



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

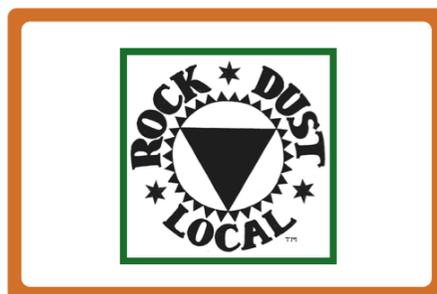
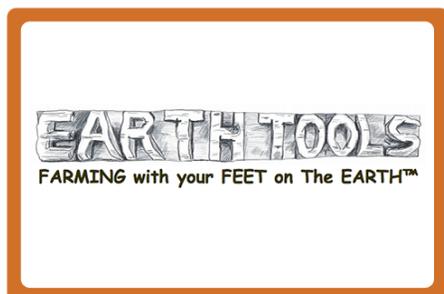


## EPISODE 116

### Dan Guenther of Common Harvest Farm on Gumption, Community, CSA, and One Red Wheelbarrow

April 27, 2017

#### TRANSCRIPT SPONSORS





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

The transcript for this episode is brought to you by:

[Earth Tools](#), offering the most complete selection of walk-behind farming equipment and high-quality garden tools in North America

[Rock Dust Local](#), the first company in North America specializing in local sourcing and delivery of the BEST rock dusts and biochar for organic farming.

Additional funding for transcripts provided by [North Central SARE](#), providing grants and education to advance innovations in Sustainable Agriculture.

Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, Episode 116. This is your host, Chris Blanchard. Dan Guenthner of Common Harvest Farm along with his wife, Margaret Pennings, has been a CSA farmers since before CSA was even really a thing, 1990 to be exact. With 12-acres of vegetables and a 200-member CSA in Osceola, Wisconsin, that's just outside of Minnesota's Twin Cities. Dan and Margaret take a thoughtful approach to how they engaged with their CSA membership, the farming community, and their farm's land and production systems.

Dan reflects on the CSA movement and how it has grown and changed since its inception and the challenges that even CSA farms that deep focus on community have faced. As local and organic produce become more widely available, we discussed some of the ways that Dan and Margaret have built their CSA on community organizing, and shared values, and an effort to breakout of the marketing paradigm and how they are working to get even deeper into this heart of the CSA movement now.

Dan also digs into how he has built a production system at Common Harvest Farm, including a 4A in the draft animal production and the investment strategy that has supported the development of a highly efficient farm in terms of both labor and energy use.

The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is generously supported by Vermont Compost Company, founded by Organic Crop Growing Professionals, committed to meeting the need for high-quality composts and compost-based, living soil mixes for certified organic plant production. [Vermontcompost.com](http://Vermontcompost.com).

And by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are versatile, maneuverable in tight spaces, light-weight for less compaction, and easy to maintain and repair on farm. Gear-driven and built to last for decades of dependable service, [bcsamerica.com](http://bcsamerica.com).

And by Farmers Web, software for your farm. Farmers Web makes it easier to work with your buyers, saving time, reducing errors, and increasing your capacity to work with more buyers overall, [farmersweb.com](http://farmersweb.com).



Dan Guenthner, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Dan Guenthner: Thanks, Chris. Thanks for inviting me to be part of it.

Chris Blanchard: Really fun to have you on board. We were talking before the show, you're not a podcast listener?

Dan Guenthner: No, I'm not. Like I say, I'm looking forward to being converted into a podcast listener as a result of this interview. Thanks for welcoming me into the fold.

Chris Blanchard: Dan, I'd like to start off by having you tell us about Common Harvest Farm. Where are you guys located, how many acres you're farming, and how you get in your produce to people?

Dan Guenthner: Yeah, Chris. We live about 60-miles northeast of the heart of the Twin Cities. Osceola is the closest community to our farm and that's where we do our business. We do have a number of other farms in our area. We're right along the St. Croix River, which forms the boundary between Wisconsin and Minnesota. We're marketing our produce almost exclusively through a CSA. We do supply one restaurant, and a couple other outlets as well. By enlarge, the majority of what we do is send it around CSA. This is our 28th season coming up.

Our farm was founded in the fall of 1989 and it was 1990 being our first growing season. We have about 12-acres of vegetables, about 200 members. We own 40-acres and we have some pasture land, some wetlands, a small woodlot, and then sandy or loam soil in the alluvial plain here along the St. Croix River Valley.

Chris Blanchard: You guys got started, you said your first farming here was 1990?

Dan Guenthner: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: CSA wasn't really a thing in 1990.

Dan Guenthner: Not really, no. We didn't even really know what to call it. I think that's one of the things is so curious about how we got into this is this concept of the hundredth monkey, how there's this idea just swirling around and then all of a sudden it takes shape and that's really what was happening in the Northeast. A lot of this was really growing out of the farm crisis of the 80s. I should just mention that both Margaret and myself grew up in predominantly rural areas.

Margaret's father was a veterinarian, small town vet. His work and their life was central, was defined by this small rural community and the fabric of that rural community. Likewise, my father was an agronomist and he managed a number of research stations in Montana, and Idaho, and Eastern Washington. I grew up around agriculture, all four of our parents grew up on farms and ranches. This agricultural influence runs deep through us.



I went to a land-grant college and I'd cattle in high school and college and in experiment station and worked in a vet lab, and a number of other things. I was no stranger to farming, but it just didn't seem possible to embark on a farming career given everything that I had witnessed in the 70s and 80s. I'll just give you one example. The ranch where my mother grew up was milking about 75 cows in 1978. They doubled or even tripled the size of the herd up to about a 175 to a 100 head. In addition, they had about a 500 head beef operation, cow-calf operation.

After my grandmother died in 1978, my two uncles that took over that ranch went on a spending spree and they put up blue harvester silos and expanded the barn and brought in some irrigators. All of a sudden, the farm had several million dollars' worth of debt. They barely survived the 1980s. It was nip and tuck. They had to get off jobs in order to make the bill stay. I remember my mom saying a number of times to my brother and I who both were very interested in farming, just really discouraging us.

When I did an internship with Martin and Atina Diffley in 1989, it was really the first time that I was able to witness and practice a scale of farming and growing something with a high enough value to be done on a small acreage that it seemed possible all of a sudden. 1989 was the Alar scare where a number of people are hospitalized. I believe even two, three, four people killed out in the West Coast. The Exxon Valdez was in the spring of 1989 and so there was a lot happening environmentally around that times.

I moved to the Twin Cities in 1988. We began to gather friends together and talk about this dream of having a farm and finding people to support that enterprise. We held a number of house meetings. When I think back to that experience, it really was an eye-opening and life-changing experience. We held maybe three or four of these gatherings and we invited people, urban people primarily in the Seward neighborhood in Minneapolis, home of the Seward Coop in Birchwood Café and the heart of a lot of progressive movements in the Twin Cities.

To reflect on their connection to land and to food and to community and the stories that came out of that were just really remarkable. Most people had some direct connection to land and they wanted their children to know that connection. Many of those threads were fraying and growing thin and family farms were being sold. People were saying, "We want a new relationship and a new connection to a place." We stumbled our way into this movement in a way by being in the right place at the right time and connecting with a group of people that had this deep desire to take ownership of their food and become more involved in how it was growing, where it was growing, and those things.

Chris Blanchard: How did that transform into a farm for you guys?

Dan Guenthner: We essentially asked folks to agree to do a number of things. We asked them, would they be willing to support us in getting started. How we described that



support, so you think about all of the resources that beginning farmers have today. In the late 80s, there were very few farms offering internships in and around the Twin Cities. I believe at the time that I was looking to do an internship, there were maybe four, three, four opportunities. Beyond that, once you had completed an internship, there were very few resources available in terms of, you know, making that next step to capitalizing a farm, finding farmland, establishing markets, and really getting yourself established.

In a sense, we were really inviting these people to be partners with us and to help us through what we knew was going to be most likely be a somewhat bumpy couple years until we got established. Now, we started by renting land. That seems like a logical choice for us. We wanted to be as close to the cities as possible. Primarily around a long-term concern, around transportation cost, and larger sustainability goals that we had. Yet, at the time, urban sprawl was really accelerating in and around the Twin Cities, land prices were really beyond our reach.

After renting land for a couple years, we realized that some of the long-term decision making around organic practices, in particular around soil fertility and weed management. Those are two very difficult things to do on rented land. When you do not have the long-term certainty that you're going to be there beyond very far into the future. We then asked our members, we said, "We really want to find a home." We had moved around a little bit. We had lost one site we are farming to development.

At the time, Rick and Verna with Philadelphia Community Farm, they started their CSA at the same year that we did, had some extra land and they had a house for us to rent and we ended up, we were west of the Twin Cities, out here Lake Minnetonka. We ended up moving across the metro into Western Wisconsin. We had more than 60 farm members contribute to the purchase of our farm, including a single mother who wrote us a check for fifty dollars and said, "This is all I can afford, but I want you to know, that I'm part of it."

That wait of anticipation and expectation and this sense of investment on the part of the people was really empowering, but it was also just a little frightening too. I remember going into the bank for example with \$60,000 of other people's money. The banker just sitting there quietly going, "Now, who are these people and why in the world would they give you money?"

That then opened up the whole conversation to what this relationship was all about, that these were people that by enlarge were feeling disenfranchised from their food and from the industrialized food system, and from any opportunity to have access to land for themselves, for their children. People started writing checks and saying, "We're ready when it's time for a down-payment, we're ready. We're onboard." We leveraged that money, using that money to leverage borrowing. We did end up having to take out a mortgage.



Then with that money, we were able to build a house. We found a farm without a house on it. It's an old farmstead that nobody had lived on since the early 60s. We brought this old dairy farm, farmstead back to life. We took down a number of buildings, we repaired other buildings, we painted, repaired windows, built this house, and all of a sudden we're on our way.

In the fall of 1997, we had a farm blessing, where we invited our members to come out and we walked around the land and we read some poems and shared some of our hopes for this work together. A number of those people are still members, quite a few and I think people are really wanting to be invited and asked. I think it was true then and I think it's true now that people really do want to be invited to be part of something. I think maybe in many ways, we're not asking enough of our members.

Chris Blanchard: There on your farm in 1997, now by '97, CSA is, it's not exactly taking off, but it's a much more common concept by that time?

Dan Guenthner: Oh yeah. We helped organize a couple regional CSA conferences. We had a smaller one in the fall of '92 and some farmers came from Winnipeg, Canada, folks from Nebraska, folks from Wisconsin. By 1994, we had a region wide CSA conference that drew 250 people to River Falls, Wisconsin. Then the following year down in Madison, Margaret Krome and Michael Field sponsored another CSA conference and so it was taking off. I should also mention that in 1993, January of 1993, Margaret and I spent a day in Madison with MERF, the Madison Eaters Revolutionary Front, which is the precursor to MACSAC [Madison Area CSA Coalition] and likewise the precursor to FairShare.

We were part of some of those early conversations with some of the farms in the Madison area as well. We also during that time spoke into practical farmers of Iowa to a group of farmers. We were invited to speak at different events and meet with other farmers. By and large, we could tell that we were gaining numbers and the movement was really beginning to coalesce and have more of a stronger identity about what made this unique, what we were doing was more than a passing fad or trend that we really did see ourselves as setting out to reform the food system, to create a new model for farmers and non-farmers to create these lasting partnerships to support a farm and that that would be mutually beneficial to everyone involved.

By the late 90s, I think some of the efforts to track the numbers of CSAs nationally became very difficult, because farms were popping up all over the place. At that point, the movement was watched. I think the risk that we've had from the beginning in the CSA movement is to measure our success purely based on numbers. Often times, folks would say, "There are now 5,000 CSAs. Wow, this movement must be successful." Yet, from the beginning, we knew that for many of those years, we were losing as many farms as we were gaining and that there was still some obstacle, there were some obstacles, there was still a hurdle to be crossed bridge there to create a lasting sustainable model



that was really going to support farms long-term. Livable wage, fair price, getting a fair return on our labor, and those sorts of issues.

Chris Blanchard: One of the criticisms that I have of the CSA movement and this is really born out of my own experience on my own farm, is that to a large degree, when you talk about those long-term sustaining relationships between farmers and eaters, I think a lot of times, that's something that's fallen by the waste side now in our, "You pay me money and I bring you a box of vegetables" model of CSA.

Dan Guenther: I think you're absolutely right and you know this well, because you had a successful CSA farm for many years and you saw firsthand those relationships changing over time. I think it's interesting to, when I think back to the evolution of our own farm and then the evolution of the movement, when we started farming, we really weren't interested in selling something necessarily. We didn't go into this first and foremost as a business model. I think Margaret and I have had, we're not the best people to talk about business, because we're not necessarily motivated by money and we don't measure our success certainly by some of the same standards of many other businesses.

[00:21:30] For us, this is about values and this is about relationships and it was about community. It's interesting, early on, many of the folks that were attracted to the CSA movement at least in the Twin Cities area came out of community organizing background. They saw this to a large degree as a way of connecting with people around a number of social justice related issues. Unfortunately, one of the things that we started seeing within about the first 10 or 12 years of the movement is that that real concerted effort around membership building and around connecting, we've always said that this is not about filling up this year.

Whenever we've spoken to groups, we've always tried to be very clear about that, that if you're trying to fill up your CSA for this year, you're really thinking in the wrong term. That what we're trying to do is to build lasting relationships with a community of members who are interested and willing to support the term so that the farm long-term. We can talk more about that, because that's becoming more difficult. It was interesting that we started seeing farms begin to try and attract new members or reach new communities by in a sense starting to offer more market oriented options for people, more choice, more convenience, something like home delivery started showing up, a number of other things, that at the times seemed antithetical to this deep community and this partner, this partnership model that what we're really trying to build the CSA movement around.

Yet, there was really very little we could do about it. I find it interesting today Chris about how many CSA farmers use the word "customer" when they talk about their community rather than members. That may seem like an insignificant thing. People are like, "What's the difference?" It represents two entirely different orientations. One is more of a market orientation and one really comes out of a different approach to build on this community organizing



and social justice and values, values orientation.

I think the difficult thing and I think the CSA charter gets it some of this is that if we're caught in this marketing paradigm, someone will always be able to do a better job. We will not be able to outlets the latest entry into this local foods frenzy here, whether it's Blue Apron or some type of home delivery service, or we're not going to have the capital, the hours to devote to that type of a campaign. It's such a shifting changing thing. That's the nature of business.

Really, what we were setting out to do is to create a lasting alternative to that. I think that's really still at the heart of the question here about the value of the CSA movement and the contributions that it's made to the larger organic movement. There's certainly have been some growing thing and I think now, we're falling into the risk of being co-opted by so many of these other, well, for one organically food is so much more widely available. This doesn't necessarily stand out as an obvious choice or a conscious eater to be connected to food that is infused with some of these other values.

I think many farmers were attracted to the CSA model, because of the upfront capital. When you think about it, it's really one of the only types of farming in the local foods movement that involves this infusion of upfront capital. We don't have restaurants, fine. I know there are some examples of it. Yeah, I've read and heard about restaurants making an upfront contribution to a farm in the spring to help with those early expenses.

By and large, the model that we've had in agriculture for much of the, really much of the history of for the industrial food system is you borrow in the spring to put the crop in the ground and you pay off those debts in the fall after the crop is harvested and you accept what's left. This is an entirely different approach to being able to ... When you think about many of the things that make the CSA model unique, one of which is this whole idea of a budget, where you can have some certainty of knowing within a relatively small percentage, what your annual income will be. I know that varies widely whether you're wholesaling or there's certainly other variables in that.

Within the standard CSA model, that was one of the things that was clear from the very beginning that this is different. This has the potential to really provide farmers with the degree of security and certainty that they have not had. That was really I think just one of the remarkable things about CSA. I shouldn't be talking in past tense, because I still think it has the potential to continue to offer that level of security.

Chris Blanchard: What are you guys doing at Common Harvest Farm in the face of some of these changes to not just the CSA model but to the local food scene? How are you guys moving ahead in that?

Dan Guenthner: This interview is timely, because we're right in the middle of that. For the first 25 plus years of our farm, we really did not experience any difficulties with



membership. We set our goals, our farm was fairly stable, we stayed in about a 220, 225 member range for many, many years, 15, 18, 20 years with very few changes. Some of our drop sites had as many as 30 shares at a given drop site, whether that was a business or someone's front porch or backyard in a neighborhood.

This past year was the first year that our farm did not fill up and we were about 30 members short. We saw some of these signs early on. A number of other farms had reported not filling up and then of course last year, one of the curious things was that many farms in different parts of the country did not fill up, in talking with Elizabeth Henderson who has her finger on the pulse of the movement pretty well. She was saying that reports were coming in really from across the country.

I think that a lot of us were scratching our heads, wondering if that was a bit of an anomaly, if there was something off the radar that we weren't really seeing. Over the course of the winter, we decided to in a sense go back to our root and to really re engage with our members in a new way. I should just mention that we don't have a formal core group like some farms do, but we've always had a circle of friends around us that have acted in that role informally. We have called upon them when we have made bigger purchases or when we've made it to float ideas or something.

By and large, we haven't routinely engaged with our members as much as we'd like. I think you get into this routine and you're moving ahead and all of a sudden we realize, "Wait a second, we need help here and we need to let our members know what's going on." Of course, one of the difficult things about not filling up with your membership as a CSA is that almost all of the short revenue ends up coming out of the farmer's pocket, because you've already spent, so many of those expenses are so heavily spring loaded that waited early and this even that when you really do realize, "Wait a second, we're short here. We've already committed to our labor. We've already made most of our major expenses." The difficult thing is it really doesn't take a very big downturn to take a pretty significant hit on a farmer's net income for a season.

So what we did this past winter is we had a number of meetings with our members and we really started throwing out some ideas. Is this still working? Is this model still working? Of course, one of the things about having been farming as long as we have, especially with these long-term committed members is if you think about how our lives have changed and then begin to think about our members here, many of whom no longer have kids at home might be retired and traveling or spending more time at the lake or with grandkids somewhere else. Their patterns have changed. Their household dietary needs have changed and yet they're still very committed by enlarge to us as farmers and to the farm.

We've been exploring a number of options and our membership is real strong this spring I think as a result of that. A lot of it for us is re engaging with our members and essentially reminding them that there are vital parts of this



partnership and that all of the members are important to us and that we really need this community of support in order to make this farm work. I would say that the temptation is to offer a variety of share sizes or start doing prepared foods or extend the season in different ways. I think that's the pattern that we've been seeing among farms.

I think in our case, what we decided to do was to, in a sense, go back to the beginning and say, "What is unique? What are the strengths of the CSA movement?" Really, when you begin to have those conversations in groups of CSA farmers, you realize the one thing that we can consistently do better than almost any other type of orientation to organic food is based upon relationship, that we can connect, we can be connected, we can be vulnerable, we can offer this authentic, this really authentic connection and experience.

That's what Blue Apron can't do. That's what other box schemes and home delivery, and all of these other outlets. It still does come down to relationship. I think the CSA movement stands to benefit this year from our national political situation where I think people are really asking about what they value in their lives right now and what is important and what they need to do to keep some of those efforts afloat and alive and vibrant. I think the CSA movement stands to benefit from some of that as well.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about keeping those relationships strong and authentic with your membership Dan, what are you doing over the course of a year to do that? Because a farmer's life is busy, it's a busy life.

Dan Guenthner: Absolutely, yeah. Right. I would say one of our strengths, when we think about farming, and particularly CSA farming, that there are hats that we wear that we don't necessarily realize how important they are. In terms of the segregation of labor here on our farm, Margaret has, she has been the primary connection with our members. I know many of them are close to all of them and interact with them when they come to the farm, but I'm focused on the production side of things, managing the crew, making the planting decisions, coordinating harvest days, doing all of that.

Margaret does the delivery and she does all of these work with the members. She comes out to the field when she's able, but for the most part, she's really trying to find every opportunity to connect with people. We've resisted things like PayPal, which maybe seems like a strange thing and you know us well enough to know that we're a little behind on the technology curve anyway. The thing that's interesting for us about Member Assembler and all of these things is that then ends up being this filter or this layer of separation between you and your members.

Maybe it's something as simple as a handwritten note. I will say that one of the strengths of our farm is directly related to Margaret's deep connection with our members, sending a notice when somebody's parent dies or sending a graduation card or reading about some art show, where a farm member is



exhibiting and say, "We can't make it to the show. I hope it's successful." These little notes, they're so important. Yet, if you had to list throughout the course of the day and get to prioritize the most important things that you should be doing in that day, rarely does something like that show up on my priority list.

I'm thinking about weeding the crop or irrigating, or all of these other tasks related protection. Yet, when Margaret, we really need to go to this funeral on Friday and you got a couple days to plan ahead and work around it, but this is really, really important to us. Then you find out later that these farm members might have been considering no longer being part of the farm. Not that we do these things thinking about our farm membership or long-term financial success to the farm, but it really does come down to relationship. I think that is something that we take seriously. Hospitality, really welcoming people to the farm, and learning how to do that in such a way. I think people really do, sometimes it's just the most simple efforts of hospitality that can go such a long way.

Somebody stops at the farm and you stop and you come over and you go, "I'm really glad you came out today. I've got this list of things to do, but I hope you're able to enjoy yourself and here's some things to look at. We'll connect up at lunch or something," and it didn't take that much out of my day, but that personal connection went a long way to making them feel like a really valued part of this farm and its future.

Chris Blanchard: It's the funny thing about relationships, isn't it? If you were to engage in the relationship, if you're like, "Gee, if I go to the funeral, those people are going to stay members in my farm and that's going to be good." It's like if you do that, it almost always shows. It feels icky and I think everybody's aware of what's going on, even if you're not explicit about it. When it really does come from the heart, it's like you get but you get the same benefits, but it so much matters about your motivation and the why behind what you're doing.

Dan Guenthner: Yeah, absolutely. This hospitality is such an important part of this movement, of this CSA movement, trying to provide people with a place that they can identify with and with people that they can have this deeper connection with. It's personalizing their experience of eating. When you think about all of the anonymity in the industrial food system, it's basically built on obfuscation and disconnection. You're going to eat fast food, you want it to be the exact same predictable experience you had, wherever else. I think that's our strength. Our strength is to - back to this whole notion of authenticity - it's to create and to offer this meaningful experience that really transcends this whole marketing orientation, this marketing notion.

We all know when we're being marketed to and we're being valued primarily for our role as consumers. It's interesting, I think about the word "consumer," which to consume as a verb, it's an active thing, but when I think of the role as a consumer in a capitalistic society, it's largely a passive thing. We're essentially told to go and buy, which as I say is an act, an active thing. It doesn't really



involve very much for thought or very much intentionality. That's what I think we're trying to bring to the food system is this degree of intentionality that everything is connected and everything has a deeper purpose and deeper meaning.

I think capitalism basically turns this all into beggars. We're all constantly saying, "Pick me. Pick me." At a certain point, we have to trust. It's going to take all of us to try and create alternative ways of alternative economies. If we're going to make any progress at all around issues of climate change, some of these larger social issues, I look right now at some of these larger issues around refugees and immigrants and welcoming people. I think all of those things are built on the same thing and that is rejecting this notion that we have been pigeon-holed into being spectators who only participates on very stringent rules written by a few people.

I think what we're doing is we're ripping up that playbook and we're saying, "Wait a second, we've got a lot more control here in this system than we realized." I think that's what owning a farm really means for me is this very, very empowering thing where we're saying, all of the economic pressures aside, we have one of the most valuable things imaginable right now in the world and it's real and it's alive and it can sustain itself if it's armed and managed well. We have a community of people who really need to be part of this.

I've often thought, okay, let's say that I were a wholesale farmer and I went out and I harvested and I put things in boxes and I delivered them to a loading dock somewhere. Then I sometimes think, "That for me would be one of the least gratifying things even if it's organic and I had a beautiful farm or whatever." I think, "Who would I think about while I'm harvesting?" This very intentional way of saying, "We are deeply, deeply connected to each other." I think that's one of the things that is being strained in so many ways in our culture right now.

I look at the role of technology and some people believe that technology is going to be this great unifier and bring us together. Look at this podcast, all of a sudden there's this community of people around this podcast. That's a good thing. In many ways, I think technology, the unintended consequence of it is that it tends to separate us from each other and not give us as much of that authentic deep meaningful connection to each other.

Chris Blanchard:

Thank you, Dan. With that, we're going to stop here, take a break, get a quick word from our sponsors and then we'll be right back with more from Dan Guenther from Common Harvest Farm in Osceola, Wisconsin.

The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought to you by Farmers Web, software for your farm. Farmers Web makes it easy to work with your buyers, saving you time, increasing efficiency, reducing mistakes, and streamlining order management from start to finish. No more lost order slips and invoices. Know what you your buyers have already paid and, which have not. Keep records and download your financial data. Farmers Web helps you manage orders from



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

buyers who place them online, but also those that order by phone, text, or email. Save time and reduce errors by keeping all orders in one place, automatically generating harvest and peak list, product catalogs and packing slips.

Farmers Web helps inform your buyer's delivery routes, pickup locations, lead times, and order minimums while also helping you keep track of buyer payment terms, special pricing, and customer information for all your buyers. A flat monthly fee and flexible plan types allow you to pause, cancel, or switch plan types from month to month at any time even during the off season, [farmersweb.com](http://farmersweb.com).

Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company, makers of Fort Vee and Fort Light potting mixes. What if you didn't have to worry about wheat transplants and poor germination due to less than great potting soil or getting truly finished compost for your homemade blend, or making sure that your employees remember to add the extra fertilizer chart? What if you could grow plants up until the roots filled the container without having to worry about supplying extra fertility? What if every transplants on your farm was growing in an optimized nature to materials designed from the ground up to produce a healthy plant in a restricted media volume?

What if your potting soil had your back consistently year after, year after year? That's what Vermont Compost Potting Soil can bring to you, taking care of growers by taking care of transplants since 1992, [vermontcompost.com](http://vermontcompost.com).

And we're back with Dan Guenther at Common Harvest Farm in Osceola, Wisconsin. Dan, you mentioned a few minutes before the break the CSA charter. Can you tell us about that?

Dan Guenther:

Yeah, I think the CSA charter is just really a wonderful expression of some of the creativity that is just an essential part of the history and the future of the CSA movement. I give credit to Elizabeth Henderson who was really the first one to introduce this idea. As I mentioned earlier, for those that do not know Elizabeth, she has been CSA farming for the better part of 30 years, one of the earliest CSAs in the country.

After Robyn Van En died unexpectedly in the early 90s, Elizabeth took her work and finished the manuscript for sharing the harvest. The CSA, one of the first founding books supporting and laying out the CSA concept. Elizabeth has continued to serve in this really important role of being an ambassador for the CSA movement, not only in this country, but also in other parts of the world including doing some work most recently in China with the growing CSA movement there. She's also been very connected with a lot of their labor issues and other things.

Elizabeth hatched this idea that we really need to come back to some of these



core principles. What makes the CSA movement unique and what are some of these identifying characteristics and qualities of the movement? There have been efforts to create certification, a number of other ways of defining who's in and who's out and those can be delicate issues. For example here about five or six years ago, we started seeing CSAs in the Twin Cities that were not organic. Then that created some questions about to some degree, it's implied that as CSA, if not certified organic and certainly following organic practices.

Then that became a little bit of a challenge for us to start to talk about distinguishing how do we distinguish ourselves from some of the CSA like model. Just a little bit of a historical note, back in 1990, I was on a radio show with Rod Shouldice who was the executive director of the Biodynamic Association and I believe it was at the Kimberton, Camphill in Pennsylvania. He said something that is really stuck with me and that is I think some of the brilliance of the CSA idea is that there were these core principles, shared risk, member involvement, giving members a say in what's grown, and this communication and this connection with our members, sustainable practices, their labor, these have been these really these core values.

What Rod said in that interview that has stuck with me is that the brilliance of the CSA model is that there's a tremendous amount of creativity and individual expression of the CSA movement. As long as those core values are honored, and so we have CSAs that do different types of distribution systems and some have a lot more opportunities for members to be involved than others maybe not as much, and different ways for people to engage.

By enlarge, there's been this connection through these core values. I think the charter, where the charter really started to take shape is to start to realize that some expressions of CSA were wandering from some of those core values. Get what you want, when you want it. These session shares, you're going on vacation for a month, you don't have to pay for that month. All of these consumer driven personal preference, consumer choice options, and so I think what the beauty of the charter and so Elizabeth in a sense, she convened this group. She invited about 30 or 40 people, some representing CSA organizations around the country to be part of this process of crafting these principles of which there are 12.

This process went back and forth over the course of three or four months. Then after the first of the year here, it was ready to be rolled out. That happened on February 24th. The CSA charter is available if your listeners haven't seen a copy, it's available through a number of different sources. Simon Huntley at Small Farm Central has been providing some platform media support for a lot of this and you can access that to the Small Farm Central website.

There's an introduction, there's a press release, and then there are these 12 core principles. I don't think we necessarily need to go into them here, but I think there were reading and understanding and reacting to. This is not the final edit. I think this is going to be an evolving conversation. Then I think the hope is



that individual farms can consider signing or endorsing the charter, so you would have on your website or your printed material, brochures, CSA charter member or CSA charter endorsee and that that then becomes an invitation to engage around these issues with your members and with the wider community about what these core principles are.

Many of them are around livable wage and social inclusion, the manner in which food shall be grown and honoring the natural process of organic practices and a number of things. I think it'll be interesting to see what the response is like in different parts of the country, if people feel like this is a useful thing, I think it's been a very organic process. I think it's a good start. A lot of water has gone over the dam. The horse was already at the barn thing and can we go back and recreate what we had? I'm not sure, but at the same time, I think we can begin to really speak more directly about what those core values are with respect to our own individual farms as a way of really reconnecting with our members.

I think it's been a very fruitful and very open process. I really give Elizabeth a lot of credit for shepherding that whole process.

Chris Blanchard: We'll get a link to that on the website. I would also note that that's available at [csaday.info](http://csaday.info) is where you can, the URL you can go to get that, so. Dan, I would be doing a real injustice if we didn't talk about farming.

Dan Guenthner: [00:57:30] We haven't been talking about farming? We're going to talk about more specifically about practices and some of those things. Yeah, I would welcome that.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, about what you do out in the field, because you're really good and really interesting farmer.

Dan Guenthner: Coming from you Chris, that's really a compliment. I appreciate that. I have tried to do things. I don't know where you want to start this segment, but I'll say that I've been a real student of scale and that I have tried to maintain a scale that fits my abilities and my management skills. We have not been in a real growth orientation for a long time. We've hit our sweet spot maybe 15, 18 years ago and we have tried to maintain that.

Our equipment and our cropping system has a maturity about it, I would say. One of the things that's been a guiding principle for me from the very beginning is that we were setting out to create a system and that individual equipment purchases needed to be evaluated in terms of how they fit within the larger system, what was the relationship between new things and with the rest of the system. I've described investing and capitalizing a farm as a stair step instead of a traditional 45-degree line where money and money returned.

I see it as in my own experience, you often times make an investment in equipment, infrastructure, and you don't always start seeing the gains from that until all of those different pieces start to jell together. You make an investment,



which ends up being the tread of the stair and then the profit is the riser. I say the goal for all of us small farms is to be right at the top of that riser as much as possible that has everything on our farm, sitting in its place.

I should also mention that I'm not very mechanical. I don't tear in the motors and rebuild motors and I don't have a lot of extra equipment sitting around. I like to weld and I like to fix things, but more importantly, I'm a real student about anything we bring on this farm has to fit. It has to have a place and it has to be, "Can I repair it? Can I find somebody to repair it? How expensive are parts? Do I want it? Do I need it?" Ways of evaluating things.

We're also very debt-averse. We have a mortgage on the farm, but we have never borrowed any money for any other purchases. We have done some creative financing through our members where on three different occasions, members provided an infusion of capital for us to move forward with some purchases and we did that in the form of up selling shares, so selling some advanced shares, like a five-year share or ten-year share.

We built a barn. We built a harvest shed. We drilled a well. We bought a tractor with that method and you have to be careful, because since you're borrowing from yourself. If that also back to our earlier conversation about CSA members, it really endears people to you if they're now invested for 10 years and feeling a sense of ownership around that investment, and infrastructure, and capital, and stuff.

[01:02:00] We've also been real students of sustainability. Margaret and I met at a place at Washington State that was very, very committed to reducing waste, reducing energy, conserving, recycling, trying to do without. That, Holden Village is the name of it, it's a Lutheran affiliated retreat center in the Cascade Mountains. We were practicing just some really forward-thinking sustainability initiatives even in the 70s and 80s around reducing waste and a number of other things.

We brought that to our farm. I know what the organic conference, there's these workshops on these lean business practices. Chris, you've done an excellent job over the years with talking about post-harvest handling and packing shed efficiencies. Some of those efficiencies for us have had to do with conserving energy and that has been a very, very important value of ours. We use less electricity on our farm than the average household does in the state of Wisconsin.

We have solar panels now and that's been a nice addition, but for example, we don't use a pickup for tractor very often when we're harvesting things. Our packing shed is centrally located in our farm and we use hand-powered parts. We just are organized and we get people in motion and the system in place. We don't have to have a pickup or a van or something to shuttle produce around. We do use a tractor for some of the larger harvest around winter squash and some of the things in the fall.



That's just a simple orientation to our farm. We don't leave walking coolers running. We don't have fans circulating. In a sense, we're outliers I think in a lot of ways, because we have a real value... this historical orientation to sustainability for us has been really trying to be as, that our stewardship transcends into all of these other aspects of the farm as well, stewarding all of those other resources.

Chris Blanchard: [01:05:00] You've even gone so far as to go back from tractors to draft horses.

Dan Guenthner: That is true. We did have draft horses for about 12 years. We just sold them here about two years ago. Many of your listeners are probably familiar with Eric and Anne Nordell who farm in Trout Run, Pennsylvania. I consider them to be some of the most important thinkers in small scale agriculture in this country in terms of their soil stewardship and stuff. They farm with horses and I've been drawn to that. I think one of the things that was an important thing for us about horses is that it ... I'm always reminded of a Joel Salatin quote that I probably don't have exactly, but he said, "One of the biggest problems with agriculture today is that we're trying to apply technological solutions to biological problems. Until we figure out how to apply biological solutions to biologic problems, we're not going to get very far."

Draft horses for me represented operating within that biological realm, all of a sudden understanding you're so connected to an animal and that animal is tired, that animal is edgy about something, what's going on and it was this deeper level of awareness. Now, having said all of that, takes out to whom you know, who farm with draft horses for years used to call some of those really wonderful times these silver cloud moments, where everything just goes well and you just think, "Life just doesn't get any better than this."

I remember one time a bluebird landing on the back of the horse. The horses are standing there resting at the end of the row. A bluebird lands on their back and I'm thinking, I've never had a bluebird land on a tractor. It was one of those moments like this is just a glimpse of what it must be like for us to really begin to accept more of this innate biological connection that we have.

Now, having said all of that, it also is a layer of, it adds a layer of complication. One thing is farming with horses is a challenge, just learning it. Teaching someone else how to farm with horses is an entirely different thing. That became one of the more difficult things that we have three or four interns, we have kids, our own kids working on the farm, some retired folks, members coming out to volunteer. We have a dynamic and a dynamic labor force.

All of a sudden you had horses into that mix and you have somebody driving a team that doesn't know what they're doing or something. That in the end became one of the more difficult pieces of farming with horses, is that if it were just myself and I absolutely loved harvesting firewood, in the woods, in the winter with horses. Just nothing was as satisfying and this deep connection to



nature and another living being. It was just this really incredible experience.

For example, you'd be farming with horses and you just get the horses in a groove. Now, horses are going to spend about the first 10 minutes testing you. They're going to see, "Okay, how serious are you?" Then once they find out that you're serious and they're going to be out there for a while, then they realize, "We better start conserving energy, because we're going to be out here awhile. Let's start behaving."

Then when somebody comes up and says, "There's a water leak, a water valve has broken and there's water running in the harvest shed and you've got to take the horses back to the hitching post, go and fix that leak and come back 45 minutes later, you start that whole process over again with the horses." They're edgy, they're agitated, they're testing you. That became one of the more difficult challenges for me, is that I had to get up earlier and earlier in order to really enjoy some of those moments with the horses, because it's just that everything took longer.

In the end, I thought, "If maybe this romantic notion of being deeply connected to nature is jeopardizing our livelihood here, then I really have to think twice about that." That ended up being the reason that I gave up horses and stuff. We've got an electric G and I just got a fat tire bike that's on loan here for the summer that we're going to set up as the harvest cart. We've always been into experimenting with things.

Like I said, we've got the solar panels and other things. I just really, for me, it's this creative side of farming is part of that experimenting and trying new things. Personally, I just think that's one of the most enjoyable parts about organic farming in general is that it's not prescriptive. We're not following this pre-determined set of rules or something, that it really is about observation and experimentation and that takes a lot of different forms.

Chris Blanchard: Dan, you're not doing the horses anymore, but I know from what some of the research I did, getting ready for the podcast today, one of the challenges that you found with the horses was that a bed system becomes pretty difficult with horses. Did you guys move to a row system or are you still doing beds? Have you switched back and forth as you've changed power sources on the farm?

Dan Guenther: Yeah, I would say that's one of the horses' lasting influences in our production system is that following after some of the research that the Nordell's were doing on their farm, of which they call, "The bio extensive market garden." We started looking at some of the limitations of the bed system, not only in terms of the horses. Just one of the practical things about horses on a bed system is when you start to separate the horses that far apart in the neck yoke, you can lengthen out the neck yoke, that's not the problem, but you end up getting this seesawing action.

When you're cultivating or something, it's very difficult. You've got three rows



or four rows on a bed and these horses are not stepping at the same rate. It can be disastrous in terms of trying to do any precision cultivating. In addition to that, we started looking at some of the high fertility needs and the irrigation needs and other things. We started realizing that a row system, by spreading things out a little bit, now I realize that you have to have the land available to do that. We're really pushing up against the limits of that on the land that we have available.

We end up doing a micro bed system where we're planting one row on this slightly elevated, it's almost like zone tillage or ridge tillage, modified ridge tillage. We're using a key line plow that we use to shape these beds and something else is unique about our orientation to production is that we do light surface tillage first or secondary tillage first to texturize the surface of the soils, eradicate any weeds, dissect some residue or something, and then we plant behind our primary tillage. That's a different orientation than most farms.

We have these Australian chisel shanks that are about 16-inches in the ground. Then we can apply fertilizer behind them and there are these killers that slightly elevate that bed and there's very little disturbance then in between those two shanks that we have. Then there are these baskets that roll along and texturize the surface. Then that's how our transplanter is set-up to go right into those little micro bed. We find that it's easier to get in and out of the field, it's easier for picking with more of a row type field layout rather than more intensive bed.

Chris Blanchard: That's really interesting change, because that seems to be opposite of the way a lot of the production models that we've talked about on the podcast are going.

Dan Guenther: Absolutely, yeah. Back to that earlier comment about it really does hinge upon your land resource. If you're limited on land as many market gardeners are, given their proximity to the city or expensive land, land is at a premium. I look at these field tunnels and how much production is coming out of these field tunnels. We have two high tunnels ourselves and it's really quite impressive. I think the difficult thing is following the nutrient trail and realizing where are the nutrients coming from to get that yield. I think what the Nordell's are trying to do is to try and grow more their fertility on their own farm and we've tried to do some interceding between some of these rows with mixed success, but that's all still part of the conversation here is how can we possibly look at some inter-cropping and other things, to try and seed the soil and keep a very active biological community in between those rows.

Chris Blanchard: For a farm that's as focused on sustainability as you are and obviously with the acre picture that you've got, you're not looking at doing a Nordell style rotation of one year in, one year out. What are you doing?

Dan Guenther: Unfortunately, no. Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: What are you doing for fertility at Common Harvest Farm?



Dan Guenthner: I would say that our covered cropping and that's one of the things about organic vegetables or the shorter season crops, just give us a lot more opportunities for our cover so we can be seeding some things in the spring and getting 60 days of growth and incorporating that. Then following that with a fall crop. For example, fall Brassicas or something. We do very little double cropping here. We do have enough land where once we've harvested spring lettuce for example, we can then come in on top of that with a cover crop. Many of those covers have the opportunity for three, four good months of growth and a lot of that biomass and then be incorporated and stuff.

Now, having said that, we're still a long way from producing all of our own fertility. Back to your comment about the Nordell's, one to, one to one, I think one of the things that I often think about is if you look at the average of Iowa farm rotation in 1920, corn made up no more than about one-fifth of the total land area, and that's because they just couldn't produce enough fertility for much more corn than that within the system.

That was a fairly close system. I think that that ratio of 1:4 or 1:5 is really about the best that we could hope to achieve if we were going to try and produce our own fertility. That ends up being a little bit of a guide for me. Now, we do import some pelletized feather meal or pelletized chicken litter or something like that to provide some, a boost of fertility and stuff. We're certainly aspiring to produce more of our own fertility, but that is one of the real challenge is I think for us as market gardeners is that a couple things, one, a disproportionate number of things that we grow are heavy feeders.

The cabbage family, potatoes, a number of those crops require a fair bit of fertility. You go back to Peter Henderson and his work in New Jersey back 150 years ago, these are intensive ... You can get a tremendous amount of production, but you also then have to put a lot into that system. High in, high out, but I think the ultimate goal for us all is to create a little bit more of a self-sustaining system. Unfortunately, that just takes a lot more land than most of us have available to us. If we are importing things, then whether that's mulch or other things, that then is in a sense robbing nutrients from somewhere else.

This is all part of a larger aspirational objective here of trying to produce more of our own fertility, which is a challenge, given these high output of these high-value market gardens.

Chris Blanchard: Dan, with that, it's time to turn to our lightning round. We're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor and then we'll get started. This lightning round and perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought to you by BCS America. BCS two-wheel tractors are often mistaken for just a rototiller, but it is truly a superior piece of farming. Engineered and built in Italy where small farms are way of life, BCS tractors are built to standards of quality and durability expected of real agricultural equipment, the kind of dependability that every farm needs.



I've worked with BCS tractors for over 24 years and I wouldn't consider anything else for my small tractor needs. Now, I'm not the only fan. More than 1.5-million people in 50 countries have discovered the advantages of owning Europe's most popular two-wheel tractor. These really are small tractors with the kinds of features found on their four-wheel cousins and a wide array of equipment. Power harrows, rotary plows, flail mower, snow thrower, sickle bar mowers, chippers, log splitters, and more. Check out [bcsamerica.com](http://bcsamerica.com) to see photos and videos of BCS in action, [bcsamerica.com](http://bcsamerica.com).

[01:21:00] Dan, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Dan Guenthner: Favorite tool, we have a number of hand-tools that I just love. We use an English style push hoe. They're absolutely phenomenal. They're a lot better than the Dutch diamond hoe, or a scuttle hoe, or anything else I've ever discovered. We have them made at a local shop and stuff. That's one thing that I think has worked real well. We've designed tomato stake puller, which is just a real simple tool for, it just makes that whole process real simple, a fulcrum principle, slide it over the stake and there's a fulcrum that just lifts them so easily. Those are just a couple examples.

Chris Blanchard: When I visited your farm and I think that was in 2001, one of the things that struck me is when you drive on the farm, you've got a poem on the side of your barn.

Dan Guenthner: We do, yeah.

Chris Blanchard: [01:22:00] Would you share that with us?

Dan Guenthner: Yeah, the poem is The Red Wheelbarrow from William Carlos Williams. Just to give you a little bit of a backstory on it. Minnesota Public Radio did a story back in the mid-90s about a state arts or grant in Wabasha County. What they did is they chose four barns on one road and each of the barns had a poem for a different season. I heard this story and the story was essentially about these poems that had been put on these barns in the 70s, were showing signs of wear and that there really wasn't money to repaint them and stuff, and they were just lamenting the fact that this really creative thing was disappearing.

[01:23:00] I said that, relay this story with Margaret and Margaret's an English teacher. She said, "I know the poem that we need to put on our barn." It's William Carlos Williams, The Red Wheelbarrow and it is: "so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater standing beside the white chicken." It's very simple and I think it captures the essence of so much of what all of us do as farmers.

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

Dan Guenthner: I love growing carrots. We have good soil for carrots. It's just a joy to dig them.



We dig them with a U-bar digger. I love eating them and I love sharing them with members.

Chris Blanchard: What would Margaret say is your farmer super power?

Dan Guenthner: I would say one of the things about my particular farmer super power is I don't give up very easily. I have a lot of gumption. I'll tell you, I come from a long line of farmers and a long line of German immigrants. Many of whom were stubborn and wouldn't give in, but I have this crazy feeling where if I give up, I'm letting down all of these ancestors who forged this pioneering lifestyle in Germany, and Russia, and traveling to this country and farming on the North Dakota prairies and then moving onto Montana and starting ranches and stuff. I feel like I've got this blessing and this curse and that is that I've got these expectations of all these people that I like to get up early. I like to work late. I've got good energy for working and I really enjoy the challenge of it.

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

Dan Guenthner: I think patience is probably the thing. It's easy to look at other farms and size up your success based on all of these other external and somewhat artificial reference points. I would say, trust your instincts, be patient, don't lose sight of those things that you really value, family and relationships and other interests. Keep other interests in your life. We've played baseball for years. I try and get out for bike rides as much as I can. As difficult as this may sound trying to find some balance in your life continues to be a challenge, but that's something that I would make even more a concerted effort to do right from the very beginning.

Chris Blanchard: Dan, thank you so much for being my guest on The Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.

Dan Guenthner: Chris, this has been a real pleasure for me. You and I, I believe we met in 1996 at Seed Savers. That was the first time I remember meeting you. I remember being really engaged to hear you lead as you led a garden tour of Seed Savers and I've always held you in high esteem and I think you're doing valuable work. I'm just really glad to be part of this.

Chris Blanchard: Thank you so much, Dan.

Dan Guenthner: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is Episode 116 of The Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for this show at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com) by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Guenthner, which if you haven't seen that is G-U-E-N-T-H-N-E-R.

The transcript for this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk behind farming equipment and high-quality



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

garden tools in North America, and by Rock Dust Local, the first company in North America specializing in local sourcing and delivery of the best rock dust and biochar for organic farming. Additional funding for transcripts is provided by North Central SARE, providing grants and education to advance innovations and sustainable agriculture.

You can get the show notes for every Farmer to Farmer Podcast right in your inbox by signing up for my email newsletter at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com).

Also, please head on over to iTunes, leave us a review if you enjoyed this show. Talk to us in the show notes or tell your friends on Facebook or at Purple Pitchfork on Facebook.

Hey, when you talk to our sponsors, please let them know how much you appreciate their support of a resource that you value. You can support the show directly by going to [farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate). We've got one-time and monthly options there. I'm working to make the best farming podcast in the world and you can help.

Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show through the suggestions form at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com). I'll do my best to get them on the show.

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