



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

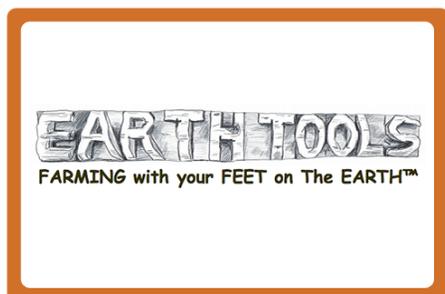


EPISODE 115

Susan and Harley Soltes of Bow Hill Blueberries on Organic Berry Production and Adding Value to Products, Farm, and People

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast, episode 115. This is your host Chris Blanchard. Susan and Harley Soltes of Bow Hill Blueberries raise five acres of highbush blueberries on the northern edge of the Skagit River Valley in Western Washington. Susan and Harley bought the oldest blueberry farm in Skagit County in 2011, transitioned the farm to organic, and launched a new line of value-added products along with their fresh and frozen berries. Harley shares the details of organic blueberry production, from weed control and management of mummy berry and spotted wing drosophila through the GAP-certified harvests that provides access to institutional markets.

Bow Hill's blueberry bushes were mostly planted in the 1940s, which provides a great marketing opportunity, heirlooms, but also presents challenges when it comes to keeping the harvest crew happy. Harley and Susan both dig deep into how they work with their labor crew to maximize the harvest and keep worker satisfaction high. Susan walks us through how the market their fresh and frozen berries to institutions, including Microsoft's food service and the Seattle Seahawks, as well as how they created their unique line of value-added products and how they've established a differentiated presence in the marketplace, even though Washington state is the United States' largest producer of organic blueberries. We also discuss how Bow Hill has developed and enhanced their you-pick market and on farm sales, as well as how they've turned purslane to their advantage.

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Harley and Susan Soltes, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Susan Soltes: Hi there, it's great to be with you.

Harley Soltes: Thank you, Chris.

Chris Blanchard: Thanks so much for joining us today. I'd like to have you guys set the stage for us there at Bow Hill Blueberries, on the northern edge of the Skagit River Valley: where you guys are farming, how much you're growing, what crops you're doing - I think it's in the name, the blueberries - and how you're selling. Just kind of as a framework to guide the conversation going forwards.

Susan Soltes: In 2011, Harley and I bought the oldest blueberry farm in Skagit Valley. It had been with one family since the 30s. We acquired it because the parents had passed away and they had four sons. The sons didn't want a farm, so they sold it. They had moved on to high-tech careers and things like that. What we wanted to do was really to breathe life back into this historic farm. It had been in the valley and people had picked there for years and years. It was just really known, but as the parents got older, things weren't as active. We bought it, and we immediately took it organic. That was our first order of business. Harley, do you want to talk about that at all?

Harley Soltes: Yeah, so the farm itself by today's standards, is small. We have a little over five acres of fruit on a six-acre site. Today, blueberry farms are 40, 80, or 200 acres and do machine-picking and efficiency. This is the size farm that farms were in the 40s when these blueberries were planted. Our plants, our five acres of blueberries, were mostly planted in 1947. It's our 70th year. The plants are 70 years old. We have heirloom varieties that date make to the 1920s. We have a gift of some fruit that's not available anymore, or that's certainly not grown commercially anymore. We, like Susan said, transitioned to organic from day one. That's the only way we would do things. That was a three-year process that we did during our first three years. That's kind of the overview of the farm site.

Susan Soltes: Because we started with fruit, we didn't have to wait for plants to mature or grow or anything like that. The first year what we decided we would do is open up the you-pick again. People in the community were really excited about that. How we promoted it was that you could have a farm experience and eat fresh fruit right off the bush. We weren't going to say "don't eat blueberries while you you-pick." We know that's going to happen anyway. We wanted to say, "Go ahead, have a good time. Enjoy your experience, and really get to know what this fresh food is like." We had you-pick, and then we decided that institutional customers might be a good way to go. That's what we started. Our first institutional customer was the University of Washington medical center. We started delivering to them. That was year one.

Harley Soltes: Susan created a thing called a "grazing pass," which people could pay \$5 and



they got a backstage pass. We still do it today where you go out in the field and you can eat all you want. You have an all-you-can-eat organic blueberry buffet. That was something very different than any of the other farms were doing. We got a lot of attention because of the grazing pass that we still use. We integrate it with our you-pick now where you can eat all you want, and then you just pay for what you put in your bucket when you leave.

Chris Blanchard: I love that.

Susan Soltes: Yeah, it works really well for us to help support that program because we have to have people there, monitoring, handing out buckets, and weighing and all of that kind of thing in our store. It's like an entrance fee. They pay \$5, and then if they pick ten pounds, if they put ten pounds in their bucket, then they get their \$5 back. It really promotes picking, as well. Go ahead and eat, but if you put enough berries in your bucket, you'll have gotten a free meal. People love that. That really promotes picking. It works really well for us.

Harley Soltes: The first few years we were here, we were mainly fresh. Our goal was fresh fruit, either sold as retail, wholesale flats and pints, and the you-pick. That was a significant amount of our fruit, early on. We can get into some of the growing things later, where we had a reduced harvest the first few years because we did some heavy catch-up pruning. Over the years, we've shifted that to help create a sustainable business plan for a five-acre small farm, to much more value-added production so that as the fresh sales diminishes every year, our frozen plus value-added marketing grows every year.

Susan Soltes: The other thing to note with this historic farm is that a processing facility came with it. Harley, he saw that and thought that would get us a leg up. He put in an organic processing kitchen, if you want to talk about that at all, Harley.

Harley Soltes: In addition to the gift of mature plants, of varieties that are incredible, we did get an already licensed food-processing building. The farm previously had processed fruit. They had a small coop here that packed raw fruit for freezing, for a cooperative of small farms. There were other five to ten-acre smaller blueberry farms. That facility was already here. We saw that, we knew the value of the farm. We knew that there was potential for cooking, processing, to do some value-added processing on this farm, rather than just plants and no infrastructure. We made use of that. We might not have gone that direction, had that facility not already been there.

Chris Blanchard: When you guys bought the farm in 2011, did you have experience growing blueberries and experience with processing kitchens or the culinary field?

Harley Soltes: Not in blueberries. We had a small farm in Kingston. We were raising pastured poultry. We did processing there, small-scale processing. I had been a photographer for the Seattle Times for a lot of years, so I had photographed food a lot. I had recently just done a book called *The Chefs on the Farm* which was a book about small-scale farming, processing, being local. We had done a



lot of research in farming. We were doing pastured poultry. When I saw the processing building, I thought, "Processing building? That could be my scaled-up chicken processing facility," and that we would rent out the blueberries to someone else who knew blueberries. That was our first thought.

We called around, different farms, larger farms in the area to see if they wanted to lease the blueberries and take them organic. We had people who, yes, they wanted to lease the blueberries, but no they didn't want to take them organic. An organic lease is kind of complicated because it's such a long-term view when you're doing organic. We knew then that we had to take over the blueberries ourselves, if we wanted them to be organic. Our house is in the middle of the field, so in addition to believing in organic farming and having always done things that way, it's doubled by the fact that you live in the middle of where the production, where spring and all that would be.

We started on sort of graduate school for blueberry farming. We got a lot of help from the other historically organic farms. Cascadian was one of them, which was one of the first organic blueberry farms in the country. Also the organic manager at one of the other larger farms in the valley sought us out when they heard we were going organic and offered to help. We got a lot of training from other farms with a lot of experience, and then I go to every workshop that I can go to that has anything to do with organics and blueberries. Now we've become the farm that other new organic farms come to, to find out "what are we doing here?" We've been successful at raising production. We've been successful at keeping disease and pests down. We're fairly innovative in some of the things we try in the field and risk-taking and do all kinds of things out there. We've become a farm now that can pass on that information to the other people that want to do the same transition.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about the transitioning process. There in 2011 then, you've got all these perennial plants. What did it take to transition that land to organic?

Harley Soltes: The legality of it is that it takes three years from the last application of a prohibited product in organics to get organic certification. We started the clock right when we got here. We went through the Washington State Department of Agriculture has a certified transitional program. Not all states offer that. Not all certifiers offer that. So that with one year and one day after we started the full organic process, we were officially certified transitional. It's a logo and it's a label and it's a certification that helps locally. People know what that means at the coops in Washington state. What it tells a buyer and an eater is that you're fully organic in your practices, but you're not yet certified.

In the transitional program with the Washington State Department of Agriculture, you actually go through inspections, all the paperwork, and you pay a fee. You're doing everything as if you're certified organic. The real advantage is, at the end of your three years, you're in the system. There's no surprise. They actually mail you, right at your three-year anniversary, you get your full organic certificate. You don't end up with a surprise, like that you did something wrong,



during the process. We went through the transitional program, and then at the end of three years, our harvest in 2014 was our first full-certified organic harvest.

Chris Blanchard: Did you guys have challenges with soils and pests during that transition period?

Harley Soltes: We didn't have a lot of challenges that even the conventional farms don't have. In fact, we were more successful than most conventional farms in terms of the two main things that can cause really big problems in organic blueberry or organic fruit. There's one fungus called a mummy berry, which can wipe out 80% of your fruit. Then nationally there's a new fruit fly called the spotted wing drosophila that is affecting fruit, from cherries to blueberries to blackberries, everything, which has limited options in organic treatment. Through intense monitoring and being relentless and using those organic products that are available to us, in a very timely, well-thought-out manner, we've maintained really good control of everything.

Chris Blanchard: What does that timely well-thought-out manner look like, when you're dealing with a pest like spotted wing drosophila? That's one of those that gives me nightmares when I hear about it.

Harley Soltes: We put out 20-24 monitoring traps throughout the field, which is a lot of traps for this sized field. We monitor everything from the perimeter to the inner parts of the field. Those are little cups. They're actually Starbucks clear coffee cups, when you go get a nice latte at Starbucks, they give you. We put a bait in there, which is a yeast/sugar mixture. Then we check those every [inaudible] and change the bait material in there. This is a monitoring bait, not really designed to kill but to monitor when you start having high numbers of female spotted wing drosophila in the field. We got around every three days and check every 20-24 traps. We put all of those on a spreadsheet. We're watching for when that rise in female in the traps goes. That tells us when to start using our organic sprays.

We use a couple of different fermented bacterial sprays that are on the market, that are organic approved. We do them at the right time of day, and we do them at the right interval spacings to get the maximum out of what you can control with them. It's really impossible, there's a lot of things you can do in the organic ag that doesn't require a chemical, an organic chemical, through mechanical means and cultural means, but stopping spotted wing drosophila is not one of them. We do use organic sprays, and we use them at the most optimum time of day and everything that we can.

Chris Blanchard: How about controlling for the mummy berry?

Harley Soltes: With disease control, mummy berry, it can come from other farms and blow in. There's a lot more mechanical things we do, there. One of the things is we apply 100 cubic yards of mulch onto the plants per acre every year, so 100 cubic yards per acre per year. It's seven semi-trucks of mulch we purchase. The mulch of



course does multiple things. It improved our organic matter in our soil. When we took over the farm, we had dangerously high acidic levels. There was very little organic matter. It was overhead irrigated, so we were losing a lot of water. By deeply mulching in the fall, we covered the mummies. If the mummies fall down, the blueberries mummify and they fall down on the ground, they become the inoculant for next year. By burying those with deep compost, we prevent a lot of them from coming up and re-infecting the next year. In addition to building organic matter, building soil structure, retaining moisture, and minimizing weeds - it adds a lot to the nutrients, to the soil. There's five or six things we're getting out of this deep mulch, and one of the main things is the mummy berry control.

The other thing we do is we pay our professional pickers, if they find mummies when they're picking, we give them pints of ice cream for every hundred mummies. They add them to a little cup. They get a pint of ice cream so that you're using sanitation. Some of the bigger farms will have vacuum systems to try to vacuum them up, but by just removing the inoculant and/or covering it, that's one of the things we do for mummy berry. We definitely are in the level of what a conventional farm using systemic fungicides does to control mummy.

Chris Blanchard: In terms of the outcomes that you're creating?

Harley Soltes: In terms of the outcome. In terms of the number of infections we have, yeah.

Chris Blanchard: Let's back out a little bit here. We talked about a couple of really specific practices, but what does a year in the life of a blueberry farmer look like? Walk us through the calendar.

Harley Soltes: One of the things is when we look at the typical life in a blueberry farm, ours is a 12-month year because we're processing. Sue can talk about this. We're actually manufacturing from our frozen fruit all year-round. We don't get time off. We don't have a season and then we're off. Then again, growing perennial plants, you're dealing with them even in the winter, with pruning.

If we just started beginning at the last day of harvest, we start then, what does our year look like? We're waiting, basically after the last day of harvest, for the first frost. We're sitting around and waiting. It's the slowest time to be in the field because we're waiting for the first frost so it knocks the leaves off. Once the leaves are off, we can start pruning and we will start mulching. In October, before it gets too wet in our field, one of the things is we have a very wet site. We're bordered by what used to be the Samish River, is now Edison Slough. We get too wet to do things in the middle part of the winter. We spread our mulch right away while we get in the field and we start pruning. It takes about three months to get through our field, pruning, and we prune every plant every year.

Susan Soltes: I was just going to say, it's all hand-pruned by just a couple of people.

Harley Soltes: Yeah, it's all hand-pruned. Then we might apply some fall dormant sprays. We're



not really that into it, but some of the traditional organic things like Bordeaux mixture or lime sulfur, just to clean up the little bit of disease. Our plants are so old and they have everything. They just tough it out because they have huge root systems. They're not small plants that are delicate. We don't worry too much about a lot of the bacterial and fungal diseases that are just there, because it's been there so long.

In terms of the field work, in the spring you start watching for bud break and green tip, which is when the buds start to swell. That's going on right now. We start treating for mummy berry, usually with a lime and sulfur type spray, some of the traditional things that have been around for a hundred years. Then we have some sort of homeopathic stimulants that we use to treat the plant, to help it fight off mummy berry and fungus diseases and botrytis. We're pretty much waiting to bring the bees in as soon as the blossom is opened. We have our own beehives, and then we rent some hives. We just sort of do what we can to enhance and facilitate pollination of the plants. We then start prepping for harvest - that's prepping all our packaging material, getting our crew together that will help us harvest, start marketing.

[00:19:30] We harvest for about eight weeks, and we rotate through different varieties. We have four varieties, and they kind of come in as waves, depending on the summer, how the weather is going, whether they overlap or they're separated out. We harvest for eight weeks. During that time, we're packing fresh fruit, we're packing frozen for freezing. We're not as concentrated on our product production during that time because it's all hands on deck. It's pretty much an 8-week party. It's sunup to sundown harvesting, packing, getting ready for the next day prepping/packaging. It's a very exciting and a very fun time at the farm. Then at the end of harvest, which can be August 20th, August 30th, Labor Day, maybe even mid-September, then we start over again.

Chris Blanchard: How about on the processing side of things?

Susan Soltes: The processing goes all year-round. Because we freeze our berries, we're able to do the production year-round. We do jam, sauce, marinade, frozen blueberries, and pickled blueberries. We just won an award on that one. Juice is our new thing that we're really excited about. We cold-pressed the berries to make a pure blueberry juice that has nothing added. Most blueberry juices have a grape added to it or apple juice or water, and ours is full-up. We like to say, take a shot or mix it. What we do, once we juice the berries, there's this big cake that's leftover of berry skin. We take that and we dry it. Then we macerate that to create a highly nutritious blueberry powder. We do dried blueberries as well. That is going on year-round in our kitchen. We have one cook. She keeps employed for about 30 hours a week, every week. Then we have a person that helps me with the marketing.

The marketing is going on year-round as well, as well as sales are happening year-round with the frozen. That's the easiest to sell, is frozen blueberries. We take reservations on that, and then we are delivering year-round with the



frozen. With the value-added products, we sell online. We have a farm store. The farm store is open year-round because we do have employees on the farm year-round so we can keep the store open, so that's happening. Then we sell to the grocer's coop, specialty stores, and that keeps us really busy. Then we do promotions and things like that.

Chris Blanchard: I'm really interested in the process of freezing blueberries. I eat a lot of frozen blueberries. I imagine you're not just packing them in gallon zip lock bags and throwing them in the freezer. Or are you?

Harley Soltes: Or are we?

Susan Soltes: Pretty much.

Harley Soltes: [00:22:30] Well, we pack them in several different ways. We pack them in pound-and-a-half and three-pound zip lock bags, but they have a zipper on them. They're really nice. We pack and we freeze them. We've added equipment here so that we have two walk-in freezers. we pre-freeze all the fruit here, and then it's moved offsite. We pre-freeze it here and then move it off frozen. We pack it onsite off a little sorting conveyor belt into one-and-a-half pound bags, three pound bags, and then 24-pound boxes. The 24-pound boxes would be for our own process. That's how we use process. Then the pound-and-a-half and three-pounds are done in zip locks. What's really nice about blueberries is that they don't really have to be IQF, or individually quick frozen, with expensive equipment. They're extremely durable. When you pack them and freeze them, they stay loose like marbles, unlike let's say what a raspberry or strawberry would do, where you'd need a sort of tray. On a small scale you would tray-freeze them and then pack them. We just put them in the boxes, and they stay loose and scoop-able. It's pretty lucky, and that's how we do it.

Chris Blanchard: Do you wash the blueberries first?

Harley Soltes: No, we don't wash berries. We sell them, we tell people they're unwashed. We're USDA GAP food safety certified, which is quite a bit of work for us but it keeps everything clean. We're inspected every year, which is the highest level of USDA food safety rating you can get. We have fruit that's never touched the ground. Our pickers are using the highest sanitation techniques. The whole process, essentially the field is treated almost like commercial kitchen food safety standards until it's all packed and frozen. We don't wash the fruit because then we'd have to have a way to dry it, which would really complicate the whole process if we were to wash it first.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about having a very sanitary harvest process, tell me a little bit about how the harvest process works and what that sanitary process looks like on your farm.

Harley Soltes: First thing we do is we have food safety training for all of our pickers so that



they're aware. The picking crew that we have is a professional crew that's been doing this for 20 years in Washington. They've been at larger farms, which have very intense food safety protocols because they're selling internationally or they're selling to the Costcos and to the Safeways and all that, that are pretty demanding on food safety. The people that we hire come already food-safety trained. Everyone in our building that's doing packing or working in our kitchen gets a food handler's license, so they're aware of food safety protocols.

One thing is we always use a clean, new container. We never use a used container. Our harvest plastic lugs that we pick into in the field that we bring in are washed and sanitized every night. Nothing goes back out into the field that has not been washed and sanitized since its last use. We never put containers on the ground. We have a portable hot water hand-wash station that is always right at the picking area so that the pickers would wash their hands during all the required, after a break, after going to the bathroom, anytime they feel like their hand was dirty. That's all going on through the process from the field all the way in. We don't do anything out in the fields, really, any different than what we would do inside the clean packing house.

Chris Blanchard: With five acres of blueberries, I know what five acres of vegetables looks like. I've seen five acres of carrots and five acres of broccoli. How do blueberries compare? How many people do you guys have on your picking crew, to keep everything harvested over that 8-week period?

Susan Soltes: Let's back up just a little bit and say that the first year that we got the farm, after the heavy pruning, we harvested I think it was 29,000 pounds of blueberries. Incrementally, it has gotten larger and larger. In our fifth year, with all the organic practices, we got 73,000 pounds of blueberries. Depending on the amount of berries coming on, that determines the size of the crew. We have one field manager that has been with us since the beginning. He's been in berries since he was 14 years old. He brings his family, so we have a family that works with us every year. They're like our family. We're really fortunate to have them. They're pros.

Harley Soltes: We might pick with eight people at a low, six to eight a day, and then at a peak would be 15 a day. It all depends on how many varieties are coming in and what we think we need to get in that day. Our pickers manage the field. We don't. The first year I would say, "Let's pick this row, let's pick that row." Then I started to realize that they're out there with their hands in it, looking at it. I'm out there every day, too, but they're really intimate with the plants. They manage the pick. We might say, "We need a thousand pounds picked this way today, or two thousands pounds picked this way today." They find the rows where it's optimal to harvest that fruit, but at the same time maintain over-picking, let's say not overgrazing, so that that second or third wave of blueberries is protected.

They are also paid by the pound, so they're trying to maximize what they get. They also take ownership of the field in what the farm itself needs, because they want to be back next year or they're interested in the survivability of the farm.



They are maximizing the pounds that they can get out of the field by the way in which they harvest, like the rows that they pick, the rows that they let rest. They are professional and highly skilled at managing the flow of fruit. We give them a goal, and they manage how to make it.

Susan Soltes: Right, so if we get a sale, like say to the Microsoft place, our berries for their food service program. I'll say, "We need a thousand pounds of berries on Monday, in ten pound flats." They'll go out and get it for us.

Chris Blanchard: When you say you pay by the piece, what does that end up translating to? How much are berry-pickers earning?

Harley Soltes: We pay by the pound, and it changes. This is really interesting. When we started, we called all these people. "How much do you pay? How do you pay? What do you pay? How do you pay?" We never got any information. We had to totally learn this. No one will talk about what they're paying. Then we started to learn, because it's irrelevant. First of all, there's modern plants where a picker could go out and pick 800 pounds a day. Then there's our plants, which are heirloom varieties, which don't necessarily lend themselves well to hand-picking. The varieties, they develop plants that were easier to pick, they grow in clusters. We have a variety called Jersey, which is a very old commercial variety that's still around the country. Ours are so tall, they're picking them on ladders which slows things down. Then we have some heirloom varieties that are teeny-tiny, that are intensely slow to pick. Kind of like a wild huckleberry.

The price per pound is irrelevant, but we track them every hour and what they're making. We have a new computerized scale that does this. Often times, they are making double to triple minimum wage, when they're picking here. We pay higher than most places. We make sure that we keep people. We pay a bonus at the end of the year if a picker stays the whole year that goes back to their first one. There's many hours where they're making well in the \$27 range or more. Then sometimes when it's really slow, they're making minimum wage. What we use as a minimum wage, which is higher than the regular minimum wage. We have a fairly high floor, which is the minimum that they can get.

Our pickers are here for the season. When they go out and it's going to be the little varieties, they don't complain. They know it's going to be slower. Maybe they'll make less. They get to be here on the days when they're in the varieties we have that pick really easy, so it's a situation where they trust us and we trust them to stay around. They trust that not every day is going to be slow because some of the days are going to be really good. It's really all over the map, what they can make and what they're getting per pound.

Susan Soltes: They also like that they're now in an organic field, so it's safer for them. A lot of them came from conventional farming, and there was issues there.

Chris Blanchard: With an 8-week picking period, what happens to your crew when the picking season is done? Are they off to other fruit crops that are in the region? Are they



moving out of the area? How does that work, for them?

Harley Soltes: All of our pickers are local, so there's no migrant workers. We don't use the H-2A program, which is the worker visa program. They're all local residents. They will start working before picking, let's say weeding or pruning or trellising. Any time we have anything we can do, we hire the same people to do that. Then there's pruning work afterwards and there's fall weeding. In the valley, there's processing work in both potatoes and other fruits. The potatoes and that kind of thing goes year-round. We have a huge tulip/daffodil industry here that goes through a lot of the year. There's agricultural work-

Susan Soltes: Blackberries.

Harley Soltes: Yeah, and blackberries. There's fruit that's before us, there's fruit that's after us. Blackberries comes after us. There's late blueberry farms that have later crops that they'll move onto after us. We get a commitment from them to stay until we're done. Typically in picking, you'll have workers moving from farm to farm based on what they're paying per pound or where the lucrative stuff is. Blackberries is one of those things that pays really well. Our first couple of years, before we started paying a bonus for people to stay the whole year, we would lose people the last two weeks because the blackberries were better money. Now we've developed a really good relationships with everybody, where they know that they're here. We're committed to them and they're committed to us.

Susan Soltes: We keep them busy. If it's raining on a harvest day, if they want to work, they show up and they want to work, they go weed since we can't pick. We create work as well, when we can, if there's any obstacle to picking.

Harley Soltes: A lot of the other farms just don't pick. They're just done for those days.

Chris Blanchard: I guess that's one of the advantages of being an organic farm, right? The weeds are always growing.

Harley Soltes: I was going to say, yeah. With organic there is always a lot more labor. There's a lot more going on that people can do. We can always pack. If we know it's going to rain on a Wednesday, on Tuesday we'll pick faster than we can quickly into lugs. Then everybody will come in on the rainy day, and we'll pack. We put it all in our cold storage, and then we'll pack our frozen. We try and hold that off until it's going to be the rainy day. Our field crew that picks is also the crew that comes inside.

Susan Soltes: [00:34:00] Right, and that's the way they like it. We thought it would be more efficient to have a packing crew and a picking crew, but they want to make it while the sun shines basically, or while it's raining. They want to stay and do the processing as well. It might be a little bit less efficient for us, but if it keeps our crew happy that's the way we want to do it.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you've got blueberry plants that are 70 years old, and



you've got blueberry plants that are tall enough that you have to pick them with a ladder. How long will your blueberry plants last? Are you guys having to plant replacements? Is there a time when you're going to have to start to rotate in replacement stock?

Harley Soltes:

We haven't had any plants die since we've been here, so we haven't had to replace them for that. It's hard for me to think about taking a plant out and then waiting five years for the next to root. We have figured out what these varieties wanted to be and created those products. We can talk about this with the processing. Each one of these berries has real characteristics. We took over the farm when we were like everybody, we thought a blueberry is a blueberry. We learned different as we started to create the products and looked at how things froze. Sue can talk about all this, in terms of the product development. We're not changing anything, in terms of the plants.

In terms of their longevity, last year, 2016, was the 100th anniversary of cultivated highbush blueberries. The first of those varieties, they started in New Jersey. That's where highbush blueberries started, which is the variety we have. The first variety was called the Rubel. We have an acre of Rubels. We love them. They're an amazing fruit. They're the highest antioxidant. They're tiny. Those plants in 1916 in New Jersey are still there. Those plants are 100 years old. The heirloom varieties that they worked on in the 1910s and the 1920s, those plants still exist at 100 years. The heirloom varieties will last 100 years. I don't know anything about how long modern plants, if they have a lifespan that's limited.

Chris Blanchard:

Tell me a little bit about your weed control practices. Is it just guys out there with hoes?

Harley Soltes:

No. Mulch deeply is our first thing. We try and cover as much as we can. Then I bought a thing called a blueberry cultivator - it was the first one that came to Washington state - from a place in Pennsylvania that created it. It's a mechanical spider weeder, where they adapted little spider weeder heads in a way that works really well with blueberries, particularly mounded, composted blueberries. They run at an angle, and they run at both sides with a way to adjust your width as you go down the row. We do mechanical weeding with this device. A lot of farms have come and seen it, and they're adding it whether they're conventional or organic. It does everything but between the plants. It does the sides of the plants, basically, between the grass row.

We grow grass in the middle between the rows, we mulch deeply around the plant, we run this cultivator down - which gets a lot of the weeds - and then we hand weed between the plants. With the deep mulch, it's not a lot of work. We do have to go through the field probably twice a year, hand weeding between the plants. There is organic weed control that you can spray, but it's pretty expensive and fairly ineffective. We don't do that.

Chris Blanchard:

Are you mostly dealing with perennial weeds in your blueberries, or is it a mixture?



Harley Soltes: It's a mixture. One of the exciting things is we have weeds that we promote. A significant amount of our field one year in our compost came with lots of purslane growing in it. Purslane, as you may know, is one of the most nutritious green vegetables in the world. In the United States it's considered a weed, but the rest of the world doesn't really consider it a weed. When we weed, we promote the growth of purslane. It helps make a pretty dense mat in the summer that chokes out a lot of the other weeds. Then we have certified organic status on our purslane as a forged crop. We do harvest and sell purslane to restaurants and clubs. That's an annual weed that we don't consider a weed, that we're using a crop. It also helps in our organic system plan, you're required to have some diversity. It's hard in a perennial field to have rotations and diversity, but that's one of our diverse things that we do in there.

Most of our weeds are annual weeds. They're annual grasses, thistles - which is kind of a biannual - horsetail in the wetter areas. That's the biggest thing. A little bit of chickweed, which we don't consider a problem.

Susan Soltes: Then our sunflowers [crosstalk] crazy.

Harley Soltes: That was Susan's project she can tell you about.

Susan Soltes: People visit the farm, and I wanted it to have a nice appearance. I wanted to plant sunflowers at the head of each row just because I thought that would be pretty. Through the years, they have just receded and receded. Now it's just crazy. It looks like we're a sunflower farm often. We actually have to weed them out so they don't choke out the blueberries.

Harley Soltes: From a distance when you drive up, you see five acres of sunflowers. There's thousands of them. Whatever nutritionally we do for blueberries must really work for sunflowers because they just grow. Between our cultivator and the birds harvesting the seed, they get thrown all over. Now in order to find the blueberry plants, we do go through and hack out thousands of the sunflowers right before harvest. Then we also sell those sunflowers as a you-pick item. People can you-pick. It's kind of nice because they start to blossom late in the blueberry season, and in the fall, when we're done with blueberries, people can still come and pick sunflowers. The WSDA gave us certified organic status on the sunflowers. There's certified organic seed in them.

Chris Blanchard: That's great. I love that. With that, we're going to stop here, get a quick word from our sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Harley and Susan Soltes from Bow Hill Blueberries, in the Skagit River Valley of Washington state.

Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is provided by the Vermont Compost Company, helping plants make sugar from sunshine since 1992. For 23 years of producing the potting soils you can buy, Vermont Compost Company founder and owner Karl Hammer has stayed intimately involved in the company. Working with a small staff of committed individuals to provide compost-based



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The podcast is also brought to you by Store it Cold's CoolBot. Way back in 2000, the year I started Rock Spring Farm, the manager of the local food coop complained that the lettuce from local producers lasted for days in her cooler, while the lettuce from California lasted for weeks. What's that, about two thousand miles? Fresher. I later found out that none of the local growers at that time had a walk-in cooler. 17 years later, this is still the number one complaint I hear from produce buyers. You have to get your produce cold. The difference between then and now is that now there's CoolBot. You can build an affordable walk-in cooler powered by a CoolBot and a window air-conditioning unit, saving up to 83% in upfront costs and up to 42% on monthly electricity bills, compared to conventional cooling units. Use the code "FDF" at checkout to double your CoolBot warranty at no charge. Storeitcold.com.

All right, and we're back with Harley and Susan Soltes from Bow Hill Blueberries. Susan, we've talked a lot - or Harley has talked a lot - about growing the blueberries and the purslane and the sunflowers. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you guys go about the processing and the marketing side of things?

Susan Soltes:

As Harley mentioned, we have four different varieties that have all different properties to them. Like he said, we didn't know a blueberry from a blueberry when we got the farm. As the season went on and we tasted them, we realized that they're like grapes - there's different varieties, and there's different uses for them. We developed products that would highlight the benefits of each of them. In the first year, we started with jam because that was easy and obvious. Then we had these tiny berries, and so we tried pickling them. Harley had been to a fancy dinner that had salmon with pickled blueberries on them. We thought, "Let's give this a try." We were super fortunate that these heirloom berries are tiny with a thick skin. We're able to pickle them, where other varieties, newer varieties, you can do a fresh pickle, but if you try to actually can it and process it, it just turns to mush and it's really pretty awful. We have pickled blueberries.

On the second year, I went back to the Rubel variety to try it. It's also like grapes in that there's vintages. Each year is just slightly different. The second year I went back to pickle the berries, and it didn't work. I didn't know what we were going to do. I tried and tried, and I had vats of pickled blueberries that were not happening. It's just the texture wasn't right. Then we tried another of our heirloom varieties, and thank goodness, it worked. We use our other, Stanley



blueberries for those pickled blueberries. Then from that I guess you could call that a mistake, these vats of pickled blueberries that weren't really working, we developed a blueberry marinade. We just blended them up. It tastes different than they pickled blueberry because there's more vinegar involved in it. That was how we utilized what had gone wrong, there.

Our jam, I like a real low-sugar jam, which I guess isn't really officially a jam. It's more of a spread or a preserve. It's a little runny, so we had to add a little bit more sugar to make a jam. Then our failed jam is what we started calling - at the beginning ... What did we call it, Harley?

Harley Soltes: We called it Jam Gone Wrong.

Susan Soltes: Jam Gone Wrong, but we figured that was a little negative. That became our sauce. I just absolutely love it. It's my personal favorite of the products that we make. Again, this last year we decided that making a blueberry juice is really ... That's Harley's project. I'll let him talk about it. Nobody else is doing it, so that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to be able to offer this pure, highly nutritious blueberry juice so we've started making that.

It's been trial and error, basically. That's how you do it. I don't come from a culinary background. I like good food, I like to eat, and I feel like I know what tastes good, but I'm not really a chef. I brought in Harley's cousin, actually, who is just a home cook, a really good home cook. She helps develop the recipes for our pickled blueberry and our jam. That's where the recipes were born, and now we just produce them year-round.

The marketing of the fresh blueberry, we go back to the same customers every year. We try to sell as much off the farm as we can fresh, but then we have Microsoft and some Amazon clients, dining facilities, and the dining facility at UW Medical Center, and variety of other markets. We do a little bit of farmer's market, but not really. In our area, there's so many blueberries at the time when ours are happening that the competition is too great. We actually don't go to the farmer's market with our blueberries because a lot of the mixed vegetable farmers also have some berries. They've already got their clients. They've already got their steady customers. It's harder for us to compete in a berry market at the farmer's market, so we really kind of bow out of that and just go with our processed, before and after the season. That's what works for us.

Then the frozen blueberries, we take reservations for those. Our biggest customer, well, not our biggest, our most famous customer for the frozen blueberries is the Seattle Seahawks. They have a self-serve smoothie bar where the players get to make their smoothies, and they like blueberries. That's pretty cool. We sell to them. We sell to the Puget Sound Food Hub. That's one of our distributors. I am learning along the way about distribution. At first I was shocked by how much the middle man would take. That's what you hear growing up, that the middle man is the bad guy. Well, somebody has got to deliver this stuff, and it's not for free. Now I've realized that they kind of earn



that 20% they take. Even though it's a big bite, my time is valuable, too, and so is Harley's. Wear and tear and our vehicles and days on the road? We want to be on the farm. We want to be producing or promoting and not driving. We got our feet wet with distribution to the Puget Sound Food Hub. That was a project that we were intimately involved with getting going in the Pacific Northwest here.

Then with the value-added products, I went with a smaller distributor who had a really nice lineup of specialty foods. That's a company called Mile Post 65. We distribute through them to specialty shops. For the larger grocers that we are getting involved with, they demand that you go with a larger distributor. We're still trying to stay small and regional, but Sound Pacific is how I'm going with for that. These grocery stores, they want to sell local. They really do, and they want to talk about it. They want to offer it, but the reality is they can't deal with individual farmers. It's just too much work for them. It costs them too much money to just process an order. I've heard that it costs \$30 to process one order.

That's for us, with the fresh fruit, why the Puget Sound Food Hub worked out so well, because they source directly from farms. They don't take ownership of it. Then it's an online buying system, where grocery stores or chefs go on and make their order, the farmer gets the order. We get an order, I'll use the Microsoft example, we get an order for 1,000 pounds. That's a lot. That doesn't happen that much. A thousand pounds of berries, and we know that we have to get it. We drive it over to the Puget Sound Food Hub and on a Tuesday, and it gets delivered on a Wednesday to Microsoft. That works out really well. It's just one bill. I don't have to do the invoice myself. It's all an online process. That's kind of the cool thing about that. When you're using a distributor, you don't have to make all these individual invoices and make sure that they're all paid and call people to make sure that they've paid their invoice or called them to remind them to order. Distributors kind of earn their money.

Chris Blanchard: Right. That's what you're kind of paying them to do.

Susan Soltes: Exactly. My first thought was institutional buyers would be good because I like the idea of large sales, but really now that we've been doing this a long time, we realize that more retail would be better. You're going to do better. At this point, I'm trying to promote people to come to our farm store and have the farm experience so we have more retail sales and are directing people to our online store. During the holiday season, we have gift boxes. That helps. Just different revenue streams and keeping the farm working all year-round. That all stems from being able to freeze the blueberries, right off of the harvest.

We do other promotions, too. We just do local advertising as well. Edible Seattle is a magazine we advertise in. There's an art house theater, and we run a slide during that. We have a great little agriculture newspaper in our Skagit and Whatcom counties. I run an ad in that. Mostly it's word of mouth and a lot of social media. I'm on Instagram and Facebook, just telling our story and talking



about our lifestyle and what it's like to live in Skagit Valley. It's so scenic. There's lots of pictures to put up. That works as well. It's ongoing. It's ongoing and constant.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about you're on-farm market, where are most of those people coming from? Are they driving up from Seattle, or is it more folks that are in the Mount Vernon and Sedro-Woolley areas? I've been looking at a map of where you guys are. You're an hour and a half north of Seattle. Is that where folks are coming from, or are you getting more a local crowd?

Susan Soltes: We have an island that's closest to us called Samish Island. We have a lot of customers on Samish Island. We have a lot of customers in Bellingham, and that's where we go to the farmer's market. Part of the farmer's market is promoting the farm store. Then Seattle, yeah. People like a day trip. We're really fortunate that we're near this little town called Edison. Edison is a foodie haven. It is a gorgeous little town. It's about six blocks wide. It has the best food, and it's got real art. It's got great little craft stores that are all local artists. People love it. People love to come up for a day trip. They come to Edison, and they come to us. Ice cream always draws people in.

The other thing I had to work really hard to get was, you know those signs on the freeway that have businesses or tourist activities? I worked with the state really for a couple of years to try to get the farm on a highway sign. I finally got it, but there was a lot of pushback from that department. "Why would we promote you? You're just a store?" It was like, "Well, what's the difference between us and an antique store? We have an experience. We can give a tour and there's fresh food." Anyway, it was an ongoing conversation that we finally got. You had to be open all year-round, which we are, and you had to have certain hours to qualify. Anyway, through many rounds we finally got that. I don't know how much it has helped, but we got it. It's just Bow Hill Blueberries, it's our logo, and it says "organic farm." Hopefully it will bring in-

Harley Soltes: We have a walking tour. Susan put together these storyboards that have the history of the farm, the original family, and pictures from their history here, with blueberries. They used to grow other things, strawberries and mink. Seasonally, you can put up a walking tour. The storyboards are framed behind the original windows from the Anderson's farmhouse that was here. They get history. This site we're at is drop-dead gorgeous. We see mountains, and we're in the middle of the valley. When you're picking, it's gorgeous. When you're just dropping by in the winter even, to pick up some juice or ice cream or some of the jam, they're in a spot that's just really beautiful.

Susan Soltes: [00:55:30] Yeah, we have trumpeter swans that come in in the winter. There's a lot of birding that goes up in our area, as well as hiking and biking and fishing. The valley itself is a draw, so that helps. One of the other things we do is a field dinner every year. That's really a special event. You've heard of Outstanding in the Field. We do our own version of it with a chef that we've become friends with, who is one of the chefs that's won on Chopped. She's amazing with her



combinations. It's a blowout dinner with wine pairings, and it's really good. We just do that once a year. It's only a 30-person seating, but it's really a special event.

Harley Soltes: Yeah, we do it out in the blueberry field itself. Actually during the desert course last year, the wait staff picked blueberries for the dish, as it's being served. They would just be in the plants around them.

Susan Soltes: Each dish had a blueberry garnish to it, at least. If it wasn't made from blueberry, it had a little bit of blueberry with it. A full-up blueberry experience. We promote tourists, too. Whenever anybody wants a tour, we've got Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland brings in people from Seattle. A bus of 50 people will get off, and we'll give them the blueberry story. That's fun. We have Japanese delegates that will come, and they'll have lunch as well. We tell them about basically the same things we've been telling you.

Harley Soltes: We just had a tour of German blueberry farmers come and tour for an hour. They came on a bus. Then we do a blueberry camp every summer for kids. Kids historically have always picked here. Every day in the store during the summer, somebody comes in to buy from us and says, "I picked here as a kid. This is how I bought my school clothes." This was the blueberry farm in the valley. The Andersons had a little flatbed truck that they would drive around town in the morning, right after sunrise. Kids would hop on and come to pick and get paid. We continue that. We had a blueberry crew, where kids got paid a couple of summers. We just actually integrated the kids now with the professional crew, and they have a great experience.

We also run a blueberry camp, which is free. We did it for a week for at least one year, but now it's a one-day camp. It'll be either one of the local Boys & Girls Clubs or a camp group will come. They spend all day, and they get some cooking information on healthy blueberry cooking and how to get away from boxed blueberry pancake recipes and how to make things from scratch. They'll usually have an art project to do. Then they go out in the field, and they get to harvest all they want, to take with them. We just give it to them. They will take it back to their program and freeze them and use them throughout the year. These kids come in and pick incredibly well and have a great time.

Susan Soltes: If any kid wants to be a picker at our farm, I will interview them and I'll tell them they'll go out with the professionals and they'll be treated like a professional. They have the kid rules. We always adhere to the kid rules. They get to out out and pick. Not many of them last more than a week, but if they want to do it, they're welcome to.

Harley Soltes: We have a child whatever it's called, work permit, for agricultural so that they can participate.

Chris Blanchard: It's really interesting to me that you guys have one crop. In one way, you're not a very diversified farm. Then your marketing that, a lot of different products,



and a lot of different ways that you're selling that product. How do you guys decide how much you're going to put into blueberry vinegar and how much you're going to put into blueberry juice and how much you're going to put into fresh or frozen?

Susan Soltes:

That's an ongoing process. First of all, it's how much can we harvest of each variety. The tiny berries that go into the pickled blueberries, we only get so many. That's how many we can do. You don't know that until the end of the season, so it's always guesswork. We do elaborate spreadsheets and enterprise budgets. I get help with that because that is not my first love. Really, we look at the numbers. We look and try to decide what is most profitable for us because we need to be sustainable and keep these people employed, make our mortgage payment, and all that kind of good stuff. It's really a tracking thing, and then it's also where have we succeeded and fails, what sells the best. Pickled blueberry is a bit of an oddity. That's neat, it's special, and it is delicious, but it's a little weird, too. Jam always sells, so we know that. People know what to do with jam, so we know how much goes into jam. Like I said, we have a limited variety for the pickled. I have to go to further reaches to sell the pickled. The frozen, we're taking reservations for frozen. Again, that's very easy to sell. We like to process as much as we can. It's a balancing act, really.

Harley Soltes:

We could sell the whole field frozen in little bags easily, but it doesn't keep people working all year. You basically would be storing them and delivering them, and that's it. It doesn't give you the diversity and the product line. We do the amount of spreadsheets and planning and food safety computer work and all that and traceability that a very large - a 40, 80, 200, or a 1,000 acre - farm would do. It's the exact same amount of time and paperwork. We would be a really good study for a business, of how to trace things, how to do the enterprise budget, the contributory margins, and all these things. We track all that, and we've gotten a lot of help to do it.

Initially, with the Small Business Administration local, which is the Economic Development of Skagit County kind of helped us for a few years build these business plans and spreadsheets. In the last two years and now going into this year, the finance department at Western Washington University has adopted us to help do all kinds of budgeting and enterprise budgeting and projections. They use us as a study module. That's been a lot of benefit for us. We have lots of data that helps us, particularly with pricing so that you don't price something where you're actually losing money on it because you're not taking into account everything. We get a lot of outside help. Everywhere I believe, farmers should be taking advantage of that. We tell farmers to do that, that there's help out there for you to do this planning and this budgeting so that you know whether you're actually making money and how to make the most of your opportunity, to make a sustainable business out of your farm. Five acres shouldn't be working, but we're showing that it does.

Susan Soltes:

Right. The other advantage that we have, too, is that our daughter is a graphic designer. She does all of our branding and label-design. It looks pretty great, I



have to say.

Chris Blanchard: It does. It's just so clean. I really like how clean it is. It's very recognizable and it does have a nice heirloom feel to it, with a real focus on the blueberry. I'll just leave it at that. Anybody that wants to go look at the logo can look at it, but it's a nice clean, really tight design. I like it.

Susan Soltes: Yeah. It was interesting to do that because we wanted it to look professional for one, so that we could compete on the shelf with bigger brands, but we also needed it to feel farm-y. That was a bit of a balancing act, to try to create something that looks like homegrown and small batch but also professional. I think we landed on something that fits us pretty good. Do you want to talk about your juice project, Harley?

Harley Soltes: One of the things is we thought about we get a lot of fruit at the end of the year. Typically juice fruit is the end of the year soft things that you can't use for other things. We dehydrate a lot of fruit, which that fruit can be used for. I bought a small juice press, a bladder press type thing, and started just juicing some of the leftover fruit. It was the most incredible-tasting when it was just pure, raw juice pouring out of the press. We decided, "Let's start bottling juice. This is so incredible." We're doing a really nice glass bottle that our daughter designed. It's a 16 oz and 32 oz glass, Boston round bottle. We got a USDA grant to help with that.

We're using the heirloom fruit. We have one variety that's a little bit modern and we tried pressing it. It was all kind of pulpy and not quite purple. We pressed some of the heirloom fruit, the Jerseys and the Rubels, and it comes out purple. It's really dark, dark, dark and with a lot of clarity to it that doesn't have pulp in it. It's very sweet, naturally sweet, and intense to the point where you can't drink more than a few shots of it and you're full. Like we say, it's a really good mixer for bars or people who just want to take a shot, or mix it with milk, or do whatever.

We pasteurize and bottle it here. Juice must be pasteurized to sell, according to the Food and Drug Administration rules, unless it's like a raw juice bar. We had a real challenge finding scale appropriate equipment to both press and bottle and pasteurize. We found a pasteurizer in Germany - it's very small-scale, it looks like a very tall hot water tank - that flash pasteurizes and bottles all in one little unit. Once a week we thaw our frozen fruit, and we press, flash-pasteurize and bottle it. All of our production is very just-in-time. Our back stock isn't very full. We sort of maintain what's selling right now, and that's what we're making. The juice is a very incredible product because it's heirloom fruit, and it's pure juice. Whereas what we're looking at on the shelves that say "blueberry juice," a lot of times, as Susan said earlier, it's really mostly apple juice or grape juice with some blueberry juice in it. Or they're doing it from concentrates, where they cook the blueberries down and then add water and sugar back into them. It just doesn't have that sweetness, that pure, fresh sweetness that this stuff has.



When we're done pressing, about 40% of the weight of the fruit is now just a pulp or a cake they call it. We take that out of the press, and we put that in our dehydrator that we dry our blueberries in, then dry it down to about 5 or 8% moisture. Then we blend it in a Vitamix blender and pack that both in 8 oz or much larger boxes for people to either buy as ingredients ... We at first didn't know what people were going to do with it, but people sort of knew what to do with it. They're putting it in smoothies, they're making baked goods with them - it's really good in scones - they're adding it in mixed drinks and throwing it on deserts and putting it with chocolates. We have a couple of chocolatiers that are putting it in things.

Susan Soltes: In a mustard, that was the latest thing. We have a mustard.

Harley Soltes: Mustards. The way I eat it is with steel-cut oats and just stir it in. You can pretty much put it in anything you're cooking. It's a high fibrous, nutritious, lots of anti-oxidants supplement. It helps with color and all that. That's kind of making use of this byproduct, which helps the sustainability of the whole process. Hopefully selling the powder can sort of cover some of the expenses of the juice because the juice is very expensive to make, because of the printed glass bottle and the large amount of fruit. Like our bottle says, each 16 oz little bottle, that's 547 blueberries pressed into it. It takes a lot of fruit to make one bottle. Having this secondary use of the pulp into powder, which is a great product on its own, helps make the juice work financially.

Chris Blanchard: How have you guys differentiated yourselves in the market? Obviously to some degree, with the products, like a pure blueberry juice which you've said is something that just isn't out there otherwise. Western Washington, it feels to me like you guys can't be ... Well, you said earlier, you're not the only blueberry farm on the block.

Harley Soltes: No, Washington is the largest grower of organic blueberries in the United States. They may be the largest grower of blueberries. I'm not quite sure of that. One of the things that differentiates it is a small farm. The other is the heirlooms, that we have fruit that other people don't have. Most of those farms have modern fruit varieties. Our customers are starting to, particularly our you-pick customers who get out there and taste each of the varieties, know that there is a difference between the heirloom fruit and the modern fruit. Susan has incorporated that in all the packaging, the brand names always say "heirloom" on them.

Susan Soltes: Right, so that's a differentiator - the variety that we have and that we're small. That makes us different. And that we make all of our products on the farm. That is also really different. No co-packers are involved with our products. We do have an ice cream that is made by a local ice cream company, Lopez Island Ice Cream. We are trying a chocolate, too. We don't make our own chocolate, but we have a chocolate-covered blueberry that is colored with the blueberry powder so it's purple. It's an all organic ingredient, but we don't make that as



well. That's a differentiator, that we're small batch, and that's for real.

Chris Blanchard: All right, with that I think it's time to turn to our lightning round. We're going to get a quick word from a sponsor, and then we'll be right back.

This lightning round plus perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer podcast is brought to you by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are real farming equipment for real farmers. With BTO-driven attachments like rototillers, flail mowers, rotary plows, power harrows, log-splitters, snow throwers, even a utility trailer, and a new water-transfer pump, you've got the tools that you need to get the jobs done across the farm and the homestead. On my own farm, we went through a number of so-called solutions for mowing and tilling before we finally got smart and bought a BCS. Even though we owned a 4-wheel tractor to manage our 20 acres of vegetables, the BCS tackled jobs that we simply couldn't do with the larger machine. For mowing steep slopes and around trees, to working in our high tunnels. Plus, they're gear-driven for years of dependable service. Check out bcsamerica.com to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments, plus videos of BCS in action.

Harley, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Harley Soltes: My favorite tool on the farm is just my blueberry weeder and my hand pruners, really. I have a little hand pruner that I like to use, but the really favorite thing that sort of saved this farm and helped it be organic is my blueberry weeder, mechanical cultivator.

Chris Blanchard: Is that the one from the Hillside Cultivator Company?

Harley Soltes: Yep, it's from Hillside Cultivator in Pennsylvania.

Chris Blanchard: Great. We'll include a link to that.

Harley Soltes: Which I didn't know it was a blueberry growing area, but they make a thing called the blueberry hillside cultivator.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, I think it all kind of works on that same principle, like you said, of being able to actually make those adjustments as you're going down the row.

Harley Soltes: Yeah. Modern fruit fields are laid out with lasers so every row is exactly the same, perfect, straight. Ours was laid out at different times by guys with probably a stick and some strings. The ability to adjust that as we go up and down the rows is dramatic. All our rows, they range from nine feet to ten feet and everything in between.

Chris Blanchard: Susan, your favorite tool on the farm?

Susan Soltes: My daughter, who does the graphic design. She does a lot of work.



- Chris Blanchard: Well, we usually ask what's your favorite crop to grow, but you guys might be the first people that we don't really need to ask.
- Susan Soltes: It's interesting that we are a mono crop. That was one of the attractions for me with this farm is I would know how to work with a blueberry and berries in general. We love berries. That was attractive to me, to be able to focus and really do everything you could with one crop. Maybe that's not a popular thought, but that's what was attractive to me.
- Harley Soltes: I'm glad that our crop is blueberries. I grew up loving wild berries, like everybody picking wild berries in the woods. Before we owned a blueberry farm, I would hike in the woods with each season as it progresses. My year was marked by "when are the thimbleberries, when are the huckleberries, when are the blackberries, when are the salmonberries?" I would carry our son and a backpack, and he would pick as I picked those things. I read lots of Henry David Thoreau growing up, and he writes a lot about huckleberries and wild berries. It's easy to be passionate about blueberries.
- Chris Blanchard: Susan, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Susan Soltes: That this truly would be a full-time job. I had no idea how much time it would take, if I could do my former career at the same time. I thought maybe I could, but there's just no way. I guess that "you will be eating and breathing this seven days a week for the next I don't know, ten years." We thought it was 3-year project. We would take this farm organic, and then we would move onto another idea, but it's really become our lives.
- Chris Blanchard: Harley, how about you? If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Harley Soltes: I agree with Susan on this. "It's going to be 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, 12 months of the year, so get ready for that." The fortunate thing about that is I got no problem with it. I had a job before also where I thought I worked really hard. I worked intensely hard every day. I lived it forever and ever. There was no day off. This is more work than that, but I'm also sitting in the most beautiful spot that I can think in the world every day in the location where we're at. I have no problem with that. If I had thought that I was going to work this hard with no days off, I wouldn't have believed it and enjoyed it this much. That's really what I've learned is that I could work this hard, when I thought I had semi-retired and really enjoy it.
- Susan Soltes: For me, it's the creativity of it. I was in a creative field before, and I would have thought giving that up to be a farmer would not be as satisfying. Again, because of the area we're in, there's so much beauty here that that satisfies that portion. Just being a small business owner is so much more creative than I ever expected.



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Harley Soltes: I would have never, ever believed - and I guess every new farmer needs to get on board with the fact - that you're going to have a lot of numbers to deal with and a lot of spreadsheets. I never did that in my life. I was an employee, but I didn't have to deal with how things worked financially. That's the big thing to get prepped for and get ready for, is that it's going to be a lot of numbers and a lot of spreadsheets and a lot of planning at night and on the weekends and when it's raining. That's not something you consider when you're looking at the idealism of being a farmer.

Chris Blanchard: Susan and Harley thank you so much for being my guests today on the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Susan Soltes: Thank you! Thank you for having us.

Harley Soltes: Thank you, Chris.

Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here I'll say again that this is episode 115 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast. You can find the notes for the show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the Episodes page or just searching for Soltes, that's s-o-l-t-e-s.

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