



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 143

Wendy and Asher Burkhardt-Spiegel of Common Thread CSA on Community Engagement, Apprenticeship Realities, Tractor-Scale Permanent Raised Beds, and Season Extension

November 2, 2017



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- Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast episode 143. And this is your host, Chris Blanchard.
- Chris: Wendy and Asher Burkhardt-Spiegel raise about 12 acres of vegetables of Common Thread CSA in Madison, New York, in the central part of the state. With 20 years of experience doing CSA, Wendy and Asher have continued to emphasize CSA in their current operation with additional sales at farmer's markets and wholesale accounts.
- Chris: At Common Thread, Wendy and Asher maintain a community focused vision for their farm. Prior to Common Thread, Wendy and Asher managed a non-profit CSA farm in Poughkeepsie. And we talk about how moving to their own farm had an impact on the experience of engaging with the community, as well as other aspects of their farming experience. We dig into their program for subsidizing shares, their education-focused apprenticeship program, and the realities of an increasing minimum wage in New York.
- Chris: Out in the field, Wendy and Asher share their development of a tractor scale, permanent, raised bed system, and how they've sourced to modified tools to support that system. We also talk about the solutions they've found for successfully cultivating in their raised bed system, season extension in the field and in the cooler, and the planning they do for a CSA program that includes box deliveries, and free choice on farm pick up.



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- Chris: Wendy and Asher Burkhardt-Spiegel, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.
- Wendy & Asher: Thanks for having us.
- Chris: So glad you could join us today. I'd like to start off by having you tell us a little bit about Common Thread CSA. Where you guys are located, what you're doing, and how much of it you're doing.
- Asher: So, we're in Madison New York, which is pretty much the geographic center of the state. We're not in the capital region. We're not in the Finger Lakes region. We're not in the Hudson Valley. We're not in the Adirondacks. We're not in the Catskills. We're between all of those things.
- Wendy: It's called Central New York.
- Chris: Okay.
- Asher: Yep. And, we're about four miles from the town of Hamilton, New York, where Colgate University is, which is a significant part of our marketing plan. We grow about 12 acres of veggies. This year, we had about 18 acres of plant-able beds available to us. So, about a third of that we own, and then the remaining two thirds is in two different leased fields close by. We do about 330 CSA shares, two farmer's markets, and a bit of wholesale here and there.
- Chris: And, most of those CSA shares going, then, into the town where Colgate is, right?
- Wendy: I would say, it's about half that's on farm pick up, and the other half we are sending to ... We do a Syracuse run, and a Utica run, and a small number go down to Norwich. So, we're doing a lot of drop off sites. It's about 15 drop off sites for the other half, which is delivered shares.
- Chris: And about how much of your business is CSA, and how much is the farmer's market and wholesale?
- Wendy: Yeah. So, our budget is around just a little over \$300,000 and probably over \$200,000 of that is CSA shares. And then it's about \$50,000 for farmers markets, and then the remainder we're doing in wholesale. The wholesale has sort of been an unexpected piece that we've sort of been increasing as it has been a little harder to get CSA shares



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in the last two years. We've been doing more wholesale and finding that to be more of a good thing than we anticipated. We've been doing CSA for 20 years, now, and always saw wholesale as something we never want to do. But, now that we've been getting into it a little bit, it has been interesting, actually. I'm not so averse anymore. Although, CSA is really what I enjoy doing the most.

- Chris: Now, you said you've been doing CSA for 20 years, but not all of that has been happening at Common Thread, right?
- Asher: We've been here about five years. We took it over from a couple who ran it as a CSA for the five years before that. But, prior to five years ago, we managed the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, which is a non-profit organization down in the city of Poughkeepsie New York. We were there for ten years. And then we ran a small CSA in Durham New Hampshire, where we were finishing our undergraduate degrees for two seasons.
- Wendy: And then before that, we worked for other people on a few CSA's. So, we've been doing it a while. Yeah.
- Chris: So, interesting that you guys spent ten years at the Poughkeepsie Farm Project before transitioning to your own operation.
- Wendy: Yeah. We didn't go there anticipating being there for ten years, but it was a really interesting experience. We helped bring the organization from a CSA that was doing a lot of food justice and education work into a non-profit that had a farm, but had quite vibrant education, and still does have quite vibrant education and food justice programs. It was very interesting. We also had children during that time, which made life pretty full. So, we did start looking for a farm about five years in, but it wasn't too easy to find a farm. And we were very engaged in what we were doing there. After ten years we managed to find one and move on. And that was good timing, too, with our children. Because they were getting to the point where they were going to be starting school. And being able to live on the farm, and having our own business, at that point, started to make a lot of sense.
- Chris: And the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, were you guys salaried employees there? Or, were you running the farm as kind of a Wendy and Asher for profit project? How did that work?
- Asher: So, when we got there, we were the only full time paid staff. There wasn't an executive director, or program director, or anything like that. We were salaried and we ran the whole show with considerable volunteer assistance.
- Wendy: A lot of volunteers.
- Asher: Both, in the day to day work of getting the farm work done, but also on the organizational end, from the board of directors that the non-profit had. But, as the years went by, then there was an education director. Then, about five years in, we hired an executive director. So, we basically hired our boss into her position. We remained salaried and more and more focused on the farm as a productive entity, but we always had our hands in some of the administrative and mission elements of the organization.



- Wendy: And we've really brought a lot of that to where we now, too. A lot of how we thought of how a CSA could be involved in the community, we believe in a lot and have tried to bring as many elements to this farm as we can without the support of a non-profit.
- Chris: So, tell me about that, when you talk about bringing those elements of being involved in your community to your current location. What does that look like?
- Wendy: So, one piece is the education piece, we do run an apprenticeship program here. And we developed an apprenticeship program for the ten years we were at the Poughkeepsie Farm Project. So, we do weekly workshops, or field trips. We set up weekly education sessions one evening a week with the apprentices, and also try to set up the apprenticeship in a way that it's a very good learning experience for folks. So, we run it, largely, very similar here to how we did there. Although, the community around us is different. So, we end up doing more of the education ourselves here because there isn't a CRAFT program near us here, and we've participated in two of them in Poughkeepsie.
- Wendy: And then other pieces are giving tours upon request to the community, having different school groups in by request, and trying to make the farm as accessible as possible to the members. We have the on farm pick your own. We do a few events a year.
- Wendy: We do a weekly newsletter that we really try to convey to them what's going on outside and help them feel a part of the farm, help them understand what goes into growing our food, so that being a CSA member is a learning experience and a connective experience.
- Wendy: And then, in terms of the food justice pieces, it's really just about trying to make the CSA accessible in every way that we can. So, we have a sponsored share program, where we invite members to donate money to subsidize shares for folks who are more low income. We also have a sliding scale. The sponsored share program is for folks who need a deeper discount, but we have a sliding scale where people can do that without any sort of application.
- Wendy: We also donate food to three soup kitchens in the area, that's basically the leftover produce from markets and from CSA. But, we take the time to package that up and deliver it each week.
- Wendy: We accept FMNP at the farmer's markets. We also can accept food stamps, although it's been tricky, the logistics of it. So, we're still working on trying to really connect to people who would use food stamps here, but it's something we've been working on.
- Wendy: I think those are the main pieces that have been the easiest to bring along and implement here in the context of a family farm.
- Chris: I'm really interested, especially, in the price parts that you're offering. Both, through the subsidized shares, and in the sliding scale. Tell me more about how that sliding fee scale for the CSA actually works, at a nuts and bolts level.
- Asher: Well, I was doing the calculations for next year, just a couple hours ago. So, we settle on a base price for the share, and the bottom end of the scale is a 10% discount, and



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the top end of the scale is an 11% premium. And the way the communication around that goes, people understand that any premium they pay above base is supporting people who feel like they can't meet the base price.

Wendy: The suggested price, you mean?

Asher: Right. The suggested. Yeah.

Wendy: Right. So, we actually tell people on the farm, the suggested price covers the cost of growing vegetables, and above that you're subsidizing folks who can't quite pay the suggested price, and pick wherever on the scale that works for you. We've just done that for two years.

Wendy: We've done the sponsored share program the whole time, but we actually introduced the sliding scale two years ago when we had to make a pretty big hike in our share price, because, between minimum wage going up and realizing that we, ourselves, were not paying ourselves enough.

Wendy: We had to do a significant price hike two years ago, and introduced the sliding scale at that time to soften that. And that year we explained why we were doing it, and we got a lot of extra money and were able to sponsor a lot of shares that year. Whereas this year, it didn't come with an explanation and we came out below the suggested goal. But, since we do the sponsored share collection, in addition, then we can also apply some of the monies from the sponsored shares towards subsidizing the sliding scale, as well.

Wendy: So, we try to make it come out even. Anything people donate above the suggested, or for sponsored shares, goes to sponsor shares. And it's been working out.

Asher: So, the sponsored shares. That's actually something where, if I was signing up for your CSA, is there a line on the membership form where I could say I'm going to put \$50 towards sponsorship shares, in addition to whatever I'm paying on the sliding scale?

Wendy: Right. Yeah, we give people an option to give donation when they sign up. So, that's usually when most of the donations happen. Although, we've had some people just from the community who've found out about it and given us donations. And then, in terms of the folks that get the sponsored shares, they just contact us and we give them an application to sign up for one. If we get more people than we have funds for, we just keep a waiting list. Eventually, we've been getting to everyone, it just might be a wait sometimes.

Chris: And, all of that has worked out financially for you guys? That hasn't presented too much of a burden?

Wendy: No. It really hasn't, because when we get the donations, then we give them away. But, if we don't have the funds available, then we put people on a waiting list. So, we're not handing out more funds than we have the money there for. So, it really isn't a burden.

Chris: So, you mentioned that the sliding scale program actually started, at least somewhat, in response to realizing that you weren't paying yourselves enough. How did you come to that realization? And what made you decide that you weren't paying yourselves



enough? Because, we're market farmers. Most folks aren't paying themselves enough, that's more the norm, than not the norm.

- Wendy: Well, we were just doing our books at the end of the year, doing our taxes, and doing the math, and realizing we weren't paying ourselves minimum wage. Which, I would think that the base of what's fair to be asking our CSA members to be meeting. It takes a couple of years when you start a new farm, a new business, in a new place to understand what your cost is going to be. So, yeah, we our projections were not correct on a few fronts, particularly labor. When you go from working with volunteers -large numbers of volunteers- to not having lots of volunteers, you have to do things differently. We were underestimating the amount of labor that we needed initially. Yeah, it was really just from looking at those.
- Asher: Another factor in that year that we increased the prices more significantly was that was around the time that New York State initiated it's minimum wage increase, step-wise increased the minimum wage.
- Chris: When you say step-wise increase, like started a what's-going-to-be ongoing set of increases for the minimum wage?
- Asher: Correct. It's, what, 70 cents a year? Is it five years, Wendy, I can't remember?
- Wendy: Something like that. Basically, the year we started, which was when we had a five year budget projection for how it would go for the next five years, minimum wage was \$7.25. Which, we paid more than that, then, but over the next couple of years it's going up to \$12.50. So, over just six or seven years, or so, it will almost double. We're not upset about that, we think it's fair. People should be making more money. It just means that we have to adjust our share prices to keep up with that, and also to still be able to pay ourselves with all of the financial realities.
- Chris: And then, I think, if I'm putting the pieces together correctly, you said that was at the same time that you started having trouble filling your shares. And started doing more wholesale. Is that right?
- Wendy: Yeah, but I really think it was, last year was the first year that we weren't able to grow the CSA. As far as I could tell, it seems like that was an issue for all the CSA farmers that I talked to and I heard about that being sort of a national trend. So, I didn't connect that to being as much to do with our share price as it just being a bigger issue out there that CSA shares were not on the increase anymore, for whatever reason. Certainly, also, we've started doing more small shares. And this year, we didn't quite fill our shares in the summer, but we had a change from last year, two thirds of our CSA was the standard size and one third was a small share. And then this year that flip flopped, so that we had two thirds of our CSA were small and only one third was the standard. So, that was a lot more people that we had to recruit for the same amount of vegetables. I'm not sure what all the factors are, but that's a piece of it, also.
- Chris: It sounds like your shares are ... You guys are packing the shares and people are picking those up, is that right?
- Asher: No. The delivered boxes are a prepacked box. The on farm shares are more of a free choice system. So, the different share sizes are assigned a different number of items per week. But, then they are selecting, say a standard share is eight items, they're



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selecting their eight items off of a list of, easily, 20 different vegetables. There's two on farm shareholders can walk out of the distribution room with two completely different CSA shares in any given week.

Wendy: Yeah, we've actually come up with a CSA ... for the on farm shares, we've come up with a system where we grow as wide a variety for as long of a season as possible, and that's actually been really great. People like it a lot and it's worked really well. But we've sort of figured out you don't need to grow a lot of fennel, or kohlrabi, or celeriac, but we can still supply them for the season and really increase the variety by growing a wide variety of crops. But, for the boxes, we're designing the box that is going to please the largest number of people based on surveys, and also based on what people take in the room. That gives us a pretty good idea of what is most popular, but then also to try to give it on a schedule that is reasonable. And in addition, we give a swap box at each site, so people can swap out an item for something else to try to help deal with the fact that one size does not fit all. And it's worked pretty well, but of course for some people CSA just isn't going to work that well, if they can't take out their own items. So, the box share definitely has more turnover than the on farm share.

Chris: So, it must be interesting trying to plan for both of those different CSA systems. Like you said, you can keep a small amount of kohlrabi, or fennel, or celeriac available over a long period of time for the folks that are picking up on the farm. But then, for that other large group of people who are getting boxes, you still have to plan to have occasional surges of product.

Asher: Yeah, that's exactly right. And Excel spreadsheets are our friend. We do the crop plan, at this point, all in excel. And the box, their plan exists as a grid with all the possible vegetables down the left hand side, and all the weeks across the top. If we want to put eight or nine or maybe ten items in a box any given week, we might plan as many as 12 items to account for any crop failures, or anything like that. We'll pepper the kohlrabi once or twice in the season. And the celeriac once at the end. And only give beets a certain number of times. And chard is every third week, approximately.

Wendy: It's a bit more, it's not quite that often. Yeah.

Asher: Right. So, all of that is mapped out in detail, and then we build the crop plan that's consistent with that box share plan.

Wendy: We have an idea of how often to give certain items. And we're checking in every year on surveys about what people feel they got too much or too little of. It feels like it's a pretty good plan, at this point.

Chris: And, with the CSA, you talked about differences in turnover rates. And I think, certainly, what you talked about with people who are picking up on farm, and using the free choice method, having less turnover than folks that are getting boxes in Syracuse, or Utica. Do you guys have a pretty steady core of CSA members? Or, are you dealing with the high turnover that so many farms are?

Wendy: On the on-farm, we have a really great core. And I think that's not only the on farm is very appealing, because we have the free choice system. We have the on farm pick your own. But, it's also, it's a small community. And we're the only CSA farm right here. Yeah, and we have an enthusiastic core of people who are great supporters. So, that's wonderful.



- Wendy: For the box shares, people have different options of which CSA they go to. We might never meet them, so we don't have as personal of relationships with as many of those folks, so it's just a different kind of set up. And it's not surprising that our turnover is definitely higher for that.
- Asher: We do offer that all of our box share members are free to come to the farm. With a couple days notice, they can cancel their delivered box and come pick up their share on the farm. Even if they don't pick up their share on the farm, they're free to come do the pick your own element of their share at any time. We post picking limits for the pick your own area in the distribution room. And delivered share holders can pick twice whatever the stated limit is since they're not going to make it out to the farm as often as the on farm shareholder will.
- Chris: And how often do the box share members take advantage of that opportunity?
- Wendy: It really varies. Some people only live 20 minutes away, and folks from those communities might come more often. And then some people, you know Syracuse, are a full hour away, and they really might come once or twice, or they might never come. Certainly, when we have strawberries, or raspberries, or then when the cherry tomatoes come in, there are certain crops that have higher appeal, so that might get people out when we say "Raspberries are in, come out now." That might get people to come out, at least, once or twice when those crops are in.
- Chris: You also mentioned that a couple of years ago, you started doing more wholesale sales. And that you were kind of liking that.
- Asher: So, our wholesale kind of has two different components to it. We have a small list of restaurants mostly, I guess, and then the local college, that are easily within our delivery area. Either they're on our route, or they're just down in town four miles away. So, we send out a list to them once a week, and they place an order, and we deliver the order with our CSA shares, or when we're taking the kids to piano lessons. So, that's been working nicely. There's also a small wholesale distributor based in Syracuse that we've been working through. Those are two different outlets with two different sets of pros and cons, but they've both been working, each in their own way.
- Chris: You guys are distributing crops whether it's wholesale or to the CSA over a pretty long period of time.
- Wendy: Yeah. That's one of the things that really funny about having moved up here from Poughkeepsie. We've gotten at least a zone, if not more than a zone, colder, but we distribute for a much longer season. And it's all just because we're a more rural place, so we've had to push the edges. So, basically, we had to do winter shares. Which has been fun, but it does make for a very long season.
- Wendy: So, yeah, we're distributing. We start right at the first week of June, which is when we started in Poughkeepsie. So, we have to use a bit more season extension to get started that early here. And then, we go through the end of October, and then we start up with biweekly boxes, or approximately biweekly boxes, from November through January. And that's been interesting to find out what we can store and what we can hold. It's been interesting.



- Wendy: The first year we just into it and did it just based on what we'd read about cold season growing and we just learned what would hold into what time periods, what we had to cover how and when. And, of course, every year is different.
- Wendy: This year has been so warm that a lot of stuff that we would have covered more by now, we have minimally covered this year. But, yeah, it's been an interesting experience. I've been shocked at how well things hold in the cold.
- Chris: And when you say hold in the cold, you've got crops that are planted in the field that you're holding out in the field for harvest? Is that right?
- Wendy: Into December, yeah. We have harvested some greens out of the hoop houses in January, but that's been definitely not something we've been able to count on every year. We have lows of -17 here in the winters. And there was January we never came out of freezing at all, not one day. So, we know we can't count on that, but we have been able to hold greens under row cover, in the hoop houses, using caterpillar tunnels, and low hoops up through December. We actually put our Brussels sprouts and leeks under row hoops, because we went down to zero over Thanksgiving one year, and we actually lost our leeks and Brussels sprouts at the end of November. But, we've been able to keep them longer by putting them under row hoops. We move caterpillar tunnels onto kale and spinach patches, so we're able to pick those, and also things that we've planted in the hoop houses, into December, and that's worked pretty well. So, we're also storing a lot of storage crops, too, so a lot of things we're just holding in storage, as well.
- Chris: What kind of a setup do you guys have for your storage crops?
- Asher: There's two walk in coolers in the barn, and we pack them full. We've got one space in the barn that we can heat, so we keep the winter squash in there, the onions end up in there, too, because we're out of room in the coolers. This year, it looks like we're going to have to find a little bit more room, to store some crops, than we actually have available.
- Chris: If you're going to have a problem, right? That's a good problem to have.
- Asher: Yeah.
- Chris: So, how many shares are you guys selling in the winter time? And, how much storage do you have to have to accommodate that?
- Asher: So, we're at about 100 shares, 110 shares, this year. What pushes us over our storage limit is not the CSA shares. The carrots, and beets, and cabbages, that we need for the winter shares would easily fit into our two coolers. It's having that extra that we're then going to wholesale out over the course of the winter that pushes us over that storage capacity that we already have.
- Chris: So, what are we talking about?
- Asher: I guess I could open that file and read off numbers. Let's see, we've strategically placed me at the computer. So, with the buffer, we're putting away 3500 pounds of potatoes. That'd be the single biggest thing right there. So, you can fit that on two pallets. And



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most everything else would fit on one or two pallets. So, beets take up a pallet, carrots take up a pallet, onions probably take up two pallets. So, it's that kind of volume that we're talking about.

Chris: And are you guys harvesting those things into plastic totes and storing them? Or are you using bulk bins? Or, how do you guys handle those winter crops?

Asher: Yes. Scale-appropriate material handling is a little bit tricky. So, what we've been doing this year, we have put things in bulk bins. We do the winter squash in bulk bins, and the cabbages in bulk bins, but we don't have a bin dumper, or a wash line we could dump a whole bin of carrots out in to. So, we're bagging them in the field, stacking them on a pallet in the field, working the whole pallet into the barn, and then we can roll that pallet worth of bags right next to the cooler so that then we're just handing the bags into the cooler. I don't know, as my back gets a little older, even just avoiding lifting a 40 or 50 pound bag of carrots into the back of the truck, and back out of the truck again, instead just stacking it on a pallet in the field. Somehow, that feels like a great innovation. Though, it'd certainly be easier if we could dump them into bulk bins and just deal with bulk bins.

Chris: Although, I know on my farm we stored a lot of our winter crops in bulk bins, just from the cost of materials handling standpoint, for getting things out of the field, but we didn't have a bin dumper on the other end. So, we were pulling things out by the hand full, or by trying to shuffle things into buckets, and pull the buckets out of the bins. And it was actually a lot of work on the other end, and not a whole lot of fun.

Asher: Right. We've played around with that with one or two crops over the last couple years. And it just felt like bagging them and stacking the bags on a pallet just felt easier. Given how our wash and pack facility is set up, that feels the easier solution.

Asher: I was going to say something about the harvesting of winter greens. I think a point that needs to be made is that, not only do we get the cold temperatures, but the sun becomes a very unreliable friend right about now. So, if the daytime temperature was ten degrees, but the sun came out, we could harvest greens. But, if the daytime temperature is ten or twenty degrees and you don't see the sun for a couple of weeks in a row, then we've just frozen up. And with unheated tunnels, the product -the spinach, or the kale, or the whatever- doesn't thaw out for us to harvest. But, that's been one of the limiting factors in greens production for us.

Chris: I think it's something that's really underestimated, in its importance for winter production, is the actual amount of sunshine that you get in the winter time. In my experience, in Decorah Iowa, which is at about 43 degrees latitude, and you guys are more or less at 43 degrees latitude, as well, along that I-90 corridor.

Asher: Yes.

Chris: That when we had sunny Decembers, we were banking heat that whole time. And we could handle lows outside of minus 30, minus 35 degrees, and everything inside would be fine. But, if we had a cloudy December, and then maybe January was zeros and minus tens, we would lose crops. Because we didn't have the heat banked in, the soil would actually freeze in the high tunnels.

Asher: Yep.



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- Chris: So, I don't think it's the absolute temperature that really matters. I think it's that whole combination of how the climate works.
- Asher: Yeah. And we're far enough from the Great Lakes that we don't get the lake effect snows that some of the closer cities do, but that means we're far enough that we don't get warm off of the lakes, but we're definitely close enough that we get clouds off of the lakes. So, we can be quite cloudy through the winter.
- Chris: With the shares going into the winter time, and the wholesale going into the winter time, are you also keeping your employees into the winter time, as well?
- Wendy: We have one who is a year around employee, but part time in January and February. Otherwise, we have folks here for eight months, or shorter, some folks just here for the summer.
- Chris: Are most of your workers, do they fall into the employee category, or are they more in the apprenticeship side of things?
- Wendy: We have had usually about four apprentices. And we do, also, have the year around employee, his position is senior crew member is what we're calling him right now. And then we have summer folks who are more part time employees. So, usually it's been about four apprentices.
- Chris: And you mentioned that that apprenticeship program, you guys are putting in a lot of effort into making sure that it's actually an apprenticeship program and not just a source of cheap labor.
- Wendy: Right, that's very important to us. We were both apprentices in the mid-90's, and definitely came out of that feeling very grateful to have had that experience and wanted to pass that on, but also being very aware of how it can be misused. At that time, there were definitely apprenticeships where the education wasn't as front and center as it needed to be. So, we've been very careful about that, about making sure that people are learning. And also part of that is, then, encouraging people to move on, when we feel like it's time for them to move on. It would be nice to have people here for longer, but I think often people, for their own, need to keep learning. We've encouraged them to move on to other positions, at times.
- Asher: To be perfectly clear, as far as we understand, from a legal perspective, we may call them apprentices, but the department of labor considers them employees. So, everyone is paid, at least, minimum wage, and has worker's compensation coverage, and all of that. So, from a legal perspective they are employees. We are just recruiting people who are interested in on-farm education. And then, in addition to simply training them to do the work that needs to be done on the farm, we train more people in more different aspects of the work than we would if we were just thinking of them as employees. And then we offer these separate, out of the workday, educational opportunities. So, we're recruiting people who are interested in that.
- Chris: Are your apprentices getting paid on the same pay scale as your employees?
- Wendy: Yes. At this point, since we've been trying to keep up with minimum wage, that's what we're paying, except for folks who return for another year, then they get paid more.



- Chris: How do you structure the educational opportunities for you apprentices?
- Wendy: So, once a week, we do an education session after work. Which, can either be a field trip to another farm, or it can be -we have about, maybe 10 or so workshops that we can run for them, and we have them tell us what they want. So we kind of give them a list of "These are all the workshops we can give. These are the farm videos we have. These are the different farms we could ask to go visit. And what do you guys most want to do?" And we'll schedule some of the things they're most excited about to make sure we fit those in. There are certain workshops that we always do. We say these are the important ones, and people generally agree. So, there's some that we start off with, soil management, and tractors 101. We always do one where we're reviewing the farm plants with them. We always do one where we share a budget with them. Those are key ones that we always do, but then others it's really according to what they're interested in. So, that's that piece.
- Wendy: We're also passing along other opportunities. So, if they want to go to something else happening in the area, they're aware of it, and we can try to schedule time off for them to go.
- Wendy: The other piece is just being very intentional about their training on the farm. That we're giving them challenges for where they're at, personally. And that we're aware of what their learning goals are and trying to help them meet them, in terms of what skills they're acquiring each season. Each person has areas of responsibility, so they can get better and have a lot of practice at cultivation, or green house, or whatever it be. So, we do have people that end up specializing in certain areas, but then everyone does end up coming in and have a chance to do some green house work. Of course, everyone does harvest. They get a chance to see every part of the farm, but then they get that more in depth time on either a particular tractor, or a particular area.
- Chris: What's the difference than on a day to day basis between an apprentice and worker on the farm? Or, an apprentice and a standard farm employee?
- Asher: Well, the apprentices outnumber the standard farm employees. Do we have any standard farm employees? We have some people that are just with us for the summer who may not think of themselves as apprentices, and may not take advantage of the educational opportunities. And then, there are some part time folks who, likewise, aren't. So, the apprentices are the core of the crew. And over the course of the season, come to be leadership for the other people who come and go a little bit more over the course of the season.
- Chris: With that, we're going to stop here. Take a quick break. Get a quick word from a couple of sponsors. And then we'll be right back with Wendy and Asher Burkhart-Spiegel from Common Thread CSA in Madison New York.
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- Chris: And we're back with Wendy and Asher Burkhardt-Spiegel from Common Thread CSA in Madison New York. I'm interested in how you guys are actually growing your produce. And one of the things that came up, when we were getting ready for the show, was about your tillage system. And that you guys are doing a somewhat permanent raised bed tillage system. Can you tell us about that?
- Asher: Sure. So, in Poughkeepsie we had very well drained soil and no rock. So, a chisel plow and rototiller seemed like a very good system there.
- Asher: But we knew we were moving to a cooler weather climate with some heavier soil. And one of the leased fields has quite a few rocks. So, it felt like, because of the rock, that a rototiller was out of the question. And because of the climate and the soil, it felt like raised beds were a good idea.
- Asher: So, we looked around. I guess the initial inspiration for how we've ended up doing things was what we understood Jody and Jean-Paul were doing over at Roxbury Farm, down in the Hudson Valley. Although, if you look around, there's a surprising number of takes on permanent or semi-permanent raised bed tillage.
- Asher: So, the system that we have is, we're on six foot center beds. So, we have a chisel plow that fits completely within a bed. The outer two banks are directly behind the tires. And we use twisted shovels on those, so that you can still see where the bed is after you take the chisel plow through. All the shovels are set to move the soil in towards the middle of the bed. That in itself doesn't make the bed raised, but it moves enough soil out of the tire track that you can still see where they are.
- Asher: And then, we lucked upon a very nice heavy duty disc bedder made by Kelley Manufacturing Company, down in Georgia. So, that's been implemented has four sets of double disc gangs that work to scoop soil up into a rough mound centered behind the tractor. The unit we have even has this spring loaded leveling door that will then start to level the bed off again.



- Asher: And then, we've customized a Perfecta field cultivator to finish off the bed. And all of that, I think, is working surprisingly well. It feel like it's getting better and better, we continue to make little tweaks here and there.
- Chris: I mean, I think anybody's tillage system has a lot to say about it. And it's interesting when you talk about kind of lucking in to the right equipment, and doing some of those modifications and changes on everything.
- Asher: Everything's modified. So, the chisel plow was an eight foot model that, I don't know why a dealer was selling it used, very used, but perfect -a nice, high clearance, spring loaded, chisel plow- Brillion chisel plow that was eight feet wide, but the two outside chisels were just bolted on to the outside edge of the frame. So, it was easy to take those off and, in fact, those two extra chisel shanks have become a separate implement. So, now we have a nice six foot chisel plow, even with a modest amount of residue, it could end up clogging up. So, we found someone who helped us jigger up a set of coulters. So, there's a coulters gang now mounted to the front edge of the chisel plow. So, it's not kind of a coulters chisel, and those coulters will cut through ... Say we had a nice, well grown, stand of oats and peas that winter killed, those coulters will cut through the residue so it doesn't end up wrapping on the chisel shank.
- Chris: Right.
- Asher: So, that piece works really nicely early on in the tillage process. And then, this disc bedder that we found. You know, Buckeye Tractor will pull together a disc bedder for you. This has twice as many discs and is just a really heavy unit. We pull it with a 90 horsepower tractor and one of the two tractors that we have, we have to put it in four wheel drive just to pull the thing. So, it's a really heavy unit. It does a really nice job. If you've got a lot of residue on the surface, it does a nice job of burying it. Not complete burial, but it does a really nice job of incorporating material, and it does a surprisingly nice job of breaking up clods, as well.
- Asher: So, we can chisel plow and disc bed in either order and in the same day, more or less. But, if there's any significant amount of residue after we've done the disc bedding pass, we just have to let the bed sit and let that buried residue break down, because then the s-tines on the field cultivator would just pull any significant residue right back to the surface.
- Asher: So, after disc bedding and any significant residue we'll let the bed sit, and if the clods have been broken up well enough by those previous steps, we can come through with the field cultivator. If it's still cloddy, then we'll actually take the disc bedders through one more time. But, the field cultivator is just a standard, well, it's a seven foot wide field cultivator frame. Perfecta's have those nice leveling bars and rolling baskets in the back. But, to that basic frame, we've added some side panels that keep the soil up on the bed. And then, behind the side panels we have a couple of tilling discs that -because the side panels do a good job, but soil does leak out around them- return additional soil up onto edges of the beds.
- Asher: So, that all worked really, really nicely, and gives us a nice level, well enough formed, friable, seedbeds for us to transplant or direct seed into, and then successfully cultivate.



- Asher: There's a couple of other fun modifications that we've done to that field cultivator. We've added, because weeds would swim between the s-tines. You know, if you were three days too late bringing the field cultivator through a failed seedbed situation ...
- Chris: Yes.
- Asher: ... and any weeds were up too big, they'd swim between the s-tines, and then you'd never get them. They would keep getting bigger, and bigger, and keep being missed. So, we stole this idea off of -we were out in the Salinas Valley in California, a tractor salesman drove me around so I could see things on other vegetable farms, and one guy had a tiny, little, a narrow, little under cutter bar mounted at the front edge of his field cultivator. So, we've just taken a small piece of weld-on bucket edge, and we run that in front of the s-tines at the very front of the field cultivator, and that just slices everything off right below the soil surface.
- Chris: And so, that's just running an inch or two deep to slice off any weeds. And then, you've got the s-tines on the cultivator that are breaking up the soil and making it into the nice smaller pieces, and really creating that friable seedbed that you're looking for.
- Asher: Yeah, exactly. So, that little under cutter bar, because if we missed weeds, we'd have to bring the disc bedder back through again, and that's much more intensive tillage, and the dumb little piece of metal at the front of the field cultivator just eliminated that headache.
- Asher: Well, both the field cultivator and the disc bedder, now, also have stabilizing coulters on them, because we've got some fields that are on a little bit of a side hill, and those implements would want to drift downhill a little bit. So, we've jiggered up some stabilizing coulters so that they track behind the tractor better, which gets us closer, and closer, to being able to keep our beds truly in the same place from one season to the next.
- Asher: And the advantage of that wasn't even something that we were aiming for, it's just what we've noticed is, you know, your tire tracks get more compacted than the rest of your beds. So, when you go till up the bed the next time, all of your clods are in your tire tracks. And if you can keep your tire tracks in the same place from one season to the next, then you're keeping your clods in your tire tracks where the clods aren't bothering you. And, in fact, your tires do a better job breaking up clods than any tillage implement that you could ever find. So, now we can reduce the number of tillage passes we do to break up clods, because the clods aren't on the bed's top, they're in the tire tracks where they're not causing any problems.
- Asher: So, all of that has worked out. And then, you get the advantages of the raised bed, like when you have too much rain, the water ends up in the tire tracks and your plants can still breathe. So, all of that has worked out, even better than we had hoped it might.
- Chris: What are you doing to try to keep the tire tracks in the same place year after year? How are you getting those beds lined up? I've looked at the satellite pictures of your fields, it's not like you're dealing with just ten beds, you've got some pretty wide fields that you're working.



- Asher: Right. So, the new fields that we have laid out in ten bed blocks with drive lanes between them. So that if we do screw up by a couple of inches, it doesn't cascade down the whole field. Nevertheless, we're getting better and better. And the key seems to be just that every step of the process, you can tell where the bed was. So, I think it kind of comes back to the twisted shovel on the chisel plow, pulling the soil back out of the tire tracks, so that even when you're done with the chisel plow you can still see where the bed was.
- Chris: When you're going in and planting cover crops at the end of the season, are you maintaining those beds? Or, are you leveling that field back out again?
- Asher: No. It turns out we're keeping the raised beds. It turns out that the field cultivator does a very nice job of incorporating cover crop seeds. So, the field cultivator is set up to maintain a raised bed. So, we spin out the rye and vetch to the oats and peas. Then, we come through with the field cultivator, running real shallow, and that ends up doing a very good job of helping the cover crop to establish. So, even with the cover crop growing on it, the bed is still a raised bed.
- Chris: And with that tool, you're still getting good incorporation, even in the wheel tracks?
- Asher: Yeah. The cover crop germinates better in the wheel tracks between the action of the tires firming the soil, and those tilling discs. Yeah, we get very, very good germination in the wheel track.
- Chris: So, talk to me a little bit about your weed control systems on the farm, then, because you've put a fair amount of effort into making sure that your bed tops can dry out quickly to keep your crops happy. I assume that also helps you to stay on top of things like the weed control, because you're able to get in there just that much sooner.
- Asher: Well, the problem always is that the bed tops may be dried out, but the paths are then wetter. So, there's definitely this situation where you've come in to do some cultivation, and you probably leave the tire tracks in worse shape than they would have been, because they're a little too wet.
- Asher: So, we're using pretty standard equipment for people at this scale. We have a couple of cultivating tractors. And we're using basket weeder for the earliest cultivation, tine weeder, quite possibly, as a first pass through, depending on the state of the transplant. And then we're using sweep, and that's where we're at.
- Wendy: We are not 100% happy with our weed control. We've been trying to improve the tools that we do have. We keep hearing about these fancy ...
- Chris: The finger weeders. Yeah.
- Wendy: Yeah. You know, they're tempting to try, but time and investment, we actually decided it makes the most sense for us, this year, to just put the basket weeder and the tine weeder on the same tractor, at the same time, so we could do them at the same time, and that, that would really help us out a lot. Our mechanic actually didn't end up having time to do that job for us, so we didn't pull off the innovations of what was going to be instead a finger weeders, so we'll see if we try that again or whether we try the finger weeder next year. But, I would say making sure that we get the tine weeder



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in there every time that we can, making sure we spring weed on time with carrots, and then just being really timely. We're always prioritizing, we're never can do everything that we should do on the farm, but we do try to make sure we run through everything that can be cultivated every week. I would not say our weed control was perfect, but we don't do much hand weeding, which I guess doesn't matter mean anything. It also helps, actually, we had a big help with our weed control this year, in that we took on a new field two years ago, that is a significant amount of acreage for us. How many acres is that, Asher?

Asher: It works out to five or six acres of beds.

Wendy: Right. And it had been just a hay field, and we've cover cropped it for a year before we started using it. And there's really low weed control, really low weed pressure in there, low annual weed pressure, and the perennials were pretty well taken care of from that one year of cover cropping. So, we've had one pretty significant field with low weed pressure, that we're trying to keep it that way. And it's also allowed us to not use a lot of the other fields that we have that have been getting out of control. So, I feel like that's really helped us a lot with starting to catch up with our weed seed bank. So, I feel like it's improving, but we do still need to make some improvements to the tools that we have to make it more efficient and maybe we'll eventually try this finger weeder that everyone says is so amazing and be amazed. But, we'll see.

Chris: It is something that I hear about again, and again, and again, that it is -I hate the word-game-changer, but it's a game-changer. What tractors are you guys using for cultivation? Or, are you on an Allis-Chalmers G situation?

Asher: We do have a G that we converted to electric, which, for the first time this year, we pretty much didn't use at all. We couldn't ever get it over to our leased fields, which are about a mile on the road and up a significant hill. So, we had range anxiety with the electric G. So, now we have an International 274 and a Ford 1710, both offset cultivating tractors.

Chris: And both of those with a three-point hitch on the back, right?

Asher: They do both have three-point hitches on the back, yeah. So, those were some things that I wanted to add to what Wendy just said. So, in terms of having the basket weeder and this tine weeder on the same tractor, we were just talking about trying to steal Paul Arnold's idea, over at Pleasant Valley Farms. He's rigged up a tine weeder on a three-point hitch toolbar so that he can fold it up or down. So, he can be basket weeding along, and if the crop is well enough established to take the tine weeding, he folds the tine weeder down, and if it's not, he folds the tine weeder up. And that's what the mechanic/welder, that we work with, ran out of time before he got too busy with all of the dairy farmers breaking their hay equipment and stuff like that. So, we'll hold his feet to the fire, very gently, and he'll get that done for us this winter. So, hopefully that'll be working for us next season.

Asher: The other thing that I wanted to add was, we stumbled upon a pretty good way to deal with the tire tracks and bed edges. So, in lieu of a true track sweep, we're actually running a ten or twelve inch furrowing shovel directly behind the cultivating tractor tires. And actually, now, we have those on gauge wheels, so the tractor operator can just drop the three-point hitch and go. And those furrowing shovels are scraping the edge of the bed and they're pushing soil back up against the edge of the bed. So, in



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combination, that's taking care of weeds at the bottom of the tire track. It's taking care of weeds at the edge of the bed. And it's putting a little bit more soil back at the edge of the bed, so that the next time that we come through with the sweeps, the sweeps have a little bit more soil against that outside edge of the outside rows of crops on the bed.

Chris: Because that's always a challenge that I've seen with raised bed systems, is controlling the weeds on the shoulder of the beds. So often, I've seen that be the death of those systems.

Asher: Yeah. The furrowing shovels are working really, really well, if they're adjusted properly. If they're biting well enough, then that's not a problem. It takes care of it.

Chris: And I really like the idea of the gauge wheels, so that all you have to do is drop them down, and then you can just forget about it.

Asher: Yes. We didn't have them until the beginning of this year, and we set them up on one of the tractors at the beginning of the season. It was clear within two cultivating sessions that it was going to work very, very well. So, we invested in the extra little bit of metal here and there, and put gauge wheels on the second tractor's track sweeps. And it's been wonderful.

Wendy: Yeah, it's the touch and putting that down, it's not very precise, those are very tricky to get it at just the right level. So, that has made it so much easier to just put them down a go.

Chris: I've never put gauge wheels on something that didn't pay for itself the first couple of times I used it. It always made the whole system work better.

Asher: Yes.

Chris: So, I think I saw on some of the pictures that you had online, that you guys are using a Jiffy Hitch system on your tractors to make it easier to hook up the three-point implements.

Asher: Yes. So, we have Jiffy Hitches on the two bigger tractors, and the two implements that they use. Yes.

Chris: So, you're just using it on the really big heavy stuff?

Asher: Right. The two cultivating tractors, and then we have one little 40 horsepower tractor, none of those have the Jiffy Hitch on them. Although, we would consider, if we put the Jiffy Hitch on that 40 horsepower tractor, that's the one that pulls that field cultivator. If we put a Jiffy Hitch on that implement and that tractor, then that would give us the flexibility to pull that field cultivator with one of the two larger tractors. And that wouldn't be a bad thing, but it's been fine the way it is.

Chris: Because that's kind of the problem with the quick hitch system, is that either everything has to be on it that you're going to use with the tractor that's got it hooked up, or not. It's almost like having the old style. I remember I worked on a farm that had three-point hitch implements, and they also had the old style Allis-Chalmers hook up. And if you were on the Allis-Chalmers tractor, you could only use the Allis-Chalmers



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hook up on a WD45. Whereas if you were the three-point tractors, you could only use the implements that were associated with that.

- Asher: Right. And the reality is that, that field cultivator is the only crossover implement between the smaller tractor and the bigger tractors. So, that's not a real hang up. But, yes, it wouldn't make any sense for us to have a Jiffy Hitch on one of the two big tractors. It's like having a whole nother tractor. Having Jiffy Hitches on the tractor, you just hesitate so much less about changing implements. It allows you to do the operations in the order that makes sense, instead of thinking forever about "How am I going to go get this? How am I going to do it without changing implements?" You can just change implements, do what you need to do, and then of course it just feels so much safer to not have somebody in between a big tractor and a big implement hooking and unhooking.
- Chris: How long does it take you to hook up an implement with the Jiffy Hitch?
- Asher: Well, if it's not a PTO implement, it's really a matter of backing up. I don't know, how good are you at backing up square?
- Chris: And that's really it, then, it's just backing up square and lifting up that triangle so that it connects with the female part on the implement.
- Asher: Yeah, correct. You need to have a hydraulic coupling. So, you need to have a remote hydraulic port on the tractor to run that hydraulic coupling, because you've got to change the angle of the male triangle on the tractor to match the angle of the female triangle on the implement. But, yes, it's very easy.
- Chris: Alright, with that, we're going to turn to our lightening round. First, we're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor, and then we'll be right back.
- Chris: This lightning round and perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is provided by BCS America. A BCS two-wheel tractor is the only power equipment a merchant gardener will need. With PTO driven attachments, like a rototiller, a flail mower, a power harrow, rotary plow, snow thrower, log splitter, and more. You name it, you can probably run it with a versatile BCS two-wheel tractor. The first time I used a rototiller, way back in 1991, it was mounted to a BCS two-wheeled tractor and it spoiled me for life. When you get behind a BCS, you can tell that it's built to the same commercial standards as four-wheeled farm tractors. It has many of the same features. I've used other tillers and mowers and I spent most of the time when I was using them thinking of how much easier it would be with BCS. Check out BCSAmerica.com to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments, plus videos of BCS in action.
- Chris: Wendy, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Wendy: I think I'd have to say two. One is, we have a tractor drawn sprayer, which we got this last year. Of course, as an organic farmer, I'm , but after 20 years of carrying those backpack things, having a tractor drawn sprayer is like this magical thing. So, I would say that, and my other little one is the fanny pack. I sort of had years and years of losing my pick sheet, and losing things out of my pockets, and I've start having a fanny pack where I feel like Mary Poppins in the field. I can pull anything I need out of my fanny pack, and I have what I need at all times. And I don't lose things. People can hand me money and I can safely put it somewhere. So, those are my two favorite tools.



- Chris: Okay, so a question about the fanny pack. Are your children just mortified that you wear a fanny pack?
- Wendy: I feel like now that I'm 40, I'm embracing my middle age nerdiness, or something, but I'm totally gleeful about it, until all my apprentices in their 20's ... And, actually, two of them came in with fanny packs after I told them how amazing it was, so I'm not the only one on the farm with one.
- Chris: And tell me about the sprayer. You said it's a pull behind sprayer, so is this something that you're ... Well, just tell me about that, is it a three-point hitch, or is you pulling it down the alley ways, or?
- Wendy: It is attached with a draw bar. And it's a small sprayer, but it covers up to six beds, if you're straddling a bed. Usually, I'm just using it, I can either spray two, four, five, or six beds, depending on the configuration. It's just amazing after all those years of carrying those heavy packs. My back, I just can't do it any more with my back, I've had to ask other people to do the spraying instead, and it's wonderful to be like "I can do it."
- Chris: Do you feel like your sprays are more timely, or that you're more likely to put on an application that should be made, than you were with the backpack sprayer?
- Wendy: Yes. That's the other thing. We've been experimenting a lot with these bio pesticides. And, also, just wanting to... We've had the same problems with late blight threats, as everyone else in the Northeast. So, we always got one spray of copper on the potatoes, but was just like when you're doing it by hand, on our scale, it's completely prohibitive to do it more than once. But, no, I think we did it maybe even three times this year. Actually, we didn't get late blight this year, but we had some other issues they were trying to prevent. So, we have sprayed a little bit more since we have it, but still just what's absolutely necessary. We probably could do more with beneficial, nutritional things, and I feel like that's something that feels more reasonable to consider and to integrate now that we have that sprayer.
- Chris: Asher, your favorite tool on the farm?
- Asher: Well, I have two answers, too. Sorry. So, anything that has the proper gauge-wheels and parking stands on it is wonderful. And then, that field cultivator that we were talking about earlier. It's just working so well with all its little extra bits and pieces. It just does exactly what we need it to do.
- Chris: Wendy, what's your favorite crop to grow?
- Wendy: That's another hard one. I'm going to say, I guess, spinach. Just because spinach is hard to grow everywhere except here. We moved here, to this cold place, and spinach has been super easy to grow. So, I love that you can just direct seed it. It's really easy to cultivate. It's just comes up. We don't have any pest problems with it here. And then people love it, and that's really high value. And we can grow it almost the entire year. And it's tasty. So, I would say spinach.
- Chris: And Asher, your favorite crop to grow?



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- Asher: So, I'm going to say onions. I think they exemplify the improbability that growing all vegetables does. This little grassy thing turns into this great, big, hard ball that you know is mostly liquid, yet seems to be perfectly solid. And it sits on your counter, and it makes its own paper. It makes paper, and it just sits there wrapped in paper forever. And it makes you cry, but then it turns into this wonderful sweet caramelized mess, if you want it to. It just seems so unlikely. It's just wonderful.
- Chris: I love it. Alright, and Asher, if you could go back in time and then tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Asher: It would have been nice to have not moved as many times as we have. I think it comes down to, we could have done a better job of starting our farming careers in a place where we were going to be able to find land to farm, so that we could have been building and maintaining networks the entire time, instead of having to create or build and find new networks each time we started in a new place.
- Chris: And Wendy, how about you? If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Wendy: I think it would be to take better care of your body. I think when you're young, you feel invincible, but, you know, I've had a number of back problems. And I've discovered, actually, a posture method called the Gokhale Method, that I'm all about and so excited. I herniated a disk a couple of years ago, and dealt with a couple of years of farming in intense pain, and I feel like if I had had the right posture, and had been better about stretching and maintaining my body, from an earlier age, I could have avoided a few years of a lot of pain. And also, sleep. My brain would be in better shape if I had made sure to maintain sleep. So, remembering that your body is your most important tool.
- Chris: Wendy and Asher, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.
- Wendy: No, thank you.
- Asher: Thank you, Chris.
- Chris: Alright, so wrapping things up here. I'll say again that this is episode 143 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast. You can find the notes for this show at FarmertoFarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Common Thread, that's c-o-m-m-o-n-t-h-r-e-a-d. We usually use the last name of the guest, but you try spelling Burkhart-Spiegel.
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- Chris: Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show, through the suggestions form on FarmertoFarmerpodcast.com. I'll do my best to get them on the show.
- Chris: Thank you for listening. Be safe out there, and keep the tractor running.