:** Then, we also consulted with one of the other local wood fired pizza oven enterprises over in the area, Anna's Cutting Garden. Between taking those two classes and consulting, we felt like, hey, we can try and do this. We did it for that reason but we also recognize that mother nature is pretty volatile and it's nerve-racking farming the way we do. You're kind of at the mercy of mother nature and in a bad year, it could be really bad. Having a different enterprise that is more



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shelf stable, I guess, was attractive to me. It would be something that I would enjoy doing. Andy, you like managing the oven. He's really excellent at getting those pizzas in and out.

Andy Dunham: I actually do quite enjoy managing the oven. We're tired though. We're doing all of this but we kept the farm kind of on the same track that it was on and we've added this pizza enterprise on and we've just told ourselves, we're going to be tired and we're tired.

Melissa Dunham: We're tired, but I think if you look at the trends for farms and diversification, diversification doesn't just mean the stuff that's going in the ground, it means the entire operation, multiple enterprises and there's a lot happening around agri tourism. In addition to wanting to provide people with good food, we also wanted more people to come to our food naturally. On our wood fired pizza nights, we do several wagon ride farm tours around the yard. One of our core six is there and he gives these tours. He is so excited. He's also the gentleman I told you is Captain Awesome. He's just a really excited individual and his job is to kind of highlight the environmental pieces that we've worked into the farm. We're trying to bring people in, to show them that, hey, there is a different way to farm the land. There are different opportunities out there for people. We're trying to build community. It is and it is a lot of work.

Andy Dunham: I'm not downplaying it too much but I've enjoyed having it and so Melissa ends up doing much of the promotional stuff and then we've been lucky enough to find somebody in town who has restaurant background and she's helping with food prep and all that kind of stuff. On pizza night, Melissa is managing the flow of everything and I'm actually sliding pizzas into and taking them out of the oven. I'll admit, I'm having fun with that. The last time we did this, it was busy enough that we actually met, the manufacturer had a number of pizzas per hour advertised with each oven that you could buy and we actually hit that a week and a half ago. For the whole time we were doing 120 pizzas an hour.

Melissa Dunham: It's like the equivalent of running out of cooler space two months into your farming operation. Not cool.

Chris Blanchard: That's a lot of pizza. If you're doing 120 pizza's an hour in a town of 8,000 or 9,000 people, that's not nothing.

Andy Dunham: No, if you count the kids, we're typically having, it's hard to get an exact count necessarily but we're figuring 200 to 300 people a night is typically how many people are coming out.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of licensing id you have to go through to be able to do a pizza night on your farm in Iowa?

Andy Dunham: We probably should set the stage a little bit, Melissa, just because, when we built the packing shed in 2011, we were still living in the mobile home and so we didn't have an office space for the farm. We built an insulated spot of the side of the packing facility that was our office for a number of years. We knew that we were planning on building a house on the farm eventually so we wanted to not have it just be an office space. When we built the thing in 2011, we put in all of the infrastructure that you'd need for a licensed kitchen. We had an oven plug and we



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had three drain hookups, or three water hookups for hot and cold water. We had the water heater already. We had a floor drain. You could sanitize all the walls. We had this space that we could convert into a licensed kitchen.

Melissa Dunham: There's a lot to learn. That's part of why we wanted to consult with somebody who was local who knew some of the local rules. Melissa, who came on staff, and who is basically managing this new enterprise for us, she had already had a licensed kitchen and operation in our community so she really knew the food safety rules and things like that. That has definitely helped, finding somebody who's got that background already was great. We had to have an inspector come out and go through another certification and get a license just like any other restaurant would.

Chris Blanchard: You said you did this in an effort to build community not just within the alternative, organic hippy types, but reach across that divide. Has that worked?

Melissa Dunham: Yeah. Our community is, I'm going to sound redundant to all the Grinnellians who have heard me give this speech before. The Grinnell community, a lot of people think Grinnell College, it's going to be a liberal community. It is, in a certain sense, but we've got three different populations, kind of sections of our community. We've got the people that are here strictly for the college. Then we've got another group in our community that is from here. They grew up here and they were born and raised here. Then, you've got this weird third circle, that's a little bit smaller. That's Andy and myself. We didn't grow up here. We're not affiliated with the college and we're just kind of these outsiders. It's been really challenging to kind of integrate into these other bubbles. Yeah, that was a huge piece in why we wanted to do this. I would say we have been very successful in getting those members to the table.

Melissa Dunham: The neat thing is, you can just, it's a totally new way of being creative. You can think of different things to do to get different populations to the farm. Not everybody is interested in the grass-fed beef or pork from B&B farm. Maybe that's not the reason they're coming here. Maybe they're coming here because they love that their kids can just run around. I don't know. There are a lot of different reasons to come out but we've also encouraged different people in coming out. This next Friday, on the 22nd, our next pizza night falls after the international day of peace, which is on Thursday. Because of everything that has happened, we decided to do peace and happizzaness. It's kind of happiness, only with pizza, obviously.

Melissa Dunham: We're integrating peace into it and we're going to have ten different lantern lighting sites and we're going to light off peach lanterns over our community. I'm really hoping we don't start anything on fire. We've never done this before, but by doing an activity like that, which is a little outside the norm, I think we're going to see other people from the community kind of gravitate this way or wonder, what's going on. It's kind of like doing these odd, or unique, or inviting things that I'm hoping will bring our community together.

Chris Blanchard: I love that. I was really struck by your happizzaness. I'm not quite sure how to pronounce that but it's H-A and then P-I-Z-Z-A and then N-E-S-S. It seems like you guys have a lot of fun with your marketing.

Melissa Dunham: We do. I mean, why not have fun? Otherwise, it's just a job. The neat thing is, once you're an entrepreneur you're like, yeah, there's a lot of work, but slowly, after you've been doing it for a while, it dawns on you. You're kind of like, hey, I can kind



of do what I need to or do what I want to and you can be creative. You can think outside the box and I guess that's one of the pieces of this job that I really enjoy. The sky is kind of the limit. You can think about anything and as long as it's financially sustainable, you can probably pull it off.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned children on the farm. How many kids do you guys have?

Melissa Dunham: We have three children. I have a son, who I had before Any and I met. We were nine when we moved to Grinnell. Andy and I have two daughters together. Emma is eight and in third grade and Leonora is a five-year-old in kindergarten.

Chris Blanchard: That's a lot of kid to be weaving into a farm operation. How do you guys handle that?

Andy Dunham: We're pretty fortunate in that my Aunt Janet, who allowed for the farm to kind of, allowed me to get my start farming here, I guess. She is still working with us full-time and she is now kind of a farmer emeritus status, which includes a fair bit of kid time. She'll run kids home from school for us and if both of us have to go to a farmer's market or something like that she'll be with the girls, but they spend quite a bit of time outside with us. Emma is learning to drive tractor. Leonora desperately wants to but can't reach the pedals. I remember my childhood growing up learning to drive tractor at the age of eight. Why not?

Melissa Dunham: In addition to Aunt Janet, we've got some awesome crew members and so, when we were writing our employee manual a number of years ago, one of the rules, I mean, Chris, you had young kids on the farm. Leonora, when she was two or three, she would disappear. We'd be in the packing shed doing something and all of a sudden, we'd be like, where'd she go? I wanted to get a GPS tracking device on this kid. Emma would stick around but not Leo. One of the things in our employee manual that we did was we have to make eye contact. The crew could take them out to the field any time they wanted to but they had to make eye contact with Andy or myself or whoever they were handing them off to, and get a verbal confirmation because having kids on a farm, 80-Acres, you can lose them in a hurry. There are a lot of dangers on a farm but there's also a lot of opportunities for them to see things that they normally wouldn't too. We're fortunate that our crew members like our kids as much as they do.

Melissa Dunham: Also, we've got really great neighbors. We've got the Van Dyke's to the north. We've got Dewey across the street and all of them help with various farm activities. This is a more community oriented farm than maybe some other farms. I think that by doing it this way, it's helped us be successful. It's helped Andy and I be able to focus on some of these other things, when, if we were focused solely on the kids, it would be more challenging if we didn't have as many helping hands.

Chris Blanchard: When we started off, you mentioned that there were a substantial number of acres that you put into fruit trees and into a wildlife habitat. What was behind that?

Andy Dunham: I think, for me, one of the most enjoyable aspects of all of this is, my degree was in ecology in college and I didn't feel like I ever used it until six or seven years ago when we really started to put wildlife habitat and beneficial insect habitat into the farm. The amount of time, we've got the entire crew now are rescuing predator beetles out of the packing shed. We have kids come out and they're looking at



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praying mantis and these other things just because we have so many of these beneficial insects around. It's been one of my favorite parts of this is seeing the wildlife come back to what used to be a corn and soybean field.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about putting in beneficial insect hedgerows, I think you said, what does that actually look like in your farm operation?

Andy Dunham: We've probably planted about 4,000 native trees and shrubs. We started out just by putting them in some of the buffer strips. Since then, we've actually planted shrubs right out in the middle of the farm. My grandpa, who was a conventional row cropper, when we did it, my Aunt Janet, who was helping to plant them, basically said something along the lines of, he would be rolling over in his grave to see you planting shrubs in the middle of the cornfield. I think he would be very on board now that we see what's coming back to the farm or what has come to the farm for the first time. We've had wild turkeys, we have about 15 resident pheasants this year, about three different species of snakes and I didn't see any snakes the first few years. We're noticing that we used to have a lot of crow pressure on our drip tapes when we were trying to irrigate. When we had the drip tape laying on the surface, the crows will actually come and poke holes in the drip tape. For the spring carrots that's really not a problem because we have enough red wing black birds nesting now that they chase the crows away.

Andy Dunham: We've put in beetle banks, two different beetle banks, which are just native bunch grasses planted on raised beds and left there permanently. It was an idea I got again from the MOSES Conference when Eric Mader talked from the society about putting in beneficial insect habitat. We put in two of these and I don't really remember every seeing any of these predatory ground nesting beetles prior to having done that. I'm not sure if it's because they weren't there or if it's because I wasn't aware that they were there. Now, we actually have to kick them out of the house and the packing sheds on a daily basis because we have so many. I'm talking about those big black beetles that have the giant pinchers on the front and then there are a number of other species. Some of them are kind of iridescent green and a number of other black species.

Andy Dunham: We used to have to spray for Colorado Potato Beetles in our Potatoes. We haven't had to do that for years. If we have potato beetles, I'll scout the field. I'll notice them and I'll come back the next day or the day after and they really don't seem to be any worse. Then, by about day four or five, you just see carcasses of dead Colorado Potato Beetles because they've been eaten by these ground nesting beetles. There are some farm scale things that can be done, even on a vegetable farm to greatly increase the amount of predation of pest insects.

Chris Blanchard: You guys do all of this work to take care of an improve the land that you're on, but then, you guys have had a couple of times where you've had pesticide drift onto your farm.

Andy Dunham: Yes, most times it was a feed corn field that was to the north of us. The way that that works is the farmer contracts and plants the seed corn and then the seed company, more or less takes over management of the field. Seed corn, especially the genetically modified seed corn is very, very pesticide dependent. They're spraying many, many more times per year than you would in a regular conventional corn field. The first time it was an aerial application and we were out in the field and



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we're a farm of a certain scale and we're geographically located in one spot, so we're not spread out like some of the other farms that maybe some of the other people you've interviewed are spread out more than we are. If we're in the vegetable field, you can pretty much see the entire farm. If someone is spraying next to us, we're very aware of it.

Andy Dunham: We saw the plane spraying the seed corn and we saw it actually physically drift onto our farm. We reported it to the Iowa Department of Agriculture's pesticide Bureau and they sent out the field person that takes samples and they tested it and it came back positive, so we had to form a field z for three years. That was out of organic production from 09 to 2012. The second time it happened was in 2013. Again, it was a seed corn field and we'd had some discussion with this particular company and convinced them not to do aerial application because of the imprecise nature of it and they committed to only doing ground based application but they had their contractor come and spray in the middle of the day when the wind was blowing straight at us. We had people in the field and we noticed the smell and we could hear them. I jumped in the car and drove around the corner and managed to get the applicator to stop, thankfully, but we lost organic certification on our asparagus from 2013 through 2016.

Andy Dunham: This is the first year, 2017, this was the first year that we had certified organic asparagus again since before the drift incident. Again, we did the same thing. We called the Pesticide Bureau and they came out and took foliar samples and they did them along the asparagus field where we knew that we had the most likely contamination and then they did stepwise into the field beyond that. The asparagus did come back positive so we ended up dealing with the insurance company for the applicator. The feed corn company is completely insulated from liability because they're hiring a contractor to do the application. The contractor's insurance and we, over the course of, a little over a year, hashed out a settlement. We did the same for the first incident. We've since become more active in talking about these kinds of things and we've done quite a bit of talking with people who have had drift incidents. We kind of walk them through some of the things they need to know or what they might need to do in order to, hopefully one, not stress themselves out too much, but also get some sort of resolution.

Melissa Dunham: Earlier in the podcast you asked us about record keeping and things like that and I have an accounting background, which I'll joke about every now and then, is the reason Andy married me, but having that data, I can't emphasize how important it is to be able to pull up that data when you need it, like in times of the drift incident because we didn't have to hire an attorney. We were able to give them our data, prove that it was authentic and be compensated for it. Record keeping on so many levels, not only that, do you know where you're tracking on a financial basis? We've had several people call us over the last few years and they say, we've been drifted on. My first question is, do you have records of past yields and prices? A lot of the times, the response is no. It's really important to keep these things. We're certified organic so in part, we keep these records to comply with those rules but it's also come in handy when we're faced with a drift incident because we can easily respond and say, hey look, this is our data and we're not going to just roll over and let you drift on us.

Chris Blanchard: What do you recommend that a grower do when they observe a drift incident happening?



- Andy Dunham:** I think the first thing to do would be to actually start preparing before you even witness it and to have those conversations. If you're a sensitive crop grower of any kind, you could be a non-GMO row cropper, you could be having fruit trees or nut trees or vegetables, have those conversations with your neighbors and let them know that, hey, I exist and I don't want you to drift on me. Do it in a civil way so there's not some sort of animosity, if you can. Definitely be clear, like I'm not going to allow drift to happen on my farm. When you do recognize that it's happened, be direct and talk to the person and say, no, I'm notifying the department of agriculture in my stewardship if you're in Iowa or whatever corresponding agency there might be in other states and I'm reporting this and we're going to follow it through. You can do it in as civilly way as possible. You don't have to be mean about it but you can be direct and communicate to them that that's what you're doing.
- Andy Dunham:** We're on the sensitive crops registry. I guess it's now Driftwatch. We have signs up that say "no spray" and they're angled up towards the air so airplanes can see them. We have conversations with our neighbors every year. You do all of those preventative things but if something happens, definitely have an action plan in place because it can be hugely costly if you don't.
- Chris Blanchard:** One of the other things that I've noticed following you guys over the last few years is that you're pretty involved in the advocacy for diversified and beginning farmers. What do you guys think that we need to do to increase more farms, like you guys, like the farms that we're always talking to on the Farmer to Farmer podcast?
- Andy Dunham:** I think some of the things that are holding back beginning farmers in the United States at least, a lot of the things that are holding farmers back come from federal policy and so, in having a federally subsidized crop insurance program, which the farm bureau and some of the larger organizations have quite heavily lobbied for, really railroads farmers into not being too terribly diverse and allows for some pretty poor land use patterns and inflates prices, especially in the corn belt where we're subsidizing corn and soybean insurance.
- Andy Dunham:** I think one of the first things I would do would be to take a very serious look at the farm insurance program and make it actual risk based instead of just having a blanket, we're going to pay 60% of your bill regardless of where your farming, your practices or how large you are. Perhaps some of the more marginal land would become more available to beginning renters, kind of like before CRP came into being, one of the easiest ways to get into farming back in the 70's might be to rent the marginal ground and graze some dairy cows and have a small dairy. I'm not saying that's how they need to do it now, but in order to gain the experience, you need to have a place that you can actually farm. Maybe by revisiting the federal programs that affect land use, like the insurance subsidy, would be a very beneficial place to start.
- Melissa Dunham:** I would add, when we're talking to beginning farmers, I usually start with, we're also beginning farmers. We're only 11 years into this. That's not that long. What we've seen is a trend of a people doing a lot of seeking who don't necessarily have that long of a track record. We've been to a lot of great conferences and we've seen a lot of great speakers. We've learned an immense amount from these people, but I would say at each session and each conversation, take it with a grain of salt and kind of look into that speaker. You've got to question. Here's this farm, here's this farmer



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and they're presenting on their farm. Are they financially sustainable? Are they environmentally sustainable? Ask those questions because I think what's happening is, beginning farmers, they're getting introduced to maybe some of these new ideas or concepts and it's kind of a false reality in a sense and I don't think it's necessarily fair for them to receive this information because it's not necessarily accurate or realistic.

Melissa Dunham: Andy and I will always attribute our success to having access to family land and having access to people in our community that have helped us get started. There's so many reasons as to why we've been successful. If you take away any of one of them, we wouldn't be here. It's a complex thing starting a farm like this. One of the biggest pieces of advice we always give beginning farmers is to intern.

Melissa Dunham: As you know, Andy interned on your farm, Chris, and he learned so much. An internship experience can provide you with a wealth of knowledge about how to do things but it might also give you the opportunity to get your toes wet and try this kind of farming or try a different kind of farming and then realize, hey, I don't want to do that, which is just as valuable of a lesson, before you sink a bunch of money into something that you might not end up liking.

Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to turn to the lightening round. First, we need a quick word from one more sponsor.

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Chris Blanchard: Andy, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Andy Dunham: It's kind of an old standby, but I'd have to go with the tractor. If you can find a way to do it with a tractor, do it with a tractor.

Chris Blanchard: Melissa, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Melissa Dunham: Because of the hat I wear on the farm, I would say QuickBooks.

Chris Blanchard: Are you using the online version or do you use the desktop version?

Melissa Dunham: It's backed up online but it is not the online version because when I looked into that, it's only 2/3 of the platform and I just couldn't take away pieces of the software that I'd been working with for years.

Chris Blanchard: Melissa, what's your favorite crop to grow?



Melissa Dunham: Oh, man, Brussels Sprouts. I don't even have a favorite crop. Every week, when you live on a farm like this, there's something new to eat.

Chris Blanchard: Andy, are you going to answer with the same thing that there's something new every week or do you have a favorite crop?

Andy Dunham: I do feel that way, but I'd have to say seedless watermelon. I could eat a 10-pound watermelon in a sitting. Seedless watermelon are one of the more challenging things to grow on a vegetable farm, especially organically. They present some interesting challenges. When you have a good seedless watermelon, they're good.

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

Melissa Dunham: My head space was so focused on spreadsheets and things lining up when I first came to the farm and I even put in an inventory system when we were at three acres, into the accounting software, which turned into a mess, don't do it. The thing that I would tell myself then is to be okay with adapting. Not everything is going to fit perfectly in a box. Nothing is ever going to be perfect. I think the sooner you can learn that adapting doesn't necessarily mean stress, it's just what that is, it's just adapting, I think the easier life will be.

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

Andy Dunham: I think I would jump back before my move here in 2006. After I worked for you, I went and stayed with my folks for a time and they have an acreage. I did a small market garden on their property and the neighbors and I think I would go back and try to convince myself that I needed to swallow my pride and intern for at least another year on at least one more farm. I don't think I would have been very good at convincing myself at that time, but that's the advice I'd give myself.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome. Andy and Melissa, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.

Andy Dunham: Thank you.

Melissa Dunham: Thanks for including us, Chris.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 140 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast and you can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Dunham, that's D-U-N-H-A-M. 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, and by Cool Bot, allowing you to build an affordable walk in cooler, powered by a window air conditioning unit. Save \$20 on your cool bot when you visit farmertofarmerpodcast.com/coolbot.



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Chris Blanchard: Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show, through the suggestions form at farmertofarmerpodcast.com. I'll do my best to get them on the show. Thank you for listening. Be safe out there and keep the tractor running.