



FARMER TO FARMER

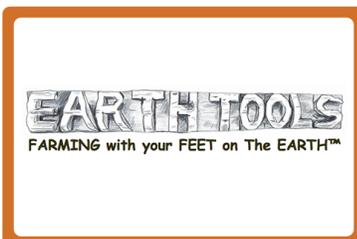
podcast

EPISODE 95

Michael Ableman of Foxglove Farm and SOLEfood on Urban and Rural Farming

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C. Blanchard:

It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 95 and this is your host Chris Blanchard. My guest today, Michael Ableman, splits his time between his family's Foxglove Farm on British Columbia, Salt Spring Island and SOLEfood, an urban farm on the downtown east side of Vancouver, British Columbia. Michael has been farming full time since 1976 starting as an orchardist and evolving into a wide range of vegetables, fruits, grains, dry beans, and livestock. An early pioneer in the urban agriculture movement, Michael has long focused on the creation of good jobs and production quantities of food.

In this episode we dig in the production systems that Michael developed at SOLEfood to allow that 4.5 acre urban farm to meet the challenges of growing in an urban environment, including how they farm on top of payment and how they mitigate the risks of uncertain land tenure. In addition to producing \$350,000 worth of food each year, SOLEfood provides employment to individuals who struggle with poverty and addiction, and Michael shares his perspective on managing labor under those challenging circumstances.

Michael's 120-acre farm on Salt Spring Island includes 30 acres of hay and grain and six acres of fruits and vegetables marketed on the island and via the ferry in the Vancouver. Michael shares details about marketing in the two very different marketplaces and we get a good look at his white asparagus production which I thought was cool.

We also get to hear about Michael's experience with global agriculture in the 1980s and how that's influenced his approach to farming in North America. I worked on Michael's Fairview Gardens in California back 1991 and it was great to get back in touch with him. I hope you enjoy the shows as much as I enjoyed making it.

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Michael Ableman, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

M. Ableman: It's so nice to be with you, Chris. Thanks for having me.

C. Blanchard: So glad you could join us today. Now, you and I, Michael, we haven't had a lot of contact over the years but we do go back a long ways. Your Fairview Garden Farms down in Goleta, California was actually the first commercial farm that I worked on back in 1991.

M. Ableman: Yeah, that's right I remember that going way back and I think even before that. I had some involvement with Deep Springs College which I think you were involved with at one point as well.

C. Blanchard: I actually came to Deep Springs after you were there but that's why I called you and you were crazy enough to accommodate my goofy schedule coming out from that weird little college out in the middle of the desert.

M. Ableman: That's an awesome college. Actually, I loved it.

C. Blanchard: I did too. Weird and awesome. I go both ways. You're not in California anymore. Can you give us a little bit of a background on the projects that you're working on right now?

M. Ableman: Yeah, I'd be happy to. I am now almost 1400 miles north of where I spent 25 years on that little farm in Goleta, California working on two fairly significant projects. One is our family farm which is 120-acre mixed farm on an island off the coast of British Columbia where we raise a range of things. We've got a small grain operation and doing our own milling, et cetera. We've got quite a few fruits and vegetables, a little bit of livestock, some hay.

Yeah, so it's a fascinating place because we have essentially taken over one of the original homesteads on Salt Spring Island and have really continued on the shoulders of a long history that existed on this land. It's wonderful to be on a really old place living and working out of very old buildings and seeing the different layers that have taken place here over the last hundred plus years.

That's been a very wonderful project. It's a piece of land so different from what I was doing in California because it's surrounded ... All of our farm fields are surrounded and intersected by swathes of intact forests. There's a whole intact of ecology. We're in the heart of a water system here, creeks running through. There's a lot of wildness around us and a wonderful history and the opportunity to grow on a scale that I was unable to in California.

After a few years being on the island I was missing being in the trenches and was invited to a meeting on the downtown eastside of Vancouver. The downtown eastside is the neighborhood where the terms skid row was coined, it's a logging term. People on that neighborhood were grappling with



how to deal with a community of people who live there who are all facing long-term drug addiction, mental illness, and it is also the poorest postal code in all of Canada.

They wanted to do something innovative and we came up with a very, very interesting urban agriculture model. We started on half acre and now have moved to four and a half acres. We're employing 25 people generating 25 tons of food annually, that's 50,000 pounds. Also, four and a half acres of primarily pavement and have had quite an impact on the lives of individuals who were previously considered to be as they say hard to employ, have multiple barriers to employment. That's been an exciting project as well.

C. Blanchard: It must be interesting to be bouncing back and forth between downtown Vancouver, British Columbia and what looks like a very rural Salt Spring Island.

M. Ableman: It is very schizophrenic to be honest with you. I've reflected back. I'm 62 years old. I started farming with the Sunburst communities when I was 18. Interestingly enough as I reflected I realize that for most of my farming career I've been on more than one farm and I don't know what that's about but it is in this case the two farming operations couldn't be more different. In that way yes, it can be challenging.

I spend only a couple days a week in the city on the project that I described and certainly, in the peak of the summer season less so. Both projects have very particular and unique demands. I mean, like I say, they are so different it's unbelievable and yet they both satisfy a part of me that I think needs to be fed and needs to be expressed. Salt Spring Island is a wonderful place, incredible, very rural. The farmer on is amazing and has lent us opportunities to do some amazing innovations and things.

The truth is that many other people who live on Salt Spring Island or who come to Salt Spring Island are of privilege. I really felt the need to use my skills to address some real significant needs that exist pretty much in every low-income community anywhere in the world. Two of those are fresh food and the other is meaningful employment jobs. The model that we created was really specifically focused to address both those things.

C. Blanchard: In Vancouver.

M. Ableman: First of all, the physical model is pretty amazing. We designed a system that allows us to both farm on top of pavement and, if necessary, on top of contaminated soil and also to move on short notice. Now there are a couple of things that are common to every urban community everywhere in the world that are major obstacles to safe food production on a significant scale. One is contaminated soil because most urban soils are too contaminated to grow in. The other issue is the cost and value of land that most developers, landowners, whether they be private or municipal are not interested in providing land to farm production because they can't deal with the political



ramifications of having to ask them to move and the short term leases that would be associated with that.

Our system is we've designed a box system. These boxes have forklift tabs, interconnected drains, little holes for hoop inserts. They're stackable, they're nestable, they allow us to move on short notice and they isolate the growing medium from either pavement or contaminated soil. We have 10,000 of them.

This system has especially addressed in one elegant very simple design these two fundamental challenges that exist everywhere. That's the physical system.

The social system which is really the important one is that we are working in this neighborhood, the downtown eastside. If you walk down the streets or alleys of this neighborhood in broad daylight you would see people with needles in their arms on the sidewalks or someone pirouetting in the middle of the street high on crack. This is a neighborhood unlike any place in North America. I think if you visited that neighborhood as I did early on you would bring judgments and prejudices but since I've been there I have discovered that those same individuals have hearts and souls and creativity and the desire to do something meaningful in the world.

The project that we set up was simply that, to give people a reason to get up out of bed, a job to perform that was needed in the community, plants that depended on them, community that was reliant for the food, and the results of that have been quite profound socially. We have people working with us now for over seven years who didn't hold a job for seven months previously. A couple individuals who were hardcore drug addicts that are now supervisors and performing at a level as farmers that is really highly skilled. It's pretty remarkable in a short amount of time.

This is a model that is truly agricultural in scale, as I said 25 tons of food. It was important for me to really demonstrate that if we're going to use the words urban agriculture which are thrown around quite freely these days, then we need to respect the agricultural part of that term and operate on a skill level and a scale that was respectable, credible and can really generate serious amount of jobs and food.

C. Blanchard: This being a farming show, I'm curious and I want to come back to some of the social aspects but what are you using for soil?

M. Ableman: Yeah. This is a big question. We fully understand, as I said, you cannot safely grow in any of the soils in the neighborhoods we work in. I would venture to say quite confidently that that's probably the case for most urban soils. Those contaminants are multifold depending on what was there before.

In order to do that, we actually have to bring soil in. We have been lucky because there was a company in the region about a half an hour out of the city who was making soil from the waste of the city. They were composting



and creating some beautiful soils. We were able to draw on those soils and essentially, they are hauled in, they're pumped into the boxes using a pump truck, if you can believe it. The challenge from there is maintaining soil biology and soil fertility within a closed box system. Very, very different challenge than in an open field situation where you have this vast reservoir of biology and fertility to kind of draw. In this case we find that organic matter in particular burns very fast and the challenges of doing this in maintaining soil fertility in a box is a really interesting and new game for me. Like I say, I'm only eight years into it but we've made some interesting discoveries.

We've had to come up with some strategies that mitigate this without having to haul in vast quantities of material which is impossible in the city. Certainly, compost tease and worm castings and things that have high concentrations have been really beneficial.

C. Blanchard: When you talk about these growing boxes, you talk about pumping soil in with the pump truck, all of this sounds extremely expensive. I'm always curious about this. Is the project, is it a financially viable thing or is it something that's ... and it sounds like for good, there will be a lot of good reasons to get funding for something like this. Are you getting funding for this from the outside or are you making this roll with what you're picking off the farm?

M. Ableman: Now that's a pretty critical question especially for people in the farming world. When I started on this project my philosophy and opinion was very strong. I agreed to take part but I said look, this has to support itself like any other farm by the pound. Pound of tomatoes, carrots, what have you at a time. After a couple of years realizing that our hiring approach and our social agenda was to hire people from the neighborhood without skills. Many of whom not only were ... did not have any farming skills but were dealing with some pretty heavy stuff.

I realized that we would never ever be able to operate on the same playing field as any other farm and that our social agenda was so worthwhile and so powerful in its effect that I came to accept that we would always have our handout to some degree. The project generates about \$350,000 a year in products grown and sold. We have to raise about another \$300,000 a year to support the social agenda of what we're doing.

Now I should note that that's not just ... that additional fundraising is not solely to pay the staff from the downtown eastside or to even train them, but we're also running a number of ... we run a financial literacy program, we do driving classes, we do canning classes, we have a breakfast program. We're buying rain gear for people, things that are normally not always part of a regular farm's operations, maybe the rain gear. A lot of management time of course is spent in dealing with people's stuff.



We're not social workers. We're not addiction experts. We are not psychologists but we still have to spend a fair amount of time helping folks who on a daily basis are having challenges.

It is not self-supporting on its own. I do hope and still have a goal of achieving that eventually. The infrastructure alone as I describe and as you brought up is a very expensive infrastructure. The boxes we designed and had manufactured out of plastic, we tried wood initially which was a disaster, and of course the soil, bringing the soil in is not cheap.

Once that foundation is in it is conceivable to me that this could eventually be far more self-sustaining. The biggest challenge is the short-term leases on the land.

C. Blanchard: Therefore, the potential that you're going to have to pack everything up and move.

M. Ableman: Exactly.

C. Blanchard: Which you can keep the boxes but then you've got all the material handling expenses of moving that soil from one place to another.

M. Ableman: Well, the soil would remain. The system is set up so the soil will remain in the boxes. Each box has its own ... The boxes have forklift slots underneath and they are entirely movable and stackable. We can move the entire system. In fact, in a year we have to move one two-acre site. It is movable. There's cost associated with that as well, of course.

I mean this is really ... I have never positioned this project as I don't refer to it as sustainable agriculture nor do I know of any very many farms that could actually comfortably call themselves such. I think sustainability is a question, series of questions we ask ourselves, not a place that I think any of us have arrived. In this case in particular, this is really particularly designed very particularly for an urban application and for situations where there is no other option. It's very difficult to plant seeds into asphalt or into soils that are contaminated.

C. Blanchard: Tell me a little bit more about the challenges that you face on the human resources side. All of us I think as farmers and especially as vegetable farmers have experienced challenges at some level with people. I mean the work itself relative to the other work that most people are doing in the world is very different. It's much more physically demanding. It requires working in all kinds of weather, something that you don't get out of working in a McDonald's necessarily.



Now you've taken all of the challenges that are inherent in finding good employees on a market farm and elevated those by bringing in people who don't know how to work.

M. Ableman:

Yeah, it's interesting. I think that I would have to say that when farmers get together in the winter months I think it's probably the most common topic and probably one of the biggest challenges of course.

We do. We have this incredible amount of attention now focused on the work we're doing. Suddenly, some recognition that food and local food in particular is important, lots of films and books. Yet, in my view the one thing has not changed fundamentally is the number of people who are actually on the ground doing the work. Those of us who are managing farms whether they are owned or someone else's I think are seeing this issue fly out more acutely than ever.

Most younger people are not being raised on farm certainly and they're not being raised to do physical work. The almost entire focus is on pushing buttons on a keyboard and yet that can only go so far when it comes to growing food and at some point somebody has to grow food, build houses, make clothing, do the real work of the world that we all depend on.

I think that it's a huge challenge. We found that it's getting worse. I think the project ... it's interesting the project in Vancouver, in the city, in some ways the individuals we employ there with all of their significant deep challenges, and I'm talking about hardcore heroin and crack addicts, people who have really significant mental illness issues, in many ways though they are so thankful to have those jobs because no one else will hire them. That in many ways they perform at a much higher level and with much more focus when they're there and that's the key word than the well-scrubbed white kids that might come to our rural farm on Salt Spring Island.

I think that it's a huge question. In California and most of the states now of course it's people who have crossed the border, in many cases illegally, that are doing the work that Americans will no longer do. We actually guard the borders to keep out the people who are actually growing the food. Canada has a legal seasonal agricultural workers program with paid flights, housing inspections, waste requirements, full health care for people from Mexico. It's not perfect but it's certainly a lot better than what we see in the States.

We still are reliant on local people to do the work on our farm on the island but it is probably our biggest challenge to be honest with you. We have had some great success and a number of farmers out in the world who over the years we have helped launched which we're proud of. I think most people doing this work are struggling with this issue. I think it's really fundamental.



C. Blanchard: How have you worked to engage people and again, particularly interested in talking about your work at SOLEfood. With folks that are facing some fairly extreme challenges, what have you done to make that work?

M. Ableman: Well, it's imperfect. At this point in my life at 62 years old I find it's far more valuable to be open and willing to express those areas that I have not been so successful in than those areas that I have. The new book that I wrote is certainly a great example of a warts and all story about this project in Vancouver.

I'll start off with that, just say it's certainly imperfect. I will say again that to have individuals employed with us for seven plus years who never held a job for very long, individuals who may go home at the end of the day and stick a needle in their arm. While they're there, while they're present are actually performing quite well is I think a great accomplishment but even more than it's a sense and if you read the interviews in the book you'll see these are people who in many cases the work at SOLEfood street farms is their only meaningful engagement. It's the only thing they have going on in their lives that has meaning and purpose and sense of community. I think the sense of community is a big part of it. I'll give you an example.

If someone disappears, they fall off the wagon, they're gone for a few days or a week or even a few weeks. When they return to work at SOLEfood farms they are not asked where have you been, they're asked how are you doing. This is a big fundamental difference. The employment model we have is actually established and set up with enough backup knowing that on a particular day, even though the order is still have to be harvested and there's 500 bunches of radishes that have to get picked in so much time. We know that's the case we have to run the business. We have enough backup individuals to cover knowing that almost every day someone is not going to show up.

This kind of flexibility that would never exist in a normal employment model or a regular farm has allowed us to keep people engaged who normally no one would have ever had patience for. The result of that has been that they want to stay involved and the longer they stay involved, the more their skills develop. The more their skills develop, the more we feel like they're needed, the less they feel like they have to lean on other things to support them.

I think that this is really a question for the people we're employing. Obviously, they can't be here today on the phone call. I do have people who tell me the only reason they're still alive today is because of the job they hold and the community of farmers that they're associated with and the fact that they feel needed. They simply feel needed.



I don't think there's any secret sauce or technique or anything about this except acceptance, patience, and people who don't feel judged who have previously been heavily judged.

C. Blanchard: I think there's a lot to be said for that. That's not necessarily a skill that comes easily, is it?

M. Ableman: Well, certainly not. I know it's been a long ride for me. I think, as I said, my only relationship with the downtown eastside of Vancouver, this neighborhood, Skid Row, previously was driving through on my way into the Fraser Valley to pick up parts for farm machinery or tractor or farm supplies because you have to pass through that corridor. Boy, I had all my judgments when I drove through that neighborhood. It was a shocking scene to see.

Now to be working with these folks and actually have relationships with these individuals and some for many years has been as much to my benefit as it has been to theirs because the amount of courage and perseverance it requires on their part on some days just to show up for work is unbelievable. None of us could live with that. Nobody is choosing to be drug addicted in this neighborhood. In fact, many of our staff want nothing more than to be clean but it is such a difficult ride.

I am constantly inspired by them more than they are of me. We just provide a really awesome environment for people to come and put their hands in living soil on a day-to-day basis. Grow nourishment for the neighborhood. We require that all of them participate at the farmers' markets, we don't keep them hidden, which is really amazing socially because it demands that they breakthrough some of their social inhibitions. Even more important, it requires that the public deal with their own stuff because when you're walking along the farmers' market and you see somebody handing you a sample that doesn't look like a farmer and actually looks like they just came off the street you have to deal with your own stuff.

It's been a wonderful way of creating a new idea of who people are that we normally would not relate to. There are those who choose not to shop with us simply because of those people we're employing. That's an interesting thing and we accept that.

C. Blanchard: Michael, I'm touched by how you talk about this. I'm touched by how it's not just about you. I think I'm not quite sure how to say this but I want to go back to, I think, with your first book where you were out traveling the world and looking at agricultural systems around the world and engaging with people that you didn't know, in cultures that you weren't a part of. Making a human relationship and learning about farming, and how that has brought you to where you are today.



I don't know. I don't feel I'm asking a good question but I'm going to put that out there and let you run with it.

M. Ableman:

No, it is a good question. In 1983, I made my first trip to Mainland China. I was actually not on my way to Mainland China. I was on my way to fulfill a childhood dream which was to go hiking in the Himalaya Mountains. It was midwinter, time off from my farm in California. A friend of mine was living in China. I stopped to visit with her. I found myself just so intrigued by what was happening there at that time and I began a very long walk outside the city of Chengdu into the rural areas which were at the time inaccessible by anyone from outside of China.

The Chinese government was not interested in portraying the peasant culture at the time. I had an experience. I got to the outskirts of that city into the rural area, hiked to the top of the hill, looked out and beyond I saw something that was really remarkable. For as far as I can see was this vast networks of fields with vegetables, small fields intersected by waterways. Most intensive production I've ever seen, all being worked by families working together. I discovered these families were working land that was not only worked by their parents and grandparents but by their great grandparents and all the way back, in some cases, for a thousand years.

For a thousand years yet those fields at the time still appeared fertile and productive. I just couldn't fathom, how is this possible? I mean I've seen land in the Central Valley that was played out after only a decade. What was going on here? That really triggered a really strong interest to understand not only what was going on there in China, the oldest agricultural tradition in the world, but what was going on amongst other traditional cultures.

As a photographer at the time I thought this pull to begin to record the remnants of those traditional cultures, many of which have inspired what we now know of our organic farming movement and so many other movements, permaculture and biodynamics and you name it.

That began, I think there was, gosh, seven or eight winters that I went out during my farming breaks to look at different cultures around the world culminated in that first book. I was really young and naïve when I did that book. I was clear that this was not some romantic view of some golden path but it wasn't an attempt to look at okay, whose shoulders are we standing on in this movement and what do we learn from the remnants of those wonderful traditional cultures. If you fast forward I think there is a connection.

I mean there's no question that that experience has really informed the work I'm doing now, who I am, how I see the world, how I see farming, the work I'm doing in Vancouver. I mean we started the center for urban agriculture in 1980, what was it, mid '80s based at Fairview Gardens in California. We used the words urban agriculture in the same sense in the mid '80s the people look



to see like there is something wrong and now of course, it's this huge movement around that. I don't know how much of it is truly agricultural but certainly, there's a big movement around that.

I think that when all of us as farmers look back for our history I think we all have to recognize that there were all these different inspirations, mentor seeds that were planted in our minds, ideas that we got from who knows where. Observations we made both on our own farms and other people farms, all these things come together to form who we are and how we express that creativity on our own land and each place, that's the most amazing thing.

Every farm I've ever been to and I've done a couple books that profile other farmers, they all are so particular to the ... Those canvases are particular to the farmer artist that is the personality and history and background and culture of the farmer artist who has painted them in. I think that's pretty cool. That's a really wonderful thing to see. There is no single farm that is not totally unique and individual to the person that's running it. I love that part of it. It is true art in that respect.

C. Blanchard: On a really practical level, how did your travel and how did your encounters with so many farmers over so many years influence the farm that you ended up with on Salt Spring Island?

M. Ableman: Well, first of all, I was on that Fairview Gardens project for, gosh, well over 20 years. At a certain point I really wanted to live some place where my neighbors cared something more than what was going on with their lawn.

C. Blanchard: I do want to give just a, I want to pause here, give just a little bit of perspective because I do know a little of the inside story at Fairview Gardens. I mean when I was there you were in the middle of a fight with your neighbors and these are neighbors that had moved in next to a farm that was already there over the roosters making too much noise.

M. Ableman: You were there for that. Yeah. Now I was actually threatened with jail time. District attorney actually was going to put me away for the crow of my roosters. That was the third series of incidents that had happened over a period of years. The compost was one. We were composting and accepting material that used to head to the landfill and finds advertising and that was the roosters. We used each of those instances of the web to try to inform the public of how disconnected we should become and how important that farm was to the community. It was a hundred-year-old farm. It had been there for a hundred years. The neighbors have been there for just a few years and we were getting complaints about what we had always done there.

I did take it up as a fight but not necessarily a fight between myself and the neighbors as much as an opportunity to educate an increasingly urban and more developed changes were taking place. agricultural land that they developed. This was a farm that used to expand all the way around. It was



now surrounded by shopping centers and in fact. I felt responsible to not just fight for our survival but also use our situation as a way to educate people.

Yeah, if you fast-forward at a certain point, I'm tired of that. I wanted to be somewhere where people cared about soil fertility and I could have a conversation with my neighbors about their particular grain crop or that there was some instincts that still could be shared related to food and agriculture. I was living in a farm neighborhood and so we moved 1200 miles north. I think in many ways the farm that we ended up on is as different as Fairview Gardens project as possible. It's ten times the size. It's very rural. It's quiet.

It does give me the opportunity to play with some things that I didn't previously get to play with like grain production, for example, which I'm very excited by. We do a lot of dry beans to be able to raise livestock as larger than a chicken that's kind of which is our only opportunity there.

C. Blanchard: Did your experience with third world agriculture translate to things that you're doing at Foxglove Farm?

M. Ableman: I think that not directly necessarily. I used to get asked that question a lot after the first book came out. In the end I think that my inspiration from traditional cultures and their agriculture in various parts of the world was less specific or technical and more on a bigger level. I felt that what I was seeing in many of those places and I described China but I saw it in another places as well.

First of all, there was still an intact ... This is at that time. I'm talking about the early and mid-1980s. There was still intact culture around agriculture. There was still ... Mind you, this was ... for many of the people I've visited this was simply about survival. It wasn't like how we're approaching it now. This was self-sufficiency for many people. These were not market farms necessarily although I did visit numbers of those.

I was looking at in the end the inspirations were about things like land tenure and the culture around agriculture and the fact that there were still people participating in a livelihood and a profession that was disappearing at the time in North America. We're having a resurgence now but it was disappearing.

Aside from particularly techniques I think I wanted to just say look, we have dismissed present culture and the wisdom that was inherent in thousands of years of agricultural development in those parts of the world. Let's revisit that and understand that we all came from that, that organic agriculture evolved from that. What are the bits and pieces that we can draw?

C. Blanchard: I remember just little bits of that from Fairview Gardens when you talk about paying attention to what we've lost. I remember having a dinner there that you made serving barbecuing salmon on peach wood trimmings from the orchard.



M. Ableman: Probably wrapped in fig leaves.

C. Blanchard: Probably wrapped in fig leaves, yeah. Just that, so for me I was 20 years old. I was very enchanted by the whole idea of having my hands in the dirt. I had never done that before. It was all very romantic but even when you talk about that, when you talk about the fish and using the trimmings, using the leaves, all of that coming together around a table full of people and that's something else that I remember very particularly from your farm was that everybody that was involved in the farm was celebrated.

For me I was there for eight weeks, I was celebrated when I left as a white kid going back to college. The Mexican crew that you had, when we went out to a dinner you brought everybody. It wasn't just the interns. It wasn't just the market people. It was everybody who held a hoe or traded cash for sweet corn or anybody on the farm. I don't know.

That it feels to me like that sort of level of involvement with your staff really says something about what you're talking about here with the operation in Vancouver.

M. Ableman: Yeah, I think it's true. It's interesting because I've made every mistake in the book in terms of human resources and yet I look back on the Fairview Gardens experience and I had the same crew there for 17 years, I think, and oh my gosh, do I miss them. It was an amazing crew. Both the Hispanics and the white crew for whatever reason, we had some really good longevity. Boy, when you have that kind of long-term relationship on a crew, it's almost like you read each other's minds. It's like a well-tuned machine. It allowed me to ... The only reason I could go away in the winter months is that I had people who ... Everybody knew each other's jobs.

We did. We tried really hard to even out the playing field there. It's not easy to do but we tried so that everybody felt that they belong. They were honored and respected. Again, we made a lot of mistakes, I think everybody does. I think it's interesting if you look back and you ask yourself about what you're most proud of in your life and your career in agriculture, it's interesting.

I mean, certainly we can all point out various technical accomplishments or the food that we grew or maybe even some people how much money they make, how many people they taught or inspired but in the end it's the human element that really stands out. Eliot Coleman and I started a group called the Agrarian Elders which we now meet every other year as part of the Center for Theory and Research at the Esalen Institute.

It's interesting. These are folks, there's about 30 of them who have been farming for 30, 35 years or more, and out of that entire group, only a tiny percentage has their children, their own children who are wanting to continue or participate or pick up the standard. That's a really telling piece in this



conversation related to the question you've asked because it really does beg the question, who's going to do this in the future? I've always said, if you want your kids to farm, don't raise them on one.

I do realize that we keep coming ... Chris, you and I in this conversation have kept coming back to the same topic and I think it is ... there's a reason for that. The transition, the succession is in my mind been one of the most prominent pieces of the Agrarian Elders conversation that we've had because I think all of us here are concerned about that. Who's going to take over? How do we pass on our knowledge? How do we do it respectfully to the younger generation so they can apply their own creativity and we're not standing over them? These are very difficult questions that I think many of us are asking.

C. Blanchard: Any answers?

M. Ableman: I think it's so individual. We have had this conversation for years now and I, honestly, I wish I could just give you a series of bullet points but because this is so personal and so social and so particular to the culture of the farm that we operate in, our families and our relationships, it's really ... it's hard to say. There are people whose kids have decided to come back to the farm who swore that it was the last thing they imagined they would do because of how they were raised and the amount of stress they saw their parents when they were growing up.

In other words, it doesn't make a lot of sense that those who choose to return. Sometimes I think it's a matter of percentages. If you have enough children that maybe one of them might decide to stick with it so maybe bigger families . I mean, you look at that in traditional cultures and that's actually ... that is a strategy. It's certainly not a great strategy for the future of the planet but it is a strategy of survival that a lot of folks will have big families, number one, because infant mortality rates are high but number two, so they'll have more hands to help carry the load. These are practical considerations.

C. Blanchard: With that, we're going to stop here, get a word from our sponsors and then we'll be right back with from Michael Ableman of Foxglove Farm and SOLEfood in British Columbia.

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All right and we're back with Michael Ableman. Michael, you've got this far. We've talked a lot about SOLEfood in Vancouver. Let's talk about Foxglove Farm on Salt Spring Island. Salt Spring Island is located ... Well, maybe you could describe it. I got a visual of where it is but maybe you could help us get that picture.

M. Ableman: Yeah, so you know, the Gulf Islands with Salt Spring Island is the southernmost gulf island. They're the northern extension of the San Juan Islands which go up through Washington State. In fact, you know, from Salt Spring Island, you can really just, essentially, you could see over the border.

We are the largest of the gulf islands. The gulf islands sit between the mainland where Vancouver is located and Vancouver Island. They're in those protected waters in between both. By ferry we're about, well, an hour and a half to the mainland or about 45 minutes to Vancouver Island. We're fairly close to Vancouver Island.

C. Blanchard: You got about how many acres of vegetables?



- M. Ableman: The farm in total is 120 acres but there's a fair amount of that that is still in forest. Roughly, there's about 30 acres in hay and grain and dry beans and then there's about six or seven acres roughly, quite small, in fruits and vegetables. The intensive part of this has been scaled specifically to the access to or lack of access to labor. We hadn't been really smart about that and also, to the fact that our markets. This is an island. We have made an attempt to sell the majority of our food on the island but the reality is we still are having to send roughly about 30% by ferry off island most primarily into Vancouver.
- I'm heavily focused on restaurants there. Yeah, our farm system, the crops were producing, is very much scaled to the limitations of the population in the market here on the island to the access to resources, very expensive to haul materials in and actually to access to labor. Those three things really have dictated how we design things. Obviously, things like grain can be quite wonderful. We have our own medium-sized commercial mill so we can do some milling. We have things like dry beans that are also wonderful in this environment but we do a lot of fruits and vegetables as well. A lot of asparagus, both white and cream asparagus. Lots of berries, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, lychees of course.
- We're always experimenting with different things. We do sweet potatoes. We do some baby ginger. We do ... you know, flying around on a very small scale of stuffs that's kind of out of ordinary here.
- C. Blanchard: How many people are there on Salt Spring Island?
- M. Ableman: Salt Spring Island has a population of ... permanent population of around 12 to 15,000. Population doubles in the summer. It's a popular place for people to come. I'd like to say, there's population of 12,000 and 12,000 opinions about everything. We refer Salt to Spring Island as an argument surrounded by water. A lot of independent minds here, we love that. We fit right in.
- C. Blanchard: How about your view of produce are you selling there on the island?
- M. Ableman: Yeah, roughly about 70% is sold. There's two farmers markets that we do possibly sell to some local restaurants and stores and we have a CSA program as well. So we're still holding strong at about 70%. Interestingly enough, we've trained a number of new farmers on the island. When we arrived, we didn't have a lot of competition here
- Now, most of our competitions are folks that we've trained but the population still remains the same. It forces us to continue to be creative now and with what we grow and how we grow it but where the foods are getting distributed.
- C. Blanchard: For that 30% that you don't sell on the island, how are you getting that to market?



M. Ableman: Yes. We, during the growing season which is roughly seven, eight ... eight months, it could be year around easily but we choose to take some time off in the winter and work on my other projects. During that peak time we do a round of Vancouver every week delivering to primarily restaurants. We deal with some probably 25, 30 different restaurants over there. That's quite an endeavor. It's a big job but it's worth it. We have fairly fixed minimums. Our cost for going over there are quite high in ferry cost, et cetera. We have to make sure there's enough to make it worth it.

Yes, so the availability list goes out every Sunday and then we get our orders in and generally Wednesday night deliveries into the city.

C. Blanchard: You talked about designing an extensive model for production there because of the lack of labor availability. Is that something you do in all of your enterprises? Do you have ... Are your vegetable set up in such a way as to minimize the labor input? I mean, more so than ... I mean, I think everybody wants to set up their vegetables to minimize the labor input because that's your major cost but have taken other, I guess what we might call, extraordinary steps to do that?

M. Ableman: Yeah, I mean, it's interesting because I think certainly after 40 years of hitting your head against the wall you learn a few things and certainly, my technical skills have improved but I would not necessarily refer to myself as a really excellent technician like many farmers that I know who are. In this case, in this situation here, I've been forced to be really smart because as I said, there's no labor force available here.

It's interesting, it's a two edged sword. On one hand, we have actually scaled back to some degree in the last few years in order to create a primary focus on sales to the islands so we're not having to haul too much off island. When you scale back of course then it's hard to be able to warrant the use of or the expanse and the investment of various pieces of machinery called equipment, et cetera, you're scaled because it's too small so they were working from both sides. We have a full size combine, for example, for our big grain fields but the machine relative to the scale of grain we're producing is almost a little silly.

It was a used machine, it was pretty cheap. It of course requires three days of maintenance and repair for every day you might use it.

I think that we have ... what we really have done well, I think, is ... and I think it's something that most growers evolve to at a certain point is you find out those things you really love to grow and that you love ... They're often the things you love to eat and generally, that you really resonate with, they become your signature products. We have probably 10 of them. If you do those really well, they become the core of your broader crop mix. Those also, hopefully, resonate with the local market. In our case, because in the summer months we have a huge influx of people coming to the island as visitors we



grow a certain percentage of what I call tourist food, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, carrots.

We also grow for the local community. We have to grow a certain percentage of things that have longer lifespans that has stability. We're in a situation here, for example, if a market rains out or bombs out for some reason, which rarely happens but can happen, we could be stuck holding the bag for thousands of dollars' worth of products. How do you balance your crop mix to protect yourself from that when the market to any kind of support market around that is too far away? Thinking like an island is how I describe it, both in terms of soil fertility measures, in terms of labor, in terms of crop mix.

It's very important to think like an island, to imagine that you do not have this vast support system or land mass around you that you have to work within the resources of the gift here both fertility wise and labor wise and market wise. We have done that through scale, through particular crop selection and through some farming systems that I think reduced the amount of labor that are involved. I'm happy to get into that a little bit more if you want.

C. Blanchard: Yeah, let's dig in. Give me some ... throw some practical examples our way.

M. Ableman: Okay. Well, first of all, in this climate - and I would probably go further and say in most climates but certainly here - the use of unheated high tunnel's very important. In our case, we move them. We have movable tunnels which allows us to continue some form of crop rotation whereas leaving those tunnels in place. We're using solo Haygroves that we can move around. They're adjustable in terms of length and size.

Our fields, it's a very difficult place to design rotations because our fields are not even sized. Very rare to have any single field that mimics any other one. We're using ... the tunnels are important. They're giant umbrellas in a climate that can be quite wet in the shoulders so we need to protect crops in the spring and the fall. Less from cold and more from rain, in fact. We also use low tunnels or caterpillar tunnels for things like strawberries to keep the rain off of them. We are, for a fertility perspective, heavily focused on cover cropping, both annual and longer term perennial and pasture-related cover cropping.

As an island we are not in a position as I mentioned to be hauling in vast amounts of fertility resources so we have to create them from within, right? We're fortunate unlike my experience at Fairview Gardens, I have enough land to be able to create some longer term rotations but we use very intensive cover cropping religiously here. That's important to us. The grain crops that I mentioned, the grain and bean crops are ... while they have some value in and of themselves, they have equal value as rotational crops. We really have to view that way. We're never going to compete with this multi-thousand acre grain producers who have that economy of scale. We have to view the grain production as having multi-benefits, both the production itself and the fertility benefits and rotational benefits.



Every grain crop is planted with double seed, with tow or understory. There's that whole benefit that takes place. The wheat gets harvested, there's clover growing underneath. We also value add that grain, so again, there would be no point in the amount of acres of grain we have to be selling it as raw feed. We mill it, we can sell flour, we have a substantial sized wood-fired oven, we can sell bread, so there's some value adding that can take place.

Yeah. I mean the asparagus, another wonderful crop, one of the crops that we do send a fair amount into Vancouver because we do some white. The white really maximizes the profits of the asparagus planting. It's a unique product and that's sold to restaurants primarily.

C. Blanchard: Tell me about producing white asparagus?

M. Ableman: Yeah. Well, it was a big signature crop for me when I was in California all those years ago and in fact, I still could go into certain well-known restaurants in San Francisco and get asked when am I coming back to growing asparagus. That should be a little cute for someone down there but nonetheless, basically, if you were to travel in the spring in various parts of Europe, the Netherlands or Germany and you were to go into those markets at that time of the year, you would never see green asparagus, in fact you'd probably be running out of town if you showed up with it. It's all white.

There's a long tradition there but here in this country I remember when I first brought white asparagus to a farmers' market in Santa Barbara, this was probably 30 some years ago, people walked by and turned their noses up and thought something terrible had gone wrong in my field. Basically, it's very simple. I mean, the European tradition is that those spears are blanched or the light kept off of them with soil. We realized years ago that the energy requirements for doing that were far too high, both in terms of tractor work and movement and turning of soil, which we didn't want to do and in terms of harvest.

We developed a system using low-tunnel hoops and a dark material that we put over them that allows us to lift the material for every harvest and harvest those perfectly pearl white spears. That has become a very important crop for us over the years, again, huge thing for us in California and a little bit less or so here.

C. Blanchard: Yeah. Like you said, one of those crops can be a signature crop for you outside of Salt Spring Island and give you that hook into the marketplace out there so that you do have a place to dispose of your excess.

M. Ableman: Exactly. Yeah, I mean we used to grow these Mara des Bois strawberries here and French strawberries. There were some falling around that but my gosh, the cost of doing that was so extreme and the perishability of it we finally came to our senses. There's a lot of things that you can certainly create a



niche around anything but at some point you have to evaluate whether you have the stamina for it, you have the right systems to support it, whether the market is there and we've tried just about everything over the years and I think it continues to evolve. I mean that's the beauty of it. You continue to experiment, something does well for a period of years, maybe somebody else comes into the market. You have to be willing to constantly shift and change.

C. Blanchard: I think that's a nice note to take and turn towards our lightning round then, Michael.

M. Ableman: Can't wait.

C. Blanchard: What's your favorite tool on the farm?

M. Ableman: Oh my gosh. Well, believe it or not, I have a couple of them and it's funny. I would have to say in terms of hand tools, the wheel hoe is certainly high on the list and, believe it or not, the stainless steel digging fork. I love the feel of that tool. It doesn't matter how big your scale is, at some point there are one or two hand tools that just seem invaluable and the stainless digging fork in particular, the handled stainless digging fork is really important to me.

On a tractor level, I have to say my favorite tool is the spring-toothed chisel that I have. It was left behind by the previous owners of the farm. My gosh, that one very simple implement does such a beautiful job in these particular soils and I say that very carefully because again, these favorites, I may not have it as a favorite or have the same relationship with it in other soils but certainly here it's the perfect tool. Just opens up the ground beautifully, is used for a number of purposes both before and after cropping systems. I'm trying to think of what else I really love, my bean sheller.

C. Blanchard: What do you do for a bean sheller?

M. Ableman: I have a Rotofingers which is made in Mississippi. It was originally called Mississippi sheller but they call it Rotofingers and this is a tool unlike any other. Beautifully made machine that has rotating drums and within the rotating drum are set of rotating fingers and you can actually shell a bean from the fresh stage and when we're talking about things like flagolet or some European shelling beans, there's a long tradition that in the late summer of fresh shelled beans, not dried but fresh shelled beans, and this is the only tool that I know of that actually allows you to do that.

If you've ever tried to hand shell flagella beans you'll know that it's an impossible task. We're able to offer them fresh shelled and so that's an awesome tool that we have. For the market, we have a pepper roster that we had built up here. Something that's fairly common in the Southwest that most farmers' market's management owns one and people buy their peppers and go to a central location, have them roasted but we, that's not a tradition up



here. We actually had one made and we roast peppers at the market. That's a wonderful tool at the farmers' market.

I'm trying to figure out what else is really fun here that we really resonate with in term of tools and implements. Yeah, pretty simple.

C. Blanchard: Where did you come up with the pea sheller or the bean sheller?

M. Ableman: Oh, yeah. Well, it's been years. I've had these shellers. I had one at Fairview Gardens in over 20 years ago and I don't even know that the people that were making them. It was a very small kind of home operation in Mississippi that was producing this machine. It's been at least 16 years or so since I wasn't been in touch with these people but this is a beautifully made device, it's not only incredibly functional and does something that no other machine I know of does but it's also wonderful to look at.

The drum is made out of wood slabs and it's got a couple different motors on it that operates turning mechanisms. It's really something else.

C. Blanchard: I'm just curious, you mentioned the stainless steel digging fork. What role does that play on your tractor scale farm?

M. Ableman: Well, it's interesting because there are still things that I choose to do by hand. For example, we don't grow a lot of potatoes here. We grow some but it's not a major crop and we primarily grow fingerlings because everybody grows everything else and I have no potato digger. I don't have a single row digger. We have these beautiful forks and I would venture to say for the scale that we're growing potatoes that we're probably able to harvest as fast as a single row by the time I hook up the harvester and go through the whole process.

These are wonderful because the soil flips right off the fork even at any moisture level. Listen, because it's stainless they're heavy and I can literally go down and dig, loosen up a full row and open it up quite quickly and then come back and pull all of the potatoes. I think obviously as potatoes becomes a crop that we decide to do much more off, it would not make any sense to be doing it the way we're doing it.

There are other things like digging forks. We have a small area that we have maintained over the years of raised beds. For odds and ends, culinary herbs and things that we don't want to grow on a field scale, right? You can go in with that fork and do various things, whether it's prepping a bed or replacing plants that you can't certainly could not bring a tractor into that particular plot. I still feel like maintaining my contact with those kinds of hand tools is really important. That I don't ever want to not be capable of or have the tools to do those kinds of jobs on that kind of level because it may ... there could be a time when we we're doing more of that again. Maybe that's where I'll end up, doing it all by hand.



C. Blanchard: Great, how did you get started in farming? I know this is going to the way back in the way back but you didn't grow up in this business.

M. Ableman: No, my grandparents and my great grandparents had a very heavy influence on agriculture in Sussex County, Delaware, in Southern Delaware. In fact, there are pieces of my great grandparents and grandparents' lives that are in the agricultural museum in Southern Delaware which happens to be right next to the NASCAR racing track. I wrote about that in my last book. I grew up every summer going with my grandfather what he called down state and along the way stopping.

A trip that should have only taken two and a half hours was usually a half a day because he stopped along the way to visit all of his friends, primarily in the farming community down there and we'd sit there with for an hour just cutting open cantaloupes or peaches on his back porch and just talking while we're eating away or at the Indian River inlet picking up crabs or visiting his favorite mustard green. They loved ... Southern Delaware has a very strong southern culinary tradition. They loved tarp greens, mustard greens, all that stuff and he ... by the time we'd arrive at our destination, his car was loaded with the products of all his friends.

I have to say, I think that was the last thing in my imagination that somebody had asked me would I be a farmer was ever agriculture. Those experiences became part of who I am and I think genetics, we think of genetics as physical traits but I'm discovering more and more that there is a lot more to genetic makeup that informs who we are, who we'd become, what our skills and strengths are. I mean, no, there's no way. My father was not a farmer although he had a massive garden that he ran every year. He always shot deer for the freezer, he was into that stuff but it was my grandparents' influence in many ways.

C. Blanchard: Where did you actually get your start?

M. Ableman: I started at Sunburst Farms which when I joined that agrarian commune in the early 1970s they were the largest producers and distributors of organic food anywhere in North America with semi-trucks crisscrossing the nation. I was really lucky I knew nothing about production farming but I was thrown into this scene. We have 4,000 acres of land. We had an operating goat and cow dairy, we had four natural food stores, juice plant, a major distribution warehouse and I within four months of being in that community I was asked to manage the hundred-acre organic pear and apple orchard that was in the high desert valley east of Ojai, California that was owned by the community.

I knew nothing about orcharding, managing people. I was 18 years old and here I was directing a crew of about 30 people, most of whom were older than I was. That orchard had been abandoned for 15 years. The branches between the trees have become so intertwined you couldn't see the alleys down the



middle of the road. I had this 1930's copy of Modern Food Science. I had the journal from the guy who ran the place the year before and I had a copy of Goethe which is still attached to my wall here in my home." Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." That was attached to the door of my 20-foot unheated trailer.

That experience was awesome. I got beat around, I didn't know anything, I had the opportunity to really experience agriculture in its most raw form and after five years, I think I learned a few things resulted to that and I think my beginnings there were such that in the end, I realized that good farming had less to do with fertile soil and refined technique and more to do with the fact that ... more to do with people who love their land, have burning passion to that land and to the work they're doing and love to feed their communities and in that case, at that community, that was certainly what was going on. It was a communal experience and that's what informed who I was then and probably who I am today.

C. Blanchard: What's your favorite crop to grow?

M. Ableman: I would say, to be honest, I brought up asparagus. I think asparagus is just an awesome crop for many reasons. I love it aesthetically. I love to eat it. I love it as a perennial. I really love growing perennials. It's delicious. It's really good for you. Everybody loves asparagus and it doesn't go on and on and on for many, many months. I don't get tired of it. It's one of those things that comes, you're enamored for the time that's there and then you get to let go of it and you appreciate it the next time around.

C. Blanchard: Finally, if you can go back in time and tell your beginning-farmer-self one thing, what would it be?

M. Ableman: It would be number one, not to take yourself so seriously. To understand that the beauty of farming, the wonderful part of farming is that it teaches you the essential lesson of life which is impermanence, that everything is passing through. In farming, if there's one thing we might learn from farming, it is this constant change that's taking place in a living biological system and that all things that we deal with are so impermanent. As such, if I had understood that as a young person, I think that perhaps instead of being so incredibly serious and focused, I probably could have relaxed around it a little bit more in the early years.

That farming is really about the community of people you're working with and the community of people that are eating the foods you're eating. That when those, both those communities are happy, then the food tastes better and the farm produces better and the cliché, the farmer's best fertilizer is the farmer's footsteps on the field. I'd take it a little further than that. I'd say that when our staff are happy then inevitably, I hear from our customers of how delicious the food is. There's a direct relationship there.



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- C. Blanchard: Thank you so much, Michael, for being a part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.
- M. Ableman: Certainly, my pleasure, Chris. Nice to be speaking with you again after all these years.
- C. Blanchard: Hey, Michael, before I let you go, you did just come out with a book.
- M. Ableman: Yeah, new book, number four. Just out after what four plus years of working on it. It's called [Street Farm: Growing food, Jobs and Hope on the Urban Frontier](#). Street Farm is the name again and Chelsea Green publishes them and it's been a real pleasure working with them. This book is very much ... Probably of all the four I've done it's the one that I think people really need to read because it's not just my story. It's the story of the individuals that we're working with on the downtown east side, many of whom have had quite a tough life.
- How food and farming has affected their experience. How we did something on a scale that hadn't really been done before in the city of Vancouver and yeah, I think there're some really fun stories and some heartbreaking ones as well. I hope people will check it out.
- C. Blanchard: Have a great day.
- M. Ableman: Okay, man. Take care.
- C. Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 95 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast and you can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Ableman. That's A-B-L-E-M-A-N.
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One last thing, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show through the suggestions forum at farmertofarmerpodcast.com and I'll do my best to get them on the show.

Thank you for listening. Be safe out there and keep the tractor running.