



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 170

Rebecca Graff and Tom Ruggieri of Fair Share Farm on CSA Transitions, Greening the Farm, and a Fermented Food Business

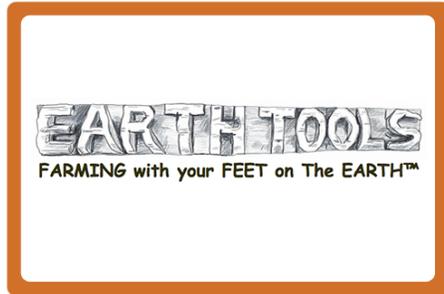
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Chris Blanchard: It's the farmer to farmer podcast, episode 170, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Rebecca Graff and Tom Ruggieri raise vegetables for 100 member CSA, manage a small laying flock and operate a cottage skill farmer and food business at Fair Share Farm, 45 minutes north of Kansas City Missouri. They've been farming together on family land since 2004 after meeting in the fields or Peacework Organic Farm in upstate New York. We did into the nitty gritty of their member oriented CSA and the changes that it's undergone in the last couple of years as Rebecca and Tom have looked to change the farms economic paces and the quality of life.

Chris Blanchard: Tom and Rebecca share how they've changed their sign-up process and their work requirement and so CSA has gone through these transitions. We also take a hard look at their permanent foods production and how that fits in with their vision for the farm and their CSA model as well as the efforts they've made to reduce the overall ecological footprint of the farm with a solar greenhouse and electric tractor, and a vigorous cover crop and soil building effort.

Chris Blanchard: The farmer to farmer podcast is generally supportive Vermont Compost company founded by organic crop growing professionals committed to meeting the need for high quality compost and compost based living soil mixers for



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Chris Blanchard: Rebecca Graff and Tom Ruggieri, welcome to the farmer to farmer podcast.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, thanks so much for having us Chris, we're excited to be here.

Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, thanks Chris.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off today by having you guys tell us about Fair Share Farm. How much are you guys growing? Where are you doing that? How are you getting that product to market?

Rebecca Graff: Sure. We started our farm, Fair Share Farm in 2004 and we're on my family land, so we're outside of Kansas City Missouri, about 45 minutes from downtown Kansas City. We're north of the city for those who may be more familiar with Iowa, it's kind of like Iowa, but we're further south, so the soil barn is deep, but we have a little bit of that [inaudible 00:02:46] wind blowing soil here. We're farming [inaudible 00:02:49], we do not have quick bottoms, and since it's my family farm, we were farming the land we have.

Rebecca Graff: We grow a large variety of vegetable for CSA, we've done that since the beginning, we've focused on growing for CS, exclusively for the most part and at our highest membership we had 150 members. We're now with 100 members going forward. Started a commercial kitchen in 2016 and we're making a live culture fermented foods from our vegetables, so merely sauerkraut, kimchi and cucumber pickles. Our area that we farm is at the most we were probably doing five or six acres, last year we did an acre and a half on the actual crops, the way that our ridge land is, we try and stick to the furthest ground and have a lot of cover cropping intermixed with that.

Rebecca Graff: You could look at our farm and say it's maybe a 20 acre farm, that includes our irrigation plan that we use, it's just on the family farm, [inaudible 00:04:06] buildings and our home is probably a total of 20 acres. We're on family land that's 280 acre, so we're a little bit of a buffer in that sense between us and our neighboring corn city farmers, which is a primary farming activity out here, corn soybeans, beef cattle pasture for the most part. The remainder of the family farm was in row crops, but back in 2012 my father sold it into a native grass perennial system and the past year was the first year that we were able to have that combined and we're actually selling native grass seedoff of that land. It's been a great transition for the family farm to have that shifted to something more sustainable for the long hall. Then you know a lot of organic ground is a little bit more protected from drift, et cetera.



- Rebecca Graff: When we started, we were... we met on a CSA farm outside of Rochester, New York, Peacework Organic Farm, Elizabeth Henderson was farming.
- Chris Blanchard: How did you guys get started? I mean, talking about starting in 2004, what came before that for you?
- Rebecca Graff: I first started CSA and looked on the idea of coming back to the family farm when I was living in San Francisco California, I moved into a household that was a drop off site for carrot farmers CSA and started reading their newsletter, this is like 2000, and just have the idea. The time I was working for non profit doing community organizing and kind of social service work. I loved the work but I didn't love living in the city. I thought I was going to become a city person, but I grew up in the middle of nowhere here on the farm, and I don't think I quite realized how much that still held a place in my heart.
- Rebecca Graff: I hadn't really grown up growing vegetables of any kind, so I realized I needed to start apprenticing on farms and I applied at just out of some strange luck, I didn't even realize where I was landing, but I ended up at Peacework Organic Farm, which is the farm that Elizabeth Henderson ran for many years outside of Rochester New York, and the farmers there were just excellent vegetable growers plus they had an amazing CSA model, a participatory model with people coming and helping with the harvest. They had a work requirement for all of their membership and it was that model that really got me excited about coming back to the family farm and bringing people to the farm and giving them that experience that I had had as a kid growing up out here.
- Rebecca Graff: I guess Tom can talk about how he came to it, but that was my inclination. I moved to Peacework and apprenticed there and I got the bug and then the members started coming out for the work days and low and behold, Tom Ruggieri came out for his work shift.
- Tom Ruggieri: Oh yeah, first I was living in Manchester, was there for about 20 years, I was an environmental engineer helping safety professionals and I tried to to drop out a couple of times, I used to say I was environmental engineer but nobody ever talked about the environment, so it was my training and my profession but it was really just about liability, kind of protecting corporations and businesses from environmental needs. At one point I got a house and I sold it and a friend of mine told me about the CSA and it's kind of what I wanted to do. I figured I really wanted to get out and get my hands in the dirt, but I didn't necessarily need to own my own home to do that and CSA was the perfect opportunity for that.
- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah I came out from my work days, I'm kind of the same as Rebecca, I was part of Liz's CSA, and I would come out and I would work with my fellow members and really that conversation was what got me a lot more aware of the politics of food and really more the environmental issues surrounding food. In 2001, Rebecca came out, she was apprenticing and we met and I had quit my job at that point, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do, I wanted to find a job working with my hands, I was trying to be a photographer, I did a lot of dark room work editing photos and selling those. Rebecca and could ... I could see she did the same thing, she quit her job, and she was pursuing something and I



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could see that she was somebody that really and truly had vision, you know, this wasn't just some pipe dream she was talking about here. Not everybody has the, you know, that's kind of what I recognized, so we decided...

- Tom Ruggieri: Then we went and apprenticed at a farm in Indiana, which is close to my home in Cincinnati. We did that for a year and then we came out here and started the farm.
- Chris Blanchard: When you came back to the family farm Rebecca, did your family have an organic bench or were you curving Fair Share Farm out of conventional corn and soy bean ground?
- Rebecca Graff: Yeah, the whole farm was rented out to neighboring farmers that were raising corn and soy beans and then there was some pasture that was rented out to some people that had beef cattle. The farm itself, when I was growing up out here, it was the 80s and the farm crisis and whatever, and the only reason why we still have the farm was because my dad had a Computer Science degree and drove into the city an hour and a half every day and had a day job. Luckily, that meant that the farm didn't need to be sold or we didn't have a huge financial crisis during that time period and had to sell it.
- Rebecca Graff: The reality was when we came back, no one had been living on the farm were really putting much attention on the farm so it did 20+ years. There were outbuildings, but they were half fallen down or there was a really big equipment barn that had fallen down. The house hadn't been lived in for many, many years and needed a lot of work. We had an old, my grandpa's tractor that my dad had also used in the 60s that we're still using today. We had some infrastructure that had a lot of potential, but the farm itself was needing a lot of attention.
- Rebecca Graff: My dad is very kind of ecologically minded, so that was a huge help that he not only had farmed this land and cultivated corn and soy beans which nobody does anymore but knew something about equipments and a little bit about everything, electrical work, plumbing, repairing things, you know a typical farm hat that every farmer wears. He was a huge partner in us getting the farm back together and getting it producing again.
- Rebecca Graff: It took us a while, Tom can maybe talk about soil more, but the ground was not in the best shape, you know, a conventional system, you just kind of kill off the soil life and there were just wasn't a lot of life in the ground and we were growing cover crops and they wouldn't even germinate. It was just really the first few years pretty tough going just to transition from conventional real crops to an organic vegetable system.
- Chris Blanchard: How did you guys go about doing that because you're talking about, well kind of two things all at once, which is making that transition from a conventional farming soil, but also working on land that clay soils, right. This is not exactly vegetable ground.
- Rebecca Graff: Right. Now I would say the barn that we are still using today is an old tobacco drying barn, so our soil, yes, it's definitely riddgeland and we don't have these nice sandy creek bottom well drained soils for sure, but we do have fairly rich soils and we've been able to make them work, and it's not like we wouldn't love



to have a bunch of sand underneath our soil instead of clay, but we've been able to manage it and it's kind of over the years, we've figured out how to do that.

Rebecca Graff: We came from our apprenticeship on beautiful creek bottom sandy soil types. We didn't really know how to manage our soils until we got here and just started trying. I think that's one of the reasons why, you know, we talked about just the whole idea of like a cottage industry for the farm kind of comes out of that. Our soils are very workable, but it's nice to have a little bit of cushion on the farm finances to also have some value added products coming out of our farm as well, so that we're not just relying on one revenue stream to provide for us going into the future.

Rebecca Graff: I think that when we started, we thought we were going to be at a much bigger scale than we are now, we thought we'd just kind of keep increasing, I think Peacework has like 300 members when I was there, so that was kind of our model, but when we started actually looking at the ground and farming the ground, we realized really, 100 members and a little bit more diversified income was going to make more sense for our rich lands that we were farming.

Chris Blanchard: Did you start off with the additional cottage industry or is that something that you added in later?

Rebecca Graff: It was always kind of part of our vision statement or whatever we called it when we started that, Tom, he doesn't come from a farming background, he does come very much from a food background, I guess I would say, and you can talk more about that but he always had a lot of talent around value adding, making tomato sauce and wine and cheese and cooking, so we always wanted to somehow include that in our farm business, this took us a while before we felt like we were ready to make that jump.

Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, kind of going back to the start, you know, we've focused on the soil pretty much since the beginning when we were in the North East, we go to NOFA conferences and you go to those workshops and it's fifteen years ago and there'd be people talking about virtues of one cover crop versus another and they've been doing it for 30 years, so we could see the value of it. As environmental engineer I understood the power of micro organisms, I got my training to start with in biological waste water treatment which is to take sewage and add bacteria to it and aerate it and you degrade the pollutants. All those things are kind of inherent and like technical knowledge and when started here like Rebecca said, the soil was quite dead to the point where we were having trouble even getting the cover crops to really grow at first, so we had to do a lot of mineral additions and liming and cover cropping and you can look on our website, fairsharefarm.com and we have a page on carbon sequestering and we show our soil organic matter over the years.

Tom Ruggieri: For the first five years or so, it was between two and a half and three and it actually kind of started going down even for a while. It took us a while to re-establish the infrastructure for the micro organisms in the soil and then actually build up the population to booth. It was only after about five or six years that our organic matter really began to go up to the point now where our average organic matter is more between four and five percent. We've gone up almost one and a half percent in organic matter over the years.



- Tom Ruggieri: It's nice to be where we are now versus then, I mean that's a very big difference to have a soil that is that alive that you're growing in and we can grow more in the same area. Kind of what Rebecca was saying, you think we just keep expanding but we've actually been contracting a little bit more to take advantage of our improvements in the soil quality.
- Chris Blanchard: With the 100 family CSA, is that the only market that you guys have?
- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, that kind of cottage industry that Rebecca is talking about, so a couple of years ago we had 150 member CSA and it was every week we had extended season two, so we had 31 weeks where every week we had shares and after what amounted to 13/14 years of that, we felt that we really needed to take a break. Last year we went through 100 shares every other week, so it's more of a 16 week season. Then we started focusing on our permanent business and 2016 we finished construction of a certified kitchen and we prepared a half plan, hazard assessment critical control point plan that allows us to do fermenting and then last year was our first real year of production.
- Tom Ruggieri: The ideas that we are shooting for the same kind of income that we had with 150 member CSA but now we have a more diversified product for CSA and then the farming.
- Chris Blanchard: You guys geared down last year and did the every other week CSA, is that how you're going to continue in the future or was that just to take some time and get the fermentation business up and running and do some evaluation of where you are at and where you wanted to be in the future?
- Rebecca Graff: We were really happy with every other week CSA and we surveyed the membership and 98% of the respondents were happy too. It was kind of shocking how many people were enjoying it. We were doing two share sizes and then every week, we were doing a buffet style distribution model where we're packing 60 of carrots in crates and then saying carrots take one bunch down the line, you know, and then just pick up out of the crates. Two share sized every week for 150 members. Anyway it was a lot and we just felt like we needed a break and we also needed some time to just kind of re-think everything, like we felt like we were going on repeat of what we had done the year before and we felt like we needed some space to try some new ideas and not take such a large amount of money from people that we felt like we didn't have time for anything else, we just needed to focus on making sure we had shares every week. Anyway, it worked out great, we called it a sabbatical, I think we put a blog post up in September of that year, where we were starting to think about it. The sabbatical has been quite what ended up happening, but just the space of having a week off was just really dramatic for us. We were able to travel a little bit in the summer, leave the farm. We were able to have some time for the ferment business to get that up and running for sure. We have a flock of 70 chickens, so just doing some of the work associated with the chickens, that was really helpful to have a week off so that we're not trying to figure out what day of the week we can move the chickens that we're not going to be harvesting right after that.



- Rebecca Graff: From a food safety perspective, it's really nice to have, you know, get that stuff done and then don't go harvest spinach. It really seemed to work better for our model that we were developing with more diversity of products and the membership has really been supportive. We didn't advertise during that year for any new members coming in so they are pretty much all our existing membership signed up, and we told them up front we weren't sure how it was going to go, it was a little bit of an experiment. We were reducing the amount of crops we were growing as well, so trying to focus on the favorite crops a little bit more and get rid of some of the less light crops but also crops that didn't grow as well for us, so we're not growing melons and winter squash, which in our climate is a real battle.
- Rebecca Graff: We have so many generations of squash lovers and cucumber beetles in our climate that they really have to struggle to get melons and winter squash, so we took these crops out, I know your favorite kohlrabi was not planted.
- Chris Blanchard: Yes.
- Rebecca Graff: We just tried to simplify things and streamline things, so we did one share price people had two weeks to get through it all so that seemed to work for everybody, so it made our lives easier, I think we made our members lives easier. We scaled back on the work permits, we haven't talked a lot about that yet, but when we started farming here, we pretty much took Peacework Organic Farms CSA model and tried to import it to our location. For the most part, it's been great and our members have loved it, it's one of their favorite things of our CSA, we love it, we love having everybody come out, but we have pretty hefty requirements.
- Rebecca Graff: For a full share you have to do three farm shifts from eight to noon on a Saturday or Wednesday morning. For some families that wasn't a bog deal because they had three plus people in the family and they could everybody, but if you were a single person or a couple, that meant you had to come out more than once. We scaled back on that, we just said everybody needs to come out once, bring as many people as you want and just felt like we were just trying to allow for flexibility with people's schedules, people's family sizes, I think people appreciate that.
- Rebecca Graff: Here in 2018 we're planning on where we are pretty much using the same system that we used last year. We realized we can grow a little bit more than we thought, and shares are going to be a little bit bigger than they were last year, but otherwise, we're sticking with it.
- Chris Blanchard: That work requirement to me is a really interesting part of your CSA because I've reflected before on the show on the difference between what I think of as the two different models of CSA. There's kind of the customer subscription agriculture model, and then there's the really community supported agriculture model and it really feels to me like you guys have focused on building that community that supports your farm and part of that is getting people out consistently throughout the season to the farm to engage and real work on the farm.



- Rebecca Graff: Yeah, definitely. I mean it helps us, we get each family coming out to help with the harvest, so that means our labor costs are lower and so many remember say, I grew up going to my grandma and grandpa's farm, helping them in their garden and want that same experience for my kids. Or people want to start a garden and they don't have any experience and they can come out here and we can give them some pointers. Yeah, it's been great, it's great to see it in action, I think theoretically like in your mind if you're out there listening and you're a vegetable grower, you think, "Oh my God, I'm going to have all these people coming to my farm, I don't know what the heck they are doing and they are going to start ripping up my crops," and that is not the case, we have a very controlled environment for our membership when they come to help us. We're always supervising them and we only allow them to do certain tasks that we feel are the lowest kind of skill set required.
- Rebecca Graff: They are not picking tomatoes for the most part, they are not picking pepper, things where you kind of have to decide on ripeness and where the plants are more fragile. They are helping us make kale bunches, they are helping us pull carrots out of the ground, digging sweet potatoes and definitely helping us with high labor crops like peas and beans. It used to be cherry tomatoes, we stopped growing cherry tomatoes.
- Rebecca Graff: There's that and then we also have wash area, packing room where they help wash the lettuces, all with supervision, all with food safety talk first. They bag up beans for shares, they clean garlic, clean onions, a lot of different jobs so people can sit down and clean onions or garlic if they're tired or if they have a bad back or something like that. It works really well as long as you kind of have the parameters pre-strict to be gin with and you don't have them do things that is beyond what somebody coming from the city that has never gardened before to be asked to do.
- Rebecca Graff: We mulch, we like to put hay or straw mulch sometimes on some of our crops and that's a low skill job, some people are faster than others, but people pretty much understand how to put hay or straw around the crop, sometimes they put it on too thinly and you have to tell them to put it on thicker, so it's just a matter of being out there with them.
- Rebecca Graff: Usually I'm in the packing room, overseeing the washing and packing, and Tom's out in the field overseeing the harvesting and then we have other employees that are around to kind of keep an eye as well.
- Chris Blanchard: Not a lot of knife work, mostly hand labor and mostly pretty straight forward activities?
- Rebecca Graff: Yeah, sometimes... we do a lot of head lettuce, so that's something we will have people help us with. Although we started picking our head lettuce the day before so I guess we aren't doing as much of that now. Sometimes there's knife work but one of the points in the safety talk is always if you use sharp knives at home, you can use them here, because we often have kids come with their parents, so not only food safety stuff but also personal safety because we keep our knives sharp, that's part of the talk. We usually try and make sure we have, you know, if we're going to have a knife job, we'll have another job that's just



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like pulling turnips out of the ground that kids can help with. Yeah, we don't have them do a lot of knife tasks really.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of a retention rate do you guys have with your CSA?

Rebecca Graff: We average about 75%, which it'd be nice if it's higher but I hear that's decent for a CSA farm. We do a lot to make sure that our members are happy, we do a survey every year, so now actually one of the other things we did during those sabbatical years, we started using small farm central and that's been a great help for us because they can do things like rate the box. There's a survey feedback function where every time they get a share, if they want to rate it they can. We try and be really transparent about what we're doing at the farm, all the typical things that people do for CSA, make sure they know how to cook it and eat it and store it and find out what's working for them, what's not.

Rebecca Graff: At this point, we have a solid core of people that have been with us for 10+ years, of course people move away or things change in their lives or they can't continue, but sometimes people come back as well. I think we're right now at 95, numbers that we just got five more openings and the season starts in about a month. I think we'll fill up and we tend to get referrals from our current membership, and that's how we get new people, it's through word of mouth from our existing membership.

Chris Blanchard: It's interesting to me that you've moved to an online sign up, because if I remember right, a number of years ago when you and I talked together about how to run a CSA, you and I taught a class somewhere, I can't remember where, but you guys were doing a much more elaborate in person sign up system at that point.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, so Chris Blanchard, we did the CSA mini school at the Great Plains Growers conference in St. Joe Missouri and Elizabeth Henderson and we did that for about five years, Tom and I would bring in different CSA farmers to our little farming conference in St. Joe and yeah, it was great to have you participate in that. Then think we were practical farmers of Iowa at one year.

Chris Blanchard: That seems right to me.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah. For years we had this in person sign up meeting which was totally based on the Peacework model, I don't know what they do these days with the hi-tech options that are out there now, but everybody comes, usually the first day of spring, it's kind of a way to celebrate the start of the season and they fill out their contracts and they meet the partner vendors because we also have kind of a whole diet CSA option but with our partner vendors that provide meat and cheese and other products. Anyway, it was kind of a big event for us, and for many years, we would bring it up to the core group and say, "Well, do we want to try and go online? Is that something we want to do?" Every year they were like no, we love having in-person kind of party at the start of the season.

Rebecca Graff: Last year, they were like, "Well, you know it's a lot of work, you got all this paper work that you're making photocopies," it just seems like it was getting a little out of date. We decided to go with small farm central and really we've been very happy. The members were all coming out to the farm, so we still get



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to see them, they get to interact with each other when they pick up their share and we have a distribution team at each pickup site so they kind of organize themselves and there's still a lot of community going on without that in-person sign up.

Rebecca Graff: It's allowed for us to accept online payments, credit cards, through PayPal. It has allowed us to have a more efficient, what we call our bulk list, so because we only grow fresh produce for the CSA, and we don't take stuff to Farmer's Market or other outlets, we would have extra stuff. There was stuff beyond what we needed for the share that week and we have had for so many years this email system where we would email out what was extra that week and people would email us back saying what they wanted, which was cumbersome and we would often miss orders or there would be confusion or just kind of hard to manage.

Rebecca Graff: Small farm central has a way to have kind of an online store where people can do that and it's a much better system as far as keeping track and people can make payments there instead of leaving cash at the distribution site, but then we have to come figure out who left that. It's definitely improved.

Chris Blanchard: You don't feel like it's taken away from the sense of community?

Rebecca Graff: If the online sign up was the only chance people had to kind of interact with each other or interact with the farmers, maybe that would be the case, but because we have this work requirement and we have a very interactive distribution system model, plus we have a picnic at the farm in the fall. There's a lot of opportunities for people to have that community feel without the in-person sign up.

Tom Ruggieri: The other thing with the community is just all the involvement that our membership has. We have the core group that coordinates a lot of stuff and then all these distribution captains. There're kind of people working on the CSA kind of the whole season through, so yeah, it's a great model, we were really lucky to experience it at Peacework, I think it's a really kind of difficult thing to explain to somebody and have them go do, but we were lucky enough to, like I said, experience it. It wasn't a very hard sell for us.

Chris Blanchard: Then, are you marketing through other outlets as well or is everything that you do going through the CSA?

Rebecca Graff: Our fresh produce is either going to the CSA or we are going crops specifically for the kitchen, so cabbage, napa cabbage, carrots and onions and cucumbers, we're growing more of those crops so that we have them for the farmers. Otherwise we go to a winter farmers market and sometimes we will bring left over potatoes, beans, carrots, things that are in storage after the CSA season is over, but for the most part it all goes to the CSA members or to the kitchen.

Tom Ruggieri: The ferments were looking for farmers market in retail sales for those involved with CSA.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. Do you have ferments in stores now when you talk about retail sales?



- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah. Last year we were able to get in about four different stores in Kansas city area, just kind of nice, north, south, east and west of town. This year, in spring we applied for a USDA producer grant and it was good, just giving the application helped us look at the volumes we had and what we'd be projecting and really what our business plan was going to be with ferments. We want to get into more stores, we've been doing a lot of talking to different stores and there's like food hubs around right now, looking at bulk sales, possibly the restaurants we can sell our ferments in gallon tubs and look for salad bars or for delis, things like that. We're really looking to expand our retail and wholesale sales this year.
- Chris Blanchard: Is the fermentation business a scalable business for you guys? Is that something that you're going to be able to continue to expand to meet that increased demand?
- Tom Ruggieri: We'll be able to scale up some, we were looking and you can get a lot off an acre, or even a half acre if you're doing the ferments. We have about five acres here on the farm that we can grow on and so we're going to the point where we're looking to have close to half or even more in cover crops at any one point in time. We have something there to grow as far as any vegetables for the ferments. Yeah, with the value added producer grant we realized that we need maybe 2000 regular customers would be good enough for our kind of cottage industry.
- Tom Ruggieri: That's one way we're kind of looking at this, you look at a winery or a dairy you have an agricultural product that's growing on a piece of land and then it's processed and actually fermented on the property and so now we're doing it with vegetables. There's nobody else that we really know that's doing that, so we're kind of in an uncharted territory around here, but it is on the same lane as these other agricultural businesses. Yeah, we're just going to see how it goes too.
- Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about how that fermentation process works. I once made a five gallon batch of sauerkraut, and it was really good but man was it a lot of work to get it all salted and pounded. It felt like a lot of monkey business.
- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, one thing with the fermentation, in our vision and plan kind of had possible aid having value added products and I've done a lot of home preserving and realized that I wasn't going to boil water for people and sterilize jars for tomato sauce and jams and stuff. The ferments process takes place at room temperature. It's low in energy and the other thing is when we decided to go not it, we really wanted the kind of closed loop, we've been spending a lot of our efforts on building the soil and just tie this whole biological process together. We've been working on the microbiome of the soil, with the fermenting work stressing what's going on in the ferments, and then there's the microbiome of our bodies, and it's all the same thing.
- Tom Ruggieri: Since we've been doing it even, so we eat the ferments all the time, we can almost feel the positive benefits of that. As far as the difficulty of doing it, it's a little tricky, but we bought a new cooler so we have a good place to store crops like cabbage. You can hold those until you need to work on them, it's neat to



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have in a kitchen with no stove, that was kind of different for the health department, to have a kitchen with no stove. There is some equipment you can buy to help chop the vegetables. We use a lot of five gallon, seven gallon food grade pails, so we've developed a pretty good system I think to kind of have a quality control over our product.

Tom Ruggieri: The whole idea is as we get older as farmers, maybe half the day could be in the kitchen instead of out in the field, so it's a way to balance our lives at the same time.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about the actual physical process. What do you go through in making a batch of sauerkraut?

Tom Ruggieri: Like sauerkraut, we grow the cabbage and when we promote our product we say, the first step of our recipe is raising the vegetables, it's very important to us. You are what you eat so you are what your plants eat. We try to stress to people we've been building soil on our farm for 16 years and flavor and the nutrition that you taste in our product really comes from our growing practices. We'll harvest, say the cabbage, we'll store it in our cooler and when we're ready to make the kraut we'll take it out. You trim the ends and take out the outer leaves. You quarter it and then we have a drum shredder, it's a hand crank, and you just put it in that and crank away, and you've got this shredded cabbage. Then you add salt and put it into a bucket and make sure it's submerged in the liquid.

Tom Ruggieri: That's one of the important things about fermenting, it's making sure that it's anaerobic, that all the solids, all the vegetables are below the level of the juice that gets extracted, and then monitor it. In the case of sauerkraut, it's about a month at room temperature. You measure the pH, that is the kill step, so for the hazard, you have to plan the main parameter you want to look for, for food safety, is the pH of the sauerkraut. It can start out at somewhere around five or so and then by the time it's done it's down close to 3.2, 3.4 somewhere in there, which is 10 times more acidic than it needs to be.

Tom Ruggieri: Once the fermentation is complete and it's relatively stable, we put it in our cooler and then when it's time to sell it, we'll take it out, we'll fill labeled jars or the one gallon pails and then we'll put it in another cooler we have that's cold and dry, so the boxes and everything don't get all dump and it's ready to sell.

Chris Blanchard: What other products are you fermenting for sale?

Tom Ruggieri: We also make kimchi which is a little more complicated, it has more ingredients and so there's more chopping. There's two types of kimchi, we have our regular kimchi which is made mainly with napa cabbage and then green kimchi which we make with bok choy and tat soi. For those we have to buy ginger, organic ginger and organic paprika, but other than that and the salt that we buy, which is Redmond sea salt out of Utah, it's a pink salt. Those are the only things that are not raised on the farm, like build into our jars. Our jars have over 95% product just from the farm. Then we make a jalapeno dish, Jalapeno en Escabeche, it's a traditional Mexican recipe, and then cucumber pickles. Those are what we're working on now, there's more products that we can possibly



make in the future, daikon radishes, you can make pickles out of that and some other things.

Tom Ruggieri: Like you said you made kraut once, we feel good we have a year under our belt because you can make a bucket of something that's really delicious, like a bucket of mash, it's easy but hard at the same time to ferment. Growing all the ingredients has really helped us in our quality step.

Chris Blanchard: In doing something that's, well I'm just going to go with the word weird, from a food processing stand point, I mean, usually when we talk about a kill step, it's like pour in the vinegar or heat the thing up, and I can imagine that your county health department must have been a little bit confused by I want to ferment and sell things.

Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, if anybody's been in food service, you know that leaving something at 70 degrees for more than four hours is a no, no and we're leaving things at that for a month. I've taken a lot of food safety classes and they never even mentioned fermentation. It was frustrating getting these certificates and they don't even talk about what it is we're doing. It's an ancient, it's one of the older squirms of food preservation that there is. It's weird to us in my society, but it's really fundamental to civilizations and disciplines to be able to store food naturally. We try to... it's a live culture, so we have to refrigerate it after we make it so it's the probiotic, it's really a missing link in many people's diet.

Tom Ruggieri: The thing about the soil in plants is the co-evolved symbiotic relationship, plants and soil, like organisms, they grew up together, they have a long term relationship, or the same way with the bacteria in our digestive system. They're not just any micro organisms, they're what we co-evolved with and have a symbiotic relationship with. We're tying all that together, so from a health stand point, that's an important part of our product.

Tom Ruggieri: Another is the flavor and nutrition of sauerkraut is just our cabbage and salt, so all the flavor that is in that is really from our, soil something has flavor, so we attempt to really have more nutrition because of the bioflavinoids, it's the actual vegetable. It's a biological diversity, any biological life survives on that diversity, so it helps to incorporate more diversity in into our lives

Tom Ruggieri: The other thing that we're trying to stress to people is that in doing all this, we also are taking carbon dioxide out of the air, and on the lid of our jars, we say carbon was sequestered making this product. We say that's really important for people to know, I mean when you talk about a value added product, that's one of the values. We can measurably say that we are reversing climate change by growing our vegetables in making the products that we make, and we think they have a lot of value and we want people to understand what value is.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, and Tom did this whole calculation which you mentioned earlier with just organic matter that we've increased in the soil. They did a calculation based on our energy use on the farm we purchase wind energy credits from our local rule electric co-op and so if you talk about energy used on the farm and look at the organic matter improvement, we're on the positive side of sequestering carbon. That's kind of where all of that statement that we're sequestering carbon comes from.



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Chris Blanchard: Got it. All right, we're going to stop here and take a quick break, get a word from a couple of sponsors and we'll be right back with Rebecca and Tom from Fair Share Farm in Kearney Missouri.

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Chris Blanchard: All right and we're back with Rebecca Graff and Tom Ruggieri from Kearney Missouri. Before we went on our break, we were talking about the carbon sequestration a little bit as kind of a function of your vegetable production and how important that is to you guys as farmers. I know that there are some other things that you've done that fit into that energy conservation, carbon sequestration model, one of them being your passive solar greenhouse.

Rebecca Graff: Right, when we moved back here, one of the first things we did was we built our greenhouse. It was built on the part of the farm that sed to have an old chicken house that was somewhat passive so, it was built to the side of a south facing hill and not far from the house and the barns, but that building was long gone, there were just kind of some big chunks of concrete left from it. We did some



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dirt work and pretty much replicated the space that that took up. Now we have, I guess it's a 12 by 6, we added on a little bit a couple of years ago. It's very long and narrow and that's to take advantage of the sun and the winter months when we're sorting our seeds.

Rebecca Graff: It's well insulated on the north side, it's actually below ground on that side, and then we have black 55 gallon barrels that are filled with water inside of the green house on the north wall, so the sun can shine on those, heat up the water that's inside of the barrows and then that moderates the temperature overnight as the temperature outside cools down, that heat that's been stored in the water is released passively into our greenhouse.

Chris Blanchard: Are you providing supplemental heat in that greenhouse or is it completely done with the passive solar design?

Rebecca Graff: We have heat mats for germinating flats or keeping our peppers and tomatoes warm if we need to, but that's really the extent of our supplemental heat in that greenhouse. It stays above freezing without any supplemental heat and if we're starting crops in February and March and if we have the heat mats going then that's really all you need, is to keep the soil warm if the air temperatures cool, that doesn't really affect the plants. We do have tables, with the heat mats on them and then if we need to we will put a piece of raw cover over the table just to hold in more of that heat from the heat mats over night, and yeah, it works really well and we've been really happy with the design.

Rebecca Graff: We kind of stole the design from this University of Missouri extension location further south from us, they actually had a similar building, bit built into the side of the hill, just free standing, but they were growing crops inside, kind of like a combination of a hot tunnel but insulated more. We took that design and adapted it to build our greenhouse. We do have a ventilation fan, it will get warm in the summers, so we have to check the thermostat controlled to keep things from getting too hot in there.

Chris Blanchard: Is that the only space that you guys are using for transplant production on the farm, or do you have additional greenhouses, high tunnels, things like that that you're using?

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, we grow all of our transplants in the passive solar greenhouse, but we do have a high tunnel on the farm as well, we have a 30 by 96 high tunnel that we built 2012, something like that. That is just for season extension for the CSA vegetables. We planted in September for November and December harvest, and we planted again in February for April into May harvest. That gives us another two weeks on either side of the growing season for us here and northern Missouri. We're growing cool weather crops in that, we're not growing tomatoes, we're growing spinach and chard and lettuces and salad turnips and things like that that can handle cool weather on this unheated high tunnel.

Chris Blanchard: You guys also have an electric tractor, right?

Rebecca Graff: Yeah.



- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, people want to see that when they come out Ron Khosla at Flying Beet Farm in New York City, he came up with a [inaudible 00:52:28] for it and he's part of the SARE project, the details for it are online and so we found an Allis-Chalmers G back on '07 and converted it to electric and so that's kind of need to be able to have. It's a real work course, we have cultivators, healers, seeders that we use on it, and we can good a good acre more out of it, dragging steel through the field with it on a charge. We have a solar powered irrigation system, we have a pond and there's a well pump in it and we have about kilowatt worth of panels. That's on demand, we can turn that on and that supplies all of our irrigation needs, totally off grid.
- Tom Ruggieri: Like Rebecca said, we pay two and a half cents extra to our electric co-op to be on their green power program and we get renewable energy credits for that. The tractor is being charges through the grid so it's kind of being charged on wind power. All those things together they really help us, we've done a little annual CO2 omissions from the farm and so electrical, we don't have any omissions associated with anything we plug in. We have about, we figure about 20,000 pounds of carbon dioxide just from all our vehicles and then we have propane for hot water, then we sequester about 50,000 pounds of carbon dioxide through our cover cropping and farming practices. Over the last eight to 10 years, every year we've had a negative carbon footprint.
- Tom Ruggieri: I started looking at this a couple of years ago, kind of drawing on my environmental engineering background, we have all this data and numbers to really look at and it's nice to be able to have some type of quantification of that.
- Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about the cover crop rotation that you're using, since that seems to be a very important part of your carbon sequestration plan.
- Tom Ruggieri: It took us several years to figure out the best crops to grow here, the best way to see them, buckwheat took root the best when we first started, but it really doesn't add a lot of organic matter, but it started giving us good practice. What we tend to do is we'll grow peas and oats in the spring, we use sorghum Sudangrass and either cow peas or sunn hemp in the summer and then sometimes we'll do some peas and oats again in the fall because winter killed or we'll use rye and vetch. We don't really double crop anything, and so every year we try to have every bed that we use either get a cover crop or get mulched or get compost or have chickens on it or have organic fertilizer put on it.
- Tom Ruggieri: In general, we cover crop about two or so acres, maybe two and a half a year. That's been out plan, is out cover crops in whenever we can, the spring crops come out, we're clear whatever is done in June and we plant sudangrass and cow peas and then we turn that in, we usually turn that in kind of late in the year, September or so and decompose some, but there'd still be residue underground in the spring and that would help add some nutrients and life to the soil once the soil one back up.
- Chris Blanchard: How are you getting those cover crops seeded on a farm that you scale, because it seems like you guys are a little bit on the small side for a drill.



- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, we are looking for a drill, we were part of a SARE roller-crimper project, so part of that was going to be to get a drill and we couldn't find one around here, we actually then ended up buying a vegetable seeder four row and kind of going back and forth with that twice, and that didn't work very well. It turns out for us what seems to work the best is just to broadcast seed with an Earthway [broadcast seeder] and then harrow it in. That can even help, it's almost like one extra little bit of scale seedbed harrowing when the crop goes in. That's what we've been doing and yeah, we're a smaller scale farm and it really doesn't hurt to walk the fields anyway while you're doing that, so that works well for us.
- Chris Blanchard: Then tell me a little bit more about the growing setup that you have at your scale of operation. How are you going about getting the soil tilled and getting the crops into the field.
- Rebecca Graff: We have a spader which we've had since our first year, so that's our primary tillage piece of equipment. Tom handles most of the bed prep and he's really gotten away from doing a lot of spading, he tends to use the spader for incorporating cover crops, and then once that's accomplished we're using our cultivator to kind of break up the top of the thrill and then we have two disks on the tool bar that we call it a gutterer, we also call it a raised red shaper. We put that on the G, the Allis-Chalmers G and drive that down the bed to create a little bit of a raised bed. Then we still do some hand planting for small plantings, but we do have a transplanter just to water wheel transplanter that we pull behind our grandpa tractor, the international 504, so any of our big crops like potatoes, onions, cabbage, we try and use it as much as possible to save a lot of time and a lot of backaches.
- Rebecca Graff: We use the transplanter for a lot of things. We also have a Planter Jr. Three row seeder that is designed on the tool bar for the G, so we direct seed our carrots and beets and other large plantings of direct seeded crops with that planter. . we still use some earth waves here and there, like we just planted our peas and we ended up using earth waves for that. For one thing we were training apprentices so it's a good experience for them and it's just easier than reformatting our three row seeder to become a two row close together feeder for what we want for the peas that need to be trellised so we tent to plant two rows close together for that.
- Rebecca Graff: I think that pretty much covers it. We've experimented with other seeders, so we would love to send carrots and so two years ago we bought a jang, just to push one row, walk down the row push a jang and we have not gotten it to cooperate, I don't know if it's our soils or what, but we have had horrible germination with it. We probably need to talk to the jang rep, but we've gone back to using earth waves and sticking with our Plant Jr. Seeder because every time we use it, the carrots come up great, they don't come out perfectly spaced, but they come up. That's pretty much our planting method. Then depending on the crop, how much attention it needs after that kind of depends.
- Rebecca Graff: Last yer, support of our sabbatical, if you can call it that was also to move towards this idea of planting half of the ground in cash crops and planting half of the ground in cover crops, and so we started doing that last year and Tom spent a lot of time on the cover crop areas during cultivation before we seeded them



to really get some of the weeds under control. We're hoping that that's going to be a great benefit to the farm down the road, to be able to have that time to really do the stale seedbed method where we get rid of a lot of weed seeds in our soil, because the first few years, we realize now, we were just planting way more than we could manage and the 15th year we're coming on now we're finally figuring some of that out, like we need time to get those weed seeds out of our soil before we plant.

Chris Blanchard: Kind of going to more of what I would call an Nordell style rotation.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, there was a year at Great Plains where I think the Nordell's were there and then Henry Brockman from, I forgot the name of his farm, he was part of our CSA mini school, and there might have been some other farmer from New Jersey and they were all doing the plant half of it in cash crops, plant the other half in cover crops, and it just blew us away. It took us a few years to really figure it out, that we could do that here, but it's hard for us to come up with the amount of compost that we would need to not do that. We've always relied on cover crops for a lot of our fertility. We introduced laying hens to our farming operation a few years back, and that has helped. We're still relying on the cover crops to provide majority of our nutrient needs.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, we're really excited about shifting to that Nordell model as far as ... It's also good for, you know, I've been working a lot on creating insectories for beneficial insects. There're so many benefits to having flower and crops near your cash crops to bring in as beneficials that really reduce the pest pressure.

Chris Blanchard: Have you guys seen a difference since you started planting those insectory plants?

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, last year we spent some time putting in an insectary within our block, so we started using one of these silage tarps so it's 100 by 50 feet and within that we can get eight beds and then a half bed so that half bed becomes an insectary and we've had a lot less caterpillar damage in our tomatoes. Sometimes we get a lot of fruit worms in the tomatoes, and there were hardly any. I see those little wasps flying around with caterpillars in their clutches and it makes me happy.

Rebecca Graff: Yeah, it's hard to see it all, for so many of those insects they're so tiny, you can't even see what's going on, but we saw less pest pressure last year and we were assuming that that was the result of having the insectory in there, and we'll see if it's similar this year. One year isn't much to base things on, so I guess I'm edging a little bit, but it seems to be working.

Chris Blanchard: 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.

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

Rebecca Graff: Well I have to say our chickens, they do a lot of work for us. They eat bugs, they break down old crop residue, they're a huge amusement for ourselves and for our CSA members that come out to the farm. They do so much work and they don't really look like they're working at all. They have a special place in my heart.

Chris Blanchard: You know, they're kind of fun and amusing is something that you can't apply to very many tools. I mean you don't look at the hose hanging on the wall, no it's a fun thing. Tom, do you have a favorite tool on the farm?

Tom Ruggieri: Well, I think it's starting to be our sweep cultivator. We were just talking about the stale seedbed and it's something that can really get in there and clean up the beds well for us out of all the cultivators that we've tried, so I'm starting to like that.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about a sweep cultivator, is this something that you're running behind the tractor as a stale bedding tool or is this something you're running underneath the G as a between the road weeding tool?

Tom Ruggieri: It's behind the tractor and then it's nice because it's more of an undercutting tool, some of the other cultivators we've had hits the weed and just kind of goes around whereas this, we've even had dirt be pulled up by it, so it's a pretty hefty tool. We're trying to do more shallow tillage, that was the other thing, talking to Nordell's, the shallow where we can cultivate the better too.

Chris Blanchard: Using kind of, when you talk about a sweep cultivator then, these are wider sweeps that are maybe mounted on a C shank that hooks up to a tool bar?

Tom Ruggieri: Yeah the big B-shape flying V type suites.

Chris Blanchard: Rebecca what's Tom's farming super power?

Rebecca Graff: Okay, let's see here. He loves growing cover crops, I joke that he loves growing cover crops more than he loves growing cash crops, but he puts a lot of energy and time and attention into making sure he gets a good seed germination and he gets out there when it needs to be mowed down. It's great to have that energy going to that step because it's such an important step on our farm. Thicker cover cropper I think is his title.

Chris Blanchard: Tom, same question for you, what's Rebecca's farming super power?

Tom Ruggieri: I think she's a really good listener, so whether it's the chicken or our animals or the plants or anything, I think she listens to them well and have an understanding of what's going good and what isn't and she'll even talk to them. I think it's her communication skills with all the living things in the farm.



- Chris Blanchard: Rebecca what do you talk to the plants about?
- Rebecca Graff: I don't know, I would love it if they would talk back to me, but it's usually a pretty one way conversation, but they talk by the color of their leaves and how well they're growing, so they communicate plenty of information without actually speaking of course. I think it just comes from growing up out here and not having any neighbors to play with and just kind of having my own role, like world that I was in, so I'm kind of going back to my childhood of just talking to the trees or whatever. I talk to the chickens too and I just kind of warn people when they start working with us that I'm going to be talking to inanimate objects and don't worry, I'm not insane.
- Chris Blanchard: Food safety training, inanimate object talking training, you just kind of make sure that people are ready for their farming experience. Rebecca if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Rebecca Graff: Oh, I would say try not to grow more than you can handle. I guess it's hard to tell myself that when I started because I thought we were growing what we could handle at the time, but I think we just tried to do too much at the start, and we were only kind of fixing those things now to where, you know, we're at a scale that we can manage. Yeah, go slower or be more deliberate with your crop choices. Grow what grows well. I guess that's three things but at least two.
- Chris Blanchard: You can make it all into one sentence so we'll let it fly. Tom if you can go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would you say?
- Rebecca Graff: I think it would be to get some laying hens to start the farm, we really enjoyed having the hens, a farm fresh egg is really the perfect food and I think it's really healthy to have around and working them into a vegetable rotation it's just been really helpful for us. I put the CSA, we tend to be just vegetable farmers and I like to say to get some chickens or something that add some ei, ei yoo to the farm which is nice to the farm when you have members come out with their kids and that's just one more thing they have out here to show people what raising food's about.
- Chris Blanchard: Tom and Rebecca, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Rebecca Graff: Yeah, thank you for having us, it's such a great resource for farmers and we feel so honored to be a part of it.
- Tom Ruggieri: Yeah, thanks Chris, and great talk to you and thanks again for doing this.
- Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 170 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, you can find the notes for the show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Fair Share, that's F-A-I-R S-H-A-R-E Fair Share. 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 seeds, industry leading customer service and



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