



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 149

Heather Secrist of Suncrest Gardens Farm on Going Out on a Limb to Build and Grow One of the First Pizza Farms

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, episode 149, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Heather Secrist raises two acres of vegetables, as well as pastured pork and lamb on 16 acres at Suncrest Gardens Farm in the rural hills of Cochrane, Wisconsin, and turns it all into pizzas and other value added foods. With sales on farm during pizzas nights and a new Garden Café, as well as the Farmer's Market in Winona, Minnesota, Heather has developed a business model that works for herself and for her family. Heather returned to the region where she grew up on a family farm to start Suncrest Gardens Farm back in 2003, and has been making pizza for on-farm pizza nights since long before it was cool. She shares with us how she grew the farm and value added operation to provide her with the full-time living, including developing the infrastructure, marketing to regular and occasional customers, and how she's negotiated the regulations for her small-scale processing facility, as well as how her marketing strategy has evolved through the years.

Chris Blanchard: The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is generously supported by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are versatile, maneuverable in tight spaces, light-weight for less compaction, and easy to maintain and repair on the farm. Gear-driven and built to



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last for decades of dependable service, BCSAmerica.com, and by Vermont Compost Company, founded by organic crop-growing professionals committed to meeting the need for high-quality compost and compost-based living soil mixes for certified organic plant production. VermontCompost.com, and by High Mowing Organic Seeds, the first independently owned, farm-based seed company proudly serving professional organic growers with a full line of 100% certified organic and Non-GMO Project verified vegetable, herb, flower and cover crop seeds. HighMowingSeeds.com. Heather Secrist, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Heather Secrist: Hi, Chris. Nice to be with you this morning.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off by having you tell us about Suncrest Gardens Farm, where you guys are located and just exactly what you're doing there.

Heather Secrist: Suncrest Gardens Farm is in the rural hills of Cochrane, Wisconsin, kind of more towards Waumandee, and we're about six miles off the Great River Road, also known as 'Highway 35' there, so remote, but not too remote for people to find us. What we do here on the farm is while we're a small farm, so we are only 16 acres, our farm consists of a variety of vegetables that we raise on a couple acres. We have livestock as well, and then our other aspect of the farm is what people refer to as the 'Pizza Farm', and so it's the licensed kitchen side where we create wood-fired pizzas made through September, and we also use that kitchen now to create other value added items that we can sell directly to customers or through the Farmer's Market.

Chris Blanchard: You've been farming at Suncrest Gardens Farm for how long?

Heather Secrist: The farm started about 14 years ago, and then the pizza side of the farm began about 12 years ago.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. It seems to me like everybody's doing a pizza farm right now. I keep getting people on the show, and they're like, "Oh, yeah. By the way, we're doing a pizza farm", but you've been doing this since long before that was cool.

Heather Secrist: When I first had the idea of the farm here, because of its limited size, I knew that having a licensed kitchen was going to be an integral part of this farm, and so I don't think I realized the full impact of having the pizza farm be as big as it is now today, be a part of the whole picture here, but for me, it was like a blank canvas that I was very comfortable with preparing, and it left a lot of creativity to be involved and what items could be put on those pizzas, and it's an easy sell because people love pizza.

Chris Blanchard: You say it's an easy sell, but when you were talking about your location, I mean, you said six miles off of the Great River Road, which is, I mean, I'm just going to say, one of my favorite roads in the country, but you're not exactly located near major metropolitan centers.

Heather Secrist: When we first built the farm and we're going to have the pizza farm be a part of it, I mean, people thought, "Oh, good luck with that. You're out in the middle of nowhere." Right? It was just something that we felt right. I didn't have huge expectations for.

Heather Secrist: It felt like just a natural way to incorporate everything that we did on the farm. In our same driveway is actually the Great River Organic Mill, and so we had this asset that



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was literally next door where we could pull the little wagon over and get flour to bring it over to our kitchen, and so that seems like a natural marriage to utilize that asset, but we started really small, and maybe that first season, 30 pizzas seemed like, "Wow." That was a big accomplishment for that night, and to be honest, we didn't know exactly what we were doing, but we're just learning as we grew and grew slowly every year through word of mouth. It's primarily how people heard of us as they liked what they were eating here or they told their friends, "You got to come out and try it", and so it just grew every season like that to where we are now, where I'm really having to have a full entourage as fast that helped meet the demands on those busy prime summer evenings out here on the farm.

Chris Blanchard: How did the pizza nights work on your farm? How many nights a week are you doing that?

Heather Secrist: We're open one to two nights a week made through September, and then we open up for the two nights, June, July and August, and that's a Thursday night. It's not a huge amount of nights there, but it takes a lot of effort to pull off a pizza night.

Chris Blanchard: How many pizzas are you doing in a typical night?

Heather Secrist: A typical night, Thursdays are going to be a little bit slower than Fridays just due to the natural weekend draw that the Friday night has, and so the Thursday nights maybe have 75 pizzas on average, and the Friday nights, maybe around 150 on average.

Chris Blanchard: When you're talking about a pizza, is that serving one person or is that serving a family?

Heather Secrist: The pizzas come in two different sizes. We have the 16-inch pizza size, which can feed two to three people, depending on how hungry they are, and then we also started offering a 12-inch size the last two years I think, and depending on how you are, it can feed one to two people.

Chris Blanchard: In addition to the pizza nights then, you are growing a lot of the products that you're putting on the pizza. Right?

Heather Secrist: Right. It's not just producing pizzas here. We raise most all of the vegetables that we put on the pizzas here, so there's the tomatoes, peppers, the garlic, onions, your basic standard fare that might find its way onto a pizza, but we also find fun ways to incorporate sweet corn that's in season on a pizza and different seasonal pestos that we make, and the kale, and broccoli, and carrots are all found on a pizza as well. You have an offering of your standard vegetarian or a meat lovers type pizzas that we have here, but then, you have all the seasonal fun ones that can be inspired from an abundance of something in the garden that week or from just a new way that I want to combine some vegetables that week.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. About how many acres of vegetables are you growing?

Heather Secrist: We have about a three-acre garden space out there. One of those acres has cover crops, and some clover-mixed driving lanes to access the different plants that are out there, so that gives us about two acres of growing space that we have, but we also have our pastured hogs that are raised out in the back of the garden space, and so



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we have a variety of livestock that are incorporated into the farm not in huge numbers because again, of our size. We're small, but in numbers that are able to meet our needs for the pizza products, so we're doing a whole hog sausage on the pizzas, and those are from the hogs that we raised here on the farm, and then we also offer chicken on the pizzas, which are from our meat birds, bacon, Canadian bacon. We also have our Euro season lamb, and so it might be easier for some people to just go buy some lamb to put it on your pizza. That would seem like a pretty straightforward decision, but the way I did it was I brought a small breeding herd of Katahdin sheep, and it took me three years to build up this herd, so now, where I have a crop of lambs that I'm able to process and have lamb on a gyro pizza.

Heather Secrist: Maybe it's the slow way to get that food onto the plate, but it's a way ... It's just part of the principles of the farm. You don't just order off the truck. It actually comes here from the farm, and you have all of that love that's built into those pizzas then.

Chris Blanchard: I assume that's something that's an important part of the experience for the people that come out for pizza night?

Heather Secrist: Yeah. I think the food is just one aspect of the pizza farm. The other half is partly the experience that they have here. If you're looking for fast-food, there are probably are easier ways to have that meal, but the pizza farm is really ... Usually, people are spending a couple of hours here.

Heather Secrist: They're taking a little time to slow down, and to relax, and enjoy. People watching enjoy live music that we offer actually once a week every Friday, we offer live music in the yard here. You can walk around, walk through the garden, visit the different farm animals that you might see, bring a yard game, visit with your neighbor that you actually haven't had a conversation with, even though you drive by regularly. All those things. It just lets you unplug a little bit out here.

Chris Blanchard: I really enjoy the tagline that shows up at the bottom of your webpage, and it's also in the title of the page, which is "Eat well, smile often", and it did seem like, because as I was noodling around it, you put a lot of emphasis on helping your customers to get those smiles.

Heather Secrist: The "Eat well, smile often" tagline was something that came very early in the whole farm. It's really what's at the heart of everything I think here is that when you have food and it's, tastes good, it's clean food and all of it, it just leads to you feeling good about yourself, and to be able to share that with other people and see their enjoyment of the food that you have raised yourself or to combine flavors in a way that just makes a great experience is just a really a wonderful part of the job here.

Chris Blanchard: What other things do you do at Suncrest Gardens Farm besides providing pizza that makes people smile when they show up for a pizza night?

Heather Secrist: I think what brings the smiles to the folks that visit the farm here is sometimes the, what they think the experience is going to be like going to eat pizza on a farm is totally not exactly what they're going to experience here. We're a small setting in the valley, so you have this enclosed kind of hug around you, I would say as you land in the valley, and you've driven out here on this windy road along 88, and you feel like you're going out in the middle of nowhere, and then it's like this little oasis pops up, and you can see kids and families frolicking around in the yard, and you see the



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different animals that are out there, and it's just kind of an idyllic setting for everything to be, and then everyone just seems a little bit more relaxed out here. There's no cell service, so people are less tuned into their devices a little bit here. Our staff has been with us for many seasons, and they're more like family I would say than they are just a person that works here, and so their passion and their love of what they do and being a part of the farm really comes right through them to the customers and stuff, and so, it's like I say, it's a lot more than just the food that they get here that makes them feel like this is a special place.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that it takes a lot of people to make a pizza night happen, but your staff is involved in more than just pizza nights. Right?

Heather Secrist: Right. Our staff here during the summer time, we have about two people that work full-time in the garden space and working in the kitchens, along with the pizza nights, and then we have about 10 staff that work part-time schedules that come in primarily for just the pizza nights, and then in the winter time, it all scales back, and I have about one person that helps part-time with the farm things to keep processing those items that we've harvested and to still help out going to the Farmer's Market.

Chris Blanchard: Where have you drawn your staff from? I mean, you said these folks have been with you for a long time?

Heather Secrist: Finding staff here for the farm has never been too much of an issue. Some of my summer seasonal people have come doing like an internship on the farm usually during college break time, so they come from all over. They've come from Maryland, down south, Winona, close areas like that, so usually one of those people is a college-aged person with a summertime availability. Then, the other person is ... Can be anybody of just ...

Heather Secrist: Usually, we have a couple, a neighbor family that has three daughters, and all of their daughters now work in the farm in some degree, which is fun, so we've kept it in the family that way obviously. They've spoken well of us back home, and it's really great to have gotten to know them and to continue that relationship with them, and so the other staff from, I've grown up in the area, so I know a lot of different people here are old classmates of mine with their husbands, and then children that are now working here as well, neighbors and other sorts that just have signed up to be a part of the fun here.

Chris Blanchard: Is Suncrest Gardens Farm where you grew up or did you grow up on a farm in the area?

Heather Secrist: I was raised just up river in Elma, Wisconsin, and I was an only child and grew up on a dairy farm there, and so I was very much used to the rigors of farm life and was my dad's hired hand. A great summer job there. Right? Helped milk cows, raked a lot of hay growing up, and was always in charge of feeding all the calves and things like that on the farm, and so when my parents sold their farm, I was a junior in high school, and they asked, "Do you want to take over the farm?", and I said, "Heck, no. I do not want to sign up to do all this right now", and was very much in the thought process of I was going to grow up and leave the area and go do something else.

Heather Secrist: I thought I was going to go into veterinary medicine or something else like that. The farm was sold, and through life's journeys and back to figuring out what it is that I



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wanted to do, I found that the roots of farming were very strong in me, like knowing where my food came from was really important. I really liked growing food, but in abundance, not just a small garden. I think I tried my first garden, and I had 36 tomato plants, and as a single person, I was completely overwhelmed by all of these tomatoes, but I had to pick all of them, was surrounded by bushels of tomatoes in my kitchen. I remember crying over the stove because I had to process them all because I couldn't waste anything, and so I decided, "I think I'm onto something here, but I need to feed more people than just myself with this", and so that's a little bit of the nudge that I found getting into growing vegetables and food for people.

Chris Blanchard: What brought you back to the area where you grew up?

Heather Secrist: I think just when I was ready to settle and have a family of my own. I was just drawn back to my hometown area where I had family. My parents actually just live three miles over the hill from where the farm is now. They've moved down river closer to me after the years here, so it's nice to have my folks so close because they've been able to assist, especially while my children are young and raising of them, and helping with some of the construction of the buildings and stuff here. My dad had switched gears from dairy farming into construction, which was a very nice gift to be able to help utilize some of his skills in the building of the farm here.

Chris Blanchard: When you came onto the farm, was it blank land or were there buildings that you inhabited?

Heather Secrist: The farm was literally just 16 acres, so it's just a little section of the valley space that was available. I looked at a lot of different farms, and they frankly were just too much investment for me for what I was wanting to grow, the size that I was wanting to grow, and so I was able to get in on 16 acres, and then start with a fresh approach to that land to make it be what I was wanting to be.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you've got kids. How old are your children?

Heather Secrist: I have two boys. Ashlan is 12 years old and Ethan is now 10. The farm has been in existence for 14 years, so there was a couple of years they're pre-children to work and trying to get things established. A lot of buildings I think happened for the first few years. Building the barn actually came first before our house.

Heather Secrist: The house came second, which was a multi-year process to get that up because we put in a lot of our own sweat equity into all those things. I would say that that barn that we've built though was one of those things that we really built backwards because we built the barn in its original size of a 24 by 48 small barn. Was a lot, but it's been added on to at least three times, which has these three different heights of the barn that extend out from it now, and what was originally a gravel interior, pole shed style building that had a tractors or equipment and animals in is now a concrete floor, insulated walls, the drop ceiling, a barn that's made for people, so there was a little loss of ... The barn probably costs way more to build nowadays than it's needed to, had I had the proper vision of where this is all going to go to from the beginning.

Chris Blanchard: Of course, you say proper vision, but I mean, so much of that I would imagine has just been feeling your way and figuring out how you're going to make a living off of a small plot of vegetables in rural Wisconsin.



Heather Secrist: Yeah. Feeling the way is definitely a good way to put it because "If you build it, they will come." Right? That's that saying for the Iowa baseball diamond cornfield or just having to tap into the energy of the farm and what people are wanting from the farm as far as what the customers seem to be driving the farm in what we produce for them, and so sometimes, it's been harder to do in what enterprises you keep and what enterprises you drop because you have a lot of heart into them, like with our CSA. I had a CSA here on the farm for at least 10 years, and it grew from just a single season CSA where we had started, which is summer and maybe a couple ...

Heather Secrist: I think it started with six shares the first year that we did it, so it was just feeling it out to see if there was any interest in here. Then, it grew to 12 shares, and 24 shares, 36 shares, eventually got to 70 shares here on the farm, and which was a good amount for a small crew we're able to put out there in a very rural area like you said, and we only marketed or drove those CSA boxes as far as Winona, so very short distance. It was 20 miles from the farm. We never chose to go beyond that radius. We've always ...

Heather Secrist: I didn't want to ever want to spend my time in a car driving places. It's not one of my favorite things, and so over time, instead of growing those CSA shares to be larger, we chose to try to take better care of our people in a longer season, and so I better care. I just provide them food through a longer period of time. That's where we've added spring shares, fall shares, eventually winter shares to a full year-round type CSA people or CSA option. That was very fun and challenging to meet those needs and figure out how to create those shares throughout the different seasons.

Chris Blanchard: Do you still have the CSA? Are you still selling fresh produce off the farm?

Heather Secrist: We actually stopped offering to CSA this last season, and it was a really hard decision for me to make because I had all these connections with families, and I felt like we had raised the children or helped feed the children that were in womb that I now knew as 10-year olds running around, and we all had a really good relationship with everybody, and I just felt so dedicated to the families to be providing that food for them, but I also had a new motto that was entering the farm was, "Farm smarter, not harder". That was added on to that "Eat well, smile often", and the other motto was also was just to try to "Do less while still making our living here", and so we gave up that CSA fall, winter option and decided to put all the fresh produce through our kitchen here because that was something really unique that this small farm had, was that licensed kitchen.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about putting all of that produce through the kitchen, what else are you doing besides the wood-fired pizzas on pizza night?

Heather Secrist: We go to Winona Farmer's Market, which is actually a year-round market, and we are able to offer a variety of frozen soups that we sell there. We started making our frozen wood-fired pizzas so that we can extend this season for those and because there's a demand for them. It took me a long time to realize that people really had us niched as a pizza farm, or when they thought of Suncrest Gardens, they were thinking, "Oh, yeah. That's that pizza farm", and so that's what they kept asking for, was things down that road, and we can see this in the market trends present today that there is a desire to have more ready to eat kind of convenience type foods, but that are still healthy. Instead of having a CSA box that has all of the fresh produce



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there for them to chop up and to prepare into a meal, which does require some thinking and some planning a little bit of time, that we instead would do all the preparations for the food here, and then send that out to our customers, and people received that well and wanted us to do more and more of that instead of having them to put in the labor and the time.

Chris Blanchard: Pizza is kind of a universal food. Right? I mean, that's something that I think everybody eats.

Heather Secrist: Yeah. You can make pizzas. Like I said, the crust is a blank canvas, and so you can make it be anything that you want, and sometimes some of our seasonal offerings are a little unique, but they are just inspired from other dishes that you would find out there that you might like, so our sesame chicken pizza is inspired from one of my favorite Chinese dishes, the sesame chicken, where you have the chicken and the fresh steamed broccoli and things on there, and so we just made a really delicious brown sauce and put that on the pizza, put some cheese, and the chicken, broccoli, some carrots to make it some pretty color on there, a little bit of sesame seeds on top, and then our own made sweet, spicy chili sauce made it pop, and so what a fun different way to put broccoli on a pizza that is a way that people are willing to try and not go, "Oh, broccoli pizza. No way."

Chris Blanchard: Are you selling any of your prepared foods through wholesale channels or is it all direct to retail customers?

Heather Secrist: We sell... 95% is direct to our customers. We have a few different wholesale people from local places that are buying frozen pizzas to offer either cooked or frozen to customers at their locations, but primarily, sell direct to the user.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit about how the regulations work on that? I mean, you're doing prepared foods in Wisconsin, and there's been a lot of discussion here in Wisconsin about prepared foods and the Cookie Bill, and I know that it's not cookies, but there's a lot of conversation going on about what's an appropriate level of regulation for that.

Heather Secrist: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: What have you had to do to meet the regulatory requirements here in Wisconsin, and you're taking stuff across the river into Winona, Minnesota, and I'm curious what sort of regulatory concerns that's raised for you?

Heather Secrist: Right. We have had a licensed kitchen here for at least 12 years now, and so, I mean, Wisconsin has been very ... I don't know what to say. There's a lot of things to say.

Chris Blanchard: There's a lot of things to say about Wisconsin right now.

Heather Secrist: Yeah. Right? Working with our local health inspector from Wisconsin has really been a good working relationship from the beginning, and so there's very clear expectations of what was needed in the licensed kitchen. One of the challenges we had was concerning like a grease trap. The rules said that we should have a large tank buried in the yard because that was just the universal rule.



Heather Secrist: However, common sense was showing that we are only open one or two nights a week throughout six months, so the amount of grease that we are actually creating or using that's going to go through that grease trap doesn't require a multi-thousand dollar tank to be put into the yard. There is a smaller unit that can be put inside the kitchen in the building that is much more cost-effective, but still took care of the needs remove any grease from that waste water that comes from the kitchen, and so we were eventually able to have our request pass through the desk of a very commonsensical man that was in the Green Bay area who gave us that stamp of approval to have the smaller grease trap that we service yearly that's in our kitchen. That saved us several thousand dollars in the set up of our licensed kitchen here, but otherwise, we collected equipment that was used slowly over time, have bought units used usually first to make sure that they were more affordable for us to get our hands on, and then if they were used well within the kitchen, then we could always expand as we needed to.

Chris Blanchard: I mean, you said that with regards to that grease trap, and I know this is like such a fiddly little thing to talk about, but you said that you ended up getting that passed across the desk of a regulator in Green Bay, which is on the opposite side of the state, and Wisconsin is not a, it's not a small state either population wise or geographically. Tell me a little bit more about how that worked. How did you navigate that regulatory process because a lot of times, and we're certainly seeing this with the produce safety rule, and I think you see it to a certain degree even with the Preventive Controls Rule, the one with the Food Safety Modernization Act that has to do with the processed foods and handling and storing product.

Heather Secrist: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: Common sense isn't nearly as common as the name would indicate, and how did you navigate that process to get to the right person who have the common sense to say, "You don't need a seven day a week grease trap"?

Heather Secrist: Getting the smaller grease trap was really just pure luck I think at the end because I tried to talk to so many different people that were in the La Crosse in Eau Claire, in the different more local agencies, and all of them just said, "Nope. That just isn't what we're going to accept." There is an option that you can apply for a variance to the rule, and I applied for it several times because to me, it just didn't make sense that we had to have this major grease trap units when we could suffice with a much smaller one, and I think I finally was just ready to just give up and get in and go, "Whatever. This is just what we need to do in order to move forward with the process", and I believe my plumber was looking for the units to install here, and while he was looking for the actual grease trap, he took it to the Green Bay area where somebody with enough higher authority saw it and gave us the right approval.

Chris Blanchard: Probably one advantage of working with a professional plumber there, somebody that actually maybe new a little bit more about how to navigate that process and how to bounce through up because they've been around and they've seen other people dealing with similar situations.

Heather Secrist: Yes. Yeah. What I thought, I was working through the right chains to try to acquire the proper variance. In the end, our plumber was able to look in a different direction and gave us the help that we needed.



Chris Blanchard: Speaking of plumbing, what do you guys do for toilets on the farm for visitors?

Heather Secrist: We actually use a composting toilet system here on the farm, and so at first, we used a portable outhouse, and nothing wrong with using an out hose. It was the convenient method to deal with that side of having the public, being out at your place, so having a porta-potty out here on the farm when we had a smaller amount of traffic with the pizza farm was a great way to offer the bathroom facilities that the public needed. As the numbers of people coming through the farm grew a little bit, our number of porta-potties was going to have to increase as well, and I just felt that I didn't like the idea of the blue chemical toilet stuff being spread on the fields in some of our local areas. I just felt like there was a different way that we could handle the bathroom facility side of working with the public, and so we actually turned to the composting out hose set up that we have now, and so we have a three-stall bathroom that can handle the amount of traffic we have, but it also smells a little fresher than say a porta-potty does.

Heather Secrist: It has little curtains in it, has a laminate flooring in it, so it's all cleanable. It's made out of wood. It just looks friendlier and more like a space that you don't mind using in the middle of summer. Then, we have to manage obviously the outhouse and stuff, and it's really the concept written by the humanure topic with the five-gallon bucket system. We use sawdust from a local mill as our carbon ratio in there.

Heather Secrist: We have little spiffy directions for people, one scoop of sawdust for number one and two scoops for number twos, and everybody gets it, and it goes through a two-year composting process, and then is used in our non- food production areas of the farm.

Chris Blanchard: The food safety guys didn't give you a hard time about that?

Heather Secrist: It falls in a gray area, and frankly, walking the gray lines is kind of what you do, and if you ask for clarification, sometimes then you're asking them to draw the line, and so I've been told a few times like, "Don't ask me that question because then I have to clarify", versus, "You can remain in a gray area", because they don't feel like we're doing anything harmful or bad. It's just that if you require the exact specifications for everything you need to do when it's not necessarily written there, as long as it is for good health and for land and water safety, and makes sense and takes care of all the checks that are around it. Sometimes, you can use systems that aren't written specifically down.

Chris Blanchard: I've run into this a lot, I mean, both as a farmer. I've run into this as a food safety trainer, and I've run into this even when I've gone to train the trainer programs as a food safety person. A lot of times, it's like, "Just give me the answer. Tell me exactly what I have to do", but a lot of times, those food safety regulations are actually written with quite a bit of flexibility in them, and it really is about, "Do you have a system that is going to not threaten public health?" It can be frustrating sometimes because we do just want somebody to tell us what to do, but I also think that that's one of the benefits of the way that some of these regulations are written is that maybe you can put in a composting toilet, and maybe that's something that you can get away with if you want to, and in a lot of ways, I mean, I'd look at the system that you're doing and I go, "If had to do a field toilet, I'd rather have that", and I feel like it's actually less risky to have a bucket of sawdust and humanure in place than it is to



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actually have a porta potty out in your field with 40 gallons of liquid, but when it tips over, it's going to run and soak into your soil.

Heather Secrist: Right.

Chris Blanchard: My two cents worth on the poop subject there, so ...

Heather Secrist: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: Again, as long of course as you have a system for managing that in a safe manner, and like you said, not putting that back on to those food crops that would potentially be a health hazard for people.

Heather Secrist: Dealing with the public coming onto your farm is just a whole another subject to our people control, management control of the flow of the people, and the garbage that's generated, the recycling that's generated from products that they buy, how you deal with truck traffic or the car traffic, and people that come even when you're not open because they heard about the farm, and like another restaurant, you could drive to it any hours or any times of the day, but you might be having a time with your family in the backyard, and all of a sudden, on Sunday afternoon, people are just strolling in through and our walking around your farm because it is a place that is known to be open to the public. There are challenges when you open your farm gate to the public.

Chris Blanchard: I'm just curious, I mean, talking about this waste management stream, I mean, you mentioned recycling, and trash, and I remember on my farm, one of the challenges that we had was that we really couldn't get anybody out to the farm to pick up the trash that we did generate. We had to figure out a way to get that the landfill ourselves and to store that until we make that trip, where we were located in Northeast Iowa. I know this is different in every neighborhood, but how do you deal with all of the recycling and the trash that results from the public and the kind of operation that you have?

Heather Secrist: We have about five miles down the road as a recycling center and a place or us to take our trash, and so that is our only option because you need to take to your township recycling center here in Wisconsin. However, the hours of that facility are only two hours on a Wednesday, which happened to be our CSA delivery time back in the day, and two hours on a Saturday morning, which also happened to be Farmer's Market time, and so that made it extra challenging for us to take care of those things, so I had to utilize my dad and other people to help get their truck in and get that loaded and take it to the facilities myself. In the last two seasons, I have come across a company from La Crosse that takes care of the recycling for those recycling centers that are around us, and they're now willing to come to the farm and pick up the weekly recycling on their own, and so that is a service that I am so excited to be able to pay for because it saves us a ton of time in handling recycling just the garbage that's generated from the sales of beer, wine, soda, et cetera that happens from the pizza nights.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about things like recycling, and waste management, and even the poop management with the green toilet, all of this seems like it would take a lot of training for your customers to actually to get it, and to get them to do the things that



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they need to do because that's pretty different than what's expected when you go to Pizza Hut.

Heather Secrist: Training our customers to be able to manage their own wastes, such as recycling their containers into the proper barrels, putting the cardboard pizza boxes into the cardboard recycling, taking all food scraps out, and putting just a little bit that's leftover trash into the garbage has been an ongoing battle at times, and where you'll get a couple of customers that'll take that pizza box, and they will put it right into the trash can, and that trash can is full from two 16-inch boxes, and in a busy night, there may be 300 boxes, so the common sense part would say that, "Obviously, those boxes are not going to function well for our trash being put like that", so we have made a lot of different signage helping people to learn how to separate their trash in the right places. If we see things left around in the right areas, we help people show them how this works, try to explain to them. Our new brochure this year also lists those environmental green practices that are used here at the farm. I think just a lot of us are used to throwing things in the garbage can or flushing whatever down the toilet, and it's just out gone, and we don't have to deal with it anymore without thinking about the process and the cycle that goes the entire way down. Part of that experience here on the farm is really being involved in that whole process, and so there is a lot of education that goes on regarding that.

Chris Blanchard: All right. With that, we're going to take a break, get a word from a couple of sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Heather Secrist from Suncrest Gardens Farm in Cochrane, Wisconsin. Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractor is the only power equipment a market garden will need, with PTO-driven attachments like the rotary tiller, flail mower, power harrow, rotary plow, snow thrower, log splitter and more.

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- Chris Blanchard: All right, and we're back with Heather Secrist of Suncrest Gardens Farm in Cochrane, Wisconsin. Heather, we were talking about this communication with the customers on the farm, training them to do the things that you need them to do when they are out of the farm, and I guess it raises a couple of questions for me, but the first I'd like to ask is, "How many ..." You talk about 150 pizzas a night on your Friday night pizza night. Is that the same 150 people every week or are people coming out once a season?
- Heather Secrist: Our customers, we have a variety of customers that come out here. We have like our local steadfast crew that comes out rain or shine to the farm, which is absolutely great to have that kind of crew, because when it is a rainy night here on the farm, the numbers are going to be a lot lower. Everyone's looking to have that full, beautiful summer night in the yards with live music and everything like that. Another group is going to be those that plan to do kind of their three times that they might come. They're within a driving distance, and they make it on their to-do list, and they bring different friends or family that might be coming with them, and then we have our third category, which is more of like our culinary destination travelers that heard of us.
- Heather Secrist: Maybe they're from a lot farther away from the farm. They are actually calling, making sure that we're open and are planning to make sure they swing through that Thursday or Friday when we're open when they are driving through the Midwest area, and so we have a fun, little map in the barn that has the 50 states on it and stuff and pins, and so that people can mark where they have come from, and I think we are maybe left with just under five states. I have to check again on where we're looking to get those pins from. Primarily that far East Coast I think is what we're out.
- Chris Blanchard: I mean, you said people actually call the farm to make sure that you're open. I mean, I think about the kind of communication that you must be doing with your customers to let them know, "Hey, pizza season is starting, and now, we're doing it on Thursdays and on Fridays." How do you go about keeping in communication and letting your customer base know what's happening with your farm and with your schedule?
- Heather Secrist: We try to stay pretty consistent with our schedule, but we were on Facebook. We have our websites. We actually use a service called 'SinglePlatform', which helps put our stuff out there, like TripAdvisor, Yelp ... Where else does it go? It keeps it up-to-date on Google.
- Heather Secrist: It has our menu on Google now, so all of those updates, I don't have to physically do anymore, and I feel it's a pretty valuable service as people are on their devices as they're coming and going and stuff. That is one of our primary ways of getting our information out there. Of course, our phone number is on those things as well, and so we do have people that still call the farm, double checking, and I always have a voicemail message that is usually too long for most people. In the summer, that's telling the hours, and our website, and what we offer so that it hopefully has answers to some of their questions, but I'm not by the phone a lot because I'm out in the fields working because it is a working farm, and so it's hit or miss if you're going to actually get a hold of me on the farm here, so email usually works better.



Chris Blanchard: I think it makes a lot of sense to leverage that technology like that SinglePlatform, especially because you do have so many different places that people might be going to look for the specific information about a farm like yours.

Heather Secrist: We've had a lot of different write ups and press releases every year, the last few years and stuff, and those are fabulous ways that have put out the information about the farm or shared the pizza farm experience with people from all over the place, and so we haven't actually had to do a lot of marketing to promote the farm. We'd probably use those dollars to just keep up-to-date that social media presence and keep our information online all up-to-date. You can spend a lot of money on marketing, and our flow of customers has actually grown to be at a fairly good level to where we wanted, and so instead of spending money on say newspaper ads, or radio ads, or all the other sorts of advertising streams, we've chosen to actually give donations back to those community auctions that are always looking for things to raise money for schools, or for different programs, sports programs, or other things in the community, and so I feel like it's a great way for us to be involved in the community, give back to them, and also does highlights the farm name a little bit while it's at those events.

Chris Blanchard: Are you still trying to grow your business or have you settled into a level that you're pretty happy with?

Heather Secrist: We do get a lot of calls asking if we're open on Saturday and Sundays because we only are open on Thursday and/or Fridays, depending the time a year, and so it would make one wonder if we should add one of those weekend nights to the farm operation and stuff, but the staff and I, we've talked about it and there is ... We're pretty tired by the end of Friday night, with a couple of busy nights like that, and I don't think I could handle ... I'm the one that cooks all the pizzas that go through the oven, and so there might be 450 pizzas on a wonderful summer night that I've cooked in a matter of eight hours than we've had. That's a lot of upper body strengths that's needed, and you feel like you've ran a marathon at the end of the night, and to think about doing it all over another day is more than what I want to do, and it's kind of takes away from our family time that we have here as well, and the boys are both active in baseball and activities, and things like that during the summer time, and so we've just kept it at that limited, one to two nights a week.

Chris Blanchard: I was going to ask why you chose Thursday night instead of Saturday night, but I suppose baseball answers that question.

Heather Secrist: Thursday nights were the original night of the pizza farm, and that is because we were taking our produce to Farmer's Market on Saturday morning, and so Friday was needed as a prep day for harvesting the produce and getting it all ready to take the market. That's why Thursday nights made sense for us, and it's kind of a precursor to the weekends. You can be a little tired if you go to work on a Friday morning, if you've been out Thursday nights, especially during those summer months.

Chris Blanchard: At the scale which you're at, the level where you're operating now, are you making a living on the farm?

Heather Secrist: Yes. The farm is my full-time job. It took probably at least seven years for it to get that point where it could sustain me as a full-time job or income that I was getting



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raising from the farm here, and I was supplementing that income by doing some off-season tax work or some, I even substitute taught in the schools one winter. I decided I was not meant to be a kindergarten teacher. A mother was much easier than having a whole tribe of young ones to look after for the day, and did a lot of different little side jobs that I could add in seasonally like that, but it came to a certain point where the farm really needed all of my time and energy for it to become what it needed, and that was a really great point to come to and watch it flourish more because I was able to put even more into it.

Chris Blanchard: As you mentioned earlier, pizza farm seems to be popping up in every rural neighborhood now. Do you see competition coming down the road for what you're doing?

Heather Secrist: There are other pizza farms that have popped up. A new one just this season has come up and it's within, I don't know, 48-minute drive of the farm here or less, and so, and there are probably at least five of them within an hour radius drawn on the map here, and so I don't really look at it as competition in the negative sense of it at all. I've always viewed it as a California wine country. Like there are all kinds of vineyards and all sorts of wines to taste, and each of them is unique, they have a different way that they do things, they have their own flavors depending on how it's grown or where it's grown, and I think the same is true of the pizza farms that it only has brought more attention to the fact that, "Oh, there are these cool destination like dining places that we can go to", and if they hadn't heard of a pizza farm, oh, it just encourages more and more people to hear about it and spreads the word, that, "Oh, wow. I tried that one. Have you tried this one?"

Heather Secrist: "Oh, no. I should go here", makes a hype about it. I'd even heard some groups of friends or church groups or other people that have created like a pizza farm tour that they'll do for the season, and they'll make sure to go to all of them during that one summer in order to compare and contrast and experience all for what they have.

Chris Blanchard: That's cool. I like that. Tell me about how you balance your crop production with your processed food game, because if you're going to a Farmer's Market or you're going to a CSA, you have a lot of extra tomatoes, it's pretty easy to go and sell the extra tomatoes or add the tomatoes to the boxes. How do you manage that relative to your prepared food preparations?

Heather Secrist: Because the farm enterprises have changed throughout the years, we are still trying to figure that balance out a little bit. This last growing season was the first year that we did not have the CSA, and so everything was trying to go through the kitchen space, and so I felt like I made a big adjustment into what the space that I was using to grow all the different varieties, and the garden's shrunk, but in some regards, it didn't shrink enough, and so we were still left with like way too much broccoli, and sweet corn that I probably didn't quite need to grow that much, but I'm not going to throw anything away. It's just not my nature to do it, and so the volume of it once it's sliced off the cob and blanched on the stove, and then frozen is a lot smaller than when you have a truckload of cobs, and husks, and everything there, but it still takes up room in that whacking freezer, and so it's a thing that I'm still trying to figure out, and I feel like one year into it, I've made some important changes and reductions, and now it's trying to figure out how much less I can grow and still have enough to meet my needs, so I think to myself like two acres and shrinking.



Chris Blanchard: I suppose that must be a challenge with the pizza nights too. I mean, you've talked about how on average, you're looking at 150 pizzas a night, but I think you mentioned it on your busiest nights, you might be looking at 450.

Heather Secrist: Yeah. The 450 would be like a weekly total, so yeah, a busy night could have 350, so planning to make the right amount of dough for the night in advance and to prep the right amount of ingredients. The ingredients are prepped from the gardens the day of the pizza nights. We do use certain tricks to help us prepare for pizza nights like roasting and freezing onions in advance because we can pull those out and use them on the pizzas that way, and we can impart that roasted flavored goodness versus serving just a raw onion on the pizzas. The same is for the peppers.

Heather Secrist: We don't just have peppers in August when peppers are abundant. We roast them that whole crop, and then freeze them in portions that we can pull out and use on the pizza nights. There are some things that we can do to help ourselves prepare in advance by using preservation methods, and there are some things that need to be done the day of.

Chris Blanchard: Again, I'm comparing this to Farmer's Market. If you are at Farmer's Market and you run out of carrots, I mean, you might have some disappointed customers, but man, I would think that at pizza night, the last thing you want to ever have happen is to run out of pizza.

Heather Secrist: You can't run out of pizza on pizza night. We never can run out of cheese. That's one of those critical ingredients for a pizza, and because we raise all of our own sausage ourselves, we have a backlog of sausage in the freezers here, and so we don't really run out of those things either because we can see in enough advance if something needs to be done, or if we're starting to use the sausage that is allocated for the next season, that means we need to raise more hogs next year, or you can go to another farm and get a hog and be processed and so forth. Ideally, we are doing it all ourselves here and keeping it in-house, but not a problem to ask another grower or to purchase things for wholesale that way.

Chris Blanchard: Do you advertise your pizzas as being organic or sustainable or anything else along those lines?

Heather Secrist: We advertise our pizzas as being delicious, and creative, and grown using farm-raised ingredients and crops here. A lot of people say a lot of different things about them, but it's not necessarily about the labels that are out there. We're very transparent in how we do things here. We grow things organically. We have non-GMO organic feeds that are now fed to the hogs, and the birds, and the meat birds, and everything that are here and stuff, but I don't really get into promoting I guess that they're organic, that this is the way that real food is supposed to be.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. Right. It's just food.

Heather Secrist: It's just food. That's just the way it should be.

Chris Blanchard: As far as sourcing ingredients from off the farm because Great River Organic Milling being right next door, you said that's where you get your flour from, but you



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mentioned things like cheese, which you're not making there on the farm. Where do you go about getting those kinds of products?

Heather Secrist: The quality of the cheese that we get is important to us. I mean, it needs to taste good, and there are so many types of Greta cheese that have the anti-caking and other things added to them, and they just really take away the flavor of the cheese in the end, and so we were using cheese from Foremost Farms. It wasn't organic, but it was from milk that was produced right in our local area and stuff here. We are buying it in a block form, and we were grating it all ourselves here in order to have the quality of cheese that we wanted to be serving, because it tasted really good. It has that tangy, stretchy, good mozzarella quality to it, and so we did that for many, many years.

Heather Secrist: As our time was getting crunched as far as how much we can prepare in the kitchen as the amount of numbers of pizzas we need to sell and a projected evening is going to be, I just started looking for another option that might be available this last winter, and it came across the product that is a very high-quality cheese that is created in Viroqua, Wisconsin, and it comes grated already, so this way, I'm not going to kill my Hobart Food Processor that is running, another 100 pounds of cheese through it, which has to be hand-measured out into cups, and the amount of labor that goes into all of that. I mean, those sorts of expenses and time, labor costs has to be thought about as well, and you don't necessarily think about them as much at first when volumes are smaller and you just more time, but as it gets busier, it definitely makes a big difference, and so we're really excited this summer because it's a very good quality. It's one of the highest quality, grated mozzarellas I believe we have available to us, and made from group of a hundred premium milk producers in the State of Wisconsin here, and it's been a life saver to have it.

Chris Blanchard: Now, your husband is a dairy farmer, right?

Heather Secrist: Yeah. Jason operates the dairy farm here about 10 miles from Suncrest Gardens.

Chris Blanchard: Is that something that's associated with Suncrest Gardens or is that something that's completely separate?

Heather Secrist: Since we're looking for good cheese and it made sense to think about, "Oh, hey, honey. How about you just start making some cheese that I can use on the farm here?", but -

Chris Blanchard: "Just make us some cheese, honey."

Heather Secrist: Yeah. "Come on, honey. Come on. Why don't you just start", or ... That's actually how I found the company in Viroqua because I was calling around to a variety of cheese producers and plants, and asking them like what volume of milk they would need to make us our own mozzarella cheese that we could do some select shipments of his milk to the plants and have them be processed and do our own cheese through that, a distributor type thing that way, and it just, I wasn't really getting anywhere with the whole conversation, and there wasn't a lot in that size amount that we needed that was going to make sense and stuff, so we're just going to let him milk the cows and produce milk, and that he's always done in that way and I do my thing here. We operate the his and her farm operations here.



Chris Blanchard: I just think that's really interesting like my mom always used to observe about my farm that it was like we were living in the fishbowl. We were always there and we were always together, and we were always up in each other's business, and it must be kind of nice not to have that.

Heather Secrist: There's probably there's plus and minuses to it. I mean, we both were well-established in our farms when we met, and so there wasn't an easy way to ... I mean, people know this place as the pizza farm. It's sort of set up in its flow to make sense that way. There's no way that we could just take this and move onto his farm, nor the same.

Heather Secrist: I have 16 acres here. This is not set up to be a dairy farm, so we just did what we always did, and we all live here at the farm at Suncrest, but he is the commuting farmer, so he leaves. That's 3:30 in the morning to get the cows milked, starting about 4:30, and returns home at about 7:00 at night after everything is done for the day, and we're pretty happy to see each other at that time a night and both pretty tired and have done a lot during the day, so there's always good conversation and updates to what's happening, but yeah, we're both pretty independent in how we run each of the operations that way.

Chris Blanchard: You're turning your produce and your meats into wood-fired pizzas and froze soups and sauces. What else are you doing with the food that you've got?

Heather Secrist: We are just raising so much food on this farm, and it's more than we can even utilize for those pizza nights and there's more than I can even do with creating frozen type ready to eat healthy foods, and so sometimes when we're out there like picking the beans and just thinking about this fresh, green salad with a vinaigrette and those sliced cherry tomatoes in it, a little bit of feta, you start salivating as you're like working in the garden over what you're going to eat, like, "What's that food?", and so we just thought about offering the food in more of a café type style, where you come here and it's already prepared and inspired by the season, and what's fresh and what we have here, and so we've been exploring a variety of different ways to do that and the Garden Café is what has come about in that.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about how the Garden Café works at a practical level?

Heather Secrist: The café, the Garden Café is only open the second Saturday of the month. It was a way for us to dabble with it, and it needed to be a different nights obviously than pizza night because we already focused on that one style of food that night, and the Garden Café is things beyond pizza, so there's different vegetable curry dishes. There might be like a, we made some naan using our wood-fired pizza oven and had a Tikka Masala or a lamb with some Masala sauce and stuff in there, some Euro sandwiches and farm burgers, and different seasonal fresh salads, and things like that, so things that are not regularly offered on that pizza night, but it's been a really fun way that the staff and I have enjoyed doing something different with the food and like all things, getting that word out, take some time, and to distinguish that the Garden Café is not just another pizza night, because, "Oh, oh." They hear we might be open that Saturday, so then, they think, "Oh, they're open on a Saturday for pizza night. Oh, they're open every Saturday", and so there's some challenges with trying to add something new into the mix, and then communicating that word to our customers about, "Oh", what this is, when it is, and what's all involved with that.



Chris Blanchard: I'm just curious as you dived into this whole other area of culinary exploration. Do you have training as a chef?

Heather Secrist: I do not have any formal training in cooking or chef. I just am a girl who enjoys food and likes to cook and loves to use what's in season and not waste anything, so yeah. I just kind of been learning as I go, and it's a fun, creative challenge for me.

Chris Blanchard: Love it. With that, we're going to turn to our lightning round, but first, we're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor. This lightning round is brought to you by High Mowing Organic Seeds. When your livelihood depends on the quality of your seeds, be confident in your investment. When you grow organically, you need to know that your seeds were selected or performed an organic conditions.

Chris Blanchard: High Mowing offers professional quality seeds grown by organic farmers for organic farmers. Purchase your seeds from High Mowing before December 21st and receive a 10% discount, your High Mowing's community supported seeds program. This program is just like a CSA. Customers purchase seed shares supporting an independently-owned organic seed company, and as a thank you, you receive 10% off the value of your share. Shares can be purchased in any amount. For details, visit Highmowingseeds.com/save, or call 866- 735-4454 and also request a free copy of the 2018 High Mowing Organic Seeds catalog. Heather, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Heather Secrist: My favorite tool is the cobra, the standing cobra weeder.

Chris Blanchard: That's that tool that's a ... I mean, so it's a stand-up hoe, but it's got kind a hook on it and it comes down to what ends up being a fairly small point or a little shovel on the end that's maybe about an inch across and about two inches long?

Heather Secrist: Yes. I feel like it is my hands, but it's a metal, and so it takes a lot of that work off of my fingertips and my joints, and frankly, I am near the 40-point here and been farming for almost 15 years, and so those fine joints in the hands are definitely starting to feel things, so I love the tools that can take place of those.

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

Heather Secrist: I probably find the most enjoyment out of growing tomatoes, followed by peppers. So many colors. So many flavors. So much just deliciousness can happen from them, and while they're fresh, as well as being able to transform them into a lots of different frozen, preserved ways.

Chris Blanchard: Do you grow most of your tomatoes in the high tunnel?

Heather Secrist: I do grow all of the varieties, except the cherries and the romas, I grow outside. All of the other varieties, I grow vertically, trained to a single step and metal post.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. What's your farming super power?

Heather Secrist: I feel like I have a way to look at things with like a creative, positive side to things, and so it's not like the answer is, "No. It can't happen." It's like, "We just haven't found the right answer yet." It's just a matter of sometimes your perspective.



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

Heather Secretist: Crazy is not a bad thing. I don't know. I'm not sure. I might actually be like a little crazy is okay. It takes a little edge. It takes going out on a limb and trying things as long as your heart is behind it and you feel like it is the right decision with your head and your heart, but not everybody is going to be willing to take those risks, and it's what's makes you stand out if you do.

Chris Blanchard: Heather Secretist, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.

Heather Secretist: Thanks, Chris. It's been a pleasure visiting with you today.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this episode 149 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, you can find the notes for this show at Farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episode's page or just searching for 'Secretist'. That's Secretist. 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 Osborne Quality Seeds, a dedicated partner for growers. Visit Osborneseed.com for high quality seed, industry-leading customer service and fast order fulfillment, and by CoolBot, allowing you to build an affordable walk-in cooler powered by a window air-conditioning unit.

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Chris Blanchard: Thank you for listening. Be safe out there, and keep the tractor running.