



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 162

Lorien Carsey and Shea Belahi of Blue Moon Farm on Farm Ownership Transitions, Farm-Life Balance, Complex Crop Rotations, and Custom-Packed CSA Shares

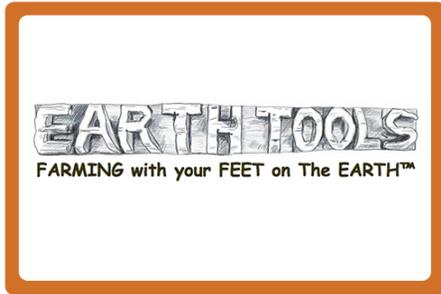
March 15, 2018



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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast Episode 162. This is your host, Chris Blanchard. Lorien Carsey and Shea Belahi of Blue Moon Farm in Urbana Illinois raise vegetables for Farmer's market, restaurant, stores and a CSA. With 20 acres dedicated to vegetable production and ten high tunnels totalling just under half an acre of year round production, Blue Moon Farm was found in 1977 by John Cherness and Michelle Wander. Now Lorien and Shea are in the process of taking over the ownership and management of the farm. We dig into how Lorien, Shea, John and Michelle are all managing the nuts and the bolts of this ownership transition. Including ownership structures, roles in the transition and how they figure those out. Tackling farm-life balance issues and the challenges of managing employees through this transition. We also discuss their homemade customized CSA program, which includes meats and eggs from other farms, a complex crop rotation that keeps 10 acres of farm in a combination of long and short term cover crops and the in and house of managing a diversity of high-tunnel sizes, shapes and technologies.

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Chris Blanchard: Lorien Carsey and Shea Belahi, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Shea Belahi: Great to be here

Lorien Carsey: Thank you so much for having us on.

Chris Blanchard: Really excited to have you here today. So I'd like to start off by having you guys give us the lay of the land there at Blue Moon Farm. How many acres are you guys farming? What kinds of things are you growing? Where are you located? All the details, like that.

Lorien Carsey: Okay so Blue Moon Farm is here in Urbana Illinois, East Central Illinois. We are on 20 acres of certified organic prairie land. We grow only vegetables. We don't have any livestock. We sell to the local Urbana farmers market, we sell to some restaurants and we sell to a couple of our local stores that feature local produce. We also have a CSA. Along with that, in our CSA, we have a feature to the CSA, which is sort of a customizable CSA. People don't even have to participate in the CSA program, but then can order a box of whatever they want. Then in the Winter time, we have a Winter market, which is not a CSA. It's either a market, people can show up at the market and buy stuff, or they can show up and pick up their pre-paid customizable box.

Chris Blanchard: And marketing in Champaign Urbana Illinois, you say East Central Illinois and, you know, I'm from Wisconsin so we have a thing about Illinois. So, tell me a little bit about what that market's like. Because I would think that Central Illinois is not exactly a hot spot for organic vegetable farming.

Lorien Carsey: So, I think in general that's true. We are in the middle of a vast corn and soy bean world here. It tends to be very rural. Except that we live at the town of the University of Illinois and we have this really wonderful little bubble of people who care about local produce. It's actually, in terms of the Farmer's market, it's a great Farmer's market town. There's huge support for that market here. I do think there's a divide between the rural and the, you know, the country mice and the city mice. You get a lot of support in town. Then it is true that there aren't a lot of markets around Champaign Urbana that we could go to, except for of course Chicago. We're in the great little bubble of people who do want locally grown produce.

Chris Blanchard: So you said 20 acres in vegetable production and then you guys also have a lot of high tunnels as well, right.

Lorien Carsey: So we have 20 acres on the property itself. About half of our acreage is in cover crop at any given time. We also have ten high tunnels, all of different sizes. It adds up to about 17,000 square feet of high tunnels. Some of the heated, some of them not



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heated. We have all different types of high tunnels and different conditions in the high tunnels.

Chris Blanchard: That lots of different kinds of high tunnels is the result of how long your farm has been around, right?

Lorien Carsey: Yes, exactly. It really reflects the history of... so the farm was started in 1997 at this present location. By John Churness and Michelle Wander, who, Michelle Wander is a soil scientist at the University of Illinois. When the farm started, of course there weren't any high tunnels on the property. Slowly we've been adding since then. Our most recent high tunnels, which were built in 2008 or 2009 are 30x90. We've built two, 30x90 high tunnels and we have a range of sizes from smallest to the 30x90's. Of course, if we could do it all over again we would just build a couple of really big high tunnels and try to connect them. But, we have this funny mismatch or sizes and shapes and some are double layer. Some are single layer. Some are really long and narrow. It makes planting this mathematical puzzle each year. You gotta figure out how you can fit the same amount of tomatoes in different sized houses.

Chris Blanchard: It is kind of funny now, here in 2018. I mean high tunnels are completely standard farming equipment. Back in 1999 that really wasn't the case. I think at that point a lot of the high tunnels that were being built were much smaller, longer, skinnier units than what we standard-ly run into now.

Lorien Carsey: It has. Over the years working with the high tunnels it's really brought home that the bigger, the better. The more automation the better. All that stuff pays for itself. Having tiny, really cold houses, very much limits what we can do in the winter. Really the only things that we can grow in the winter in those tiny houses are spinach and some bunching greens.

Chris Blanchard: What other crops are you doing in the wintertime in the larger houses?

Lorien Carsey: In the larger houses we have, one of our larger houses is heated by a multi-oil burner. This multi-oil burner is a really great heater and it allows us to really try to keep that house at around 40-45 degrees at night. In that house we have a lot more options. We'll grow parsley and cilantro and bok choy, salad greens. We try to grow a little bit of a diversity because that's kind of our backup, in case. If we have those crops in other houses, but they get a lot of cold damage in the other houses, then we have them in the main house, in order to provide the diversity that we like to provide in the winter time. So in that main house, most of it is salad greens. We do have small amounts of these other things that we try to keep alive, just in case they don't stay alive in the other houses.

Chris Blanchard: Are you producing out of the high tunnels, all year round?

Lorien Carsey: Yeah. We have our high tunnels in the summertime, is where we do our tomatoes and peppers. We do some okra and some beans. Then in the wintertime we convert those to about half spinach and then about half salad greens/bunching greens.

Chris Blanchard: I wanna circle back, real quick, to something that you said earlier, which was that the farm was founded by John Cherniss and Michelle Wander. So why am I talking to the two of you?



Lorien Carsey: Go ahead, Shea.

Shea Belahi: Oh, so John Churness has been the primary farm manager since 1997 and he just wants to retire. He's been farming. He's destroyed his body and ready to move on. Lorien's been with Blue Moon Farm, I think for about 15 years. He kind of approached her about the opportunity of succession and Lorien didn't want to run it by herself. She wanted a partner. A couple years ago I was running my own farm. I had my own farm for about three years and John Churness reached out to me about an opportunity and I thought, well, the worse thing that happens is I say no. So I went and met with them and was pretty much presented with a dream. So I ended up taking the job as Assistant Farm Manager with Lorien. We're in the process of succession. Transferring the farm to Lorien and I. So that's why you're talking to us today.

Chris Blanchard: So when you say, transferring the farm to Lorien and I, are you guys actually talking about transferring the ownership of the business and the land and the machinery, the whole nine yards to you guys?

Shea Belahi: Yeah so we're in the process of purchasing the farm from John. Everything, the land, the machinery, the packing shed, the business. Everything.

Chris Blanchard: I know because I sold my farm a number of years ago now. That's a lot. It's not your typical beginning farmer enterprise to go out and by a going concern of a vegetable farm. When you look at the balance sheet and all of the assets sitting there, I know that number is not small.

Shea Belahi: It's not. No, it's pretty overwhelming. We have frequent meetings with John about transfer and the different possibilities and the challenges with it. Yeah. How are we gonna possibly pay for this giant operation? There a lot of meetings and a lot of different things to think about when you're transferring ownership.

Chris Blanchard: Let me just ask, to be pushy about it, how are you guys gonna pay for this? Are you guys organizing this as a business partnership then, that's coming in and purchasing this from Michelle and John?

Lorien Carsey: What's happening right now is that we have become, Shea and I have become members of the LLC that John and Michelle created in 2010. The way the business is set up right now is that we are fifty-percent owners of the LLC. We are pretty much renting the entire farm operation from John Churner. So currently we are farming Blue Moon Farm as the LLC, Shea and I. But what we actually own is very little. The process of purchasing the land, the machinery and the building, that's a long term discussion. We are looking into FSA loans. It's a whole exploration that is going to take a long time to figure out.

Lorien Carsey: As you said, this is a huge operation. We don't have the funds personally to just straight up buy it. We're not sure exactly how it's going to unfold. It could be a situation where using the profits from the farm we just slowly buy the farm, piece by piece from John and Michelle. Starting with tractors, going into greenhouses and slowly make that transfer. It is not a simple process at all. It's not like a contract loan or a simple transfer. It's really a complicated accounting puzzle. Just the LLC itself, in terms of all of the different pieces of equipment that the farm owns, versus all of the



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different pieces of equipment that John owns, that we're renting from him. All of these things. It's just adding a new. It's kind of like going to accounting school, instead of going to farming school, in our spare time we're going to accounting school to try to make sure that this transfer happens in a way that's fair to all parties, and that is economically viable to all parties.

Chris Blanchard: Do you guys have help with the negotiation process here? Or is this something you're just tackling between the four of you?

Lorien Carsey: I have gone out and tried to get some consulting from the outside and all of that consulting, what it revealed to me, is how much I have to learn about the process and how much more help that we need. Probably the next step is to actually pay for lawyers and accountants to give us real advice and some real concrete information in terms of forecasting for the future and how the loans are de-structured. We're really at the beginning stage of understanding how the farm's ownership process would happen.

Lorien Carsey: In terms of transferring the LLC, all of that's pretty basic and straight forward. That part makes sense and it's already pretty much done. We really don't want to get ourselves into a contract that, you know, at the end of 20 years we realize, there were so many mistakes and, you know, loop holes that we built into it that don't make any sense, anymore. We really want to do it right. I think we do need help.

Chris Blanchard: I think one of the hard things about trying to structure a deal like this. Trying to be fair to all the parties, is really that, when you go out and buy a house or even when you buy a piece of farmland or a single piece of farm equipment like a tractor, there's a process that happens there. It usually doesn't have a whole bunch of what I might think of as social imperatives laid on top of it. Nobody's trying to be fair, right? The deal is you're trying to get as cheap of a tractor as you can get, and the tractor dealer is trying to get you to spend as much as they can get. If they're gonna give you zero percent interest, there's a darn good reason that they're giving you zero percent interest. It doesn't have to do with the fact that they want to see young farmers succeed in the business. It's just a way for them to make money. I think it really is interesting when you start to layer in these other considerations that you've talked about on here.

Lorien Carsey: Yeah because currently we're all farm partners. All of us are working together. We have this common goal. That John's investment, his work, his sweat equity, what he has created, he get to be fairly compensated for. And that the farm is successful enough that Shea and I get to have reasonable jobs and reasonable lives until we have to retire. We all want the same thing. How can we get the same thing? It's not a clear picture. It's not like we're each trying to figure out how to get the most out of the other person. We actually all want everybody's needs to be met in this situation.

Chris Blanchard: As you go through this negotiation process, it must be kind of a challenge to invest the time and the energy and it sounds like you guys are already investing money, without having the whole deal worked out. Even really knowing for certain that everything's gonna work out in this transition process. Has that been a little bit of a scary process for you guys?

Shea Belahi: You know, John is really good about every step that we take, he's checking in and saying, are you both still willing to step forward? Every step of the way, he's



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re-checking in to make sure that we're still committed to the process. Is it scary? I, you know, my husband works for the U of I so I have a really great cushy-husband job, so it's a little less scary for me. This is the job that I love and I am pretty much in it no matter what. I mean, I guess not no matter what but I'm pretty much dedicated to it. I'm very much like, let's go for it. Let's go forward. I think Lorien's story's a little bit different.

Lorien Carsey: Well, yeah. I mean, it is absolutely. It is definitely a scary proposition in that I'm supporting a family with my job. There is a strong, in this country, given the fact that unless you are finessed into an institution, you're paying out of your pocket for your health insurance and your retirement. Those costs could be going up, all the time. So, as I'm making this decision, I am constantly trying to make sure that at the end of the day, I'm going to have provided a reasonable job to support my family on. The positive side of that is just that Blue Moon Farms has been around for so long, we have such a steady, good market here. We have really stable sales. John has created a sustainable, successful farm. Theoretically, if we can just keep it going, keep it alive, keep learning, keep improving. The risk of the farm failing and then we're all poor and on the streets, is very low.

Lorien Carsey: I will say there is so much money and investment involved that it's not a thing to be taken lightly, at all. It's kind of like, adopting a child. It's a huge investment. It's a huge risk. It's just in that there are, there's no one to back us up if it does fail.

Chris Blanchard: That definitely is I think with a business that's 20 years old, by my count. You've certainly got a business system in place. But there's still risks. Especially to owning your own business. It takes you outside of much of the safety net that we actually do have in this country. Things like unemployment insurance. When you own your own business, those aren't there at all.

Lorien Carsey: As I've been going through this process of buying the farm, of looking at the profit and loss statements, at the balance sheets, the list of properties that we have, all the different tractors and so forth. I think about all these farmers all over the country. All of the self employed people all over the country and realizing, we ask so much of people who are self employed here. It's such a risk. There is no safety net. All of these people, how are they paying for their health insurance? It's a conversation that I really want to have. The amount of dedication and self confidence that it takes to build your own business and say, you know, if this business wins I win, and if it loses I lose. No one's gonna pick up the pieces if it fails. It's just a really interesting set of conditions that farmers are in here.

Chris Blanchard: Shea, you said that you owned your own business, before you came to Blue Moon Farm. What prompted you to make that change? What was more appealing about coming and being involved in this farm transfer, than continuing to run your own operation?

Shea Belahi: Wow, that's a long list. I had my own farm for three years. All three years, I didn't own my own land. I lived in the city, I rented land, small parcels of land from two different land owners. When I say small, my first share was a quarter acre. My second and third year were around an acre. All of the pieces of land that I was renting from were not great for diversified vegetables. My first land piece was on a conventional parcel. The second and third year, I was renting from Prairie Foods Farm, which I think you know about Prairie Foods Farm, here in Urbana there's the



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goat farm. So I was farming by myself. I was trying to do everything. I was trying to manage everything, send out emails, make sure there was drip line by myself, put in stakes for tomatoes and tie them by myself. A lot of different things and I needed to get the soil to be better. It was just this constant struggle. My husband wasn't seeing me. It was just a big struggle in our house.

Shea Belahi: We both, my husband and I both had goals about what we wanted from the farm. So when John called me and I had an interview with Lorien and John and they were saying, "Hey, we get off work at five. There's employees. You'll be making hourly wage. There's gonna be a potential of farm transfer. All of these systems are already in place." It was very appealing.

Shea Belahi: It was really nice. My husband stepped back. He did not give me any input about what he really wanted me to do. Blue Moon Farm was everything that I wanted to be. I could still live in town. My husband could keep his job. We wouldn't have to move. There was a lot of pieces coming together. I decided, yes, this is exactly what I want.

Shea Belahi: In the interview I really tried to talk John and Lorien out of hiring me for the position. I was a young farmer. I'm still a young farmer. I don't know a lot. I was really worried that I was gonna ruin the farm. They still hired me. My husband was very thrilled that I made that decision. There was just a lot of pieces and I'm really happy to be at the farm. It was very much a dream come true, to be wanted for this position. That's pretty much the story.

Chris Blanchard: It was really a way, I think this is a possibility that I think is oftentimes overlooked when people are looking at how to get into farming but this was really a way to kind of jump start your farming career, by being able to get into a place where the markets were established, the soils were established, the systems were already there. You could just go and farm, rather than having to go and build everything from the ground up.

Shea Belahi: Exactly. That's exactly right. The first year for us was really hard. We learned a lot of things. I am still learning every single day about new things. We're improving systems so it's given me a way to really learn about the process of farming and rotations and why do we do certain things and a certain time. It's really been helpful.

Chris Blanchard: Have you been able to make your own mark at Blue Moon Farm? Does Blue Moon Farm as it exists here in February of 2018, reflect something of Shea Belahi? Or is it still kind of the, you know, Lorien who was there for 15 years and John show there?

Shea Belahi: I think it's a little bit of both, which is great. When I came in I really wanted to do this idea of our online, customizable CSA thing. I built that from the ground up. Built our website and started that program. We're trying to still expand that program so that's a little bit of a reflection of myself, be it good or bad. Something that Lorien and I have built that is a reflection of ourselves has been the CSA. John did a CSA long ago but kind of dropped it off. Lorien and I have restarted that program and that's kind of a reflection of the new age of she and I taking over and growing the farm and the possibilities. In a lot of ways it is still a lot of John and Lorien reflection which is great because they've been there the longest and they know a lot more than I do. It's



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nice for me to have little pops here and there but, if I come up with an idea or get excited about something they reel me in, which is great.

Lorien Carsey: It's really been great to bring Shea on after John and I working together for so long and having our own way of discourse. Ways of making decisions. We have a kind of a groove in how we communicate and how we talk. One thing that's been really great is to bring in somebody after all these years, who doesn't fit in with our style and is often able to point out glaring discrepancies or ways that I will agree with John or disagree with John that make no sense, that are just based on our past history. She's kind of like a fresh breeze through John and I's relationship. For me at least, she is my anchor in terms of all things having to do with the website and social media and things like that. I just don't have a really strong background in, or interest in. It's been great to just be able to throw problems at her. Call her at anytime and say, something's going wrong with somebody who ordered this or that on the website, but their order isn't going through. Can you go and take care of it and fix it? Part of why we brought Shea on is that as John was stepping back, I was looking at the workload of running a twelve-month out of the year 20 acre vegetable farm and realizing that there was just no way that I was willing to do what most farmers had to do in order to start their farm, which is to work 16 hours a day, every day except for Sunday, maybe.

Lorien Carsey: For me, family life is incredibly important. I have a nine year old son. I didn't want to look back and say I chose the farm over being a mother. I really want to be able to have a strong family relationship and be a farmer at Blue Moon Farms. I knew that I couldn't do it on my own. Especially as John was trying to push off more and more responsibility for day to day management. Then also responsibility for farm planning. Really just wanting to take a full step back. I realized that there was just no way that I could have what I think of as a successful life on my own. Shea is the answer. There's no way we could do this without her. It's just so important to be able to share the load.

Lorien Carsey: The farm is already such a juggernaut of work and tasks that it's not like there's any room for someone to come onto the farm and say, "hey let's just start this whole new operation because we have extra land, or we have extra time, or we have all this extra money." The farm is already just so full in terms of all the things that we need to get done that the thing that Shea was able to add specifically, which is her willingness to take on this project of having an online sales presence. That's really been huge and something that there's no way I could do, or John could do.

Lorien Carsey: Shea the other thing that you have to remember is that you took over that Saturday Farmer's Market.

Shea Belahi: Oh yeah.

Lorien Carsey: The Saturday Farmer's Market, as we all know, these Farmer's Markets are crucial for us. The farmer's market is crucial in terms of our sales. It's also a life killer. You work all week on the farm and then you also give up your Saturday getting up a 4:00 am, which means that Sunday you're just recovering from what you've done to yourself all week. It doesn't actually serve as a day of rest or a day of having a life. Shea took over running the Farmer's Market, which really saved, it really saved John and I. She might downplay her role at the farm, but she saved the farm. There's no



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way I could have done it and John was saying, "I'm not doing it anymore." Shea saved Blue Moon Farms.

Chris Blanchard: Way to go Shea.

Shea Belahi: That's a lot of credit that Lorien just gave me.

Chris Blanchard: Take it and run with it. I say take it and run with it. Tell me a little bit about how you guys divide up the jobs on the farm. Who has what roles in the operation?

Shea Belahi: So, what do I do? I am the Farmer's Market Manager. I start all of our seeds and manage our start house. I do the social media presence. I'm the pack and ship manager so, do a lot of managing of watching what's going where, and the online store, and the CSA. I do a lot with the CSA as well. I do the bookkeeping. Bookkeeping is a big thing that I'm trying to get better at, as well.

Lorien Carsey: My role at the farm. I started at the farm in 1999 and it started as a part-time field hand. I was actually studying poetry with a local poet and had always been interested in farming. I took an organic farming class. I always had a garden in college. I needed a part-time job. I saw a job advertisement with Blue Moon and I started just working as a part-time field hand and farmer's market person. I absolutely loved it. I thought, this is the right place for my energy. This is a really pleasurable, beautiful, tasty job.

Lorien Carsey: Immediately upon my second year doing that, John, who is a master delegator, started trying to give me more and more responsibilities in terms of being the person who does our weekly green feeding and our lettuce feeding. Doing a little bit of harvest crew management. Things like that. I worked at the farm for five years during that time and grew and grew in terms of what I was responsible for and in charge of. Then as I was doing this job, it dawned on me that, and I'm talking, you know, this podcast is going out to lots of farmers who will understand when I say that farming is hell is some ways. Farming, if you let it, will take up all of your time and energy. You will have no other life. At the end of five year I said, John, I love this job, I love this farm, I love this work. I've got to go get a real job. Farming isn't a sustainable way of life, the way that I was watching him do it. The way that I could see it would become for me if I kept going.

Lorien Carsey: I took a break. I went to grad school. I lived in Venezuela and I did all these other things. I came back to Urbana in 2009 and John said, "Hey, would you like to come back to Blue Moon Farm and be the Winter farm manager?" I had missed farming and missed that life so much while I was gone. It was a big decision to go back to Blue Moon Farms and it was an easy decision in that it was in me. Everything about the farm was so familiar to me, the landscape, the feel of a tomato in my hand, the sound of the tractors, the wind. All of it just really called me back.

Lorien Carsey: From 2009 on, I've been the farm manager. What that means today is I'm in charge of all of the planting, all of the beds prep, all of the harvest. All of the day to day operations of the farm that makes sure that crops are seeded, crops are planted, fertilized, cover crops, bed prepped and harvested. It's hard to say how the farm is exactly divided up. We're all sharing responsibility for a lot of things. A lot of what my job is, bleeds into what Shea's doing. A lot of what Shea's doing bleeds into what my job is. For the most part, I'm acting as the operations manager. I'm in charge of



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making sure that everything happens, in order to get the crops from seed form into a marketable product, that goes to market.

Chris Blanchard: Now you were just saying how farming is something that it can really take over your life. The farm is something that will take everything that you will give to it. Then it will ask for more, on top of that, unless you put up some limits. That's how John was running the farm before you came back in 2009. What changes did you guys make in 2009 when you returned to the farm Lorien?

Lorien Carsey: When I returned to the farm in 2009, I was a single mom. John, as a single mom, I was not able to do everything that I'm able to do now. The main thing that John wanted of me at that point was to give me the Wintertime. In the Wintertime it's our opportunity to rest, go to conferences, to read books, to not be a farm worker 16 hours a day. At the same time, we have these ten greenhouses. They've got to pay for themselves. There's such a huge opportunity to produce food in the Winter because not many people are doing it. When I came back in 2009, his goal was to simply give me this job so that he could stop doing it in the Winter, and to develop it. His Winter cropping was pretty basic, mainly because he just didn't want to invest the time in all of the details of which beds should be planted and what. What are the temperature profiles? All the pests and diseases that come in Winter and so forth. He wanted to pass that off. As the Winter's went by, I was slowly able to shift more and more responsibility from not just the Winter, but also taking over in the Summer as well. That meant taking over the weekly work schedules. Taking over the harvest plan. Taking over the seeding schedules. Hiring employees. Slowly all of that farm responsibility over the years has been growing such that actually, last year was the first year that Shea and I became full LLC partners and really was the first year that John took a huge step back and let me and Shea really take over the farm to the extent of doing the farm planning. Doing the cover cropping. Doing the sales and marketing. Making all the major decision. His role now is really to fix things when the break and to tell us when we are really screwing something up by not getting out in the field and cultivating that carrot crop right now when the carrots are two inches high, and the weeds are just germinating. From 2009 until the present, it's been just a slow transfer of all of the decision making and the work passed from him to Shea and I.

Chris Blanchard: Did you also make quality of life changes in terms of how the farm was being run when you came back in 2009? Was that part of the package or are things still kind of manic.

Lorien Carsey: From my perspective, we work too much. From my perspective we should be starting work at 7:00 and leaving work at 4 o'clock. We should not work on the weekends or the evenings. Currently we start work, in the Summertime we leave at 5:00 or 5:30. Then there is some evening and weekend work. To me, the farm, that's too much. I know that when I look, when I hear about other farms and I read about other farms I realize, that's really a pretty well, that's a pretty good schedule. We're pretty lucky to get away with that. I've always tried to be really strict about having family time in that I don't come home from work and then spend two hours on the computer doing a newsletter. I don't come home from the farm, so we live off the farm. John and Michelle have a house on the farm. Shea and I live in town. I try to be very strict about coming home, getting clean and then being with my family. When I look at that I realize, in terms of farming, that's a luxury. It's a luxury that a lot of farms don't have. It seems like a luxury to me in that, when I hear about how other



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people have to farm and it's just not like that. From my perspective, it's a situation where you have to draw those lines. You have to decide when something isn't worth doing in order to have quality of life.

Lorien Carsey: I guess, I'm not really answering your question in terms of structural changes in that, both John and I had a common goal of having a reasonable life outside of the farm. Even with the addition of Shea, I think we're still trying to figure out what that balance is. I mean, you can always make the farm better. You can always do more research. You can always get out there and weed more. I guess the one structural change that we made is that we used to start the farm at 6:30, so now we start at 7:00, unless it's gonna be really hot. Then we'll start at 5:30 or 6:00. Really, the only structural change I was able to make to reduce our hours was to push that 6:30 time up to 7:00.

Chris Blanchard: It does sound like, simply that, being able to walk away from the farm at the end of the day, go home and take a shower and switch your focus. That's a pretty substantial adjustment, right there.

Lorien Carsey: As I'm sure everyone listening to this relates, after a full day of farming, it's kind of an illusion that you're gonna have quality of life in the evening. After a full day of farming, you come home and for me at least, I'm clean, but I'm exhausted. I'm just trying to keep my eyes open so I can log those family hours until we go to bed at 9:00pm. I don't know what to do about that, really. I don't know how to make farming currently, less physical and less exhausting.

Lorien Carsey: Now, it's been really great this year because the Wintertime, for the first time since I've been back, has actually been somewhat of a break. We had some really cold weather, our family has been sick and Shea has been here. The combination of those factors is that there's simply been less to do that we could possibly do at the farm because it's been somewhat shut down. I've actually been forced to stay in bed for several days. My other family members have been sick so I've been staying home with them. I feel like this is the first Winter where I've actually said, wow. This is what it's like to have some time where I am not physically or mentally at the farm, getting things done. It's been wonderful. It's like, oh, this is why people don't farm in the winter. You really need this break.

Chris Blanchard: With that we're gonna stop here, take a quick break, get a word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Lorien Carsey and Shea Belahi from Blue Moon Farm in Champaign Urbana, Illinois.

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Chris Blanchard: And we're back with Lorien Carsey and Shea Belahi from Blue Moon Farm in Champaign Urbana Illinois. Something that I found interesting is that this farm was founded in addition to, by John Churness who we've talked about quite a bit. But also by Michelle Wander who's a soil scientist and has been a soil scientist for a long time there at University of Illinois in Champaign Urbana. I'm curious how having a soil scientist as one of the farm founders and as part of the team there has influenced your farm's development and operations.

Lorien Carsey: Having Michelle on hand is a really great resource. We are very lucky here in central Illinois that our soils are so great and so rich thanks to the prairie's here. We don't really have a lot of problems in terms of organic matter and all of the right nutrient levels. We are pretty lucky here. At the same time, she is a great resource in terms of things that are going on, latest research at the University, she's on-hand for consulting.

Lorien Carsey: I've brought her into the greenhouses where actually the soils are a little bit more difficult to manage in the greenhouses because we don't get the rain that we do outside. We don't do much in terms of composting and adjusting that way. I've definitely brought her in to look at why is this going on with my spinach on the edges of the beds? I've got this condition going on at the edges of the beds, and this condition going on in the middle of the beds. She'll point me to resources online. She's a great consultant. That's been great. Being right next to the University of Illinois, with all of their ag research, it is a great resource.

Chris Blanchard: I've noticed on your website that you said that you have ten acres of cover crops and ten acres of vegetables. Tell me a little bit more about how that rotation works on your farm.

Lorien Carsey: We use cover cropping as our main source of fertility on the farm. We don't do composting. We don't do manures. For the most part we can rely on our cover crops to provide the soil management and the nutrients that we need. We are a really diverse farm in that because our main marketing is at the Urbana Farmer's Market. We really want our stand to provide a lot of the diversity of crops for our customers. Which means, in terms of crop planting, we have so many different crops going into these 20 acres at any given time, all going in at different times throughout the season, that our crop planning is really complicated.



Lorien Carsey: We have all these spreadsheets with rotations forecasting out for the next ten years. Each individual block, what's going into it, what's coming out of it, making sure we're providing as many seasons as we can between crops that have particular soil needs and particular disease pressures. We really believe and... cover cropping is a great strategy for us. It really provides all of our needs in terms of making sure that we're not over-using the soil. Making sure that we're putting, that we're getting enough fertility for our crops. Cover cropping is, that's how we manage it at Blue Moon.

Chris Blanchard: Are you doing a rotation such that you're one year in cover crops and one year in vegetables? Is that how you're kind of moving things back and forth on that 20 acres of production?

Lorien Carsey: No. It's not that straight forward. Each block is managed differently. Sometimes we will have a certain percentage of the farm that does have perennial cover crops for a year. A certain portion of our farm is always in a long-term cover crop. Other blocks on the farm are constantly being short season cover crops and then planted into and the short season cover crops and then planted into, then that block we'll try to take out and put into a cover crop and let it rest for a year. It's not exactly like a one-to-one thing where each block gets one year on and one year off. Because of the amount of crops that are needing to be cycled at any given time, it's a little bit more complicated than that. This part of the farm planning where we are deciding what the rotation is, this is really something that I'm just now getting into. In the past, John in January has handed me the farm plan and said, this is how the farm is gonna look. We need cover crops planted in this field and this block, at this time. My job has been to execute that.

Lorien Carsey: It is only now that I'm actually starting to get into the part of planning that out and reading about all the different cover crops. Which ones are annuals. Which ones are perennials. Which ones are for our quick growing to keep weeds down, etc. That part of the farm has always been in John's hands. It's only now that I'm actually starting to get into that aspect of farming.

Chris Blanchard: It's got to be really interesting to be taking that knowledge, which is so intuitive, networked... it really is something that I imagine that John has, or lack of a better word, a feel for, and try to translate that for somebody else to take over that system. That doesn't sound like it's, it's not a particularly cookie cutter approach.

Lorien Carsey: I think to some extent it is mathematical. When I look at that rotation schedule and I look at that farm planning, it's actually much more constrained than I would have thought. I would have thought, oh there's 20... but we have all this land so we can put solid mix wherever we want. It'll be easy to find a spot for these potatoes. Actually, given that we want to space these crops out for so long. Given that different blocks have different soil conditions, we have some blocks on our farm that are a little bit wetter and heavier. We know we won't be able to get in there in the Spring to be able to plant into there. We have to tend to avoid putting our Spring crops. Being on this small plot of land, with all these different crops, with all these different conditions and the weather, it's actually very constrained, that rotation schedule.

Lorien Carsey: One of the things that John has been a wizard at is record keeping and actually writing all this stuff down. That's something that I'm so grateful for is that I don't



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have to start from scratch. I don't have to reinvent the wheel on a lot of this. He has tried to take all of that intuitive knowledge and put it down on paper so that we have so many more tools when we're trying to make decisions about what we want to do on the farm. That part makes it really easy in that, you know, he does have a feel for things. He'll say, "it's the beginning of February, have you checked field F to make sure that this isn't happening?" When that happens, that's when I'm the most frustrated because I really want to have all of the knowledge on paper so that I have no surprises. Which is, of course, impossible. There's always going to be surprises. You can't control everything. For the most part I'll say, he tried to make that part of farm planning and crop planning, he's tried to make that a transferrable set of concepts so that we don't have to start from scratch.

Chris Blanchard: With ten acres of vegetables I mean you guys obviously have employees. How has the transition of farm management and therefore employee management worked on the farm? Has that been smooth, or has that been kind of a bumpy road?

Lorien Carsey: It's not gonna be, it won't be new when I say learning how to create systems on the farm in which employees are able to know what's expected of them and how to get the results that we expect of them, that is not easy. There's never enough attention that is paid to getting our employees to do what we're doing, pretty much. To learn how to set up a job so that we're not micro managing. To learn how to set up a structure that people know when they're doing the right thing, and when they're going off course, so that people can self-evaluate, so that systems are visible. It is not at all news. It's very bumpy and we have a lot to learn about it.

Lorien Carsey: I'm really excited for this next season because after last season, Shea and I had just had so many moments where we're standing there saying, we're drowning in details, the truck has to leave for deliveries. We've got to have everything ready for market tomorrow and we're standing and watching people do things that make no sense, given the goals that we have and what we have to get done. So, how are we gonna structure this so that we are actually helped by our employees and don't feel like we're doing it all ourselves in spite of the fact that there are six people on this farm who are supposed to be helping us get all these things done. Sometimes we feel like we're just running around, constantly checking up on people.

Lorien Carsey: I'm making it sound like it's totally crazy and chaotic. We do have systems in place, they just need to be better. They need to be more visible, they need to be more obvious. One thing that I keep coming back to as a farm manager is, I've got to trust that people are capable and they want to do a good job. If they're not performing that, it is my responsibility to create the conditions under which they can live up to their potential as great workers. Nobody coming to Blue Moon Farm comes to the farm and just wants to not do a good job. They all want to do a good job. Shea and I have to create the conditions under which they can do what they want to do, which is make the farm successful.

Shea Belahi: To add to that, for me, coming from a farm that I was the only person on. It's really hard for me to make the transition of I have to stop and make everyone do better or go quicker or work more efficiently. Instead of me, Shea, has to do that job faster so that we can get the truck out the door or we can get to market and I can go home and actually eat dinner. I am just in the mode of, I am the fastest person at this, I'm going to do it right now. Instead of stopping, looking at other people and making them more efficient. One of my goals this year is definitely to take a step



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back and do a better job at evaluating other people. It is very hard for me to make that transition to farm manager. It's always something that I'm working at and that Lorien is encouraging me to do better at.

Chris Blanchard: Has it been a challenge to transfer the authority or employee management from John, to the two of you?

Lorien Carsey: Yeah, it's interesting that you would ask that. Shea and I talk a lot about our role as managers and we do a lot of comparing between our role as managers and John's workload as a manager. Managing employees has to be one of your number one concerns so we do a lot of, how can we do this better and why is it that it seems like John is able to get... John is able to lead the farm in a way that we struggle to come into leading the farm in terms of our employees. I think a lot of that has to do with experience, having this sense of knowing what absolutely has to get done, and how it absolutely has to get done, that he has.

Lorien Carsey: I think it has to do with feeling like an owner. The more that Shea and I actually grow into this role as this farm is our life. This farm is a vital part of the community that we are leading. I think the more that feeling of authority and leadership at the farm will just happen naturally. Ever since my second year at the farm, I was a crew leader. I was in charge of making sure this individual task was getting done with my group that I was leading. I've pretty much always had that role. I think I'm pretty good at being able to identify how to train people in terms of doing individual tasks. That part of it I feel really comfortable with. In terms of really feeling like okay, this is my farm, this is Shea and I's farm. It's our job to create tasks and systems that make the farm successful. I think that's something that we're still growing into.

Chris Blanchard: Shea I want to circle back to something that you talked about at the beginning of the show, which was the online ordering systems that you put in place for CSA members and non-CSA members. Can you tell us a little bit more about the program that you developed there and how that works?

Shea Belahi: Sure so we have an online store. We call it our customizable CSA where people can go online and choose products. In the Summer it's each week and in the Winter it's bi-weekly. Products that they want and that will be secured for them. They come to a site and pick it up. That includes other farmers. We have a collaborative with David Bean from Bean Family Meats and our farm. There used to be more farms included but right now we're just focusing on those two. It's a great opportunity for people to get vegetables, meats, eggs, all in one place at one pickup. So we're really targeting people who are really busy and they don't have time to get to the farmer's market, or it's a long drive or especially in August when school starts. People are driving their kids to gymnastics practice or soccer on Saturday mornings, can't get to the market. But they can swing by after work and pick up their box of vegetables, meats and eggs to take home and have for the week.

Shea Belahi: That was developed to give people a little more flexibility than a locked in CSA box that we choose for them. We do choose site pick-ups. One in Champaign and one in Urbana. In the Wintertime it's one in Urbana. We're looking to make it more of a success than what it is right now. I'm a farmer, I'm not a marketer. So it's really hard for me to market things and make it grow.



Chris Blanchard: Is that something that you built using a platform that you purchased or is the online store something you built from scratch?

Shea Belahi: We built it using WordPress and different plug-ins. It was an already built system through a piece of software but there was still a lot of building that was necessary. It took a lot of hours to do. The online store not only gives us the opportunity to sell other people's products but it also links to a payment system that splits it between the vendors. We don't have to deal with David Bean's payments, they go straight to him. Which is why we specifically chose that piece of software. That makes it very easy for us to have other vendors be included and work together.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about the idea of a customized CSA box or custom packing pre-orders, that feels like a lot of work and a lot of potential for things to get screwed up. Can you talk a little bit more about how that actually works at a nuts and bolts level, on the farm once you've received the order?

Shea Belahi: It does leave a lot of potential for screw ups. So, what we've done on the back end of the program, particularly for vegetables is we create tags for each vegetable that allows us to set up our pack out line with the heaviest items on bottom the lightest items on top. When we get orders, those orders will automatically sort with the heaviest items first and the lightest items on bottom, which makes the pack out really easy.

Shea Belahi: We have to make these invoices for each customer. It has their name, their order, their date and information on their product that we hook to their box. When we send people out to the world, our employees out to deliver their boxes, they have names and their order already packed up. That can include meat too. We try and keep it together so that our employees are less confused about what's going. We set up a line. I'm very protective of this new farmers program, that it not be messed up. So I kind of do it. I should train somebody to do it because it's ridiculous for me to do it but I'm very particular about the boxes being correct. If the boxes aren't correct then I personally am usually running products around to different people to correct the issue. I want to make sure it's right so that I'm not having to do that on my, what's supposed to be free time.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about making sure the boxes are correct, what do you do? If you've got employees packing the boxes are you standing at the end of the line, double-checking the order?

Shea Belahi: When we wash the items, we pack it not into their boxes first. We pack them out for the cooler. I want those products to be packed separately and I want those counts to be right. If there was 12 arugula, I want those arugula in their own separate box that say 12. If I'm packing out the few farmers boxes for each person, with an employee and we get to the end and there two arugula left in that box, I'm looking at that employee and saying, something happened. We have two arugula left. There was only 12 and 12 were ordered, so where's the mess up. We go to each box that had arugula and look and make sure that the counts in that box are correct. That helps eliminate any issues. It helps me too, like, oh something must be wrong with that arugula if there's still some in the box.



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- Chris Blanchard: It's almost like a double-entry accounting system and making sure that everything balances at the end.
- Shea Belahi: Exactly.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you like how I tied that back in to you taking over the accounting?
- Shea Belahi: That was beautiful.
- Chris Blanchard: Thank you. Alright with that, we're gonna stop here. Take a quick break and get a word from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back with our lightning round.
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- Chris Blanchard: Shea, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Shea Belahi: I would have to say my favorite tool is QuickBooks. It really guides everything. Everything we do on the farm, we have to look at QuickBooks and all of our records to see what we're planning for, for the next day, week, hour, all of the above. I'm going with QuickBooks.
- Chris Blanchard: Lorien, how about you?
- Lorien Carsey: My favorite tool on the farm, so when I think about the tools I use the most and that I need the most and that I feel the most comfortable with, I would be thinking about our little international 274 Tractor that's lightweight, it's got thin, skinny tires. We use it constantly on the farm. We can cultivate with it. We can dibble our holes for our salad mix production. We can set up the flamer on the back of it. We can pull trailers around the farm with it. I gotta say that's like, I feel like that's my right hand. My right hand tool, my right hand man.
- Chris Blanchard: Great.
- Lorien Carsey: It's just always, you know, it always starts. It always works. It's easy to understand. That's my favorite tool.
- Chris Blanchard: Those are three really important qualities in a tractor. Always starts, always works, easy to understand. I like that.



Lorien Carsey: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: Shea since you're in charge of the packing shed, what's your favorite crop to wash and pack.

Shea Belahi: I kind of like doing the radishes. I hate to say that because Lorien hates the radishes. But they're really, you know. It's the first thing in the season that comes up that has so much color. They're beautiful and it's the last thing in the season that has a lot of color and it's beautiful. It's just that thing in the beginning of the year that I'm like, you know, everything is returned. It's the brilliancy of vegetables are back.

Chris Blanchard: Lorien, what's your favorite crop to grow out in the field since that's your area of responsibility?

Lorien Carsey: I would have to say, I mean, like you said Shea, that is a hard question. I really get the most satisfaction and pleasure out of the tomatoes. I love how they smell. I love how they taste. I love how they feel. They're just, there's so much richness and variety and good food to be made with tomatoes. They're just really a satisfying product.

Chris Blanchard: Are you guys growing all your tomatoes under cover? Or is that a combination of indoor and outdoor production for you?

Lorien Carsey: Oh yeah, it's indoor and outdoor. We like to have our shoulder season, our Spring tomatoes out of the greenhouses. It's hard to find good tasting greenhouse reds. Our outdoor production of tomatoes is really where, to me it's like, that's where the most taste is. We've got to have those greenhouse tomatoes and we're always looking for varieties that are going to give us great flavor, but our three outdoor plantings of tomatoes is where a lot of the taste comes through. We do both. We do season extension tomatoes but we also have our outdoor tomatoes.

Chris Blanchard: Shea if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would you say?

Shea Belahi: I would say that, I would tell myself, keep pushing it's gonna pay off. There's something big coming your way. Keep doing what you're doing. Keep being resilient.

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

Lorien Carsey: If I could go back in time I would tell myself that in spite of the fact that there are 100 tasks that need to be completed at any given time on the farm, whatever task that I am involved in or managing at that moment, to dig in and do it right. To learn about how to do it right so I can repeat that knowledge in the future. Even though, in the moment, it always seems like there's something else you're supposed to be doing, so you should get that task done as soon as possible to get on to the next thing. The problem with that is that you end up, you don't get the same amount of satisfaction that you get when you dig in and you say, okay, I'm feeding these greens and I am going to really focus on this, even if I feel like I'm spending too much time messing with the feeder, doing all of these adjustments, making sure the depth



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is just right. Stop, do it again, make sure the depth is just right. That will pay off in the future.

Lorien Carsey: I always have this impatience of, the farm is drowning I got to get on to the next thing. I would tell myself, it's going to pay off for you to learn how to do that thing right, then teach someone else how to do that thing right, than to get three things done that you think you need to get done. Dig into this task. Do a great job at it. That knowledge is gonna pay off later on.

Chris Blanchard: Lorien and Shea thank you so much for being on the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.

Shea Belahi: Thank you for the opportunity.

Lorien Carsey: Yeah really an honor. Thank you so much for having us on.

Chris Blanchard: Alright so wrapping things up here. I'll say again that this is Episode 162 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 "Blue Moon." That's b-l-u-e m-o-o-n.

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