



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 152

Scott Chaskey of Quail Hill Farm on Thirty Years of a Member-Harvested CSA, Land Trusts, and Making Time for Poetry

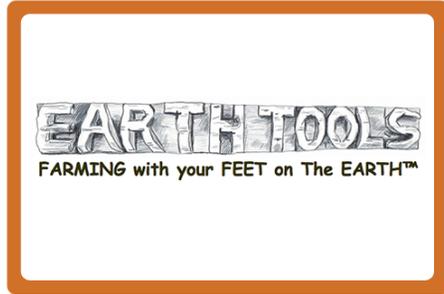
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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast Episode 152, and this is your host Chris Blanchard. Scott Chaskey is the Director of Quail Hill farm, one of the original community-supported agriculture farms in the United States. Located in Amagansett, New York on land donated to the Peconic Land Trust the farm also delivers fresh food to local restaurants, food pantries, and the Sag Harbor Farmers Market.

Chris Blanchard: Quail Hills 250 member families harvest their own food each week from the 35 acres of vegetable production and Scott digs into the nitty gritty of how that process works. We also discuss the ways that Quail Hill works to keep the community involved in the farm through its advisory committee and other mechanisms.

Chris Blanchard: Scott shares how he worked in the early years to build up the depleted soil of Quail Hill Farms, how they maintain it now, and how they've met the challenge of a nut sedge infestation. We also discuss the farms advanced apprenticeship program, Scott's start in food production while living in Cornwall, and how Scott has made time and space for writing poetry and prose while managing the farm.



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Chris Blanchard: Scott Chaskey, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Scott Chaskey: Thank you, really wonderful to be here Chris.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off today by having you tell us about Quail Hill Farm, where you guys are located, and what you're doing there.

Scott Chaskey: Okay, so we are located in a little hamlet called Amagansett, New York. About as far out as you can go on Long Island, two and a half hours from New York City, and we are part of an organization called the Peconic Land Trust, and we have been operating as a CSA for, this is our 28th year as a matter of fact out here on the East end of Long Island. Although the actually CSA started two years before that in another hamlet, Bridgehampton in 1988.

Chris Blanchard: And Quail Hill Farm is strictly a CSA farm right?

Scott Chaskey: Well we are a CSA farm that is mainly a CSA farm, and that certainly was why we were founded and that is our identity, however like all small farms we need to do a lot of different things to bring in the bread so we sell at the farmers market, we sell wholesale, we do some fieldwork like mowing and that sort of thing of neighbors, so we do a bunch of different things but the major part of the operation and the foundation of it is the CSA.

Chris Blanchard: How big is Quail Hill Farm?

Scott Chaskey: We started in 1988 with 10 families and grew pretty quickly to about 150 families, and now we're at about 250 families, and that's maybe between 600 and 700 people. In area we're farming about 35 acres for the CSA, although we're on a preserve that is 220 acres, and so we do tend more land than the 35 acres that we grow on for the CSA. We started with 4 acres and a hand pushed rototiller, and here we are 28 years later with 5 tractors and a lot more acreage.

Chris Blanchard: And Scott, what's your role on the farm? Because if I understand right you're not the farm owner here, you're an employee?

Scott Chaskey: Correct. Actually I have an unusual position I think for a farmer in that I'm a salaried farmer. I actually work for the Peconic Land Trust and Quail Hill Farm is not a separate entity. In other words we don't have a bank account. The money that comes in and



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flows out of Quail Hill Farm all flows through the Peconic Land Trust, and the Peconic Land Trust is a larger umbrella organization and my salary is paid by the Peconic Land Trust. It's an unusual setup for a farmer, but one that I actually admire and enjoy, and I have for many years and I've never actually felt the need to own the land.

Chris Blanchard: And I think in a lot of ways for a CSA farm being a salaried employee really does make a lot of sense because it is the ultimate sharing of the risk by the other partners and not having that risk on the farmer.

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, that's very true. You know, this was really an organic happening. I mean when we began it was all experiment and it was quite new. No one had heard of CSA's before, including John Halsey who started the Land Trust in 1983. The idea of the CSA was brought to him in 1989, and he said "Well, that's an interesting concept." And then began the experiment, and I still think of it as a kind of experiment 28 years later, but for many years we were the only ones in the country doing this, the only land trust operating a community farm and I took many calls from people asking the sort of questions like you're asking now. Like, what's the setup? How does it run? Who owns the land? Is there a lease? All of that sort of thing.

Chris Blanchard: Well so, okay, I'm going to continue to ask those questions.

Scott Chaskey: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chris Blanchard: You said the farm started in 1988, but the idea of the CSA was brought to the land trust in 1989, can you talk to us a little bit about how the CSA got started with you, and then how it got incorporated into the Peconic Land Trust?

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, I think that's a really important question, especially when you consider that CSA was just brand new. I mean Indian Line Farm and Temple-Wilton had just begun in 1986 so it was the beginning of CSA in this country, and I actually got involved, I said this was an organic process, I got involved because my father-in-law, wonderful man who was this sculptor Bill King, and my mother-in-law who is a painter, Connie Cox, were members of this first CSA. There were 10 families, they heard about it, they got excited about it.

Scott Chaskey: My wife and I were living in England at the time. I spent 10 years living in England. We came back to this country and my father-in-law said " Why don't you come along to this meeting of something called community supported agriculture that we're involved in." And I said "Well that sounds interesting." And I went and here I am 28 years later, I think the idea being brought to John Halsey, who was founding this land trust that was only 6, 7 years old at the time, I think it had that kind of excitement for him.

Scott Chaskey: The land trust had basically been given land, eventually it was 220 acres of land by one woman, Deborah Light, and the land trust had to figure out what to do with it. It was prime farm land, the soils are beautiful, and this idea of community agriculture was an exciting thing to dive into.

Scott Chaskey: So, that's how that transaction took place, but as I said, it was really an experiment in the beginning. There weren't really any models for us to fall back onto.



Chris Blanchard: And were you hired by the Peconic Land Trust right from the beginning to be the Farm Manager?

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, actually I was hired ... There was another fellow who was excited about biodynamics actually, he was really a gardener but he was excited about biodynamics, he heard about community supported agriculture, he took the idea to John Halsey, and I had just moved back from England and I came on as, I was really not an apprentice because I was in my late 30's at the time and I had lots of gardening experience, but I came in as a farm worker and then took over about a year and a half later, and I've had, I don't know, 4 or 5 different titles since that time but I've been doing the same thing, and now I'm technically known as the Director of Quail Hill Farm.

Chris Blanchard: But when you say you're the Director... you're still out driving tractors?

Scott Chaskey: I am, I love that part of it actually and I wouldn't want to give that part up. So, I am nearing the time where I'm pulling back, but I'm still out there plowing, and disking, and planting. I love the seeding aspect of it, and I'm not doing so much of the harvesting. The younger ones are doing that, but I'm out in the field every day.

Chris Blanchard: How is the CSA structured at Quail Hill Farm? How are members involved? Are they signing up for shares and getting a box for a certain amount of money? Or are you guys running this in kind of the classic Indian Line Farm way of having these meetings in the Fall, and presenting the budget, and passing the hat until you have enough money to run the farm for the year? How does that work at Quail Hill Farm?

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, that's a really good question, and of course a major part of the answer to that is that there is an umbrella organization so a fair amount of the administration, et cetera, happens there and so we aren't structured like Temple-Wilton. We do have meetings. The member involvement is very important, and I'm sure we'll talk more about the community aspect of community supported agriculture, but the utmost unusual thing about our structure is that the members purchase a share at the beginning of the year obviously, but they actually come and harvest their own food.

Scott Chaskey: I'm sure we'll talk more about this, but we have two harvest days a week, Tuesday and Saturday during the Summer season, and the members actually come and go out in the field and harvest their own food. It's not a box share, although in the last couple of years because some of the members are now in their 80's, or 90 as a matter of fact, and they are not able to go out in the field and still harvest the way they used to so we do provide a box share for those members, but since the beginning its been structured because those original 10 families wanted to get their hands in the earth. They wanted to dig carrots, and dig potatoes and all of that sort of thing. So, that's really how it works.

Scott Chaskey: Then we have another important part of the structure is the farm committee, and I think this is a really important part of community agriculture, and that committee is known as an advisory committee, it's not a board. The Peconic Land Trust has a board of Directors that assures the operations of the Peconic Land Trust and we are under that jurisdiction, but we have an advisory committee that's extremely important and helps to decide what's happening on the farm basically.



- Chris Blanchard: I'm really curious in this nuts and bolts level about this number part of this. So, I've talked to CSA farms where members came out and participated in the harvest and then helped wash and pack that produce and get it delivered, but that's not what you're talking about.
- Scott Chaskey: No.
- Chris Blanchard: You're talking about if I bought a share in your farm I would come every week and harvest the vegetables for my share in your farm?
- Scott Chaskey: That's how it works. You actually come ... You know, let's walk it through from the beginning. There are a few people who ride bicycles, but most people drive, park along the Deep Lane, as it's known, walk down into the valley, read the board that we have at our farm stand, and the farm stand is for the CSA members, it's not a retail stand, and every Tuesday and Saturday that board changes and the numbers read "Okay, lettuce is in number 10. Potatoes are in number 15. Bachelor button's are in number 22. Raspberries are down in the valley in number 38." And then they march out into the field and they do their own harvesting and we leave forks for potatoes, and carrots, and that sort of thing. People are told to bring bags and to bring their own FELCO clippers and that sort of thing to cut their own flowers.
- Scott Chaskey: They do all of that harvesting themselves except for the, because it's grown so much we have to grow the larger bulk crops like winter squash or something like that in another field, which is a half a mile away and then we bring that back and we put it at the stand, but we don't do any boxing up or anything like that so members do that themselves.
- Chris Blanchard: And are you telling the members how much they can harvest or is it simply a matter of saying "The potatoes are there, go get what you need."?
- Scott Chaskey: Yeah, well that's interesting that you chose potatoes because there isn't a really limit on potatoes, but for instance on most things we'll say two lettuce, or starting with a pint of cherry tomatoes, or that sort of thing, and that's on a sign out in the field. So, you read the board, then you got out to where the numbered rows are in the field and there's more instruction there.
- Scott Chaskey: You know, it's really an honor system, but it's an honor system that has worked for 28 years. Amazing really.
- Chris Blanchard: It is. And where are your members coming from?
- Scott Chaskey: Well it's really a cross section of the Hamptons. We could go on about what the Hamptons are, but besides the glittery part of the Hamptons that you've heard about there's another side to the Hamptons which is one of the oldest settled parts of certainly the east coast. These villages were incorporated in 1648, you know, I mean so this has been settled for a long time. The tradition of farming is very, very deep here and we sort of feel like we're just a new version of something that's been going on a long time.
- Scott Chaskey: So, the people that come harvest and are part of the farm are really a combination of people who are year-round people, and then also people who for maybe generations



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have been coming out here, you know, families have houses, maybe they live in New York and they're out on the weekends, that sort of thing.

Scott Chaskey: So, it's quite a combination and we try to include as much of the population out here as we can. We have all kinds of things going on to bring people into the community farm.

Chris Blanchard: I'm curious about the economic cross section that you get. Do you have people from all income levels being part of the CSA?

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, I mean it is the Hamptons and just to live here takes a certain income, but the people who are less fortunate economically here we try and bring in in other ways, and we have done all kinds of different things like asking people who can to pay more than the normal share price and then we take some of those funds and given them to other people who can't afford. So, in a way that model hasn't worked really well to include other people, but we keep trying in whatever way we can.

Scott Chaskey: And there's other options. So, people can actually be involved with the farm in other ways without purchasing a share as well.

Chris Blanchard: And when you say be involved in other ways, like going to farmers market, or buying...

Scott Chaskey: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: Okay.

Scott Chaskey: That's right. And actually we distribute a fair amount of produce to a local food pantry, that sort of thing as well, and we have open days where people can come and taste tomatoes, and rate tomatoes, and that sort of thing, and we constantly have school groups coming.

Scott Chaskey: So, everybody who lives in the Hamptons has an opportunity to participate in the community farm.

Chris Blanchard: What does your share pricing look like given that you don't really have much harvest labor invested in the final product?

Scott Chaskey: That's a good question. When we started we looked around at the other, there weren't that many CSA's, but we looked around at what the pricing was like for those, and I think back at that time a share price might have been \$400.00 or something like that, but that's 28 years ago, and every year we've basically gone up by cost of living increase, but not much more than that. I mean the present price is over \$900.00, but that's for ... The members have done some investigation and gone to local super markets, and local health food stores, and that sort of thing, and we know that the share is worth much more than what it costs if indeed you follow through and do all of your harvesting, it's really up to the member to do that, but it's certainly well worth it.

Chris Blanchard: You said that the members are very involved in the farm, not just in this functional level of harvesting the produce, but also at that higher organizational level. Tell us a little bit more about that structure?



Scott Chaskey: Well, so we have this farm committee and a number of the people who have been on the farm committee have been part of it for over 20 years I would say, but we're always trying to bring in new voices to that and basically when we meet we talk about the state of the farm, we discuss everything from the economics, including the share price, to arranging community events. You know, in the first years we were really spending, certainly the farmers were spending most of our energy on figuring out how to grow the crops, and renew the soil, and all of that sort of thing, but then we realized we weren't putting enough energy into the community aspect.

Scott Chaskey: And so we didn't have enough time to devote all of the energy we should to that so members took that up, and so we have certain events and members who are on the farm committee enlist volunteers to run a farm breakfast that happens at the beginning of the year, we have a tomato tasting, we have a potluck meal with music and et cetera in the apple orchard, we have one benefit dinner, which is a long table dinner with 175 people sitting at one long table in the apple orchard, and the members help with all of that. It wouldn't happen without them.

Scott Chaskey: Then there's the newsletter, all of those sorts of things, the things that are really the things that keep a CSA ticking, the members have a lot of involvement with that.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you've got 5 tractors on the farm and 35 acres of vegetable, and it really seems to me as I was snooping around about you on the Google.

Scott Chaskey: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: That soil building is a really important element of your involvement in the farm. It's something that really speaks to you.

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, I mean it's probably the basis of why I'm doing what I'm doing, and we've actually always said that the farmers job is really to build up the health in the soil. That's what we're for. I mean, we do have to grow some vegetables because people seem to want some vegetables, but building up the health of the soil is my favorite part of it, and I always return to the beautiful phrase by Miriam Macgillis of Genesis Farm where she said "The real health of a bio-region resides in the top 6 inches of topsoil." And I believe that's true, and I've seen it in action here on our farm because we took over land that was farmed in potatoes and corn, potatoes and corn, potatoes and corn, and it needed to be revitalized.

Scott Chaskey: So, I've seen what this style of agriculture can do and it's a beautiful thing when look on the shine on the cover crop that you're putting on in the Fall and that you can taste it in the vegetables as well. So, we've done a lot to renew the vitality of the soil, it's really essential to everything we've done.

Chris Blanchard: At a practical level how have you gone about that?

Scott Chaskey: Well in the beginning we used lots of compost, more than we use now, and probably it was easier then because we had less acreage, but we're lucky that have 2 or 3 horse stables actually near to us and they needed to do something with their manure, and we needed it for our fields so we got into a composting very heavily in the beginning, and basically for the first year, probably for the first 10 years I'd say we composted every year every bit of ground that we were growing vegetables on. We don't do that



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every year now and we've come to rely more on cover cropping, you know, the use of oats and rye with a legume Austrian Winter Peas are our favorite now, and so we do a lot with that as well, but we're still composting when we need to.

Scott Chaskey: For the size farm we are we use very little brought in fertilizer and so we're trying to do it with rotations, and resting, and cover cropping, and all of that sort of thing.

Chris Blanchard: And from a mechanical perspective, tell me about your tillage practices and how those relate to the soil building effort?

Scott Chaskey: I'm so glad you have these kind of, I love these kind of questions because so often I think probably because what we've been doing is pretty unusual, you know, the combination of a conservation organization and the community agriculture and everything, but of course the basis of the farming aspect is quite rigorous, and has to be if you're going to continue using the same soil year after year.

Scott Chaskey: So, in the beginning, I didn't talk about this, but there were some really important early meetings of community supported agriculture held at a little Waldorf school in a place called Kimberton, Pennsylvania, and there were some pretty good farmers there and I learned a lot from them about equipment, et cetera, and when I came to the farm the only tillage instrument that was there was rototiller and it was obvious that was going to really ruin the soil if used over and over again.

Scott Chaskey: So, in the end we purchased one implement a year for many years, and we use a chisel plow, and a disc harrow, and we finish it off with something called a Perfecta, my favorite implement on the farm actually, or tractor implement, and occasionally we use the rototiller, but very, very rarely. That's really our major tillage, a chisel plow basically.

Chris Blanchard: And then in your crop rotation, you said you guys use a lot of cover crops, are you pulling ground out for full years and fallowing as part of your rotation? Or is it really putting in the cover crop between vegetable crops every year?

Scott Chaskey: I think that's closer to it, what you just said. In the beginning there was a great fellow, Tim Laird, who was farming with me in the beginning and we had down on paper this beautiful 7 year rotation, and 2 of the years the last years after the cropping was clover, but then we found we have a very particular problem in that we've got nut grass, or nut sedge, loves our soil and if we leave it's everywhere basically, and if we leave a ground fallow for too long, even a year in some places, the next year we plow it up and up comes the nut grass and it looks like we've seeded nut grass.

Scott Chaskey: So, it actually is better for our system to put on really great cover crops and continue the tillage, but we do rest, obviously there are sections that we're resting for at least a year, probably not two years, but at least a year and we're putting down legume's to do that. We use clover a lot, really one of my favorite seeds.

Chris Blanchard: I'm really sorry about the nut sedge, Scott.

Scott Chaskey: Thank you for saying that.



- Chris Blanchard: That stuff is the worst, and especially because in my experience it's really hard to kill with tractor based cultivation because you're constantly cut, the little nuts like 2 inches or 3 inches down in the soil and it just keeps coming.
- Scott Chaskey: It just keeps coming. As I said, I mean, you go out and look at, say we've plowed up a piece of land and I bring the apprentices out and I say "Look, at this. It looks like we actually seeded nut sedge here. It's unbelievable." And then at that point basically all you can do is plant the plants you had determined to plant there somewhere else and disc a number of times and bring the nut up to the surface, and then it actually will dry out, and then you can plant a Fall crop or something like that.
- Scott Chaskey: So, that took us some years to figure out. There was a great reply to a question I asked in the early years when I asked the older farmers "Well, what do we do with this nut grass?" And they said "Move your farm." Very helpful advice.
- Chris Blanchard: Yeah. And just thinking about the nut sedge coming up say in a field of lettuce, I would think that weed control when you've got members out picking, I mean it's one thing to take a group of employees out there and go "Yeah, boy this sucks. We're going to pick the beans out of the, we've got ragweed up in our faces so we're just going to struggle through it. You're getting paid 8 bucks an hour so let's make it happen."
- Scott Chaskey: Right.
- Chris Blanchard: It's another thing to send your members out into that kind of environment. Would you say that your farm is cleaner than your average organic vegetable farm?
- Scott Chaskey: No, I mean on certain years yes, but as we've expanded the acreage we've got our share weeds. I guess I won't say I'm proud of them but they're there. I mean it's a constant, I mean it's part of organic farming. You've got to figure out what to do, and there's sections where members are harvesting and say the early greens or something that could keep going for a long time and get taken over, you just say "Well, we just plant again." You turn that in and put in some buckwheat or something and seed some new crops.
- Scott Chaskey: So, yeah, it's a constant struggle dealing with weeds.
- Chris Blanchard: And is it something that your members are fairly understanding about?
- Scott Chaskey: Yeah. You know, in general they are. I think there's some ... We have a survey every year and people do complain about this and that, and weeds are probably up there on the list. Say you seeded some flowers in the Spring, a beautiful patch, and then all of sudden before you know it it's taken over by some weed or another, and the members do a little complaining about that, however I think most of them, because we get so many positive responses, and this is one of the things that's kept me going is of how appreciative the members can be. You come on a Saturday and so many people will say "We really want to thank you for what you're doing." And we, the farmers feel like we want to thank them because they're keeping us going, but they can be incredibly gracious and appreciative of what it takes to farm.
- Scott Chaskey: You know, part of it is like members if they're coming every week they're saying "Okay, look at what you have to deal with. You have to deal with weed pressure, you



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have to deal with no rain, or too much rain, or whatever it is." And by actually being out there in the field they actually can see that in a way. I think this is really one of the great things about our style is that it's very different if you're picking up a box and it's easy to forget that it rained all week or something like that, but our members know because they're actually out there in the field and they can witness it.

Chris Blanchard: And do you have a lot of interaction with those members when they show up to the farm?

Scott Chaskey: Well it's basically my Saturday job, my Saturday morning job that's the busiest time for members, Tuesdays are much quieter, but on Saturday it's really a major part of my job is to communicate with the members, and I can get some farm work done, but in between I'm at the stand, and talking, and I have to have a very public persona in that way.

Scott Chaskey: We try and encourage apprentices to do that too. It's very interesting because obviously half of the people that come to apprentice aren't that interested in that kind of public contact, but it's really a major part of the kind of community agriculture that we're performing.

Scott Chaskey: So, that relationship is really integral to the whole thing.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned interns, how many people do you have working with you on the farm?

Scott Chaskey: So every year, and this is an important part of our operation, we hire apprentices and now we're actually calling it an advanced apprenticeship because we felt there was a gap there in apprenticeship training. So, we have 4 to 6 apprentices, and then we have some Summer help who slot in there during the major months of the Summer. So, we have a total of 10 workers probably in the heat of the Summer, and 2 year-round people. There's myself, the Director, and then Layton, who is the Farm Manager who has now been here for I think 5 years and Layton is a year-round employee as well.

Scott Chaskey: And then every year, in the beginning we sort of had to hunt around and find apprentices, now we get lots of applications, and people know about us, and there's just so many more people interested in learning this style of agriculture.

Chris Blanchard: So you said you've got an advanced internship program as well, tell me about that.

Scott Chaskey: Well we actually felt that there were now many farms offering apprenticeships, and we know this because a number of our apprentices wanted to keep going and learn from another farm, and so obviously there are lots of options all over the country, but we felt the thing that was lacking, and we kind of learned this from the people who were coming to our farm is that how do you take the next step and actually learn to manage a farm? Or learn enough about an operation so that you can start your own, whether it's small scale or not?

Scott Chaskey: So, we are looking and we're hiring people with some experience, and sometimes a fair amount of experience and trying to give them a lot more insight into all aspects of what it takes to run a farm.

Chris Blanchard: That's a really easy thing to say, how do you actually go about doing that? How do you structure that experience for those interns so that they are getting a real



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understanding of what it really means to run a farm, instead of just what it means to be out tending the carrots?

Scott Chaskey: Well, I guess I should mention that Layton, our Farm Manager, after farming for years at a production farm went to Santa Cruz and was part of the Santa Cruz program, which is I think now celebrating its 50th year or something. There you actually pay to learn all different aspects of gardening and farming rather than getting paid, but it's a structured study.

Scott Chaskey: So, we've used elements of that and we have this rotation system where each apprentice is in charge of one aspect whether it be the greenhouse, or the marketing aspect, or the crew leader, or whatever, and each one of those rotations the person has a lot of responsibility and of course they're checking in with Layton and myself, but that's like a 3 week rotation and then they switch and they learn another aspect of it, so everybody, you know, the tractor maintenance and the tractor work is part of those rotations as well. So, you're really learning a little bit about what it takes to run the whole thing.

Chris Blanchard: One of the challenges with bringing in even a higher level intern, somebody who has maybe had some experience on a farm and then giving them real responsibility is making sure that you've got systems in place where you make sure that they aren't going to fail spectacularly.

Scott Chaskey: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: I'm thinking in particular about tractor operation, but even with the rotation, or any number of other jobs man, you could screw up a whole lot of stuff in a hurry. Have you put systems in place to help people keep from making dramatic mistakes while at the same time they have the opportunity to really engage in a learning process?

Scott Chaskey: I hope so. You know, that is the challenge. To be quite honest, I mean it's good to be honest here, if you wanted to choose the most efficient way of running a farm you wouldn't hire new people every year, but we've chosen that as a part of our mission and it's a really important part of it. And so, yeah, we have tried to put in, you know, every year we're working on that structure and trying to make it better. It takes a lot of conversation, and communication, and check-ins, and all of that sort of thing, and on a farm you know you've got to work on that. I mean, basically it's part of the never ending drive for efficiency basically, and part of our mission is to educate younger people in this style of agriculture and that's part of our not for profit mission basically.

Scott Chaskey: So, yeah, we're basically always working on that.

Chris Blanchard: Are there certain jobs that you've held out of that rotation for the interns that you're holding onto tightly for yourself?

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, I mean still when it comes to the tractor work myself and Layton do a lot of it, and then we watch for the people who it comes more naturally to and try and train them to take a little bit more on or something. And then of course, you know, we all have job descriptions written down on paper and we've got a million tasks, and responsibilities, and that sort of thing, and parts of them I have to do, or Layton has to do that have to do with member communication, and setting up the farm committee meetings, and dealing with nearby land owners. That would be an important aspect.



- Scott Chaskey: So yeah, there are multiple parts that the apprentices don't take part in, but there's plenty for them to do as well.
- Chris Blanchard: With the apprentices and the farmer training aspect, do you have training that happens outside of the activity on the farm? In other words, do you have classroom time as well as on the job, hands in the dirt, elbow to elbow training?
- Scott Chaskey: Yeah, we do, and that varies a little bit every year by who is there, who the learners are, and what the personnel is, but there's also we're part of a craft network, which the first one I know of started in the Hudson Valley and the way that is set up is that the apprentices, along with apprentices from other farms, or workers on other nearby farms travel to one farm or another to learn the specific operation of that farm.
- Scott Chaskey: And so we've helped to create a craft network like that here, and during the season there is multiple chances to go see what's happening, we're on the South fork, go and see what someone is doing on the North fork, or someone who is focusing on raising birds for eggs or meat, or someone who is focusing on growing grains, that kind of thing. And so the apprentices get kind of all of the training they want to participate in in that respect. That's taken some years for that to happen.
- Scott Chaskey: But besides that we're also sitting down and talking about different aspects of the farm operation. Everything from the economics to how to pack vegetables for wholesale, that kind of thing.
- Chris Blanchard: With that we're going to stop here, take a break, get a quick word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Scott Chaskey of Quail Hill Farm in Amagansett, New York.
- Chris Blanchard: The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is generously supported by BCS America. A BCS two wheel tractor is the only power equipment a market gardener will need with PTO driven attachments like the rototiller, flail mower, power harrow, rotary plow, snow thrower, log splitter, and more. You name it and you can probably run it with a versatile BCS two-wheel tractor. The first time I used a rototiller way back in 1991 it was mounted to a BCS two wheel tractor and it spoiled me for life. When you get behind a BCS you can tell that it's built for the same commercial standards as four wheel farm tractors that has many of the same features. I've used other tillers and mowers and spent most of the time that I was using them thinking of how much easier it would be with a BCS. Check out BCSAmerica.com to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments, plus videos of BCS in action.
- Chris Blanchard: The radio support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company. I asked Scott about his potting soil and here's what he had to say.
- Scott Chaskey: When we started seeding for transplants at our farm the seed mix was extremely important to us, we know it's important to the life of the plant, and we actually brought in an advisor, we got a SARE grant, and a fellow named Will Brinton, known as the Julia Child of composting, came and advised us on creating our own seed starting mix, and we did that for many years but we kept growing as a farm and it just took more and more time as we grew more and more plants, et cetera, and at some point we said " We have to do something different." And we checked into different potting mixes and Vermont's Compost Mix, and we thought it was about as good as what



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we'd been making ourselves and we made the switch. Since that time I think we're probably at least the last 6, 7 years, something like that, we've been using Vermont Compost for all of our seed starting processes and it's just great stuff.

Scott Chaskey: I know and I believe in the work that Carl has done for many years. We met in the early years through NOFA New York and I always went back to Karl's workshops because I said "This person knows a lot about how to create a sustainable agriculture."

Chris Blanchard: Vermontcompost.com

Chris Blanchard: All right, and we're back with Scott Chaskey of Quail Hill Farm in Amagansett, New York.

Chris Blanchard: Well Scott, you mentioned that you had spent 10 years in England before you came back to the States and ended up working at Quail Hill Farm, and eventually taking over the management, what were you doing in England?

Scott Chaskey: Well I actually went, I studied literature in college, and took a few years off and roamed around, and before deciding maybe it was time to go back and get a graduate degree, and I luckily found a program through Antioch College, an MFA, a Masters in Fine Arts and Writing, and the reason I was attracted to it at first was because the Summer program was in Ireland and my mother was born in Ireland and I'd always wanted to see the country there. That first attracted me and so I went, and then the year-round program was in London, actually in a place called The Center For British Studies, and the fella who ran the program, a guy named Michael Lynch lived in Oxford. I went and visit and fell in love with Oxford and he managed to get me a reader's ticket to the Bodleian Library.

Scott Chaskey: And so, I spent 2 years living in Oxford and Meegan, my wife to be, who had another interesting connection with England with a tiny little fishing village called Mousehole, spelled mouse-hole, in Cornwall, the southwest tip of England, and through a kind of magical rainbow of fate we wound up living in a little fishing village in Mousehole in Cornwall and we stayed there for 8 years. Got married there, had our first house there, had our first child, et cetera, and that's where I learned to garden was first in Oxford and then in Cornwall.

Chris Blanchard: Learning to garden in Cornwall, did you have the kind of great soils that you are farming with in Long Island?

Scott Chaskey: Well, the soil quality was probably very similar, the landscape was really quite different because I actually learned in these cliff meadows they're called, incredibly steep so that actually it all was done with shovels and something called a chipper, it was all done by hand. You couldn't even get a rototiller they were so steep. Really magical, facing a beautiful bay called Mount's Bay, named after St. Michael's Mount, a castle rising on the top of an island that we looked out at, and these cliff meadows were known as the first ground in Britain. When I heard that I thought "Wow, that's an amazing thing. I want to be somehow involved in that."

Scott Chaskey: What that meant was that these, Cornwall has the mildest climate in England, although mild is an odd terminology when you're talking about Cornwall because the winds are so ferocious there, but the first new potatoes and the first flowers to find their way to London in Covent Garden Market all came from these particular



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meadows and that historical quality of that just entranced me, and I had a great mentor, a character named Edgar Wallace who had worked in those meadows all of his life and I learned a lot about the soil, and working with the soil, and about plants, and about the patience it takes to be a gardener or a farmer.

Chris Blanchard: I'm always fascinated by what people study and how they end up in farming after studying, and in part because when I finished my college degree it was in horticulture, you know, it seemed very practical and then I went off and marched on my merry way to go work on more vegetable farms, and eventually become an actual farmer-

Scott Chaskey: Right.

Chris Blanchard: It all seemed very logical, but I also know because I also had a background in liberal arts that that also has an impact on how a person approaches their farm, and you were studying literature, and I know that you're a poet, how has your involvement with literature and your writing and your poetry influenced your farming?

Scott Chaskey: Well, it's a wonderful question and I'm sure you would guess that I've done a fair amount of time thinking about that and trying to come up with a simple answer, and I have never arrived at that simple answer, but the basic fact is that they go together so well and I've never felt that they were separate at all.

Scott Chaskey: There's a wonderful, I couldn't come up with the one line myself, but I have a friend named Lisa Buschnovich who farms at Mountaindale Farm with her husband Mark Dunow, and she's a poet as well and here's a line from Lisa. "In farming I toil what nature does easily, and in poetry I work with the ephemeral by attempting to embody time and language."

Scott Chaskey: So, that's probably not an answer that's going to satisfy a lot of people, but that's about as close as I can get and it's been a real privilege to be able to study language and to study the language of the Earth at the same time.

Chris Blanchard: And I know from experience that it's not necessarily an easy thing to do, to take the time to do that writing, to notice your surroundings, to cultivate the sense of wonder that I think the poetry almost demands from a person. How have you made the time for, and maybe made the time is not the right question, but how have you made that work for you personally?

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, you know, the thing about writing poetry especially is that you need, it's not just time it's time and space, or whatever that magic is that connects them, and that's been difficult to find and to kind of protect, but there is the Winter when things quiet down on a farm and I've always used that. Years ago when I was learning gardening in England and from these great mentors I had more, you know, before kids, etcetera, I had more time to spend every morning sitting at my desk and so I developed the kind of discipline that that takes and I think it was really a great advantage to learn that early on.

Scott Chaskey: Later, you know, I've now written a couple of books, non-fiction books of prose and I find it's actually much ... It's not easy, but it's easier to write prose than poetry, and that's probably one reason that I turned to that. And so, the last 15 years or so I've actually been writing more in a non-fiction style than in poetry, but the poetry I hope is incorporated into that prose as well.



Scott Chaskey: So, I don't know. It's a challenge, but if you have to do it you have to do it, there's kind of no escaping and it's there in sort of every breath I take.

Chris Blanchard: Do you have a poem that you'd like to share with us today?

Scott Chaskey: Well I could read to you a very small poem from my book Seedtime. Seedtime, with the subtitle, On the History, Husbandry, Politics, and Promise of Seeds, and there's a chapter where I wove in ... I mean I hope the prose is poetic throughout, but there's a chapter where I talk about mythology and mythology as it relates to the language of the Earth, and the chapter is called Acrobatic Time and I'll read you a small poem from that.

Scott Chaskey: Red ivy seeds rain and split on dark earth - winter beads on stone. Light binds acrobatic time. The agitation of wind - mound moves, and limb, and cone. Look at that great space of birds!

Scott Chaskey: So that's just a little lyric poem from Seedtime.

Chris Blanchard: I mean seeds are an obvious thing to talk about on a farming podcast.

Scott Chaskey: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: But not everybody makes time to write a book about seeds, and it seems like that's been an important part of your work. Are you involved in seed saving or conservation there at Quail Hill Farms?

Scott Chaskey: Well we do as much as we can. You know, I wish we did more, but we do some and really I think we're probably more involved with making sure that we support the people who are really focused on that as their livelihood. You know, from Tom Stearns at High Mowing Seeds, or our friends at Fruition Seeds, or the Hudson Valley Seed Library.

Scott Chaskey: So, we're supporting the work that people in our region are doing, and of course on our own farm we're saving whatever seeds we can. I just sort of think it's the next frontier. It's what was lost, it's the way that human beings have always kept agriculture alive, and the revival of the skills of seed saving are so important now. So, you know, we've gotten involved with it in that way.

Chris Blanchard: So, when you're doing that on your farm ... You know, in my background I entered into agriculture largely through doing genetic preservation, I spent time in plant breeding programs at the University of Wisconsin, as a student and as a worker, and then managed the gardens at Seed Savers Exchange for a couple of years back in the 1990's, and then went and started my own farm and never saved a single seed.

Scott Chaskey: Right.

Chris Blanchard: And I'm curious what crops you're saving seeds on and how you go about maintaining those varieties in a really productive fashion.

Scott Chaskey: Well, tomatoes largely, and perhaps it's because there's such a fascination with the tomato itself and the process of saving the seed, going through the fermenting of the



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seed and all of that sort of thing is a fascinating process. So, you know, it's almost impossible to work at isolating, but we have had some luck in saving some peppers and that kind of thing. I think we save flower seeds. I think one year we actually saved burdock, I'm not quite sure why we did that, but you know we have Suzanne Ashworth about, Seed to Seed I think it's called, and we work with apprentices to teach them about the methods, and then we just do whatever we can.

Scott Chaskey: I mean when you talked about not saving a single seed it's because, well, talk about finding time to write poetry, how do you find time to save seeds? But it's a fascinating process and we're amateurs at it, but so is everyone to start with basically.

Chris Blanchard: You said tomatoes, now it's my understanding that you haven't always been a tomato fan?

Scott Chaskey: You've heard that? Oddly, you know who knows what that was. Yeah, I didn't really grow up enjoying tomatoes at all, maybe because I'd never tasted what we call an heirloom tomato, and in the first couple of years of the farm the other fellow that was farming with me neither of us really had much of a fascination with it, and then we started experimenting and growing some of the older varieties and thought "Wow, what a flavor this has." And I've never looked back since then.

Scott Chaskey: So, yeah. I think it was a late love affair with the tomato, but it's there.

Chris Blanchard: I want to go back to Cornwall because I think it's always-

Scott Chaskey: So do I.

Chris Blanchard: I think it's always interesting to make that move from gardening to farming, and I'm curious what lessons you brought from Cornwall to Amagansett because I'm thinking about farming in those cliff meadows, and I'm thinking about the hand tools, and just that long history in Cornwall. What did you bring from there that helped you to succeed at Quail Hill Farm?

Scott Chaskey: I mean I guess one of the reasons I pursued the study of literature in England was because of the great history and the heritage that was there, and it was really such a rare and unusual experience to spend hours everyday studying in one of the great libraries in the world, the Bodleian Library right in the center of Oxford, and the immersion in the history of the place is what I actually felt when I was working on the land there as well, and somehow I had never had that opportunity in this country.

Scott Chaskey: I mean I grew up in the 1950's outside of Buffalo, New York in a place called Tonawanda, and although we used to go visit my grandparents and I remember picking blueberries as a young child and all of that sort of thing, but I never felt immersed in a ... I didn't feel the ancient vibration from the Earth that I felt when I was in Ireland and England, and whatever that is I wanted to be part of that more and so that led to ...

Scott Chaskey: It's very hard to describe what that feeling in your body is for feeling connected to land or to the Earth, but I got it when I was there, and I got first through a study of literature, and then through learning gardening.



- Scott Chaskey: When I came back to this country I had that now, so I had that in my system, you know, the bodily sensation that was really a kind of necessity to work with the Earth, but at the same time there was social aspect where I felt some big change is needed in this society, the society I grew up in. That's probably why I left it, no, I know that's why I left it for many years so that I could look at it again from the outside rather than from the inside.
- Scott Chaskey: And here was this thing, now that I had this need to actually work with the soil, here was this thing called community supported agriculture and it had just happened right when I was returning from England, and that incorporation of actually working with soil, and working with the Earth, and also rediscovering a real sense of community and what community could be, that's, it was just magical, and that's really turned out to be my life's work really.
- Chris Blanchard: And as an employee at the Peconic Land Trust, and having been one for a very long time now, you mentioned having kids and how that changed your schedule and I'm interested in how you structure your work because as a farmer, and I've been both an employee as a Farm Manager and I've also ran my own farm for a long time, and it they were very different experiences. I guess I'm interested to know how you structure your workdays and your workweeks, and how that might be influenced by being an employee versus being a farm owner, for better or for worse.
- Scott Chaskey: Well, I guess what I should mention that I think my folks always looked at me like "Well, maybe he's going to settle down someday." I never had health benefits, for instance, until I was 39 years old, but by that time I had kids and it seemed like a wise thing to do.
- Scott Chaskey: And so, being an employee in that style, I mean I started working when I was 16 years old so I had many, many jobs, but being an employee and getting into a tighter structure was something new to me, but it was incorporated with something I really believed in and it gave me a sense of purpose, and that was this thing called community supported agriculture.
- Scott Chaskey: So, you know, I don't know. I could go into the details a little bit more, but raising 3 children, and being involved with an incredibly busy farm, and working on building up the community and everything its just something you do if you love it basically, and I feel lucky that I actually found that.
- Scott Chaskey: In a way you learn a lot from the things that you're asked to do by your experience and by what comes up in your life, and I just have to say that probably having to create more structure for the actual farming and because of the farming also benefited my writing life as well.
- Chris Blanchard: So do you have strict work hours that you keep at the farm or is it a keep going and ... I mean, you know, there's different approaches to that right?
- Scott Chaskey: Yeah, yeah. No, it used to be quite strict for 20 some years or something like that, and in the last years I've pulled back from that structure and I float a lot more. I still probably spend almost as many hours, but my hours are different and I do spend my earlier morning hours writing or reading now, and I had to do that when I had a book on track and I had to get the book in and the only way I could do that was to actually



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spend every morning writing to finish that book, especially the book Seedtime because it took so much research.

Scott Chaskey: And then I would arrive at the farm, by that time we had a great Farm Manager, Layton, and Layton kept the gears going and kept the fieldwork going and everything, and then I sort of stepped into my Director role.

Scott Chaskey: So, I'm not sure how helpful that kind of structure is to people who are starting off in farming, probably not helpful at all, but it might be helpful to know that later on you might have the ability to continue to be really intensely involved with the farming, but also have a little bit more freedom on the hours that you spend doing it.

Chris Blanchard: I think on the farm, just like there are seasons in the year I think I think there are seasons in the growth and development of the business, and you would hope that that frantic, frenetic beginners pace doesn't go on forever.

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, you would hope that. Yes.

Chris Blanchard: We've talked about Layton as the Farm Manager, and you as the Farm Director. Now, it seems pretty clear that there was a point when you were doing the work that Layton is doing now, tell us a little bit about how that transition happened and how your relationship with Layton worked.

Scott Chaskey: Yeah, I think the job of Farm Manager came about because originally there was me doing that, and actually my title was Farm Manager, and then apprentices, et cetera. There were just, you know, as the farm kept growing there were just so many other aspects, there was just more work to be done basically. Someone had to really focus on the tractor work, on preparing the fields, and making sure the greenhouses were in order, and that sort of thing, and bringing a Farm Manager on to really focus on that aspect of it allowed me to turn my attention to the other aspects of community building, and the finances, and all of that kind of thing.

Scott Chaskey: So, you know, it's kind of a natural growth as a business grows, and if you're not aware of that what's going to happen? You're just going to get swamped by all of the details and the business will be in chaos. So, I guess we were aware when that time came, and we've actually had a few different ... At one time we did have a Market Manager, and we've now sort of folded the Market Manager job into one of the advanced apprentice rotations.

Scott Chaskey: So, sort of, you know, you test the waters and see how you're going, measure it at the end of the year and decide what you can do to change things and make things more efficient. That's a really important part of the whole farming enterprise really.

Chris Blanchard: Was there anything in particular that happened, or developments that occurred on the farm that led you to bring in somebody as a Farm Manager and to kind of move into more of that Director position yourself?

Scott Chaskey: I think it was just the growth, you know, it was just a matter of numbers and the acreage, and more people. I mean, I'm not the kind of person that feels that, you know, I like growth to be a more natural process so I don't feel that when you start with a hand push rototiller you have to own many tractors at some point, I just feel that if you want to continue the work you're doing and serve more people then it



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becomes a matter of scale and recognizing what is the scale that you feel most comfortable with.

Scott Chaskey: I actually feel that I was most comfortable back around 20 acres, so we've gone a little beyond that, so maybe that was point where I said "Well we need someone else in here too."

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

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Chris Blanchard: So Scott, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Scott Chaskey: Well my favorite, considering all of the years I might have to say the dibbler.

Chris Blanchard: And when you say "the dibbler" tell me about your dibbler and how you're using it.

Scott Chaskey: Well the one that we used solely for many years before we got the waterwheel transplanter was formed out of a piece of white pipe that was, the price was a 6 pack of beer off the back of an electrical truck, and then Tim Laird, who was the maker of the dibbler, he and I figured out the spacing for all of the different plants that we were planting, and then we made dibbles out of bits of applewood from the orchard, they're screwed into the dibbler, and then made handles out of applewood as well, those handles have been replaced a bunch of times, and then you pull the thing down the row and it makes the holes and you can switch the dibbles, and whether the plants are 20 inches apart, or 12 inches apart, or whatever, and you can do 2 rows, or 1 row, or 3 rows, and then whoever it is that's planting, whether it's a 5 year old visiting the farm, or an 80 year old member helping out, they know where to put the plants.

Scott Chaskey: It's pretty basic, but what a great ... and boy, been a lot of conversation about that dibbler.

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

Scott Chaskey: Garlic. Didn't have to ask me twice about that. I love growing garlic, I love everything about it. I love the flavor of it, and what you can do with it, and of course we eat it every day, but I also love the fact that you plant it in the Autumn, and it's the only thing really we're planting at that time around Halloween, and then it's in the ground for 8 months and so you get to live with it. So, it's sort of more than you get out of



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most annual plants, and it's not a perennial so it's probably a little bit less work keeping it for many, many years.

Scott Chaskey: And then I just love the look of it, and the fact that it produces these twirling scapes. I don't know, I love everything about it basically.

Chris Blanchard: You've got, and this is radio so not everybody is going to know this, but you've got an amazing white beard.

Scott Chaskey: Yeah. So I do. It used to be red. Yeah, I used to be called Carrot Top as a matter of fact when I was younger, so I'm a red head.

Chris Blanchard: How do you keep your white beard clean on the farm?

Scott Chaskey: Well, probably on the farm it's not very clean, but when I come home I can tend to it. You know, you've got to sort of keep on top of it.

Chris Blanchard: Now you're a writer and have published a couple or several books?

Scott Chaskey: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: What's the last book that you read by somebody else?

Scott Chaskey: Oh gosh. I've been reading, I have quite an eclectic taste and I always have a poetry book going, and a history, and a novel. I just read a really beautiful book called *The House at Otowi Bridge* that was written many years ago, and it's actually illustrated by my mother-in-law who is a painter, Connie Fox, and it's such a beautiful story. It takes place, it's about really a quite remarkable woman who lived in New Mexico, and oddly the story of the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos is woven into the story, but it's really a very beautiful book. *The House at Otowi Bridge*.

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

Scott Chaskey: Have patience, and develop patience, and learn to respect and to learn more every day from the land that you have the privilege to work with.

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

Scott Chaskey: Well thank you Chris, its really been a pleasure.

Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here I'll say again that this is episode 152 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, and you can find the notes for this show at FarmertoFarmerPodcast.com by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for Chaskey. That's C-H-A-S-K-E-Y.

Chris Blanchard: 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.



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Chris Blanchard: And finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show through the suggestions forum at FarmertoFarmerPodcast.com, and I will do my best to get them on the show.

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