



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 099

Chris McGuire of Two Onion Farm on Weed Control, Irrigation, Apples, Labor, and Record-keeping on a Dedicated CSA Farm

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast, episode 99, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Chris McGuire and his wife Juli own and operate Two Onion Farm in Belmont, Wisconsin. With four acres of vegetables, and 3/4 of an acre of apples, all certified organic, Two Onion Farm is packing 300 CSA shares each week for delivery in Madison, Wisconsin, Dubuque, Iowa, and Galena, Illinois. Chris digs into the details of weed control without tractors on Two Onion Farm, with an emphasis on prevention, and reducing the bank of weed seeds in the soil. We also explore details of the farm's use of drip irrigation to make the most of a limited water supply.

We talked extensively about Two Onion Farm's organic apple production, including how they manage that alongside of the vegetables, and how they incorporate it into the marketing for their CSA shares. Chris also gets into the ways that Two Onion Farms manage their worker share program, and how they've changed that over the years as their employee management has gotten better. Given that they've improved their employee management, Chris also talks about how he's improved their hiring process, and their employee engagement. We also hear about Two Onion Farm's new transplant production greenhouse, and the energy savings and automation features they included when it was constructed last year.

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Chris McGuire: Hi, Chris. I'm happy to be here.

Chris Blanchard: Really appreciate your making time to join us today. I'd like to start as we usually do with asking you to give us the background of Two Onion Farm. How many acres you guys farming, where are you, how are you selling that produce, all of those kinds of details. The farmer introduction.



Chris McGuire: Sure. Yeah, so my wife Juli and I run the farm. We're in Belmont, Wisconsin, which is about an hour southwest of Madison, close to Dubuque, Iowa. We moved here in fall of 2003, kind of started farming right away in 2004, and just gradually ramped up over a few years. We own 12 acres. It's an old farmstead with a farmhouse and a lot of outbuildings and barns. We really can only use about 4 to 5 of that 12. We are primarily doing CSA. That's been our model since 2005, really. Last year, we had 489 shares. Little more than half of those go to folks in the Madison area, which is about an hour from us. The rest are distributed between Dubuque, Iowa, Platteville, Wisconsin, a small town near us, and Galena, Illinois. We actually do two delivery days a week. One day we go to Madison, and the other day we go to the other sites. We have two harvest days, one before each of the two delivery days.

As far labor, I am pretty much farming all the time during the growing season, more than full time. We have three children. Juli does a lot of the day to day childcare, and taking care of our house, and making sure their lives stay sane. Also, she's really only doing farm farm work about half time I'd say. We have hired employees every year since 2007. This past year, it was about six full time equivalents at the peak of the season, and tapering off to fewer in the spring and the fall. About 90 to 95% of our sales come from CSA in recent years. We do a small amount of selling to a couple of local grocery stores, the Dubuque food co-op, and the Driftless Market in Platteville. We're right now farming just a little less than five acres. We have four acres of vegetables, and about 3/4 of an acre of apples. That's all certified organic.

Chris Blanchard: With four acres of vegetables, you guys are doing 489 CSA shares?

Chris McGuire: Yeah. To qualify that, we do a lot of every other week shares, and also some short season delivery. In a given week, we're really only packing about 300 boxes, to lower that number a bit for you.

Chris Blanchard: That feels a little bit more in line with kinds of numbers that I'm used to seeing. How are you farming those five acres? Are you guys working on a tractor system, or two wheel tractor system?

Chris McGuire: Yeah. We have two tractors. We use the tractors for spreading soil amendments, all the tillage, laying plastic molds for the crops that we use that, but we do pretty much all our weed control with hand tools, wheel hoes, and hoes, or in a couple cases we'll use a BCS with a rototiller for tilling some wider aisles between winter squash. Once the crop is in the ground, we really don't do anything with the tractor. Then we do do a little bit of tractor assisted harvesting, undercutting root crops. Then mowing it, and sowing in the crop of course will be back on the tractor. Really, we had one tractor until we started growing apples. The second tractor was primarily purchased to be our orchard tractor. It's a narrower one that we use in the orchard. We do sometimes are able to use it in the veggies as well.



- Chris Blanchard: I always call up Google Maps of the farms that I'm talking to. I'm noticing that you're in that part of Wisconsin that isn't a bunch of flat land. The roads are curvy. In fact, as I'm looking at your fields, a lot of them are at slight angles to each other. It definitely looks like you're farming on some hillsides?
- Chris McGuire: Yeah. Yeah, it's in between a 5 and 10% slope, so it's not really steep, but it's certainly steep enough to worry about. To put it in context, and we're not in the really rugged up and down area of the Driftless region, but certainly it's a gentle, rolling terrain. That's always been a concern for us. As you said, we try to lay out our rows, and field on the contour to control the flow of water. We've done some experimenting with ditches and waterways to divert water, but it's an ongoing struggle to really farm that land well in vegetables, especially in wet year like this where we had some really torrential rains. That's one of the things that actually motivated us to start growing some perennial fruit, was to have a permanent ground cover that be susceptible to erosion at all.
- Chris Blanchard: How intensively are you cover cropping? Is that an important part of your erosion control strategy?
- Chris McGuire: Yeah, it is. We aim to have about half the field covered in winter rye over the winter. Basically, any ground that we have harvested by about October 10th, and that we're not going to plant before May 10th or so we try to have in winter rye. During the summer, we don't do a great deal of cover cropping. We do a lot of double cropping between spring and fall vegetables. That really minimizes the window we have for cover cropping, or within the growing season. We do a little bit of buckwheat, or spring or fall oats here and there. As much as we can, we try to ... We have a relatively small farm, and it's a bit of a crunch for us to get the production and income we want on the one hand, and then to farm the right way on the other hand, and to do adequate cover cropping, and so on.
- Chris Blanchard: Yeah, because you guys are kind of locked in there land wise. Your patch of land isn't a tidy little rectangle. It's a, if I'm remembering right from geometry class, this is a trapezoid?
- Chris McGuire: Yeah. Mostly they're triangular. It's the corner of what was a big 160 acre square farm, then they cut off the low corner with the house and buildings, and a small field 20 years ago. Yeah, we're surrounded by a road, and by some conventional grain fields. Yeah, landlocked as far as we don't really have a good opportunity to expand, and no one seems to really to want to sell in our neighborhood.
- Chris Blanchard: Right. It's not like there's just another small field next door that you could pick up from what I'm seeing.
- Chris McGuire: No. It's 150 acre field next door. Yeah.
- Chris Blanchard: One of the things that I've heard about you, and one of the things that impressed me as I was looking through your website, is you really emphasize the reliability



of your production. I think usually when people are talking about reliability, it means that they got some good systems in place, especially for weed control and irrigation. You said you're doing all your weed control, or at least most of your weed control, without tractors.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. I feel like we do a pretty reasonable job of keeping weeds under control, at least in the sense that we're not losing a lot of yield. I can think, in the last couple years, each year there may be a planting or two where the weeds got a little bigger than they should have, and probably impacted the eventual yield of the crop, but on the whole it's not a huge ... It's not something that reduces the yield a lot. I don't have a great theory, or silver bullet about how to keep the weeds under control. I feel like it mostly boils down to having enough people on hand to go out and do the hoeing and weeding when it needs to be done. We do place an emphasis, certainly, on keeping weeds from going to seed. That does really pay dividends, especially in the spring.

We used to have these situations where spring carrot plantings, or peas, would just get overwhelmed by foxtail. If we didn't keep up on the weeds for a week or two, we could just lose a crop. That doesn't happen anymore. The density of the seedlings that are coming up isn't as great, so it gives us some more leeway, actually, in the really hectic early part of the growing season. I guess the flip side of that is it costs us time and energy at the end of the growing season when we're really constantly walking through plantings trying to pull out stuff before it goes to seed, even though it's not going to have any appreciable effect on the yield of the crop.

Yeah, that's our weed control strategy. It's not really a great deal to it. I walk the field once a week, and try to look at every planting and see where the weeds are really starting to get larger, and prioritize what we need to do. Then just really having enough people out and around to go out and execute that is the key.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of tools are you using for weed control? Just walk us through something, like a carrot crop, or a beet crop, and the tools that you would use at each step of the way, how you would approach your weed control.

Chris McGuire: Sure. With carrots, that's certainly a crop that suffers a lot from weeds. We seed them four rows per bed. We don't get the perfectly evenly spaced rows that you would want from mechanical cultivation. We're marking our rows with C-clamps on the back hood of a rototiller, and then following those lines and seeding with a push Jang seeder. They're fairly uniformly spaced, but not perfectly. First attack on the weeds would be, depending on the time of year, but probably two, three weeks after seeding, that would be to wheel hoe the aisles between the beds, so one, or two, two to three passes with the wheel hoe to clear out that space. Then, using a stirrup hoe to do that space between each of the rows within the bed.

At that point, the only weeds that should be left would be in just a narrow strip within the row of carrots. Then, usually we'd wait, at least try to wait at least a



day, or even four or five days, and then come back when you can clearly see what was killed with the hoeing, and what survived, and then try to do a really exhaustive hand weeding. That's certainly the most time consuming part of it. Everyone crawls along with a bed, and, using their fingers or a little hand hoe, getting out all the weeds in the row. Try to leave the bed absolutely clean with nothing in it at that point is the goal, which is never achieved, but it's the goal I put out there and try to enforce as much as possible.

After that, it really depends on how much the weed pressure is in that particular bed, but we usually go through at least one more time with often a wheel hoeing of the aisles because there's really never any crop canopy in a crop like carrots that will reach out in the aisles between the bed. That's where you tend to get the most weeds. Then, hand weeding once or twice more within the bed. Really, we actually end up doing more hand weeding later in the year. As I mentioned before, it's a little bit paradoxical because the weeds don't get as big, and they're not actually as much of a competitive threat to the crop. Since we're trying to keep them from going to seed, they do go to seed as a smaller size and more readily late in the year, and so we have to be really vigilant about pulling stuff out before it goes to seed.

For that, we use just plastic crates, basically harvest crates that are solid without holes, not vented. We'll pull out the seeders, the weeds that are about to go to seed, or have flowering, whatever. Anything that's close to maybe flowering goes in that tub, and gets dumped at the edge of the field in the fence row just to make sure. You can definitely see if you pull out a weed, in many cases, that's close to going to seed, and leave it on the ground, and with its last dying breath, it'll try to mature some seeds.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah.

Chris McGuire: Yeah, we're trying to avoid that.

Chris Blanchard: All right. What about for irrigation? How are you managing that?

Chris McGuire: We use only drip irrigation. Our water source is a well. It's the original, well not the original, but it was the farm well that was here when we moved here. We don't feel like we have the water supply to really use overhead irrigation, where you're wasting water to some extent. We can just cover our acreage doing drip irrigation with the well and the pump we have now, which is producing about 20 gallons a minute. It's all drip irrigation. Since the last spring, we have buried main lines that carry the water through the field. There's a riser periodically, where we have a little manifold, and that will control a zone of the drip irrigation. Yeah, just using drip tape. We're laying it by hand down each row right after transplanting or seeding, and so it's pretty much always there.

The only crop we don't irrigate is garlic. Everything else, just as a matter of course, we put the drip tape down as soon as we plant. I feel like that's pretty important, so then when you do get into a dry spell, you're not in a situation



where we have to all the sudden run out and install a bunch of irrigation lines. Everything has it all the time, and it's always ready to be turned on and watered.

Chris Blanchard: You're not moving your drip tape from beds to bed, like I've seen some farms do?

Chris McGuire: No. No, it stays there from planting until harvest. We will reuse it for the spring and the fall planting in the same year, but no, other than that they're just dedicated to that one planting.

Chris Blanchard: You said you reuse it from spring to fall. Do you reuse from year to year? Is it a disposable product on your farm?

Chris McGuire: No, we don't unfortunately. Fortunately, we can recycle it now, which is good, but no. In our experience, there's two reasons we don't keep it over winter. One is it seems to tend to develop more holes as it ages, and pretty soon, from a financial standpoint, the value of the time, and the little couplers that you're installing to fix the leaks, outweigh the financial benefit of reusing that row of drip tape. Which is fairly cheap, the drip tape itself. The other thing is, it's never as easy to handle as it is the first time when you get it off that factory roll. We have a tool, a crank, that we can re-roll the drip tape on a spool to reuse it, but it's just not the same, and not as easy to unroll and to handle as it is when it comes perfectly off that factory roll.

Chris Blanchard: Do you have any tips, since you're using so much of this on your farm, for keeping it in place once you get it out? Wisconsin's a windy state.

Chris McGuire: Yeah, no. That's true. It's a battle. Once the crop canopy has reached a decent size, for us it's never a problem, because then it's protected and doesn't move around a ton. In those early weeks, especially in the spring when the wind is strong, it's a challenge. We do end up going out there sometimes and just sorting out spaghetti, and trying to straighten out drip tape lines that have blown all over the place and gotten tangled with each other. The only really solution we have is using staples, putting in a few on a row to hold it down. We do that especially in the spring. It's a pain in the neck because you have to get them out. When you pull the drip tape after harvest, and finding those staples sometimes a challenge. We feel it outweighs the time to sort out the drip tape after each windstorm in the spring, too.

Chris Blanchard: Talk to me about your apple production. At 3/4 of an acre, it almost sounds like a sidelight, but it's important enough to your operation that you guys charge extra if you want apples in the CSA, and you make a big deal about it on your web presence.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. To give it some history behind it, we started planting them in 2012. At the same time, we actually planted a number of other perennial fruits, grapes, currants, sour cherries, kiwi fruit, pawpaws. Our motivation at the time was we



wanted to expand the crop mix, what we could offer in our CSA, and make our CSA more appealing. The general rule, the public prefers sweet fruit to vegetable. Produce departments in stores, fruits generally outsell vegetables by a large margin in my understanding. We wanted to capitalize on that. Then also we were interested in growing a perennial crop to at least minimize soil erosion in some parts of our field. Another thing we were thinking of is the ergonomics. At least with tree fruit, we felt like we'd be working standing up most of the time. We're getting older, and that was something we were thinking about.

Our goal was that we would plant fruit for our CSA, and then maybe re-evaluate after some years and see if we actually wanted to switch our overall crop mix from vegetables to fruit, either mostly or exclusively. Very quickly within a year, well, within one to three years, we eliminated all the fruit except for the apples. Some of the reasons were kind of specific to the individual fruits, but overall the reason was it was just too much to manage. A lot of that fruit is horticulturally really challenging to grow in a sense that there's a lot of pests. You can control them organically, but it takes a lot of monitoring, and staying on top of them, and doing timely sprays. Doing all that at the same time as growing the 20 to 25 vegetables was just too much. It felt like we couldn't do it well. It was stressful, and so on.

We eliminated everything but the apples. We kept the apples because they're one of the more popular fruits. They have a long harvest season, so we felt like the work that we invested in managing the diseases and insects in the apples, we would at least get a long season of harvest, and then some of them can be stored. We'd be getting a big return on that time, whereas, with something like grapes that are fairly perishable, you can only really have them for a few weeks. All that work doesn't really give you as much return in your CSA boxes, or in your marketing.

We've expanded the apples since then. I have to be pretty up front that a lot of that has to do with personal interest. I really enjoy growing them. I enjoy eating them, so it's kind of one of my favorite parts of the farm. I'm looking for excuses, or reasons, to plant more of them. Keep that in mind. When you're evaluating why we do that, and whether it's worthwhile for us-

Chris Blanchard: I think it's important part of any enterprise. Right? It's a vegetable farm. You got to enjoy it.

Chris McGuire: Yeah, yeah.

Chris Blanchard: If you're not enjoying it, you may as well go spend your money someplace else.

Chris McGuire: Exactly, yeah. As far as marketing currently, as you've said, we have an add on for a CSA share. We did that because when we surveyed folks, there was a significant minority of members who said they didn't want to pay extra to get apples. We felt like we couldn't just ignore those people. Some of them are long time members. They're important to our farm. We really had to carve out a way for



them to get only vegetables. Our preference would be to keep it simple and give everyone the same thing, but we just didn't think it was reasonable to do that. About 2/3 of our members currently choose that apple option. A lot of our trees are not at full production yet, and so our harvests aren't what they will be in a few years we hope. Our long term goal is that people are getting our large size box. We give five pounds of apples a week if they chose the apple option. Our standard size box would be getting about three pounds per week. That's our target there.

Chris Blanchard: You're growing quite a wide variety of apples, and I think skipping out on some of the common supermarket varieties.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. That was a deliberate decision we made. Everything we grow is resistant to apple scab, which is probably the most major disease of apples, at least in the eastern United States. Can be managed organically, but requires a lot of sprays in the spring, and really careful attention to the timing. In a wet year, you may not really get fantastic control. There are organic growers in our region who grow varieties that are susceptible to scab, the more familiar supermarket varieties. It's possible to do a pretty decent job of that. We just didn't want to get involved with that. In the context of our diverse farm, where we have a lot of things to manage, it felt like it was a good opportunity to just eliminate one big trouble spot with the apples.

In retrospect, I'm pretty glad we did that. We've had pretty reasonable success getting nice, cosmetically good, and good tasting apples as beginners who are doing a lot of other things at the same time. We can only devote so much of our time to apples. From a marketing standpoint, that's a bit of a challenge. We're growing varieties like Liberty, and wine crisp, and crimson crisp, gold rush. Things that aren't household names. Selling it through a CSA is good, I think, because we have a captive audience. If we put an apple in their box, they're going to try it, even if it's not the variety they would've picked off the shelf at the store. As long as it tastes good, they'll probably be okay with it and like it.

If we were selling at a farmer's market, or relying mostly on selling to stores or through wholesale channels, I think that would be more of an issue because apples are a crop where there's a lot of name recognition for varieties. With that said, we did start selling them, a lot of our fruit, to store accounts this year, and had pretty good feedback. There's very little in the way of locally grown organic apples available in our area. Even though the varieties are unusual, they were able to sell quite a few of them, and we had really good feedback. It may not be as big of a problem as we anticipated.

Chris Blanchard: Great. How important is the cosmetic quality on the apples for your CSA members? My understanding with trying to grow apples organically is that it certainly has something to do with yield, and not having worms in your apples, but it also just has to do with it's hard to grow a pretty apple that people are actually going to pick up and buy.



Chris McGuire: Yeah. There's both going on. Just to step and not answer your question immediately, apple scab is not just a cosmetic issue. This can defoliate trees, and really reduce yield. Some of the things like insects in the apple, which I would say are more than cosmetic, are a serious potential issue that we have to control. There also are ... Sooty blotch and fly speck are two pretty much just cosmetic fungal diseases. Really are just, you can literally wash off or scrape off with your fingernail. They're completely superficial on the skin of the fruit. It does give us some trouble. We do a lot of spraying to control them. We have to be really careful with our brush washing after harvest to get as much of that off as we can. The apples we give out are still not supermarket, absolutely unblemished quality. For the most parts, members have been okay with that. We've had a few comments like, "Oh, they looked a little rough." I think most people have been pretty accepting.

Chris Blanchard: From a management perspective, you've really added on another layer of complexity to your already existing vegetable operation. The apples, if you're going to spray to control fungal diseases, have to get sprayed at the moment that they need to get sprayed. It's not like you can say, "Oh, I'm going to just take care of that next week." How has that integration gone for you?

Chris McGuire: It's been a big challenge. There's a whole other level of ... Horticulturally, they're just much more complicated to grow than most vegetables. There just aren't the issues in carrots with insects and diseases that there are with apples. The scouting, the trapping for insects, we never did that with vegetables. We sprayed our brassicas once a week for cabbage worms, and that was about it. Whereas, now, we're spraying once or twice, the apples for most the season, with a cocktail of different organic sprays. Knowing what to do, and deciding what to do is a lot more challenging. Then there's a timing issue. We're using an air blast sprayer, because that's the only practical thing, even on a relatively small scale orchard, and then you can only spray when conditions are calm. Trying to work that in can be a real constraint. Something which I didn't necessarily appreciate is that the work is all different from the work we do in the vegetables.

The different vegetable crops, they're very different in terms that they're from different families and all. You kind of do the same steps to grow them. We transplant them all basically in the same way. We use one seeder to see all of them. We use the same tools to weed pretty much all of them, whereas we don't do those things with apples. You have to prune them. That's a totally different type of work. Or hanging up insect traps, that's something we just don't do with the vegetables. There's another layer of training if we want to get the employees involved with the apples that weren't really doing before. As well as a huge amount of management farmer time in terms of just monitoring them, and doing the spraying.

I would say a really key factor is that we've been really fortunate in the last four years to have an employee who's taken sort of to a pack and ship manager, and does a lot of other things on the farm, but has taken a lot of the day to day management that used to fall on Juli and I. Now she's doing that, and has



basically freed up my time to pay attention to the apples, and worry about the next spray for plum curculio and so on. Without a real management level employee, I think the apples would be a really huge burden to take care of.

Chris Blanchard: That actually leads me to something I wanted to ask you about. You said you've got six employees, and you're describing now a situation where, for you to do your job well managing the apples, which are a significant part of your operation, you need somebody who's good in that position of being somebody like a pack and ship manager. Where are you getting your employees?

Chris McGuire: It's been an ongoing challenge. Pretty much every case since we've started farming here, and we've been having employees for 10 years now, they've been people who were living in the area. We haven't had folks who came in from elsewhere just to work on our farm.

Chris Blanchard: When you say living in the area, living in the Belmont, Platteville area, not living in the Madison or Dubuque area?

Chris McGuire: Never had someone from Madison. We've had a few people from Dubuque, which is half an hour away, so it's getting on the edge of commutable distance. We have one person for a few years now who's come from about 45 minutes away. That's probably the most that we've ever ... The longest commute we've ever had. We've had pretty good luck with short season summer workers, the June to August time frame, because the university in Platteville, the students there, we recruit from that pool. For the most part, as long as we're willing to interview a lot of people, and weed out the people who aren't really suited for the job, we've been able to get pretty good workers there. We've also tapped into a pool of people in the area. Often people's grown up on livestock and crop farms in this area who are looking for summer jobs, and later in high school or while they're in college, and some of those people have been really excellent in terms of their work ethic and their work.

The more challenging thing for us is to find people who can work for more than just the summer vacation, people who can start in March or April and work through October or November. It's been really hit or miss. I can say there's a consistent demographic that we're reaching out to, or tapping into. It's just kind of been luck. We put out ads, and occasionally we get some really good people who stay for a while. It's difficult, as a lot of produce farmers know, that we have seasonal jobs for maybe eight or nine months at most. Our pay isn't really high, and it's not really a livable profession for a lot of adults to support themselves, or a family year round. Some of the people we've gotten are in a situation where their spouse has got a higher income, or health insurance, and they're not looking to this job to really support their whole family. This is something they're doing partially for income and partially maybe for personal interest and so on.

Chris Blanchard: In addition to those six full time employees then, do you guys hire part-time people?



Chris McGuire: Yeah. I should've clarified that number. It's was like six full time equivalents. In this past year, I'm thinking we had five full time people at the peak, and plus three part timers, sort of adding up to six full time equivalents. We've done both. We have a part-time worker who works two days a week who's been with us for four years. That's fantastic. She makes a huge contribution on the days she's here. We're definitely open to that. Although in general, as a trend, we've switched more to full time workers as our workforce has increased. That's partially deliberate because when you only three people on the farm, if two of them are part-time, it's like we've added a huge training burden. If everyone was part-time now, and we had like 12 or 15 employees, just keeping track of them all, and the scheduling, and the training them could get to be a nightmare. It's nice to have most of them be full time, certainly, for that reason.

Chris Blanchard: Then, you guys also have a member worker program for your CSA, right?

Chris McGuire: We do. It's had a checkered history. We started it the same time we started hiring regular paid employees in 2007. At the time, a lot of CSAs have a program, at least in our area, where you'll be able to get a free share in return for working an afternoon a week for 20 weeks. We didn't really want to go on that model because a lot of our members are a little bit distant from our farm. Now we're in the way in Madison. We felt like that was a long drive for people to make on a weekly basis. We really wanted to have an opportunity to get as many people out here as we could to have them get a personal connection with the farm. We started this program where we had a schedule of work shifts throughout the growing season. Saturday, April 15th from 8:30 to noon. Wednesday, July 11th from 1:00 to 5:00, and so on. People could choose any number of these shifts when they signed up. For each shift that they chose, they got a \$25 rebate on the price of their share.

We did that for, I guess, about six years, really through 2012. At the peak, we had a lot of people coming out. I think it was about 150 shifts. Well, not 150 separate days, but there were ... People deducted \$25 from their price 150 times kind of thing. Sometimes at a shift there'd be five or eight people. Sometimes only one. We would set a limit per shift based on what we anticipated we'd need. After that, that that shift would be full, and you couldn't choose it anymore off the schedule. Pretty much for a lot of the season, every Saturday morning and every Wednesday afternoon, we had a shift. Sometimes there'd be 10 people. Sometimes only one. For a few years, we felt like it really contributed a lot to the farm, both in actually getting some important work done, and also in forging a connection between us and the members.

In the end, it was too much stress to administer during the growing season. I don't mean the paperwork, or the computer work of administering it, but the actual time that I had to spend out there with those members. Twice a week I had to be in the field, side by side with them, or at least a very competent employee had to be there with them. There's often new people who had to be trained, and really had to be watched carefully because this may have been the



first time they were at the farm. Sometimes you'd only get one person at a shift. It'd be Saturday mornings where I was out there alone with that one person, and that just didn't seem like a good use of my time when I was out there Monday to Friday with a crew of five or six employees who were a lot more productive. That Saturday morning was worth throughout very little in terms of getting things done.

We felt like that time should be better spent doing tractor work or office work or something that really was a better use of my time. After that, we scaled that program back dramatically starting, I believe, in 2013. Now we just have four shifts a year. They're big shifts with 10 or 12 people. We try to get a really big job done, like separating all our garlic cloves for planting, or transplanting our tomatoes and peppers. It's not really dragging or committing me to a lot of work throughout the growing season in managing them.

Chris Blanchard: It sounds like something that had more value when your farm was young, and then the value relative to the cost, the time and energy cost to you, declined.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. That's true. I think a lot of it had to do with our labor crew increasing in size, our regular crew of employees. As I said, we have five or six people here every day. They're getting a lot of work done. Having a few members doesn't add very much. When we had only one or two employees here every day, having a shift on Saturday morning was, even for inexperienced workers, still made a difference. Yeah, the return seemed a lot greater. The other thing is that we became better as employers. We got better at hiring employees, picking out good ones, better at training them, giving them responsibilities, all those things.

I think the productivity of our paid employees has really increased with our experience. We didn't improve as much in managing members. I'm not sure there's as much room for improvement. We couldn't really, really weed out the bad workers in advanced. There didn't really seem like a practical way of doing that. There's just not that much opportunity to really train someone well in one four hour shift, and so on. Over time, the disparity between the productivity of our employees and the productivity of the member workers was increasing, and really noticeably.

Chris Blanchard: That's really interesting how you're pinning that, your development as employee managers, and really developing that skill, and how that really changes where you're going to get the most out of your time and energy.

Chris McGuire: Yeah, no. I think we have definitely gotten better as managers. We still make tremendous amount of mistakes all the time. I'm out there and thinking, "Oh my gosh, I should've told that person to do something different. I should've," any number of things. "We're just wasting people's time. This is terrible supervision." On the whole, it's gotten better.



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Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to take a break, get a word from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Chris McGuire from Two Onion Farm.

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All right, and we're back with Chris McGuire from Two Onion Farm in Belmont, Wisconsin, down in the ... That's the southwest corner of Wisconsin. I had to take a minute, visualize the map there. Chris, before we went on break, you were talking about how you've improved your employee management, how that's changed your relationship with the member worker program. I'm really



interested in digging into the real nuts and bolts practical steps that you've taken to improve your labor management.

Chris McGuire: One thing is just the hiring process. That's a real critical step with employees, is just finding the right person to begin with. There's not a whole lot you can do with a really bad, or mediocre employee. Right from the beginning, we had some fantastic workers, but I think we've overall gotten better in picking out at least pretty good ones. I think one really important thing we've learned is having a trial work day when we hire people. Everyone who we're considering has to come for at least a half day of trial work here in the winter or spring, when we're doing our recruitment. That's the most important part of our hiring process. We actually started doing that fairly early. I can't really say that that in particular something that's improved. What has improved, I think, is our interpretation of the trial work days, in the sense that we used to be pretty forgiving of issues that we noticed during those work days.

We've come to the realization, actually we were helped in this by one of our CSA members who is a HR consultant, we were talking to her and she said, "Listen. When someone comes to a trial work day, that is their best performance. They're on trial, and they know it. They're as motivated, and as interested as they're ever going to be. If they seem like a little lackluster, I mean forget it. They're only going to get worse." That was a real light bulb moment for me. I am thinking about people we've interviewed before that point, and then going forward, it really clarified things for me. People will make mistakes at trial work days out of inexperience, or this is the first time they were doing something. That's forgivable, definitely. That's perfectly fine. We try to explain that to people that it's our job as supervisors to show them what needs to be done so if they don't quite get it right away, that's okay.

Any failure of motivation, or some attitude, or work ethic, or being sloppy or inattentive, or showing up late, all those things only get worse once you've hired that person. It sounds really harsh to say that. It was hard for me to internalize it because I like to think of myself as a fairly forgiving, patient person. I was really inclined to say, "Oh, they were nervous, and it was their first time here," and so on. That's really not the case. That's showing the kind of worker they are. That simple attitude change toward the trial work days has really helped us, I think, a lot in taking better workers. Not that we don't continue to make mistakes, but I think it's helped a lot. The other thing I'd say with the recruitment process is just the understanding that you have to be willing to talk to a lot of people, and that we try not to pick winners based on their initial contact, to say. We try to consider a bunch of people, and have a bunch of people out here for trial work day. That's time consuming. It's draining, psychologically and all.

Chris Blanchard: It's hard because you end up telling ... It's a lot of people that you end up having to say no to.



Chris McGuire: That's also true, yeah. Yep. I try to be a person who makes everyone like me. I had to really stop myself from practically offering people jobs when they come for a trial work day just to make them happy and all. I understand exactly what you mean by that. Yeah, that's the hiring part of it I'd say. As far as once we actually get people here, and they started working ... Improvements that we've made, one thing is definitely giving over more responsibility to employees. When we first started hiring people, we really felt like there's all this important skilled work that only we can do. The employees can weed, and they can pick green beans, but that's about it. Any tractor driving, or direct seeding, or anything that seems to involve some more responsibility has to be done by Juli or Chris. Period.

We gradually let up on that. It's been universally an improvement. Every time that we've given over responsibility to people, I think it's a positive thing. Just the obvious benefit that it's one less thing that we have to do, of course, but it also really improves that person's motivation, and investment in the job, and their happiness with it. They recognize that they've been given some extra responsibility. That gives people a boost. It makes them feel more important and all. As long as we pick a decent person for that role, say we select a pretty reasonable, competent person to do our direct seeding, that person is going to do a better job than I would.

Chris Blanchard: Really?

Chris McGuire: Guaranteed. Yeah, because they will give it their full attention. When I take that person aside and say, "We've chosen you for this very important job," I'm being a little bit silly, but that's kind of the attitude I try to take to really impress on them that this is an important area of responsibility that they're being awarded. That makes them realize, "Oh, this is important, and I've got to really put my best foot forward when I'm doing this." Then I hammer down the simple rules, that, "When you're direct seeding, you've got to make sure there's seed in the hopper so don't let it run out," and, "You've got to make sure you have the right plate in there," and, "You've got to make sure that doesn't get clogged with trash when you're pushing it down the row."

Then, that person, when they go to direct seed, that's the only thing they're going to pay attention to. Where, is if I were doing it, I'd be worrying about, "Is it going to be calm enough for me to spray the apples tonight?", and, "Is that other person at the other end of the field slacking off? Do I need to go check on them? Did I forget to tell them X and Y," and all these other things. I would run out of seed in the hopper, and not plant half a row because of it.

Chris Blanchard: Okay, but I'm thinking about all the things that can go wrong while you're seeding. You talked about getting trash caught up in the seeder. I'm thinking about the soil conditions aren't quite right. It's too clumpy, or even stupid things like the humidity's too high, and the seeds are sticking to the side of the hopper. I don't know if that happens with the Jang. It used to happen to my Earthway. How do you deal with all of that variability? That's one reason why a lot of managers, including myself, tended to hold on to things like direct seeding really tightly.



Chris McGuire: Yeah, no. You're absolutely right. That's the thorn in the whole issue. There really is experienced judgement skill required, and that the new person doesn't have that. Yeah. There's no simple answer to that. One thing is definitely trying to get that job down to some discrete, identifiable things that the person has to pay attention to. Rules, protocols, and so on. When I'm doing a job trying to think about, "All right, what does this really consist of?" All that so called experience and skill that I'm bringing to it, really trying to boil it down. Some jobs it's easier than others, definitely. It's something like with the direct seeding, we weigh the seed before we start and after we're done, the seed in the packet. Before you take it out, you weigh it. We come back in, we weigh it again. We do that partially just to track how much seed we use, and for ordering seed the next year. It's also a way of catching mistakes.

Let's say the humidity, or whatever, some problem with the seeder, is actually causing an issue. Maybe I would've noticed it right away because I'm more experienced or whatever, but at least this inexperienced seeder will notice it when they weight the seed, or when they give me the report, and I look at it the next morning, I'm like, "Wait. You didn't use any seed yesterday." Then, okay, maybe that planting was screwed up, but it's not going to go on for the rest of the year. I honestly feel, in my experience, that the potential for those kind of problems to occur, that what the inexperienced person doesn't recognize it and I would have, are outweighed by the number of problems where I run the seed hopper empty. That's happened multiple times, and I can only maybe think of once or twice where the operator made an error that I would've not made because of my experience, and so on.

It's still a judgement call. There's certain jobs that I still only do myself because of what you said, I don't feel like ... I haven't got to that point in my confidence in my employees, or whatever, or my understanding of the task that I feel like I can train someone else to do it well. Still, getting back to the original question of how we've improved our labor management, I think that giving over responsibilities has improved the satisfaction of our employees with the job, and also the quality of the work that's been done in pretty much every case.

Chris Blanchard: Thank you for all those details. One thing that I noticed on your website that's interesting is you guys actually have employment as a top level navigation item, and then a fairly detailed rundown of what people can expect working at your farm.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. That was a deliberate decision we made. The way it is, is we have an intro to working at the farm before you, or we hope people read that, before they get into the specific job description with the pay, and then the schedule and all. I think this is another area we've improved. We tried to sit down, and really hammer out in our own minds, "What are we looking for in a person? What do you need to be successful here?" I think this would be different for different farms, but for us it really came down to being a quick worker, being a careful



worker, and doing a good job, getting along with the other people on the crew, and being able to cooperate and communicate with them. Then most importantly, having a good attitude, and respecting the work, respecting us, and not being a jerk. Those kind of things.

That's one of the things we really try to emphasize on that intro page. We want people to read that and understand it. We used it as a somewhat of a testing device during the interview process. We always ask this question, "Why would you be good at this job?" Hopefully in their answer to that, the person will say, "Because I'm quick, I'm careful. I get along with my coworkers, and I have a great attitude."

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Chris McGuire: It shows that they were in tune enough that they actually read that description, and at least tried to remember it, and maybe internalized it and so on. If the person doesn't speak to our needs at all when they're asked that question, that's, to me, indicates that they don't really care what we want, or what we're looking for. That's not a good sign. Then it continues past the interview process into the actual training and working with that person. I try to come back to those points during performance review, really say, "Are you meeting these four areas?"

I use it in my own mind as I'm evaluating people, and I'm watching them work. Like, "Wait, are you doing these things? And if not, I need to go and talk to you about it." I think being clear with people about what you want is a huge part of getting them to do well. Most employees, they don't want to screw up, Chris. They want to come here and do a good job. I think realizing that, and then doing our best as supervisors to make it crystal clear to them what constitutes a good job here on this farm, that's really what we have to do as employers.

Chris Blanchard: The person who recommended you to be on the show said that you guys did a really great job at record keeping, and then a really good job of decision making that you do as a result of your record keeping. I wanted this, I wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about that. Just to roll that out there as a little bit of a vague question, can you tell us about your record keeping approach?

Chris McGuire: Yeah. I have to confess that I was a little surprised when you mentioned this in an email before our conversation, that someone had suggested me on that basis. I have a hard time thinking of a lot of big decisions we've made on our farm on the basis of records. I do feel like we've made a lot of small, maybe incremental improvements. As far as what records we keep, I do try to have the attitude that a record should be useful in the future. If I'm doing something over the winter, and I say, "Oh, gosh. I can't make this decision because I forgot to write something down," or whether we should plant this variety again for instance, or, "Do we have a good planting date for our Brussels sprouts last year? I didn't write down when I planted the Brussels sprouts," or, "I didn't make any notes on that trial lettuce variety."



That, to me, is a real failure of record keeping. I wanted to have some records, and they weren't there to use. Over the years, I've tried to improve a little bit each year that way. Make notes to myself to look at during the growing season that you've got to write this stuff down, and in some cases done the opposite, where I've realized that, "We're not using this information I spent a bunch of time writing down, so we should stop and just forget about it." That's my overall rationale there. The main records that we keep, and I think the ones that are most useful, or to me, have been basic stuff about planting. When we planted them, when we transplanted them, when we harvested them, and the amount that we harvested on each of the harvest dates.

That simple information has been hugely important in the small incremental improvements I mentioned before. Fine tuning planting dates for a succession plantings of lettuce, or eliminating low yielding varieties. I think there's a lot of, as a beginning farmer, there's a lot of room for improvement in those areas, especially on a diverse vegetable farm. We are growing a lot of different things. Looking back, we had a lot of just waste, and sloppiness, because of dead planting dates, or varieties that weren't really that good, or spacings where we could've planted stuff closer together. Hammering away at those things, chipping away at them year after year can increase your yields and profits a lot in the long run.

One thing that we kept really careful records on for a while and then discarded, actually, was time records of how much time we spent doing every task, on every crop. We spent 45 minutes on this day hand weeding the carrot planting from July 3rd, and we spent 30 minutes hand weeding the carrot planting from July 20th, and then we spent 10 minutes pulling out posts from our pepper planting. We had this huge amount of data on how much time we spent doing everything on every planting, which I thought would be fabulous because it would allow us to ... I don't know what I thought, actually, because I don't think we really used that data in too many important or useful ways.

As a CSA farm, we feel somewhat locked into having a diverse mix of crops, so we never eliminated a crop because it was unprofitable to grow because it took too much time relative to the yield. Nor did we really invest in very much labor saving machinery or devices based on that time data, and it was really time consuming to keep those records. I did all the entering them into the computer every morning during the growing season. It was a chore, especially when you have six or eight people working on your farm, and they do a dozen things during the day. That's something we gave up. The only thing we do it for now is the apples, because they're my favorite crop as I mentioned earlier, and because they're fairly new. I do want to know where ... I feel like that's an area where we're really trying to actively improve, and do things more efficiently. I do want to know how long things are taking.



Chris Blanchard: Again, it's an add on where you've got a distinct product. You need to know how much time you're spending on the apples, because that's going to be a significant point of pricing that item in your marketplace.

Chris McGuire: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. The other thing where we do keep time records still is for individual tasks, like a benchmarking. Not always, but sometimes during the year I'll try to keep a time record of how long it took us to transplant, or to seed trays in the greenhouse, or to wash carrots. Things that are pretty big tasks that we do fairly often, and take a lot of time, just to have an idea of how long they take for planting purposes. Like, "How long should I expect it to take to harvest that bed of carrots this week?" It's nice to have some data to look back on, and to maybe catch like, "Oh my gosh, we're spending a ton more time washing carrots this year than we did last year," and like, "What's going on here?" We do keep some sporadic records on that, but it's not an exhaustive timing everything all the time kind of effort.

Chris Blanchard: Really more of a sampling to benchmark how things are going.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. Yeah. That has been useful, because actually, in the carrot washing, we did invest in a barrel washer a few years ago, and then we can tell, and then an undercutter for carrot harvesting. It's a pretty big crop on the farm, and it's good to know whether we should invest in those things, and whether they've paid dividends. Another kind of record keeping I'd mention is actually about purchases. I guess everyone has to track the money they spend for tax reasons and all, but I find it's really helpful to have really good records of what we've bought. Not just, "We went to Farm and Fleet, and spent \$116 on supplies," but actually what we bought, and sometimes even write down item numbers, and assign everything to a category like, "This was for the greenhouse. This was for trellising," and so on.

It makes future shopping a lot easier, because then I can go look at item numbers. I know what pair of gloves we got for this particular job last time. I don't have to wonder, and go out and try to find them in the packing shed, and look at the label inside the glove, and all this stuff. I can pre-order it.

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Chris McGuire: Then sort of track and being able to ... You track expenses by category year to year, and see that we're making some progress, maybe, in cutting down the amount we spend on certain things and all that. That's been pretty useful I feel. It's not really that time consuming. We don't buy that much. It's not like we're buying a dozen things every day.

Chris Blanchard: How do you organize that information? It's one thing just to say, "Okay, I wrote down on the receipt the model number of the glove," but putting that into a



useful place so that the next time you want some gloves, you can actually find it without spending half an hour at it. How do you do that?

Chris McGuire: Yeah. That's a good question. We're using a Microsoft Access database. That's something I had experience with in a previous job, so it was a natural choice when we started farming. It's not a necessarily a great tool. It's a software system, especially if you don't have prior experience with it, it's fairly complicated. I think the key elements of it are having this in a table, where each row that you've got it's a spreadsheet. It's something you bought, and when you bought it, and how much it cost, and maybe an item number.

I mentioned that. We certainly don't record item numbers for every single thing we buy. Sometimes when I feel like it's going to be something we'll buy again later, and I want to know that, and putting it into a category so we have a whole ... Over time, all the categories we have has kind of gotten mushroomed into a huge number just because we add a couple every year for new things, and so on. Things like hand tools, and seed, and fuel, and greenhouse supplies, and so on, whatever kind of makes sense for your operation and your way of thinking about things.

The other thing that we do, and I think it's somewhat useful, is we do, for everything we buy, we say, "Is it a fixed or a variable expense?" That's somewhat useful when we thought about scaling up the CSA, to be able to say, "We're spending this much on expenses per CSA share," and then we had this other overhead fixed set of costs that we want to keep separate.

Chris Blanchard: One other thing that I had noticed when I was looking around about your farm is that you guys put up a new transplant production greenhouse last winter. How'd that work out for you?

Chris McGuire: It's been good. It was a big investment for us. I guess to give the background, when we started here, we really put up some very cheap structures to raise our ceilings in, and we struggled along with them for many years. We had small cold frames with electric heating cable buried in the ground. These were things that were like four feet high. You couldn't even walk into them. We laid trays on the ground in there, and we covered them with row cover on cold nights. Then after five or six years of that, we did put up some small, plastic covered quonset greenhouses. Even they were pretty primitive. We did all of our potting, actually seeding the trays, in another building, and then we carried the trays over to this greenhouse.

We sold well over \$200,000 worth of vegetables in a year raising seedlings in really primitive and time consuming ways that we struggled a lot with, especially the cold part of the early spring, late March, early April, where you have to be wrestling row cover onto these seedlings every night, and ones around the edge might freeze on a cold night. It was kind of a drag. Eventually, some of these things were rotting into the ground anyway. We felt like we needed to replace them, and then we decided that why don't we replace them with something



decent. Financially, we only spent almost \$40,000 on this greenhouse from start to finish. That's pretty hard to justify at our scale, and I hope we can justify it eventually, but I think it's something that's pretty slow to pay for itself.

It's 34 by 72 gothic greenhouse with a double layer of polyethylene. Pretty standard structure. We sized it pretty big for our size of a farm because we want to have an ample work area in there, so it has a concrete floor with a drain that we put in. That's where we can do our mixing soil. We make our own soil mix, so we have to have piles of ingredients in there. We use soil blocks. That's where we make them, and all of our planting and potting on. The rest of the greenhouse is where we actually grow the plants. I guess things that are maybe a little different there is we lay our trays of seedlings directly on the ground. Where there's no concrete, there's packed sand with landscape fabric over it. We're laying the trays on the ground there.

In the sand, underneath the beds where we lay these trays, there's hot water tubing. That's our heat source. We don't have a propane furnace. We don't make any attempt to heat the air in the greenhouse directly. It's all bottom heat under those seedling trays. At night, we still do cover them with row cover, so we have basically wickets covering the areas where we lay the seedlings down. We can pretty quickly drag our row cover with two people. It takes two or three minutes to drag covers over the seedlings at night in the colder part of the year, and then take them off in the early morning.

I like the bottom heat. I think it's fairly economical in terms of how much energy you need to actually provide the heat needed for the plants to grow, because we're not trying to heat the whole air cavity, the whole air space in the greenhouse, but just the actual area where the plants are. Then at night we're enclosing them. They're in a blanket there. I guess the other thing that we did there is we put in an automatic watering system. As you can visualize, we've got wickets over the trays of seedlings, and then from the top of these wickets, there's suspended a water line with little sprinklers.

It's just a standard greenhouse sprinkler system that we got from Nolt's Produce Supply. Then we can set it on a timer. We're going to water the seedlings for 20 minutes, and we walk away. It does it, and then shuts off automatically. That's something we were really pleased with. I've heard negative comments about automatic watering from other growers, that they trusted it too much, and ended up having problems with either too much watering or too little because they set the timer, and they walked away. They weren't really paying attention like they would have if they were watering by hand. With one year of use, that was not a problem for us. We did look at the plants every day before we watered them, and made a decision based on that observation whether to water them at all, and whether it was for 15 minutes, or 20, or 25, and so on.

We felt like it did a far more even, uniform job than we would've done by hand. It's just because the human doesn't have the patience to really do the thorough coverage, and all that the automatic sprinkler just does automatically. We were



really happy with that. It's a great improvement in terms of being fun to work with in the early spring, and not such a nuisance and a chore as our old system was. The automatic watering is great. Yeah, we're pretty happy with it, but it was expensive.

Chris Blanchard: Was it worth it?

Chris McGuire: I don't know, Chris. I said it was \$40,000, and we're selling about \$200,000, or a little bit more, worth of vegetables a year. You have to have some kind of facility to raise your seedlings, I guess. I'm not aware of anything in our area where we can really buy the transplants that we need. Yeah, I guess I don't know how to answer the question. I've thought about it, but ... What's the alternative? What are we comparing it to? Is it a cheaper \$20,000 greenhouse with a propane furnace, and not the in ground heat? Yeah, I struggle with it.

Chris Blanchard: That's good to know. Those big investments, those are hard. Sometimes it makes such a big difference in your quality of life, and not necessarily reflected instantly in your bottom line. I think after 12 or 13 years of being in business, usually you're going to run up against things where it's time to make that kind of an outlay.

Chris McGuire: Yeah. It was part of an effort to actually reduce our early season labor needs. That's one of the ways we rationalized it, maybe. We have cut that back. We have one employee start at the same time as they used to, kind of an early March, but our next employee slot now starts in mid/late April instead of late March. Having a vacuum seeder to do the seeding, having the automatic watering, not spending an hour every afternoon dragging row covers onto plants in multiple, tiny little cold-frames, and so on is part of the reason behind that. If you add up the numbers to how much we would pay someone for a few weeks, and then compare that to \$40,000, it would take a lot of time to justify it that way.

Chris Blanchard: With that, Chris, it's time for us to turn to our lightning round. What's your favorite tool on the farm?

Chris McGuire: I think a tripod orchard ladder that we use for picking and pruning apples high in the tree. They're really light. They're made of aluminum. They're really handy to use, and I love them.

Chris Blanchard: Is there a particular brand that you appreciate more than others?

Chris McGuire: Tallman, I believe, is the brand we get, like tall man.

Chris Blanchard: What's the coolest tool that you've made or adapted for your farm?



Chris McGuire: Maybe something we started doing this year, which is a system for rolling up and unwinding row cover. Basically, we took a piece of 10 foot long galvanized pipe, the same size you'd use in the purlin of a greenhouse, or like a chain link fence top rail. You need a lot of these pipes, one for each piece of row cover that we need to roll up. They all have a hole drilled near one end. Then we have a crank that we can insert into that end of the pipe. There's a pin that goes through the hole in the pipe, and through a hole in the crank, and anchors the crank there.

You can use the crank to turn that pipe when you're rolling up row cover, and then take the crank out and put it into another pipe to roll up another piece of row cover. This all sits on a cart that we made out of wood that we can wheel around the edge of our fields, down to the bed where we need to roll up some row cover. We put the piece of pipe across the cart, slip the crank in, pin it down, and then we can roll up that row cover. It's a quick way to roll it up, and it's a really quick way to reuse it, because to unroll it over a next bed later in the year, one person grabs each end of that pipe, and walks it down the bed, unrolling it as they go. It's a breeze. A little hard to explain, but it's been a big help to us.

Chris Blanchard: That's a good picture. It is radio. It looked like, from the overhead pictures that I saw of your farm, that your beds are all the same length, or at least mostly the same length?

Chris McGuire: They used to be. We've changed that. Yeah, we used to do everything about 90 feet, but we actually combined some parts of our fields. Now we have 90 foot beds, and then ... No, 280 or so foot beds. We try to keep it to those two lengths.

Chris Blanchard: Okay, so you've either got long pieces of row cover or short pieces of row cover?

Chris McGuire: Yeah, exactly. They're all labeled. Yeah.

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

Chris McGuire: Apples.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, that was pretty easy, I think, given the conversation so far. If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?

Chris McGuire: You have a hard question with that, Chris. I've heard you ask other people, and I don't know how they can think of something. I would just tell him everything I know now.

Chris Blanchard: All right. I guess that works, right? If you could just infuse that beginning farmer with all the knowledge, that'd be great.

Chris McGuire: Yeah.



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

Chris Blanchard: All right. Chris, thank you so much for being on the show today. This has been fantastic.

Chris McGuire: You're welcome. It was a pleasure, Chris. I always like to talk about farming, so yeah, thanks a lot.

Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 99 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast. You can find the notes for this show at FarmerToFarmerPodcast.com by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for McGuire. That's M-C-G-U-I-R-E.

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Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show through the suggestions form at FarmerToFarmerPodcast.com. Chris McGuire was on the show today because somebody took the time to go fill out that form and say, "Hey, you should get Chris on the show." I'll do my best to get your suggestions included in the lineup here at the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

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