



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 172

Allan Gandelman of Main Street Farms on Meeting People's Needs through Scaling and Marketing Decisions

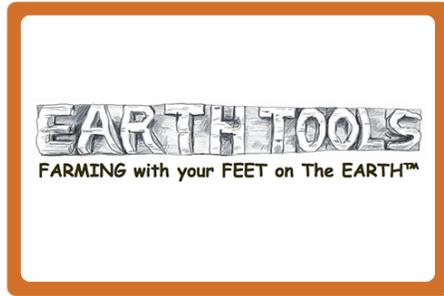
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Chris Blanchard:

It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, episode 172 and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Allan Gandelman raises 45 acres of crops at Main Street Farms in Central New York State. With 20 employees and it's 8th year in business, Main Street Farms sells through a CSA, farmer's market and wholesale accounts. Main Street Farms got its start in 2011 with an acre of production and an aquaponics setup, so they've grown a lot in the last eight years, and Allan and I talk about the process of scaling up their operation and finding their way with different mixes of enterprises and marketing outlets, and how that has meshed with meeting the needs of the people on the farm. We also dig into Main Street Farm's 42 week CSA, their acre of greenhouse production and their new hemp enterprise and how it all fits together into a coherent whole.

Chris Blanchard:

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Chris Blanchard: Allan Gandelman, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Allan Gandelman: Hey Chris, it's great to be here.

Chris Blanchard: Thanks so much for taking the time to join us here. It's the middle of July when we're recording this, so it's not exactly lots of farmer downtime at this point in the year, so I really appreciate your carving out the time to talk to me.

Allan Gandelman: Absolutely.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off by having you tell us about Main Street Farms, where you guys are located, how much you're doing and what are you doing?

Allan Gandelman: Okay. I started Main Street Farms about eight years ago as a small market garden, and now we are farming about 45 acres in production with 20 something employees and we are located in Central New York. We are about half an hour from Ithaca, which is a nice college town and a half an hour from Syracuse, New York and about three and a half hours from New York City. The farm is a diversified organic vegetable farm. We have CSA where we have 300 something members. We sell to Syracuse Farmer's Market and then we also do bigger wholesale accounts now down to New York City. When we first started out, I started the farm with a college friend of mine. His name is Bobcat. It was seven years ago, and we started a little tiny market garden here in Central New York. The city is Cortland, and we had a few greenhouses. I had bought an old abandoned flower nursery, so there was a house there and a couple greenhouses that were heated and some pots and just different things to get us started. The first year we were just selling at a tiny farmer's market and no CSA or anything like that. We were doing transplants and a lot of those little things that you do with a one acre market garden. We kept seeing the demand increase, and over the years, every year we would scale up. We started renting farmland. I think the first year we rented a second acre from our friends, and then the year after that we rented three or four more acres, and the year after that we probably were on 10 acres or so.

Allan Gandelman: Three years ago, I was looking for farmland to buy here in Central New York and I got connected with a old farmer, who was a cabbage seed breeder. His name is Don Reid. If anyone out there has grown or is growing storage number four cabbage, he's a breeder of storage number four and lots of other cabbage and broccoli and Brussels sprout varieties. He had sold off his seed business, but kept the farm and was looking to keep it in farmland and find a next generation farmer to take it over. I met Don through a mutual friend, and there's about 200 acres here and lots of greenhouses.

Allan Gandelman: We kind of have a long term lease on the land, and every year we've been kind of transitioning piece by piece into organic and scaling up the farm as necessary. Besides for that, that's kind of our big farm where all the field production has grown. We have almost 50,000 square feet of greenhouses and high tunnels spread across three sites. We still have original site where it was like the original



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market garden, and then we have an urban farm in downtown Cortland that's about an acre, and that is now just covered with three big high tunnels. Between those three, we have all of our greenhouses and high tunnels. We do year-round growing in the wintertime, lots of salad greens and spinach and stuff like that for our CSA.

Chris Blanchard: Over an acre under cover is a lot of ground to have under plastic.

Allan Gandelman: It is. Every year we're building these new high tunnels through the NRCS program or building them ourselves. The new high tunnels we're building area all 34 by 144. It adds up fast, and it requires a lot of management, a lot of different learning. From our original high tunnels, we have some 30 by 96s that we built maybe four years ago and we've been using them straight for four years, and we're starting to see that kind of soil quality issues and stuff like that. Now that we have enough under plastic, we can really start rotating through the tunnels and rebuilding that soil health.

Chris Blanchard: It seems to me that a lot of times when I talk to farms that are up in that 45 acres of production range, that they don't really have a lot of ground under plastic. Sometimes they'll have a little bit here and there, but certainly not an acre, because that becomes a really substantial enterprise for your farm. Are you managing those high tunnels with different equipment and different practices than what you're doing outdoors?

Allan Gandelman: Yeah, we manage them differently. We have a small little tractor, a Kubota with a rototiller on it and a mini chisel valve that we can run through the high tunnels. The main reason we have the high tunnels at this point is really for our winter production and our shoulder season production. In the summer, we do grow tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers and them, but really we have them for our CSA. Part of the scaling of the farm over the years has really been to figure out how to extend the season in Central New York, and when it comes to the CSA, it's how to keep our members going year-round, because what we noticed was that the retention for CSAs, they're kind of low.

Allan Gandelman: We were hovering around 50%, and we were letting go of our customers. We had a small winter CSA that was kind of bi-weekly, but by the time that was ending in February, let's say, and then our season wasn't starting up again until June, it's really easy to lose contact with those people. Those people kind of let their connection to the farm lapse maybe. Last year, our CSA ran for about 42 weeks out of 52 weeks. A lot of that is because we grow a lot of storage crops, we have a lot of space to store those crops and because we have a lot of ground under plastic where we can grow a lot of spinach and a lot of kale and some of the lettuces over the winter, and keep people interested with their CSA share all winter long.

Allan Gandelman: We approach our high tunnel management for that specific winter production, so even if the tomatoes, for example, are still doing good and it's the fall, we would still take them out and we turn the tunnels over with the tractor as quick as possible and get them ready for winter greens because that is way more valuable to us than the heirloom tomatoes in the fall.



- Chris Blanchard: Do you use the high tunnels in the wintertime for wholesale sales as well or is that strictly for your CSA?
- Allan Gandelman: The high tunnels in the winter are strictly for our CSA and our farmer's market. Our wholesale, to New York City especially, is mostly storage crops, beets and carrots and then we also grow a lot of cabbage for a local sauerkraut company. We used to go wholesale for restaurants in the region where we deliver our CSA from Syracuse down to Binghamton, and so we covered a decent geographic area and so we're working with a lot of restaurants. As the farm has scaled, we've actually dropped all of our restaurant and small grocery store accounts, and we're only focusing on wholesale customers who can handle large volumes.
- Chris Blanchard: That's really interesting. That seems kind of off trend from what I'm hearing from a lot of people that I'm talking to.
- Allan Gandelman: That is kind of off trend. It all really depends on your market, how much money you're getting, price per pound and what your farm crew wants to do. The way we really built up the farm is with the focus on the people that work here and labor and keeping them employed year-round, that is really important for me and Bobcat is to keep, we have really amazing employees and they're having kids and families. To just give them these seasonal jobs where you're working 70 hours a week in the summertime and then almost nothing in the winter. One, it's really hard on your body. Once you get into your 30s, there's a point where it's unsustainable physically and then also becomes unsustainable financially.
- Allan Gandelman: We're really trying to change the whole model of the farm to kind of meet our people needs more than just, "Oh yeah, let's grow a tone of greens for these restaurants in the summer and then in the wintertime we'll just take off and leave for two months." That didn't really work for us and it didn't really work our employees to do that message. Also, the other thing when it comes to markets, we started with a small market garden. One thing that I forgot to say was we have an aquaponics system where we raise fish and micro greens. It's one of the biggest in New York State and it's also certified organic, which there's very few of those.
- Allan Gandelman: When we started the market garden, we were in that model of high end greens, selling to restaurants and grocery stores and little packages of lettuce, clamshells, micro green clamshells, but our markets couldn't really pay the prices that we wanted to keep the sustainable enterprise. Once we started selling all of that into New York City, we just didn't really see the farm being able to grow on that market garden kind of high value greens trend. The other issue that we had with that, and this is a little bit off topic, the other issue that we had with the high value greens is before I was a farmer, I was a teacher. One of the reasons I got into farming from being a, I was a high school teacher, is that the school food was really terrible.
- Allan Gandelman: One of my goals was to grow a food and get into the school cafeterias and to teach children about eating healthy and having food access and being able to afford vegetables because a lot of the kids I was teaching were low income families and they were all on free and reduced lunch. Sometimes at school that was their best meal. I like the aquaponics system because we sited it right in



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town and people can visit and it's very educational, but at the end of the day those high valued greens are kind of unaffordable to a lot of people and they don't provide all the nutrition of a full diet and what you would need for vegetables.

Allan Gandelman: The things that we realized over the years is that if you do a lot of field production, grow a lot of beets and carrots and cabbage and all the greens outside and sell them for a lot more affordable prices to our local community, and that seemed to be actually way more beneficial to the city we live in, which is a city of about 20,000 people, than growing high value greens for fancy restaurants whether in Syracuse or Ithaca or New York City.

Chris Blanchard: That makes sense. You're still doing the aquaponics?

Allan Gandelman: We have the aquaponics system still. We actually just shut the system off for this summer because we don't have anyone left who wants to run it. We were doing it ourselves and it requires a lot of labor just to seed the trays and harvest and take care of the fish. We ran out of our fish in the spring, and we haven't restocked it yet with fish. We're going to revisit it probably this fall and decide what we want to do with the aquaponics system because the scale of our farm has out- paced what the aquaponics system could really produce for our CSA. Now we grow a lot of pea shoots in it because the pea shoots are great all year round. We can give them to the CSA. We can sell them at the farmer's market. We were doing very high intensive production in there because that space is very valuable, so there's a lot of labor in turning those "beds" over as many times as possible.

Allan Gandelman: It requires a lot of management, a lot of skill, and we just don't have anyone left working that aquaponics systems. We've tried hiring some people over the last year but haven't really found someone with the skills to run it because there's a big learning curve. There's a lot of training. You're taking care of fish. There's PH with the water. There's nutrients. There's the greens production. When you're growing indoor in a big greenhouse, that with grow lights and heat and it's nonstop for years and years, that's become an issue. It really takes a high level of skill to meet the production that has to come out of it to make it worth paying for the heat and the lights and the labor.

Chris Blanchard: Interesting. It's something that I feel like a lot of people are interested on aquaponics. It's certainly something that's gotten a lot of press, but it's not something that I feel like we see a lot of commercial producers succeeding at over the long haul.

Allan Gandelman: They're definitely out there. I know some commercial producers who are succeeding. The reason we don't know about them is because they sign contracts with the grocery store chain or something like that and they just funnel all their production to one or two outlets. The bigger ones aren't going to be at the farmer's market selling greens. A lot of the aquaponics systems and the hydroponics systems are moving from greenhouses, which I like to work into the sun, into huge buildings right outside the city. They've become indoor vertical farms, and at that point you're working inside of basically a factory, and that just doesn't appeal to me personally. Those ones are doing okay because



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they have their contracts and they're not selling direct to consumer, which is why we don't hear about them.

Allan Gandelman: They're pumping out their greens and they've got their small market on lockdown and that's why we don't hear from them.

Chris Blanchard: In your marketing setup, roughly how does that break down between your CSA, your farmer's market and your large wholesale accounts, in terms of percentages?

Allan Gandelman: Our CSA accounts for about 20%, 25% of our sales. The other 25% farmer's market, then we're probably another 30% in our wholesale customers and then the final percentage this year is coming from our hemp crop.

Chris Blanchard: That's an interesting breakdown to me. About a third, a third and a third in terms of your vegetable crops going to those three main marketplaces?

Allan Gandelman: Right. It's about a third, a third and a third. The reason why we have it set up that way right now is because it makes sense for our labor and keeping our labor steady. It makes sense because it keeps us tied into our community, which is really important for me and Bobcat. It provides the financial stability that the wholesale markets don't. Our wholesale sales to New York City don't start until September or October and they run into June. When we're growing those crops, like the carrots and the beets all summer long, if you're only doing the wholesale accounts, we wouldn't have all of that cashflow going throughout the year. The CSA gives us a nice little kick in the spring, and then it keeps us going throughout the summer and then the wholesale crops kind of kick in.

Allan Gandelman: It just keeps the farm balanced for the year. It seems to be working right now. There's a caveat. I say it right now because me and Bobcat joke about this all the time is that our farm looks different every single year. It's never been the same from one year to the next. Every year we're making changes, every year we are scaling up in some sort of way. Every year we are very consciously choosing what customers we're going to drop, who are we going to stop working with? This year we dropped all of our restaurant accounts. That was a really hard decision to make, but we needed to make those changes to streamline, to make our lives easier.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about how your CSA actually operates.

Allan Gandelman: Our CSA runs in a very traditional way and a nontraditional way. The traditional part of the CSA is that we take early sign-ups in February, and people have the option of paying upfront for the whole season. That's the traditional part of the CSA, and those deliveries start in June and they'll go from November and then we'll ask if they want to be part of the winter CSA, which will run from November until we pretty much run out of foods. We still have that traditional base of the CSA.

Allan Gandelman: The nontraditional part is that we use Farmigo for our CSA software management system. Actually, for anyone whose used Farmigo, they probably know Karli who is their farm support person. She actually is our CSA manager now, and has a ton of other jobs on the farm.



- Chris Blanchard: I'm going to just jump right in here and just say that Karli also has been doing all of the social media posting, managing all of the web work for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast for the last two years as well.
- Allan Gandelman: Right. She's extremely talented, and so she manages our website also Chris, and she manages our Facebook groups and our social media. She makes all of our marketing material. Karli started working with me about a year and a half ago, and she, after working with Farmigo for about five years, working with so many farms around the country and she lives in Ithaca, which is right down the road from the farm. She said, "I want to come and work on the farm and help grow the CSA and help figure out how to make this thing more sustainable." I said sure. She had a lot of ideas and a lot of things around CSA but also marketing to restaurants. I just gave her a place to experiment with.
- Allan Gandelman: What we decided to do last year was to turn part of the CSA into a weekly payment system using Farmigo because it has those capabilities. When we did that, so people could pay by the week, and they could also put their account on hold at any time and not get charged. I think that is part of the nontraditional CSA part that we're doing that a lot of other farms in the country might not be doing. Let's say we have 350 members at any given time, someone's gone on vacation for three weeks, they put their account on hold, and we don't charge them for those three weeks. Now we only have 349 members.
- Allan Gandelman: People have really responded to that. One of the reasons we came to that is we do a lot of those end of year surveys and we talk to our customers, and we are dealing with maybe not a high end market with New York City and people who have a limited food budget. When they were missing one or two weeks out of the whole year, they were canceling their shares because that lost \$20 or \$50 was so wasteful to them that they just couldn't bring themselves to be a member of our CSA. Now on the flip side we have people who join and they only pick up 10 out of 22 weeks. They never put their accounts on hold and they don't care about the money. Whatever. It's no big deal to them. They like supporting the farm, but we have a lot of people who those missed weeks were just a huge barrier.
- Allan Gandelman: We took away that barrier for them and we let them pay by the week and let them not get charged for the weeks they weren't there, and it's been a really, really positive response. The other thing we did, we were only having two side shares, now we have a third side share, the small CSA share which is \$18 a week, and that also is due to customer feedback. Then the final part of the CSA, I don't know, this is kind of maybe a philosophical part of our shares, for a long time me and Bobcat were packing the shares to make sure that the financial value was in that bag of vegetables. We wanted to make sure if they were paying \$29 a week for it, they got \$35 a week or whatever of vegetables that they were going to go shop in the grocery store.
- Allan Gandelman: What we realized over the last year, two years was that most people didn't value the CSA the same way that us as the farmers were valuing the shares. What they were valuing, and what we found out, again, with the surveys and talking to members, is that they were valuing their connection to me and Bobcat. They were valuing knowing that they were supporting a small farm and



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they were supporting their local food economy. Their values were actually different than our values, and we were giving them so many vegetables that at a certain point the CSA isn't that profitable, one, and two, they would buy our veggie lover share and then they would throw out vegetables. They might throw out 10%, 20% of the food and then they have veggie guilt and then they want a smaller share or they don't re-sign on it.

Allan Gandelman: What we've done is we've made all of our shares smaller and we've added value instead to the CSA through videos, Karli and Bobcat do a weekly CSA unboxing video. We've added farm events, so now we've started bringing people onto the farm for ... we had a salad party a couple weeks ago where we had the CSA members come and we took them in the field and they harvested lettuce. Then Bobcat loves to teach people how to cook, and so he did this whole demo on making homemade salad dressing because we grow a lot of lettuce and a lot of greens, and if you can't make good salad, you're not going to get your CSA share every week. He did this whole thing on salad dressing.

Allan Gandelman: Then we have a farm barbecue and then we're doing a you pick pumpkins. We're trying to add value through other ways, through the connection side, to the actual farm rather than just say, "Well here's a huge bag of vegetables and that's all you get." This is the first year we're really focusing on that shift, and so far the reaction of our members have been great. It's super positive. We've only had one complaint that the small share was too small, and the small share only has four to five items in it for \$18. You can go to the grocery store and get cheaper organic food, but we have stopped comparing ourselves to the food co-op or to the prices at Whole Foods or here we have Wegman's, because we're not growing for that market. That's not what we're doing.

Allan Gandelman: We really had to adjust our philosophical idea and our vision of how we wanted to interact with our members. That's been a huge change for us this year.

Chris Blanchard: I really like that idea of focusing on the other value that's in your CSA share beyond just the vegetables themselves.

Allan Gandelman: Yeah, it's been a difficult thing to do because it's hard to find out what the other values are for our customers. I'm sure every place in the country is going to be a little bit different. Once we found that out, then we had to figure out how were we going to create that value? Karli and Bobcat have done a really, really good job of creating that value with the education side. We have cooking videos. Right now Bobcat is in the farm kitchen doing a kale Caesar salad video because there's always a lot of kale. Teaching people and giving them that value through education.

Allan Gandelman: I used to be a high school teacher, and Bobcat spent five years as an outdoor environmental educator. We both have this basis of teaching built into us. Everything we do, it really comes out in the farm. Teaching people how to use the vegetables, teaching people about farming. We do tons of farm tours. We have all the local universities bring classes here, local high schools bring the classes here, and so we really tried to reach out that way and create that kind of connection to the farm even though half of our CSA, we are delivering those pre-packed boxes. We use bags, not boxes, but we're delivering pre-packed



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shares to offices and coffee shops and schools. We don't have the connection, we were just dropping those bags off for them.

Allan Gandelman: The other half of the CSA, we have a local brewery where we do farm style pickup. It's more of a free choice market style CSA pickup, about 100 people and that one's great because we get to connect to those 100 members. The other members, we don't ever see them, don't know their names, and so making those connections and bringing them onto the farm I think is really important. It's the first year we're doing it for real and putting a lot of effort into it. We won't really know the effect of the member retention of that until next year.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit about your farmer's market. My understanding, from what you said earlier, is you've got just the one farmer's market, they're in Syracuse, and that's accounting for about a third of your overall vegetable sales in the course of a year.

Allan Gandelman: Yes. The farmer's market in Syracuse is a pretty big market. It's a year-round market, so we're there 50 weeks out of the year. There's about 20,000 people who come to that market on a Saturday, so there's a lot of people there. It's not a producer only market. It is one of these huge markets, there's about 400 vendors spread across five buildings. People can resell vegetables. You can buy whatever you want there. There's even a little section that's more like a flea market. Just because of the mass amount of people there, we have a lot of customers who come through that market. Now that was last year's farmer's market sales. What we've noticed this year already from last year over the last six months, there's been a 20%, a 30% decline in our sales at that market.

Allan Gandelman: Bobcat and I were just trying to figure this out. Over the last few weeks, we're bringing home a ton of vegetables and what's going on? Some of our farmer friends in Ithaca think that these kinds of markets, the local food farmer's market thing might have peaked and this might just be a slow decline on how many people are buying produce or meat or whatever that's local and organic at farmer's markets, because there's just more and more of that available through grocery stores, food co-ops, there's more CSAs popping up. Then you're also having to deal with the Blue Apron and the different home delivery services that are around.

Chris Blanchard: Do you have thoughts about your continued participation in the farmer's market? Is that something you anticipate that you'll keep doing or anything that you're trying to do to counteract that trend?

Allan Gandelman: I think a lot about the farmer's market and what to do. We've been doing farmer's markets for the past seven years, and this is the first year where I personally don't want to go anymore. I'm just tired of waking up at 4:30 in the morning on a Saturday and going to the market. It's too much for me personally. I'm starting to lean away from the market. Bobcat, he really does the market. He brings an employee or two every week, and so he likes doing it for now, but if our sales keep decreasing at this rate, we will absolutely consider not going to the farmer's market anymore and increasing our CSA. Our goal with the CSA is to keep it growing. Last year, I think we had around 200 something members. We're really thinking about growing the CSA to a sustainable size.



- Allan Gandelman: We're not sure what that number is. We can handle a lot of shares, but as the farmer's market decrease, our CSA sales will increase, and that is much better for the farm. The farmer's markets are hard on farmers and on farms. There's a lot of waste and there's just a lot to do to get ready and they're giving up a whole Saturday. For us, we're giving up whole Saturdays 50 weeks out of the year because of the year-round indoor heated market in the winter. It definitely gets tiring.
- Chris Blanchard: To kind of round out the marketing front then, for wholesale you said that you're only doing large wholesale accounts now. What kinds of people are you selling to for that? Are you going through distributors or is it large grocery stores? What does that look like?
- Allan Gandelman: Our large wholesale accounts right now are restaurant chains, like these salad bar chains that are popping up everywhere and they have multiple locations. All they do is serve fresh grain bowls or salad bowls. They're going through a lot of vegetables. We deal directly with the companies, the restaurant company, and they have their own distributor. What we do is we send the vegetables to their distributor either in New York City or in New Jersey and from there they break down our pallets and then they bring the vegetables to each individual restaurant, that last mile thing for us. That's how we're dealing with those customers.
- Allan Gandelman: Also, we work with schools, so one of the original ideas is that we get into school districts and we do also sell vegetables to maybe 15 different schools, and those are not large wholesale customers, but they're just part of the mission and the value that the farm has is to get as much produce into local schools as possible.
- Chris Blanchard: Are the schools that you're selling to primarily right there in Cortland or are those also in Syracuse and Ithaca?
- Allan Gandelman: Those are mostly in the southern tier of New York State, so more in the Binghamton area.
- Chris Blanchard: Allan, you've got the farmer's market going year-round. You've got the CSA going I think you said 42 weeks of the year. You've got these winter sales going for these large wholesale accounts. Tell me what kind of infrastructure you've got because Central New York is not exactly the kind of place that you want to be washing carrots in December if you don't have the right set up.
- Allan Gandelman: Right. That has always been a big challenge. When we first started, we started like everyone else, Easy-Up tents and the greenhouse. Then we moved to a garage. Then we moved to a barn, and none of those things are working because washing carrots throughout the winter in Central New York is really hard and lettuce greens were freezing and stuff. Two years ago, a year and a half ago, because we are located only a mile from the city of Cortland, instead of building a whole new pack shed on the farm, which would have been really, really expensive, we rented a warehouse in downtown Cortland on Main Street actually, and it's about 4,000 square feet and it has beautiful concrete floors and



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it's insulated and it's heated and we put in a commercial kitchen. There's a bathroom there.

- Allan Gandelman: We were able to get GAP certified because of that infrastructure, which really opened up some of these bigger wholesale accounts. Having a building where you can have a forklift and everything is on pallets and being able to pull the farmer's market truck in there in the winter and get it loaded up and go to the market has really been huge. We can pack CSA shares, there's good lighting, the water pressure is amazing because we're on city water, so it's unlimited water for washing, which when you're doing a lot of beets and carrots or lettuce and you're filling tanks of water, that also really helps. Now people can actually work comfortably year-round and not be freezing their hands off throughout the winter.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that that warehouse space is about a mile away from your farm that's there in Cortland. How distant are your other farm locations from each other?
- Allan Gandelman: The furthest one is just a ten minute drive.
- Chris Blanchard: Ten minute drive in a pickup truck?
- Allan Gandelman: Yeah, ten minute drive in a pickup truck, exactly.
- Chris Blanchard: Little bit further on a tractor.
- Allan Gandelman: Well we don't bring the tractors to the other locations. There's one that's a mile down the road and we drive the little tractor with the tiller to that location but the further one, we just do everything there by hand or rototillers, so we don't bother bringing the tractors over there.
- Chris Blanchard: That must not be a whole lot of ground then if you're not bothering to bring the tractors over there?
- Allan Gandelman: No, that location has our aquaponics system, and then also a couple high tunnels. It's not a ton too. That was our first kind of market garden area. There's not a lot of soil to till or to work.
- Chris Blanchard: When we were chatting before the show, you mentioned that you do quite a bit of value added processing as well for your CSA.
- Allan Gandelman: Yes. We do. We have a commercial kitchen in our warehouse and we share that with our friends who have a sauerkraut company. We have all of the equipment there. What we realized last year when we made this very conscious effort to run the CSA for as long as we possibly could throughout the winter, we started doing things like making pestos and tomato sauces and freezing it all and building up our stock there to give our winter shares, not only fresh greens every week, but also value added item every week with the storage vegetables. We spend a lot of time in the summer making these products. We actually have a farm chef who cooks the whole farm lunch every day, so we feed all of our employees every day, and he's also our delivery driver and then when he's not



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doing those two things, he's doing the value added stuff. That has really helped with the winter CSA.

Allan Gandelman: The other thing we do, throughout the winter we started experimenting with ten of the fresh cut items. We're giving people, if you're not getting a frozen item this week or sauerkraut, you're getting cubed butternut squash. You're getting a Napa cabbage stir fry mix that's all pre-chopped and ready to cook. You can just throw it in the pan and make a stir fry. You're getting pre-chopped and pre-cubed beef and carrots as roasting vegetable mixes. If you want a quick easy meal, you have something to just make and you're cutting down on your prep time for the winter.

Allan Gandelman: We have it planned out that every single week in the wintertime there is one value added product for 20 weeks or whatever it will end up being this year.

Chris Blanchard: Great. That's a really nice feature to add with the CSA. You must have had to go through a licensing process to be able to do that, right?

Allan Gandelman: Yeah. In New York State, it's through the Department of Ag and Markets, and it's called the 20C Commercial Kitchen. That's the license we have for all those products. We're also, I think I mentioned before, but we're gas certified and then in New York State, there's another program called New York State Grown and Certified, which we have also. We have all of the proper certifications and licenses. When you get to a certain size and you get certain exposure in the market and you're dealing with so many people, it becomes difficult to fly under the radar.

Chris Blanchard: Right. Now you guys must have bumped up against some stuff with the Food Safety Modernization Act, with the Produce Safety Rule too I'm guessing from the scale of your operation. Has what you've done for GAPs and for the New York State program, has that taken care of what you needed for the Produce Safety Rule?

Allan Gandelman: Honestly, I assume so. I haven't been dealing with the Produce Safety Rule, just because we're GAP certified and I've been watching that from a distance and just seeing how they were going to approach it and enforce it. Right now, we are just GAP certified and we're just watching that to see what's going to happen.

Chris Blanchard: Fair enough. With that Allan, I think this is a good spot for us to stop, take a quick break, get a word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Allan Gandelman from Main Street Farms in Cortland, New York.

Chris Blanchard: The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought to you by Hoss Tools. Hoss Tools is the complete solution for all your market farming tools and supplies. Keep rows weed free with their time tested American made wheel hoes and the best wheel hoe attachments. Their precision seeders have a proven seed plate design for planting a wide variety of seeds, grow the best transplants with their heavy duty prop tech seed trays and keep your crops healthy with their drip irrigation and fertilizer injection systems. Hoss also provides a comprehensive selection of conventional and armory certified pest control products at the most affordable prices. Free shipping and outstanding customer service. Shop online or request a free catalog at HossTools.com.



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- Chris Blanchard: Check out BCSAmerica.com to see photos and videos of BCS in action. BCSAmerica.com.
- Chris Blanchard: We're back with Allan Gandelman from Main Street Farms in Cortland, New York. Allan, you mentioned when I asked how your business was breaking down, that about 20% of your income this year is going to be from the production of a hemp crop. I'm just going to open that up to you. Can you just tell me about that?
- Allan Gandelman: Yeah. About a year and a half ago I got Lyme disease and it was really bad. I didn't know I had it for a long time. I probably could have had it for a couple years, and I got to the point where last spring/summer, I was barely functional. I wasn't sleeping. My whole body was a complete pain. I had arthritis really bad. I couldn't move. I couldn't get off the couch. I had some memory loss. I was going to doctors and trying to figure out what to do, and I didn't really want to take the antibiotics, that heavy dose of six months of antibiotics. I started taking a bunch of herbal supplements and tinctures.
- Allan Gandelman: My girlfriend's an herbalist, so she was giving me these Lyme disease herbs and they were helping. Then a former employee of mine who moved to Colorado a couple years ago to grow cannabis, he was back here visiting because he's from Syracuse and he found out I had Lyme disease and he told me that I should try CBD oil. CBD is the compound in hemp or in cannabis, and so he sent me some from Colorado and I started taking it and it started working really quickly. My pain started lessening and I started feeling a lot of better, so he started sending me more CBD oil, and I kept taking more. After a couple months, I felt great. I wasn't 100%, but I was functioning at like 80%, and so the huge turnaround.
- Allan Gandelman: At the same time last year, the end of the summer, New York State decided that it would allow a small group of farmers to grow industrial hemp. CBD oil is made from industrial hemp. It doesn't get you high, there's no THC in it, but it has all the same benefits of medical marijuana. As soon as I heard that announcement, right away I got licensed to grow industrial hemp for this coming year and also registered as a New York State hemp processor. What we're doing right now is we're growing technically it's industrial hemp and there's three kinds of industrial hemp that people are growing. There's the kind for grain or seeds that you would grow, more like a small grain crop where you would combine it off.



- Allan Gandelman: Then there's fiber hemp, which is really tall, that also you need a combine, a lot of processing equipment. Then there's another variety of hemp that is just starting to come out there, and it is more of a cross between industrial hemp and cannabis where they've bred all the THC out, and you grow it like you would grow a vegetable. Black plastic, irrigation, transplants. That's the kind that we're growing. We're growing this industrial hemp that has really high amounts of CBD in it and the other cannabinoid that are the healing property of the cannabis plant.
- Allan Gandelman: What we did, Karli and I decided after we got our license to grow, we were approached by a lot of different processing companies who were starting up in the state and they wanted to sign contracts with us to grow hemp for them. Ultimately, me and Karli thought it would be best if we did our own processing. We started the processing side of the farm and now we're building out a facility to take all of our own hemp and process it into CBD oil and we've come out with our own line of tinctures and salves. It's not marketed as Main Street Farms hemp, it's marketed as Head and Heal, and we sell it at the farmer's market and we have a website that we sell it online and we ship it all over the country at this point. That's been a really developing part of the farm, and so that's where we're at this year about with the way the crops break down. We'll see how that changes and develops over time.
- Chris Blanchard: Has learning to grow the hemp been a different process than growing the vegetables or has that kind of fit in pretty seamlessly as just another crop?
- Allan Gandelman: It is definitely different because the seeds are extremely expensive. We're paying around \$2 a seed, for example. The plants, they're similar in the way that we're still using the same transplanters and the same tractors and some of the same cultivation, but the fertility is different. The pest, the diseases, we're not even sure what they're going to be. Then the harvesting. You have to dry the crop. You can't just grow this crop and then just say, "Okay, now what?" You have to be able to dry it all down to a specific moisture level and keep it clean and keep the mold off of it. There's a lot more learning and a lot more on the harvesting and the handling of the crop than the simple just put the plug in the ground, but then there's all the other stuff that's totally different from vegetables.
- Chris Blanchard: Have you guys managed figuring that out on your own? Have you guys worked with a crop consultant? What's been your process there?
- Allan Gandelman: The process has been me and sometimes Karli traveling around the country for the past 10 months, going to conferences, going to trade shows, visiting farms in Colorado and Oregon mostly and learning from people who have been doing it out west. It's still really new. People who have been doing it for two or three years, ever since industrial hemp was legalized through the Farm Bill in 2014. It's still a very new thing. Everyone's still developing the varieties. Everyone's still developing their systems, their pests. Even the people that are visiting all over the country who have been doing this for two or three years, who are breeding the seeds in pretty big operations, they're also still learning.



- Allan Gandelman: We've made a lot of connections, and at this point we're kind of all learning together.
- Chris Blanchard: It seems pretty clear that this is a crop where there's a lot to learn. It's not like this something where you're going to be able to just go out and crack a book. You're not going to get the new organic hemp grower off of your bookshelf and figure out exactly how to do this overnight.
- Allan Gandelman: Right. There's definitely a lot of risk involved in growing the crop. It's a really expensive crop to grow. For us, we're at a farm scale where I am comfortable taking on that risk and I'm also comfortable building out our own market for it and building out a processing facility because it is not a small undertaking and there's a lot of regulations around it. There is definitely a growing market for CBD oil and hemp specifically, but at the same time, it's a cautious market and it's hard to know which way it's going to go because we're growing the crop like we grow our vegetables but there's already people that we've seen out there who are growing more of the fiber hemp 1,000 acres at a time and then processing that down into CBD oil.
- Allan Gandelman: Now every time a different company comes to us to ask if we would go hemp for them, the prices go lower and lower, per acre. They're starting to already put farmers against each other. We have people already calling, telling us they want to do futures contracts for the hemp, and the prices are ridiculously low. There's a certain newness to it where the market is kind of up here, and then there's all the processing companies, which I think happens in every industry where they try to turn farmers into commodity shares basically and just run every ... The farmer business model is a race to the bottom in general, and so they're trying to race everyone down to the bottom and get the best price possible.
- Allan Gandelman: There's definitely a lot of concern that I see around the country when it comes to hemp specifically for CBD oil is crashing the marketplace with everyone trying to get in too big, too fast, and then just crushing the prices.
- Chris Blanchard: I suppose that's one advantage of doing your processing in-house is that you've sidestepped a lot of that.
- Allan Gandelman: That is, and that's why we made the very conscious decision to do our own processing, is to bypass a lot of that and hopefully we can weather that out because we just don't know what will happen, but for me personally with Lyme disease, it was such a huge part of my healing process over the last year, and it still is. I still take it every single day three times a day. It's just one of those things that's just really important to me, and that's why we're moving forward with it and taking on that added risk, when we could have just been growing more vegetables and doing more wholesale accounts and doing more CSAs.
- Chris Blanchard: On the Lyme disease front then, to pivot away from the hemp crop here and the CBD oil, what you were describing from last summer, that's pretty serious stuff for a farm owner to be going through. Serious stuff for anybody, but trying to keep a business running through a severe illness is not an easy thing to do.



- Allan Gandelman: Yeah, it was really, really scare for a while there, and it really made me question how this business and the farm can function without me, and is that even possible. I'm really lucky because I have Bobcat who does a ton of stuff around the farm. Right now, he mostly manages all of the packing and distributions, the CSA customers and the farmer's market, but he could definitely take over, but the farm's too big for just one person to do those two jobs. I really had to start thinking about how to put the systems in place so that I could run the farm if I had to for just working for a couple hours a day, or having the systems in place that if I wasn't around for a week or two, everything would still be okay.
- Allan Gandelman: We did a lot of work on our farm systems, on the backend, when it comes to the way we do scheduling for planting and harvesting and field seeding and harvesting and all that kind of stuff, and then the way to scale the farm and have the infrastructure and the equipment so that we could train more people how to do it. We are super lucky right now, and we have been for the past many years, we have amazing, amazing employees. They've really been stepping up into more managerial positions where they're taking responsibility and ownership for different enterprises or different parts of the farm, whether it's ... we have someone who's, they're just driving the tractors all day. That's all he does. He comes here, he drives the tractors all day, that's his only job.
- Allan Gandelman: Then we have someone who's in charge of all the harvesting, and then we have someone who's in charge of all the field planting and the pests and the diseases and cultivating. He does all the cultivating. Splitting the farm and having people specialize and then Bobcat runs the whole pack shed and he tells the crew what to harvest every week. It's all through Google Docs. Then Karli's running the CSA side, and we have an amazing bookkeeper who makes sure all the bills are paid and all the insurance and all the other stuff is taken care of. I really last year had to create all these job descriptions and an organizational chart of the farm. I met with every employee over the winter who's kind of a long term year-round employee, and we went over the job descriptions and where they saw themselves here over the next few years and what kind of responsibilities they could take on and how much more we can pay them, and really starting to train and delegate out my whole job basically.
- Allan Gandelman: I've given my job away. That was really the only way I could see keeping the farm going while being sick, is to do those, make sure the systems were solid and make sure the people were trained how to do them and to do that you have to be at a certain scale. You really can't be a small market garden with \$80,000 or \$100,000 a year income and sit on the sidelines and pay everyone to do your job for you. I think that would be really difficult. There's just not enough cashflow on that. That really played into the scale of the farm.
- Chris Blanchard: I'm a little surprised to hear how much of that delegation you've done considering how diversified your operation is because it's one thing to do that on a farm that's fairly simple, that's maybe got one marketing channel that they're going through or maybe has a few crops that they're growing, but you guys are so diversified. I can't imagine that that process of lining people out on the different jobs and getting people to take responsibility for significant portions of the operation was an easy thing to do.



- Allan Gandelman: No, it was extremely, extremely difficult. Like I said, luckily between me and Bobcat and Karli and our other employees, everyone is just amazing. I think part of it was they saw how sick I was last year. It's not that I didn't want to work, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't go to the farmer's market. I couldn't lift up my cell phone, let alone harvesting full of 50 pounds of beets. I think they realized this is also their job security. They've all been farming for a long time. I think across the whole farm when you add up all the years of organic vegetable experience, we're probably totaling 70, 80 plus years of experience with our farm employees.
- Allan Gandelman: It's not like we took someone fresh and just trained them in a year. These are all mostly people who've come from other farms, who have farmed for three, four, five years and then found us locally. We pay pretty well. We pay above the living wage for the area to start with. We were able to maybe attract some people that have already been trained somewhere else and that came here and saw that this is a growing business and they could have a long term place as a part of it.
- Chris Blanchard: Let's talk a little bit about your production model that you're doing in your outdoor production then, because 45 acres of crops is a lot of crops with the kinds of crops that you're talking about here. Vegetables and then the hemp that you're growing, similar to a vegetable. You've scaled up so quickly with that over an eight year period. What kinds of equipment and systems are you using on your farm and how did you make decisions about the equipment and the systems that you're using? It's not like when you start off with the little one acre market garden and an aquaponics system and a greenhouse that you know what that larger scale production really looks like.
- Allan Gandelman: Right. That's a great question Chris. When I first started farming, a couple things happened. I took a yearlong program. There's a local nonprofit called Groundswell Center for Food and Farming and they had a sustainable agriculture certificate degree. This was a long time ago. They don't have that anymore, but through that program I was able to network and connect with ... around Ithaca, it's a college town. It's kind of like Madison or something like that. Surrounding Ithaca is a ton of really good mid-scale or larger organic vegetable farms. Ithaca has an amazing farmer's market. Through that program, I was interning on some other farms a little bit here and there. We were doing on farm classes, and it was really an amazing program.
- Allan Gandelman: I got to network and connect with all of the area's good sized vegetable growers and toured their farm and talked to them and see their equipment and see what everyone was doing and what scales they were operating at and what kind of employees they had. Luckily from the very beginning, I could see all of that stuff for myself, and talk to people and ask them questions about it. That's filled in a lot of the knowledge gap. A lot of the knowledge gap came from listening to your podcast. That's a huge one. The other thing that, in terms of the scale and the equipment, is we have every Tuesday we actually have taco Tuesdays where a bunch of farmer get together and it rotates between houses and we have dinner once a week or once every two weeks together.



- Allan Gandelman: For years, there's been a time and several of them are organic vegetable growers. There's time and space to talk and to learn from other people. When I first started buying equipment, I already had an idea of what kind of equipment a bigger farm would use. What size tractor? You need a water wheel. I learned about the Perfecta early on, and those kinds of things and was able to just slowly add on equipment year after year. Now some of the first equipment we're growing out of and we're scaling up, so we're changing systems and our field systems and are tractors are constantly evolving and changing. I used to have two Allis-Chalmers G cultivating tractors that we were using for a while, and then they were too small for our scale.
- Allan Gandelman: Now this year we bought a KULT Kress fingerweeder that you sit on and steer, for example. The way we do our field production is we're chisel plow, Perfecta, seed, plant. It was either a water wheel transplanter or a mechanical transplanter. Then we do a couple acres in black plastic mulch with drip irrigation. We've got that equipment, and a tractor mounted seeder. Your basic farm equipment. We have a high crop cultivating tractor that we do the plastic bed with and do some of the fields with. Our main three tractors are all brand new Kubotas that I've leased and financed through the dealership because I was tired of dealing with old tractors honestly breaking down. I'm not a mechanic and time to fix them, it just wasn't going to happen.
- Allan Gandelman: We're able to train employees, that should be easier on those new tractors than older tractors that have a lot of quirks to them where you're trying to start them and run them and they're breaking down in the field. In terms of production system, to me it's very basic right now and there's a lot of equipment I really want to get out there that we don't have yet, but it's expensive. We have a Scott Viner carrot harvester, but it's an older one and it kind of works and I want to sell it and I want to buy a nice new \$40,000 carrot harvesting machine. We have a rocky farm. We live in Central New York, there's a ton of rocks and it's a little bit hilly and I want to buy one of the stone burying tillers and bed shapers to kind of leave a better seed bed for direct seeding.
- Allan Gandelman: There's still some equipment that's on the list and we're evolving. I want bigger tractors with higher clearance with skinnier tires because we're using tires that came on the Kubotas from the dealership. They're all sat on 60 inch centers for the most part, so everything's standardized. There's definitely a lot of upgrades to keep making in the slow and steady pace.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you finance those three Kubota tractors through the dealership. Have you used a lot of financing on your farm? Is debt a pretty major feature of your operation?
- Allan Gandelman: Debt is definitely a major feature of the operation. We have FSA loans, Farm Service Agency. We started out with the micro loan program, which I think capped out at \$50,000, which I highly recommend. Then we're onto the regular FSA loans for all our capital costs. Then I really invested all the money, me and Bobcat have really invested most of the money every year back into the farm to keep it growing, to keep buying equipment, to keep building greenhouses. I am not debt averse. I think to get to a certain scale you have to take on debt, but



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you have to do it very carefully and very wisely and make sure your cashflow can handle it, which takes a lot of learning and a lot of practice.

Allan Gandelman: Also, I like to write grants. Over the years, we've gotten a few grants that have really helped us buy equipment. New York State had a Beginning Farmer Grant program, I think they may still have it, but they gave us \$50,000 as a program to buy equipment and scale up if we spent \$50,000 on equipment. There was a two year period where I got to spend \$100,000 on equipment and then New York State reimbursed me \$50,000. That was huge. Yeah, that was absolutely huge. That really bumped us really fast. Then when we moved our warehouse to the city of Cortland, because we were in city limits in kind of a, I don't know, undesirable area or so, but because we were a growing business and we had so many employees, we qualified for this kind of downtown grant and they gave us \$33,000 this year to put in another cooler at our warehouse because we need a lot of cold storage space to run this farm year-round.

Allan Gandelman: Right now, we're building a huge drive-in cooler where you can bring the forklift into that will hold 400 pallets of vegetables. Then we have another huge cooler at the farm and a tractor trailer cooler and a bunch of small coolers. Those kinds of programs that I've been able to take advantage of have really quickened the pace of our expansion.

Chris Blanchard: That's really great. How have you gone about finding about those kinds of programs? I feel like that's one of the most frequent questions that I see in the nonprofit sector. My wife works for the State Department of Agriculture and she gets that question a lot, is where's the money? Where can I get grants for farming? You are talking about not just getting loans, but about getting grants to help you figure this stuff out. How have you gone about accessing those resources?

Allan Gandelman: Part of the way that I find out about this stuff, there's two ways. One is through email, that I actually open and read all of the strange newsletters that come across my inbox, whether it's from the Cornell Small Farms program or New York State Department of Ag and Markets or some other weird obscure email that when you're a really a busy farmer, you'll go, "Forget that, forget that. I'm not going to pay attention to that." That's one way. The other way is me and Bobcat are really tied into our community. I've been on the Board of a lot of different nonprofits. I've ran for political office. I'm on the town Farm Preservation Committees. I'm on all these different county things. I spend a lot of time I guess volunteering and working with soil and water, working with whoever else on committees and decisions for the future of the county and farming and all that kind of stuff.

Allan Gandelman: Those people who I made all these connections with over the years at Cornell, at Soil and Water in the city, just being present and doing my thing and giving back to the community, those people have really been kind of the instrumental network connections that have helped with a lot of these grant programs. If I was isolated three hours in the middle of nowhere, none of that probably would have happened.

Chris Blanchard: I think it's really valuable for people to be involved in their community because of the service aspect of it, but I do think it is something that gives back in that



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way and we don't always remember to account for that, is how important those network connections really are, especially when you're getting started as a farmer when it's maybe harder to find time to do that kind of committee work and serve on those boards. I know how important that was for me when I was farming was the connections that I made when I was on the Board of the MOSES, the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service and involved in other organizations as well. It really does help you find out about what's going on and what's available.

Allan Gandelman: Right. It really does help. It also helps that there's two of us. It's not just me doing this all by myself. There's also Bobcat. He is also a super social person. He actually has a band called The Local Farmer's Union, and they play at the the NOFA Conference in New York and they play all over town and he does education. He's also out and about in Ithaca, in Syracuse, in Cortland. There's really two of us making these connections, and because there's two of us, I can go to these meetings in the middle of the day and Bobcat's still at the farm making sure everything's going according to plan and everything's happening where it should be happening.

Allan Gandelman: That partnership has really opened the doors to having the time for these social connections and building up this social capital.

Chris Blanchard: Talk to me about that partnership with Bobcat. Are you actually business partners in the farm?

Allan Gandelman: We are. He is a part owner of the farm. I started it before he got here, did a year without him and then he was finishing up his five year stint as an outdoor environmental educator and he wasn't sure what he wanted to do next. We were college roommates a long time ago, must have been 18 years ago, and stayed friends ever since. When I was talking to him and I said, "Sure, come and help me start this farm and we'll farm and do education and we'll see what happens." He loves working outside. He is a super hard worker, and he said, "Yeah, sure, let's do this." He got to the farm, I think it's seven years ago this August actually, and the first thing we did was we built the greenhouses and put in an aquaponics system, and we just kept going from there.

Chris Blanchard: What was the process for then bringing him in as a partner in the farm? Did you do that right from the beginning, the first moment that he set foot on the farm or was he an employee for a while? How did that work?

Allan Gandelman: I don't really remember Chris honestly, but the farm is structured as an LLC. Yeah, I probably should know that, but the farm is structured as an LLC and so it's really not that hard when you're that kind of business structure to give away a percentage of the business or to add someone to your operating agreement. It really was not that complicated.

Chris Blanchard: Allan, just to take another non sequitur sort of pivot here. Right now we're in middle of July, so you guys are planting and cultivating your winter crop of carrots and beets, which is, you said, a big crop for you guys. You mentioned that you've got a mechanic harvester, that Scott Viner harvester that picks up the carrots and the beets, chops the top off and drops them into a bin. You also mention you grow a lot of cabbage. There's a lot of heavy things that you're



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doing here in the fall. How are you guys managing those crops? You've got a huge surge of work coming ahead of you in terms of weed control and then just getting all of those crops out of the field once you're done controlling the weeds on them.

Allan Gandelman: Yeah, we grow a lot of beets and carrots, probably totalling those two crops alone are probably around 10 acres or so. Cabbage, you can maybe throw cabbage into that 10 acres I guess, maybe a little more. Yep, they're planted and they're growing and we're starting to cultivate and we do that this year with our new KULT Kress cultivator. So far, so good. We're still figuring out how to use that specific piece of equipment. We do have a Scott Viner harvester, but we can never get it to work super efficiently. Labor wise, what we do is we're bringing in people from Jamaica on the H2A visa program. Last year we had two guys come. We had them come a lot earlier last year. We had them come in June, and we taught them how to harvest for the CSA and everything else, but over this winter we decided that was too much. Having the H2A people here is kind a lot of work.

Allan Gandelman: You provide them housing and you bring them to the store. The ones we had were illiterate, so you can't just drop them off at the school. You go into the store and help them go shopping. It was a lot of work, so we decided we would bring them in when we really needed them, which was for the fall harvest. Instead of using the Scott Viner this year, we will, like we did mostly last year is we have a big undercutter for one of the tractors and we undercut the beets and the carrots. This year we'll have four people from Jamaica here. They're coming in the next couple weeks. They'll do some hand weeding, they'll do some other, and then they'll start harvesting the big heavy vegetables.

Allan Gandelman: It's a lot to harvest, and we start hopefully some time in September, depending on how the season goes. We're harvesting up until they go home the week before Thanksgiving. We have sent someone out there with the tractor and the undercutter and a ton of pallet bins and that's what they do. They harvest vegetables. They break the tops off and they fill pallet things all day long, every single day in all the weather conditions. Then we bring those into our coolers, either here at the farm or down at our warehouse. Last year, we actually had to rent cold storage space at a local produce company because we were just out of space.

Chris Blanchard: Allan, with that we're going to turn to our lightning round. First, we're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor, and then we'll be right back.

Chris Blanchard: The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is made possible with the perennial support of Vermont Compost Company, makers of Fort Vee and Fort Light potting mixes. Vermont Compost potting soils are a really special product. I use Vermont Compost Fort Vee as a blocking mix and a potting soil for over 12 years on my farm and we grew great transplants with it. I mean really great transplants. Year after year after year. At a time in the organic movement when we're seeing more and more companies jumping on the bandwagon, Vermont Compost is a reminder of the art and the craft of making potting soil. They mix an incredible diversity of ingredients into the compost that forms the basis of their potting soil, incorporating many kinds of manures along with plant materials and food waste to foster structure and aeration in the compost.



- Chris Blanchard: I love that their Fort Vee mix even has chips of blue ocean granite in it and kelp for micronutrients and a little smell of the ocean. One thing I have always appreciated about Vermont Compost is their ability to put out a consistent product year after year, and in something that's subject to as many variables as market farming, it's nice to have something you can count on. Vermontcompost.com.
- Chris Blanchard: Allan, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Allan Gandelman: I have a lot of favorite tools, but I think the best tool in the past year for me has been Google Docs. I really like spreadsheets. I really like that all of the people who work on the farm have access to all of the spreadsheets and all of the data. The way the farm is set up with our field planting schedule, our field maps and we have Google forms that you can input harvest records into the field that all filter in by vegetable and by field ID and planting date. I can actually see what's happening on the whole farm every single day without having to actually be on the farm.
- Allan Gandelman: To me, that's definitely a favorite tool recently is dialing in the system using Google Docs and creating the kind of workflow so that as I'm busy dealing with the hemp crop and the processing and I'm dealing with a million other things, I can actually see what's going and see if anything needs to be changed, and I can see how much food is going to the farmer's market and how much is coming back or how much is going to the CSA and what's being wasted or what's being planted or what's not being planted and where it is in the field, every single bed of 45 acres has a field ID and a row. I know exactly where something is and when it was planted and when it's being harvested. I really like that kind of top view, I guess you can say of all the different things that are happening around here.
- Chris Blanchard: How much work did it take you to get that Google Doc system set up? What you're talking about, it's not like it's just there waiting for you to use it. You're talking about making spreadsheets and forms that really work for your farm and your farm's situation.
- Allan Gandelman: Yeah, it's evolving process. I happen to like spreadsheets and numbers, so for me it's fun to play with them. Over the years, we just keep adding and taking away and modifying. You know what information we really need is this and let's add this and let's take away that. We never look at this data, let's just stop collecting it at this point. It's a work in progress, and we're constantly developing the spreadsheets and the information and how the information flows because there was a certain point over the last few years where, especially as we're scaling up, it's like well how many feet of kale do we need for the CSA if we're going to do it every other week, and how do we figure that out and we have to keep all these records. We start keeping too much data at a certain point, and you can't even process it all.
- Allan Gandelman: There's been this fine tuning of coming back each winter and going through all of the spreadsheets and the data and figuring out what's the most important, where are we learning, where can we improve, how are our employees



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interacting with all of this data and what kind of access do they have? It's just a constant work in progress.

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

Allan Gandelman: Oh boy. From my ease of growing crop, my favorite crop would be head lettuce. We grow a lot of head lettuce, and we have head lettuce almost year-round because of its reliability here in Central New York. It's my favorite crop to grow, but my favorite vegetable is actually beets. I love beets.

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

Allan Gandelman: If I can go back in time and tell my beginning farmer self one thing, it would probably be to spend more time on other peoples farms, whether that was working for them or just volunteering or hanging out or just watching and seeing what was going on, and find farms that I could envision myself running ten years out. I wasn't thinking that way at the time when I was in my mid-20s. I was just going year by year and figuring things out. I think it would have been helpful. I don't know if it's possible, but at that time I can say, "Oh what do I want this to look like in ten years or 15 years and let's create a plan to get there."

Allan Gandelman: Instead, it's been year by year, kind of growth and change and changing strategy and selling equipment and buying equipment, which can take up a lot of time, a lot of mental bandwidth. It would have been good if I did some of that ten years ago.

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

Allan Gandelman: It was my pleasure Chris.

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 this 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 fast order fulfillment.

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Chris Blanchard:

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