



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 176

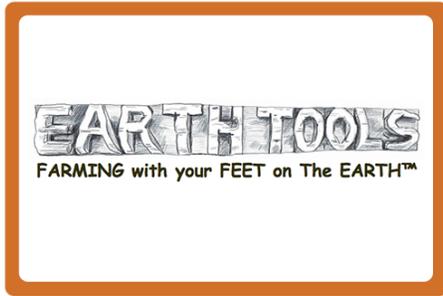
**Jan Libbey of One Step at a Time Gardens on
Scaling Up, Scaling Down, and Partnerships
and Networking**

August 30, 2018



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Chris Blanchard:

It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast Episode 176 and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Jan Libbey raises 3 acres of vegetables with her husband, Tim Landgraf, at One Step at a Time Gardens in North Central Iowa. With sales through their CSA and the North Iowa Fresh Food Hub, the market farm makes up one of multiple streams of income that include cash rent and CRP income on their 132- acre farm. We dig in to how Jan and Tim have made One Step at a Time Gardens work in Northern Iowa with an emphasis on their marketing efforts.

Chris Blanchard:

Jan shares the stories of growing the market farm operation and then choosing to shrink it again as the business matured. We discussed how they've chosen their investments on the farm so that they are mechanizing where it counts and we take a deep dive into their carrot production and the crop rotations they follow on their yearly farm as well as the landscape and habitat restoration efforts of Tim and Jan had made over the years and how those fit into the life and economy of the farm.

Chris Blanchard:

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- Chris Blanchard: Jan Libbey, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.
- Jan Libbey: Chris, it's so good to talk to you. Thank you for having me.
- Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off by having you tell about One Step at a Time Gardens. Where are you guys located? How much are you guys growing? How are you marketing that?
- Jan Libbey: Sure. We are in Southern Hancock County in North Central Iowa and we are in Twin Lake Townships. Actually if you want to back up a minute, the reason we got on to this piece of land because of the natural glacial lake that I am actually looking across the field. That was the big draw about the farm. We didn't come because it was a piece of ground we wanted to farm. We came because we were looking for some land with some quality habitat and we moved onto this ground. Well, we purchased it in probably 1989, right?
- Jan Libbey: In terms of the local food system movement in Iowa, that was way early. We really weren't talking about the local food stuff at that time. It wasn't on our radar. I didn't grow up farming. We were just looking for some ground. One thing ended up leading up to another and here we are in our 23rd season of direct marketing fresh produce, so it's been quite a journey. The farm is about 132 acres. We farm at the peak on probably about 8 or 9 acres.
- Jan Libbey: We cash rent out about 55. We have, I don't know, somewhere like 35 acres in CRP and other buildings and grounds and pastures and things like that, so trying to really keep true to what drew us here was trying to work on continuing to develop the habitat on the farm in conjunction to our practices and then also working with some neighbors who had long time been renting this and they continue to rent that and work with us on our farming practices. That's a really quick snapshot.
- Jan Libbey: In North Central Iowa, it's very, very flat in some areas and unique features on our farm is that we are right in the middle of some lateral marine. The lake is a glacial lake curved out by the glacier tens of thousands of years ago, 14,000 years ago and as that glacier was sort of retreating and progressing, it sort of dumps some rolly hills and that right where we are which makes it kind of fascinating in the first place and a little somewhat challenging for farming, but it also gives us some little microzones that we are working with as well.



- Chris Blanchard: Right. Your farm is not laid out the way that I would expect a standard Iowa agriculture scene to look with just endless roads on flat ground.
- Jan Libbey: So many times, a look at people's farms where I could stand in one place and look over, everything we have at one time, sometimes I've been really jealous and wished we could do that, but we have one section of the garden in one little stretch which we called the Alley Garden, which is kind of sandwiched between some woods behind our barn and a big windbreak and then we have another section of the gardens on the other side of that sandwiched again between that windbreak and another windbreak, then we have another section of the garden in a south field from there and we are sort of working from the hilltop where we finally found level of enough ground to put up some high tunnels and then kind of worked down the hill from there.
- Jan Libbey: Because it was a hill, we are running into some erosion problems so we had tried some contour. We finally decided, "No, that's not working. We just not going to be growing on that particular piece of ground," and so we sort of kept looking for pieces and areas that worked for us. There's kind of bit of a patchwork around there and I think one of the advantages to us is that it does have all its habitat between us.
- Jan Libbey: I think that in terms of like the pollinator issue I think that's a benefit to us. In our situation, as I said, it does create some microclimates and in some case that's good. In some cases that's like, "Oh, this is an area when it gets really still, it gets really hot. This is not really good for peas, but peas are in the rotation and they get here anywhere. Oh, well, we'll deal with it."
- Chris Blanchard: How many acres are you guys actually farming in vegetables now? You said you maxed out at about 8 or 9. Are you doing less than that these days?
- Jan Libbey: We are, right. We're probably around 3 acres, something along those lines and you asked a little bit about markets, so we've always done direct marketing. We started way, way, way long ago just with very small efforts at farmers markets when we got started in 1994 and then ran across a report about community-supported agriculture on Iowa public television show called Market to Market which we continue to watch every Friday night if we are available and we said, "Huh, CSA. That makes a lot of sense," and we learned about bit more about that and there was a project in Iowa that hosted the First Iowa CSA Conference in 1996 and we went to that and we said, "Huh, this really does make sense."
- Jan Libbey: We started our teeny-tiny little effort of CSA in 1996. My husband, Tim, had off-farm employment full time. He is by training a metallurgical agricultural engineer and it was really put in his engineering skills together with my education organizing marketing, not so much background but sort of a penchant for that and together that this farm created a great synergy for us to work together which was one of our long-term goals when we first got married. At the beginning, however, he was primarily focused on that off-farm work, so we did a few here, we did a few thereafter let's see,



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that was '96. By 2002, six years later, we sort of said, "Something's got to give, you or the farm," and we decided that it would be off-farm job.

Jan Libbey: It didn't look like the whole food thing that was going to die away, and in fact, we've all walked through those last years and we don't feel that that's going to die away yet. We said it was a leap of faith. We're going to let go of all the security that comes with off-farm employment and try to grow what we were doing. This was a pretty early stage of CSA in North Iowa as well as across the state, so we felt the market was not mature enough here. We looked at Central Iowa and ended up deciding that we would be marketing into the Des Moines area as well as North Iowa. When we were at our peak of about 8 or 9 acres, we probably had up to 125 members at the peak. That's just full members and when you do the calculation for every other week shares and this sort of thing, you're some fraction over that 125 or so and we were doing some farmers markets at the same time.

Jan Libbey: Who wants to look back on those years and say, "Oh, my gosh!"? I just get tired thinking of everything that we were doing. We're now kind of working on downsizing. We stopped going to Des Moines in 2014 and all half our membership was in Des Moines and half up at here. We had been doing a little bit of wholesale to Wheatsfield Grocery Store in Ames, but a small tiny little effort called North Iowa Fresh was starting to gain some traction and we thought, "Well, between the possibilities of that and just continuing our membership and then some other local food work that I had gotten into, that would probably be enough to kind of things going."

Jan Libbey: That's kind of where we've been holding for the last several years and that's why we are down from that larger production scope to where we are now.

Chris Blanchard: Is the farm providing a full-time living for you and Tim?

Jan Libbey: Well, you have to understand that we have several streams of income. We do have some land that we cash rent. We are getting some income off of the CRP acres and the farm itself and then the income that I'm getting from the work that I am doing with Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, so we've put all of that together and those are our primary income streams.

Chris Blanchard: Okay, great! Like a lot farms, really it's not just about the vegetables, it's about everything that you are doing.

Jan Libbey: In many cases, it takes all those different threads and it both provides us a little bit of risk management, you might say, right, by having some several different threads, but on the other hand it also utilizes the range of skills that we have and the things that we care about and the things that we feel that we can make a contribution to the local food movement, not just as farmers but as sort of organizers and moving the needle from that side as well.

Chris Blanchard: What does the local food movement look like in North Central Iowa? I mean I've never been to your farm, but I have driven through Mason City a number of times. It doesn't strike me as being a local food haven.



- Jan Libbey: Well, I think that there's been a lot of progress made in terms of awareness and engagement and participation particularly the last five years. The work that we've done through Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, we've got a couple of larger grants around Farmers Market Promotion. We've been bring the farmers markets together and I can't take direct credit for that. It's some of our other staff that are working on this, but certainly I've been part of the planning and the thinking and the strategizing. For a while, I think Healthy Harvest sort of felt, "The farmers markets, they're okay."
- Jan Libbey: They have organizing going on. The vendors, mostly they were vendor-driven and we wanted to start some conversation around collaborated marketing among growers to reach into some new market opportunities. That's kind of where this North Iowa Fresh effort got started. Boy, we had a workshop back in 2012 where we started that conversation. Then we got a grant on 2013 that started a little bit more serious conversation and North Iowa Fresh formed in 2014. That's starting to move along and then we start to look at our farmers markets a little bit more closely and say, "They aren't doing so well. We really need to give them some support."
- Jan Libbey: We had some resources from these grants and started with the communities and really kind of shift from just vendor driven to try and to build more of a community-based model of leadership and planning and promotion for the farmers market. I mean we're still working at it and Clear Lake is the biggest hub because of the culture of that community that's got a really strong Saturday Farmers Market, but I think it has made some difference in the community. Forest City Market, one of our staff was just there last night with some National Farmers Market Promotion staff and they were telling me this morning, "Boy, this market is really doing quite well."
- Jan Libbey: That's a little market that was really hurting until just a couple of years ago and we have some great partners in that community and they step forward. There are hot spots, there's greater collaboration, there's greater awareness and then when you're kind of in the center of it, you feel like, "Yes, we really are making some progress." If you step back a little bit, it's like, "Okay, it's still quite a challenge partly because of the demographics in our area." We don't have such dense population. We have older population and trying to really get that point of people prioritizing local food and really actively seeking it out throughout the year, I think we're still working on that.
- Jan Libbey: More recently, we've been starting to be engaged with some conversations with the local meat producers and stepping into some of those conversations around the marketing challenges for meat. We just started in partnership with Cerro Gordo County Public Health to open up a farm-to-school planning grant. We're using some of the initial community work that we're doing, be that a farm-to-fork dinner, be that farmers market work and then for example in Hampton and in Mason City building in towards some farm-to-school engagement, pulling in North Iowa Fresh in terms of food hub and getting food to them.



Jan Libbey: I think those steps I think maybe we've planting some seeds and we can see some places where they're going to be setting some roots deeper and then we're going to be engaging bigger institutions such as schools. When you get into that, I think we're starting to get a little bit of a different presence in the community as well. It doesn't look like it on the surface, but I think when you are involved you get a sense that, "Yeah, with those kind partnerships that have been developing over the last number of years are starting to make a difference."

Chris Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about North Iowa Fresh. You mentioned that a couple of times. What exactly is that?

Jan Libbey: North Iowa Fresh is a small independent producer business, an LLC, and they are right now about 13 or 14 producers from across North Iowa anywhere as far west as where we are in terms of its geographic. In Hancock County, we have a grower down south of us in Wright County, and then our producers go all the way over to Floyd County, maybe Howard County, I'm not sure and that over in the Charles City area and that's like an hour or an hour and a half from our farm. We got these growers. They're spread across the big area.

Jan Libbey: We've been fortunate to work with a nonprofit called One Vision that serves adults with disabilities, but because of some change in circumstances in their operation, they had a certified kitchen, they had coolers, they had big space and they were looking for some jobs. We started working with them as our aggregation center. The producers are delivering product to One Vision and we've got a couple of their clients who are helping to do the final food preparation bagging and so forth and we started just doing wholesale to grocery stores and restaurants and this year are piloting a food box program aimed at work sites.

Jan Libbey: In addition to the wholesale, they are also preparing products for the food box and I think on Tuesdays they're packing those boxes, and on Wednesday morning, the truck goes out and makes deliveries on a loop that includes both the wholesale accounts as well as the food box accounts. It's a stiff learning curve and this is a very tight margin business as you well know.

Jan Libbey: There's nothing guaranteed. Again, we feel like we're making progress and there's a lot of a relationships that have developed with that including a couple of restaurants that have opened just last year that really wanted to focus as a farm-to-fork restaurant, so that's been key for them to work with North Iowa Fresh and now as we have some schools starting to explore local food and procurement and getting it on to the menu, that food hub is pretty important in that conversation. We're getting to weave this fabric that it's great, but it also creates some vulnerabilities because if one of those partners has some disruption to their business, it's going to have a bigger ripple effect through the whole network of progress we feel we're making.

Chris Blanchard: Are you guys selling to North Iowa Fresh?



- Jan Libbey: Yes, we are founding members and we play a fairly significant role in sort of management support where we are not on the executive committee, but we have a couple of grants that have provided some support, so Tim has been doing some of the financial management, and again, he's got some compensation through that than I've done. At this point, because they're doing this food box program, we also have a role as sort of CSA consultants, providing some insights from the work that we've done in our farm and through our CSA over the years to help them develop their model and work through that, but we are founding members and we are selling to them as well.
- Chris Blanchard: Are there specific crops that you are focusing on for selling at that wholesale scale?
- Jan Libbey: Yeah. I mentioned that we had done some sales to Wheatsfield in Ames and that really started because we were making trips down to Des Moines and that wasn't much to stop off in Ames and drop off some items. We started to expand some of our root crops, potatoes, our carrots and you will remember that we had some discussion about, "Well, would it be worth getting a barrel washer and how can we look at that enterprise and really increase the efficiencies of that?" We found that barrel washer was a good deal for the carrots. It has also been a terrific deal for potatoes.
- Jan Libbey: We've also done quite a bit with winter squash, so we've already have those items that we're doing sort of larger quantities for and then we have found for North Iowa Fresh, because we have a couple of high tunnels and we can get some greens in earlier, there aren't a whole lot of high tunnels among some of our producers, so we've focused on some of those early crops. We've done quite a bit with kale and chard, some of the mixed greens early on. There seems to be a big demand for green peppers. Other growers are doing green peppers as well. I mean this year that's kind of been our focus. We got a bunch of Chinese cabbage out there specifically for North Iowa Fresh and then our members, and then as I mentioned early before we'd actually gone on today, that's where I was this afternoon, weeding in our carrots.
- Chris Blanchard: I happened to notice as I was researching and getting ready for our conversation today that you're doing some kind of interesting things with your carrot germination. Can you tell us about your process for growing carrots?
- Jan Libbey: Sure. I don't know how innovative this is. I think others are probably doing this as well, but we have found after planting them to lay out burlap and we just pin that down with some ground stakes, and if we don't hit the planting right that we get a rain on it, we'll put the sprinkles out and get that weather down well and try to watch that and catch before they get too big and then pull that burlap off, and from thereon, it's just trying to maintain and keep the head of the weeds as they've got to push through teeny-tiny stage where they are just as competitive with the weeds as the weeds are.



- Jan Libbey: Chris, I don't know if you're referring to something else, but that's probably been the thing that has helped us the most and we had terrific, I mean some folks would certainly in North Iowa you get that too much rain in the spring and this summer and I would say, "Yeah, in some cases we have," but it has been a tremendous bloom for the carrots and every bed germinated quite well.
- Jan Libbey: We take off a little bit of time in July and so our big gain the last couple of years is to try not to come back to just a complete mess in the carrots and I wouldn't say we've done a great job, but this year, we hit it pretty well, so we're going to get them cleaned up and not too much work this year. That's eight beds of carrots, there are about 250 foot long and we got three rows in each bed. Once they get harvested, the last of couple of years, we've been harvesting about 4,000 or so pounds of carrots.
- Chris Blanchard: Does that burlap, does that actually help with the weed suppression or is that strictly around helping with the germination?
- Jan Libbey: It's just helping with the germination. Yup. Of course, we're helping the carrots. We've gone through in that little bit of stale bed where Tim felt like, "This year, that was part of the strategy that seemed to work really well." We've done some stuff with the flame weeding, but he thinks that I burn too many carrots off, so he's a little hesitant to let me too loose with the flame weeder. I think it's tricky. We all know Gary Guthrie who's really the lead on carrot growing in the state of Iowa. He seemed to have that flame weeding practiced down. I hadn't quite. Anyway, we hit it well this year and we're pleased with that.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned the barrel washer for the carrots and I think it's kind of interesting at 3 acres of vegetables, you're in a funny scale of production there. You're bigger than like the JM Fortier-style that has become so popular at 1.5-acre or 2-acre model where it's really pretty easy to manage with something like a BCS, but you're small enough that doing a lot of tractor work is probably a little bit large for you, but you also are downsizing from a larger operation. Tell me a little bit about your overall how you're getting your work done out in your field.
- Jan Libbey: As we've been scaling down, we've also been, and this is just like simplifying and working with a lot of other staff is a complication, so simplifying to a certain extent is like, "How thin can we go on our crew?" and right now, last year in particular and this year, it's Tim and myself and we have one gal who comes in Mondays and Wednesdays and then we happen to have the good fortune of a friend, they are farm members, so they work off some of their share and then we pay them cash the rest of the way and they kind of come as a gang.
- Jan Libbey: When we have big jobs, we say, "Can you guys come out?" So they come out and sort of spot strategizing for us here and there, but they aren't scheduled on a regular basis. For the most part, it's Tim and I and then Becky who comes out and that's been working really well. We have some mechanization that we have figured out works pretty well for us, so we do



some tilling. We have a bed lifter that works terrifically with those carrots. It's just a dream. If we can get it right, we've used it on our garlic and it worked great this year on our garlic. We're just talking now about our onions. They're kind of a weed mess because of the spring rains and everything, and then we said, "Well, it might just be this easy to see if we can't lift that and then just go in and pull that stuff up."

Jan Libbey: We have a potato planter that we got from a friend. Again, that was in the springtime. We're really not looking at adding a lot of extra crew. We spend a lot of time hand planting potatoes. If we could automate that and that would allow, Tim and I could do that pretty quickly and that's been great and then a potato digger and that helps to have some of that crew to come and follow up and do the final digging of potatoes out once they're lifted out of the ground.

Jan Libbey: It's sort of a blending of some mechanization and figuring out where we really need that and figuring out where we need a bigger gang and then where the smaller crew that we generally run with most of the time can manage and it's been working pretty well and we've been enjoying everybody that we've worked with and that's worked up pretty well for everyone I think.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about how you're managing weeds on your farm. You mentioned that there's been a little bit of a challenge especially with the wet spring that we had and frankly wet summer that we've had in the Midwest as well. What kind of weed control strategies and tools are using?

Jan Libbey: Tim again does most of the tractor work. We've got a cultivating tractor and he did quite a bit with that going through the carrots, focusing mostly on the pathways between the carrots. I did quite a bit of wheel hoe, handwork through the carrots themselves and was able to hit them at the right time. That certainly helped kind of keep them clean. He did a lot of cultivation and hilling with the potatoes, with the onions as well, and when we had too much rain and just couldn't get ahead of it, well things got weedy and we're just going to deal with it and come to think if we had anything that we just had to mow off.

Jan Libbey: Another piece of strategy that we're using is simply part of our downscaling schedule and that is that we've been doing what we call a spring share from mid-May through the end of June and then we've been taking off from deliveries in July and then peaking back up in August and finishing out the season. We started that maybe in 2015, '15, '16, '17, '18. Yup, I think four years and part of that was because we'd have a number of seasons that the rains and the weather were just making it really difficult to make the transition from spring crops, just we're running into so much rain that we couldn't find that window of time to get the next sort of succession of planting ready.

Jan Libbey: When we were moving in from the June into the July, we were running into a potential gap and strategy problem there. In a manner, I would say we did some schedule work as a response to some of this volatile weather. Downsizing also allowed us to make greater use of our high tunnels. In the



springtime, when we're trying to get everything ready to start on this week and if it's been too cold or too wet and then we're really struggling to have enough, we could get everything we needed just to really get going for the first deliveries in the high tunnel.

Jan Libbey: That gave us more predictability and more control. Putting that break in July gave us several weeks to kind of get things back under control and get a good jump on the rest of the summer and the fall. Our members were generous enough to kind of stick with us when we took that break. The other piece of that July break is that we just wanted to get off the farm and we love going to Colorado. It was some family time that we could take advantage of. The last four years, we've been able to take a week off of the farm in July and this is our first week back. We were gone for about 10 days, and fortunately, things are not terrifically out of control.

Jan Libbey: Those carrots are the biggest concern and they're pretty good. I'd say it's some mechanization, it's a balance of tools that I use and that Tim uses, it's the schedule and it's the size that we are at at this point that allows us to utilize our high tunnels in a new way. It's sort of a whole bunch of different little strategies that we're using.

Chris Blanchard: That's really great! I really like that it's not just one thing and it seems like you guys had really given that a lot of thought.

Jan Libbey: Well, it was really interesting. When we made that change to drop Des Moines which then allowed us to get everything we need in the high tunnels, then I just thought about it and said, "Oh, this is brilliant." This really helps to reduce that early season anxiety of we're not just going have to what we should have in the first box, and everybody is hungry for greens and they want that first box to look more like, "We don't want just two items in there." They want to see four, five, six, whatever and so that just has worked really well.

Jan Libbey: As you say, we are at kind of a unique size and it may not work for everybody, but I think everybody looks at their systems, look at their assets, look at how things work and they sort of find those sweet spots and those are a couple of sweet spots that have been working for us.

Chris Blanchard: That seems like something that's a really important theme in the work that you've done not just on the farm but off the farm. It's really evaluating and thinking about the assets and the resources that you have available and how to make the most use of those.

Jan Libbey: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I was off to a meeting yesterday and traveling with a couple of other producers and this one gal was saying, "Oh, I think I'm talking too much," and she says, "I believe somebody's asset is sort of like their Achilles heel," and I had to laugh because I'm little bit of an overthinker and sometimes that's a really great asset because I think of a lot of ideas, but you ask Tim. Sometimes, my thinking gets a lot of trouble, but I think that's part of it is looking at what we're doing, is thinking it through and I love doing that.



- Jan Libbey: I love thinking about that and strategizing and I think the holistic resource management study that we've done shouldn't have been extensive, but it's just enough to sort of give me some of that framework and we've both done a little bit of that work. I think we're both kind of strategic thinkers and he is a good systems planner. Again, those are the complement between the two of us and farming has been a really good fit.
- Chris Blanchard: You started here when you began talking about moving to the farm in 1990 before you're even really thinking about doing production there was the important of the habitat there. Can you talk a little bit about why that's so important to you and what you've done to manage habitat on your farm?
- Jan Libbey: My background is I have a degree in fisheries and wildlife biology. After college, Tim was already established in his job in Belmond, Iowa and we were getting married and I was coming that way, so what I am going to do? I started a job as the first naturalist starting the environmental education program for the Wright County Conservation Board. I spent about five years, sort of figuring out what's this all about. I didn't really have a degree in environmental education, but there was a good strong organization in the State of Iowa, a good network of naturalists, a pretty strong program of environmental ed in the County Conservation Boards across the state.
- Jan Libbey: I enjoyed working with that and we started a family. Andrew was born in '89 and I stepped away from the County Conservation Board work at that time and we started to look at a place out of town and said, "Okay, what's our criteria? Quality Habitat which in North Central Iowa could be a challenge." It took us about a year and then we got introduced to this farm and it was like, "This is it. This is beautiful." It is probably one of the more beautiful locations in North Central Iowa in our humble opinion.
- Jan Libbey: I mean we can't take any credit for it. It's here. I looked straight south to East Twin Lake and there's a big ridge of trees directly south of us and there's a lake between us. There's a farm place to the east, but I can't see it. I can't see any other farm places from here, so we feel a little bit like we're here in this little oasis. It's all public land across from us.
- Jan Libbey: We're pretty conscientious about that's what drew us and that's the neighborhood, that's the ecological neighborhood of this farm, but that was in, as I'd say we moved here in '90, and so I started just using on, "What can we do to sustain this farm and what can this farm do to sustain us?" That was an early question when I was just dealing with a very young child and then not too long there were two children and also wanting something that was going to engage my creative energies from the day-to-day task of raising young children. As I just mentioned, being rather isolated because I'm a newcomer, I'm an interloper, I didn't grow up in this area, I don't have family from this year and everybody that knows where Iowa knows, "Oh, yeah, you have to live there about a generation or two before you sort of you're on the inside." I guess that took five to 10 years to feel like I started to develop some network along those lines and looking at the whole landscape, the rolling hills, we have our friend who does the cash renting underground.



- Jan Libbey: Well, we ran into some areas where it's always wet. Okay, if it is always wet, we're going to try to drain it. Okay, let's do that a couple of years and look, it's still plugging up. Okay, this doesn't make sense. This piece wants to be a wetland. Okay, well there are some NRCS programs. Okay, we entered in the CRP and sort of work on returning that and restoring that as a wetland piece. That was the first piece, so there's some wetland work, there was some drainage change and the upland had to be planted to some kind of warm season grasses, kind of early on in the whole warm season prairie restoration in terms of our involvement that is mostly grasses, some flowers and there were some other areas of the farm.
- Jan Libbey: Again, it's either an odd spot that our farmer was sort of saying, "You know, this is maybe a better thing to be putting in therapy and it's pretty hilly, so maybe we should be looking at that." Okay, so we take another piece of ground and put it to that. Now, we're kind of developing this connected network and there's a little bit more wetland restorations in it. There's a little bit of more prairie restoration in it. The last piece we did was about a 4.5-acre piece and again it was just because we've been changing the access for Gary. It was another odd piece and now the pollinator issue is kind of hot and heavy and so we said, "Okay, let's try this as a pollinator habitat."
- Jan Libbey: So 2018 is the second full-growing season for that and it has taken off and it looks like it's doing really well. That's pretty exciting to see that we actually have some other ground that we had had in our own crops, so it's not eligible for the CRP program, but we don't need it because we're shrinking our production and we're looking at well now that we feel a little confident about putting that pollinator habitat we want to get that area prepared and get that in pollinator habitat. Chris, this looks back around to whole another topic and that is what's going to happen to this farm when we reduced our farming further and when we step away.
- Jan Libbey: Our children are not living here. They are not going to take over the farm. We hosted interns for about 10 years and that's a whole other layer, thinking that maybe somebody would really click, maybe they would want to take this over and we would hand this off to them. That didn't happen, and as we've been reevaluating that conversation over the last several of years, we said, "What drew us here is the habitat and it's such a natural fit with East Twin Lake."
- Jan Libbey: As I said this sort of ecological neighborhood that that's really where we're thinking in the long run is to try to continue to grow some of that habitat on this piece of ground and probably still have some cash rented, but we're probably going to see our production continue to decline over the next couple of years as we start to make some shifts and prioritize our energy to some other directions.
- Jan Libbey: It's a beautiful piece of North Central Iowa and this is so dominated by the monoculture of corn and soy that this is something we think that is as important to try to maintain this diversity on this land.



- Chris Blanchard: What are your neighbors think about what you're doing?
- Jan Libbey: I don't know if they have any strong opinions. We talk to Gary the most probably and he is very sensitive to what his practices are and where the wind is coming and where our crops are and is great at coming over and strategizing with us. The other neighbor that is most adjacent to us in farming, this is another really interesting story because we moved here in '90. We got caught up in the whirlwind of the hog confinement debate in '93 and really got to some crosshairs with our other neighbor because it was expansion of his hog operation into a confinement operation that our other neighbors that got up into cahoots with.
- Jan Libbey: I mean that's a long story because it really ended up into a lawsuit that went all the way to the Iowa Supreme Court. Unfortunately, it was the lawsuit that had to deal with identifying that we really don't have local control, so we really didn't win by any means, but that relationship with the neighbor who is just to the east of us pretty rocky for quite some time and it's actually another generation that's doing most of the farming. It's the son that's doing most of the farming now. I wouldn't say we're chummy-chummy, but at least, we're talking to each other, and when he is going to have some spraying done, he'd send me a text, and if I have questions, he will respond to me on that, so I feel like there's a respect for what we're doing and we don't have long conversations.
- Jan Libbey: I hear people sometimes say, "Oh, my neighbor looked over the field and they think I'm just crazy and they talked to us about it and yeah, yeah." It's like I don't have those conversations with our neighbors and I don't know. I think they think what we're doing is interesting and I think they support us.
- Chris Blanchard: Now that is something interesting about your farm. You got the cash rent operation going on there, so you've really surrounded yourself with somebody who you can trust to make sure that you're not having the drift issues that have become so common here in the upper Midwest now.
- Jan Libbey: Right. We do have drift concerns to our neighbor to the east because sometimes he is doing it, sometimes he is having the local elevator do it, and just because there's a historic relationship, we're a little bit more on edge. We do have all of this buffer zone in relation to some of the habitat that we have and some of just the fact that it goes from the farm house to the pasture to the lake. Directly south, we have nobody. That's a big drift potential. If someone was across the road, we would have all of that drift potential, but we don't because the lake is right across from us and then we have as you say, Gary, that we have that pretty careful relationship with and a pretty trusting of what he is doing.
- Chris Blanchard: That's really great!
- Jan Libbey: Again, it's this little spot that we've been able to put ourselves in.



- Chris Blanchard: Jan, with that, we're going to take a quick break, get a word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Jan Libbey from One Step at a Gardens in Iowa.
- Chris Blanchard: The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is supported by Local Food Marketplace. Are you trying to scale up without the right systems? Instead of juggling email and text orders, spreadsheets for harvest packing and delivery and a separate invoicing system, Local Food Marketplace software platform will help you automate these tasks and decrease errors with its fully integrated system for online orders, inventory management, order packing, invoicing and payment processing. Easily configure the system for managing multiple sales channels, customer types, price levels and delivery routes.
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- Chris Blanchard: We're back with Jan Libbey from One Step at a Time Gardens in North Central Iowa. Jan, before we went on break, we were talking a little bit about drift issues. Are you guys enrolled in whatever the Iowa's Department of Natural Resources has for Drift Watch or Sensitive Crops Registry?
- Jan Libbey: That's been a great resource and we double checked with our neighbor that we're referring to that. They confirmed to us that they are watching that. We really appreciate that program as a way to try to create a little bit more working together because it's an easy area to feel a lot of animosity and a lot of anxiety. Boy I tell you, late July early August can often be a two, three solid weeks of aerial spraying and that's just really undoes me. I don't think we're seeing as much this year and part of that has to do with the



crop mix right beside us, but I heard some last week and it's to the south of us, like, "Ugh, I hate that."

Jan Libbey: It's the bigger challenge we have of trying to find those pathways for the more conventional egg to live as a neighbor with these specially crop operations that are all across Iowa and we've heard too many stories about folks they have gotten drifted and then really struggled to work through those circumstances and resolved that and I've heard some really horrible stories and I have heard some more encouraging stories, so sort of feel like there's been some progress made and I think the system that is available through the DNR is terrifically important.

Jan Libbey: Practical Farmers of Iowa has also been doing an awful lot of work on that area and they just came out with a really great guide and sort of informed by insights from producers who have had some experience with that drift. I think there's been a lot of positive direction but it still comes back to talking to your neighbor and working with that as well.

Chris Blanchard: Now, you guys aren't certified organic, is that right?

Jan Libbey: That is correct. We make a pretty clear point to our customers that we use practices that would be consistent with organic standards, but we are not certified. We talked about crop rotation. We make some of our compost. We do some cover crop use. We're direct marketing most of our products, and with our CSA, we write weekly notes and so it's like we're always talking about what we are doing on the farm. We always invite people to the farm. Over the year, we've had numerous field days where we always invite our members out to come to the farm. It's sort of that transparency that serves to a certain as sort of member certified in a manner but have not found that that was going to make a critical difference in our marketing.

Chris Blanchard: To circle back a little bit more about the cash rent situation because I think it is something a lot of times the parcels of land that are available are large. You know 130 acres is not a particularly large piece of land for Iowa and sometimes it can be hard to find something that's a 5- or 6-acre homestead and it does give you some advantages of having that extra control, but can you talk a little bit more about the relationship that you have with your tenant, Gary, and how that works?

Jan Libbey: This is a farm that was owned by a couple and the gentleman, Merle was born and grew up here, so he has a long time history. He has passed away now, but he had farmed it. In the later years because he was older, Gary was farming it and Gary is now in partnership with his son and probably Gary must be upper 60s, 70s, I'm not sure exactly, and continuing to look at gradually transitioning to Kevin doing more of the growing. We've worked with Gary since we started and we're really almost comical if you listen in to our contract negotiations.

Jan Libbey: We sort of say, "Well, Gary, what do you think we should charge for rent?" and "We need some of your ground, Gary, because we're going to use it for production," and then several years later we said, "Okay, we're going to



shrink down a little bit. We're going to give you that back." A lot of just sharing back and forth. We don't do a lot outside of those negotiations and checking in with each other in the last maybe six or so years. Tim went on as a trustee and Gary is a trustee so those two work together in that capacity and have opportunities to visit with each other as well.

Jan Libbey: It's an acquaintance neighbor that we're supportive of and I think he's pretty supportive of us, and when we have question about farming, he is happy to help us figure that out. We get all the paperwork from FSA and so forth and it's all sort of code language to us sometimes. We say, "Gary, what are we supposed to do with this?" So he helps us figure that out. This is a lot of common sense, trust and support between us and that's worked out very well and I think we've been very fair with each other over the years.

Chris Blanchard: He is a conventional farmer, right?

Jan Libbey: He is. He's a bit of a leader in our area in no-till, so that is part of one of things that he has done a little differently. We've talked with him a little bit about cover crop. He is not terribly open to cover crop and we haven't been beligerently pushing it. We're sort of looking for that window of opportunity when Kevin may be more involved in some of that decision making where we think we really want to step into that direction. I think part of that is our own energy. There are so many things that we can wrestle with, and as we start to shrink our own operation a little further in the coming years, I find myself ready to really work on that.

Jan Libbey: It is like, "Okay, I want to see us really look at that cover crop strategy on our land," because we do have some rolling areas, not super roilly, but in the ground that Gary is farming and we have some real issues when we have heavy rains in the spring. That's probably an area that I'd like to see some progress made and it's been Gary who has been really the one to sort of tip us off and say, "This is some ground. Why don't think about putting that in CRP and what do you think about that?" and doing some of that problem solving together as well.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned cover crops is something that you want to eventually incorporate into the cash rental program on your farm. Tell me about your own crop rotation and how you're managing that with your few acres there.

Jan Libbey: Tim does most of that management, and for a while, he had kind of seems like a 12-step crop rotation and he had it all thought about which crops follow, which crops can move those all around because as I say we were more at 8 or 9 acres and cover crop wasn't as big an issue back then, but probably in the last four or five years, we've tried to look at those windows of opportunity when we've got a field that was in a spring crop and it really wasn't slated for the next fall crop and it would be open for a while and in a timeslot where we could get enough water on it to get that germinated.

Jan Libbey: We've found cover crops to be easier for us like this time of the year to kind of get something in for late summer, early fall. We had some crops



that we didn't need to put to production earlier this spring. We put them into some buckwheat and I think we have some field teas and maybe some oats that we threw in their as well and they've been mowed down a couple of times and they haven't been tilled up at this point. We have a fairly significant thistle problem on the farm. We've tried some sort of sudangrass on that to only moderate success. We've done a little bit with sort of sudan.

Jan Libbey: We've probably done most with those sort of mid-season quicker cover crops like the buckwheat and so forth and we'll probably be getting some start here again, but it's around vegetables and timing with them. It's kind of tricky to get it in between your spring crops and your summer crops unless you happen to have a bed that's going to be open for a while. That's a whole another strategy that I hope to continue to improve on our practices.

Chris Blanchard: Do you have ground that you're taking out of production for a year at a time and putting back in?

Jan Libbey: We have historically not done that that much. We have historically used pretty much everything that we were growing on. Because we have a plot here and a plot there and a plot there, I haven't really paced it off to measure it. I would say when we say we've got about 3 acres in production, that probably includes some ground that's not being used really heavily right now or what is available to have a cover crop grown in it and I think if I was starting into all over again.

Jan Libbey: I would want to be a little bit more conscientious about having enough ground that some of it is in kind of a cover crop rotation in that. We did to a certain extent because of the chickens and talked about a little a moment ago about that operation, but they took some of our ground out of vegetable production. We put in to clover, ran the chicken on them as part of our crop rotation. That has been in the mix for quite a few years, less so the last year and really nonexistent this year.

Chris Blanchard: With the relatively small acres but you talked about these all microclimates, I would think that crop rotation would be something that would kind of be hard to plant for. You mentioned the challenge of different pieces of ground with different microclimates, but also that this crop follows that crop. How much is your rotation kind of set in stone as far as how it's going to go versus how much flexibility in kind of on the fly planning do you do?

Jan Libbey: I think there's the plan and there's the real thing and the plan worked as long as the circumstances will allow us to work. For example, if we have a field that we were planning to get the alliums into the green onions and the onions planted early, but it happened to be an area that was a little low and we happen to have a lot of rain and we can't get in and then it's like, "Well, we're going to make an adjustment," and then we just have to sort pay to attention to where we're going to put that, what was there last year, what does that allow us to do. It's going to steal somebody else's plot. Okay, where is that crop going to go?



- Jan Libbey: I think Tim is just sort of a fairly pragmatic person and he's like, "Well, we're just going to move it over here." As you say, there is a plan and there is that realistic flexibility and then you just try to get yourself a little bit back into the flow that he has laid out of which crop he likes to have and follow which crops. I don't have all memorized but that's why we have our pink book. Everything is in the pink book. It's kind of easy to keep track on because it's pink.
- Chris Blanchard: Everything's in the pink book. That's where you're doing your record keeping, right?
- Jan Libbey: That's right. That's where we have our planting schedule. We've been on vacation and I really haven't looked it like, "Hmmm, seems to me we probably should be planting something else here." We got to revisit the schedule that's got each one of the different beds and plots that we have and we have a map for each of those so when we plant it we log what's in there and keep track of that. Then on another sheet where we're doing our harvesting, we keep track of all of our yield information and that then goes in to spreadsheets in the computer and then that drives over average of how do we decide how much we need of this crop or that crop.
- Jan Libbey: Well, it depends on how many shares we're doing and how many wholesale production we think we need, and therefore, based on yield, how much we need to plant of that. Again, that's a specialty of Tim's. There's lots of number crunching and keeping track of all of that information to guide our planting planning and the pink book. Everybody knows about the pink book on the farm. It has all the information we need.
- Chris Blanchard: We talked earlier in our conversation about some of the investments that you made on the farm particularly in mechanization. Again, the conversation started with the carrot washer. You mentioned some other items like a potato planter and a potato digger and things like that. How would you go on about making those sorts of investment decisions? Because it seems to me from our conversations over the years, Jan, that you guys don't just go, "Oh, carrot washer, I want one of those," and then go out and get it, it seems like it's a much more deliberative process for you.
- Jan Libbey: Yeah. I think one of the conversations we have is that we sort of self-invested at the beginning, right? Richard DeWilde would like to say, "If you're going to start farming, don't start a CSA." I remember that and it's like, "Oh, oh, how can you say that? That's what we're doing. I want to do that." I was bristled when he said that, but I think there's some wisdom to that because CSA is a pretty complex business. We were too naive at that time to understand all of that, so it didn't stop us there, but people have to make decisions about how much investments, how much debt they want to carry and how they want to grow their business.
- Jan Libbey: Again, it's like so many other things. I think you have to think about that and you have to make the decision that is right for you and the people who are most involved in your farm planting. One of our goals was to really not



take on any debt and the name of the farm has many layers of meaning, but One Step at a Time was also like where we want to go with this we're going to sort of build it gradually so that we could keep up with the promises that we making to our members and that we could also build and develop the systems that would help us to continue to grow the operation. We started with pretty low mechanization and then got a couple of smaller tractors.

Jan Libbey: We did potatoes planting by hand, digging by hand for years and years and I don't know where we came across the notion if we saw. We went to the MOSES Conference. We always keep picking up great tips there, but we said, "Well, we got a welder friend. We'll have him weld up and make us a bed lifter." We thought that would just be the cat's meow. Too many times, I think we were feeling like we're stabbing this garlic. This is not helping matters, but he's really used to putting pieces together for heavier tractors and we had too many seasons where the ground was too wet.

Jan Libbey: We have fairly heavy soils and we couldn't pull out with our smaller tractors, so a couple of years ago finally here we are, okay we've been this for 18 to 20 years. We finally invested in a 70-horse power tractor. We just think, "This is wonderful! We love this! This power is terrific!" and now we use that bed lifter more reliably. Through Healthy Harvest, we had done some enterprise record work and you were involved in that conversation. I was having other producers participate, but we were also taking that experiment and sort of saying, "Well, okay. We don't really any signature crop, but we were expanding our carrot production. Let's really see where our breakeven point."

Jan Libbey: You and I talked back and forth about, "Take a look at that carrot washer. That really might help you." We'd picked up on the power washing from you and that's still an important piece. We have to sort of balance those two things together, but looking at those numbers gave us that opportunity and say, "That is a place to invest." At this point, we have enough income and resources that we can make those kinds of choices of investment. As we say, we're not wildly mechanized, but we've made some choices that have really fit the direction that we want in terms of the balance of labor and the crops that we are working on.

Jan Libbey: This is just part of ongoing analysis of where are wanting to take this and what do want it to do for us in terms of the balance of the labor demands and the time it's going to take and managing from all of those perspective on the farm.

Chris Blanchard: When you're getting ready to make a decision like that we say about the carrot washer, that's a lot of data points to keep track of, starting to look at how long does it take to wash carrots using our current carrot washing technique. How do you keep track? How do decide what information you need to gather and then how do you track of that?

Jan Libbey: Well, when we were doing the enterprise budget, it was part of a project with Healthy Harvest. The Healthy Harvest was a nonprofit connecting and educating organization and so we were doing workshops for producers and



we really wanted producers to look more carefully at their various enterprises. We were at the same encouraging producers to think about moving into more wholesale markets. My theory was a number of people were doing just farmers markets direct to consumer markets and add or move in to wholesale.

Jan Libbey: You should be doing some enterprise budget development so that you can kind of assess the crops that you are selling and see if it's really making a difference and also give you that information to analyze your price point to see if you can get the price that you need at a wholesale market and make all of those kinds of decisions. A part of that is just the ongoing education, working with other produces, educating ourselves while we're educating them and we were participating in that.

Jan Libbey: We had like a whole season or so in which we set the process and we had the spreadsheets and the process and the data and the details that we needed to keep and that we were asking everybody else to keep and then we brought everybody back together at the end of the season to sort of report out, "Well, what did you learn?"

Jan Libbey: That's a long season's work. It's probably a nine-month process. We weren't under a big crunch at that point to make that decision, so I would say not all our decisions are quite that deliberative about, but we tend to be fairly deliberative which might mean that we don't make decisions very fast which might drive some people really crazy and again that kind of fits the personalities. Right now, we're at that point of talking about what are going to do with this farm in the long range. We've been sort of nibbling on that for several years.

Jan Libbey: We've gotten closer and closer to saying when we anticipate that transition point and then I've said, "We're pretty clear on the direction we're going. We'll probably going to see ourselves let go of the CSA in the next couple of years, but maybe if for example North Iowa Fresh is still a viable market we would still be thinking about growing for them. It will give us a chance to let go of all that diversity of crops and all of the management challenges that come with managing so many different crops over that time and also just let go of all the communications and the people management that go with the CSA."

Jan Libbey: Again, it's just sort of an example of I think taking time every year to sort of reevaluate of what do we want to do next year, how do we want to do it and where do we want to make improvements and changes and thinking that through. We're pretty busy with crops and deliveries until December and then we start to dig in to some of that planning for the next year and that's where we get in to some of those conversations. Sometimes it's just a simple change from, "Oh, we're going to change this kind of a share option and it doesn't take us very long or sometimes it's several years that we're sort of chewing on issues."

Chris Blanchard: Great! With that, Jan, we're going to turn here to our lightning round, but first we're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor.



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- Chris Blanchard: Jan, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Jan Libbey: If I have to choose, I would have a hard time choosing just one tool, but you're talking to me after we've been working with our carrots and I use a little hand hoe. It's a Japanese. There's a fancy term to it, but it's a little Japanese hand hoe that I really like working with. In those circumstances, I love that. Pretty soon, we're going to be digging potatoes and I absolutely love our barrel washer because it's so efficient with our potato. It depends on the day that you ask me, but those things that can make work easy and fun are the things that I love.
- Jan Libbey: Oh, I have to tell you one more that I really love because this is so simple and so silly. I thought something like an apple picking bag should be utilized in picking tomatoes, but that bag was too big and we're going to squish tomatoes. We have some backpacks from our kids' schooldays that were no longer being used and so I've turned a couple of backpacks into sort of sideways pouches that I strap on when I am harvesting tomatoes and so it really allows me to go just go down the hoop house pretty quickly and harvest those tomatoes and it was really very inexpensive, so that's pretty slick thing too.
- Chris Blanchard: Nice! What would Tim say is your faming superpower?
- Jan Libbey: Oh, boy! I don't know exactly what he would say, but I think he might say the partnership between us, the balance of skills and energies that we bring to the work because we are such a good complement, but boy, you have to ask him and he's just right behind me.
- Chris Blanchard: All right, and your favorite crop to grow?
- Jan Libbey: Again, I don't know if I have a favorite, I like this one for that or I like this one for that. I like tomatoes because I like the intimate time when you're working with tomatoes and pruning them. Mostly, I like that. I like the carrots because you get that carrot bed so beautiful and you just get to watch it once it sort of canopied up. I love eggplant because I love



eggplant. I'm just not a single crop person. I don't think. It's sort of again like it depends on the circumstance.

Chris Blanchard: It depends on the day. With the tomatoes, do you grow most of your tomatoes in the high tunnel or do you just do outdoor production with those as well?

Jan Libbey: No, they're all in the high tunnel. We just were having way too much trouble with the diseases on them and we would just get torrential rains at the wrong time and we said, "This is not working." Again that's utilizing those high tunnels and getting those sort of high value crops where we can help reduce the loss and that's been working pretty well.

Chris Blanchard: Do those tomatoes all go to your CSA or some of those going through the wholesale as well?

Jan Libbey: Most of them are going to the CSA. We do some tips, so larger quantities, canning kit, a roasting tomato kit because inevitably you're going to produce more than you really need for the box. You don't want to overwhelm them and when we're in that peak of tomatoes, then and this was a tip from farmer in Minnesota I think, offer some kits, offer those opportunities for them to use larger quantities, so that has been a nice way for us to move tomatoes as well.

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

Jan Libbey: I don't know if I can answer that directly like that, but sometimes people had asked what you say to a beginning farmer which is a little bit what you just asked me but not my beginning farmer self, and when I think that, I usually tell them think about where you imagine your farm to be down the road and make sure you put enough ground into production so that you can balance the ground into some cover crops and really pay attention to feeding that soil well, so it's going to help produce good healthy nutritionally dense vegetables because that's the ground zero of growing food.

Jan Libbey: We're not depending on chemicals. We're relying on beneficial tests, beneficial insects and so forth to help us and obviously healthy soils help healthy food. Look at that whole picture and start big enough so that you have that flexibility and I think lean on networks of other farmers and other supporters that can help you because this is way too big of a job to do just by yourself.

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

Jan Libbey: Well, thank you for the opportunity. We all love this work, and so when you have an opportunity to talk about it, we love to talk about it.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Wrapping this up here, I'll say it again this is Episode 176 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for this show at



SHOW NOTES: <http://www.farmertofarmerpodcast.com/episodes/libbey>

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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.

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