



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 160

Stacey Carlberg and Casey Gustawarow of The Farm and Sunnyside on Managing a Farm instead of Owning, Conservation Efforts on the Farm, and Getting and Giving the Most with Employees

February 28, 2018



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Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast episode 160 and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Stacey Carlberg and Casey Gustawarow managed The Farm at Sunnyside with 12 acres of vegetables and eight acres of fruit trees in Rappahannock County, Virginia about 70 miles from Washington, D.C.

Chris: You'll note that I said manage instead of own, and we dig in to the ups and downs of managing another person's farm including why they've chose to do it and how the farm owners set expectations and provide oversight. Stacey provides insights into how they manage the financial implications and we look at some of the other goals of the property owners and how those fit and don't necessarily fit with the vegetable farming operation.

Chris: Casey and Stacey share how they make the most of their spot at the high quality, high volume Dupont Circle Farmers Market in Washington, D.C. including strategies for standing out from the crowd and how they manage their employees at the stand. We also talked about how Casey has worked that cover crops into the vegetable rotation and how they have integrated laying hands into the cover crop rotation including the steps they've taken to ensure the safety of their fresh produce in the phase of nearby chicken poop.



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- Chris: Stacey and Casey share the steps they've taken to manage employees for year over year retention from their overall staffing strategy to their day-to-day communications. Finally, we discussed their experience of Lyme disease among the crew and the steps they have taken to reduce its incidence among their employees.
- Chris: The Famer to Farmer Podcast is generously supported by Vermont Compost Company. Now, the bio-organic crop growing professionals committed to meeting the need for high quality compost and compost based living soil mixes for certified organic plant production, vermontcompost.com. And by Local Food Marketplace. Helping farms and food hubs around North America implement easy to use online ordering systems that integrate with the full management system for order packing, invoicing and payment processing. Contact localfoodmarketplace.com to learn more. And by Hoss Tools. Hoss Tools is the complete solution for all your market farming tools and supplies. From wheel hoes, precision seeders, heavy duty seed trays, drip irrigation and pest control they've got you covered. They have free shipping and outstanding customer service at hosstools.com.
- Chris: Stacey Carlberg and Casey Gustawarow, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.
- Stacey: Hello, thanks for having us.
- Casey: We're happy to be here.
- Chris: Really pleased that you could join us today. I'd like to start off by having you tell us a little bit about The Farm at Sunnyside? How many acres of vegetable are you guys growing? Where are you doing that and how are you getting that product to market?
- Casey: All right. We are in Rappahannock County, Virginia. It actually borders the Shenandoah National Park right in the foothills of the mountains. It's a beautiful part of the country. We're about 70 miles from Washington, D.C. We grow veggies on about 12 acres here and then we also have about 8 acres of tree fruit, Asian pears and certified organic apples and an acre of blackberries.
- Chris: Are you primarily marketing that produce in Washington, D.C.?
- Stacey: Yes, that is our main area of marketing. We go to three farmers markets, two of them in the D.C. area and then one small local market. We have a small CSA program existing members that serves our local community here. We have one drop off nearby and then we do some restaurant sales in the D.C. area and some locally as well.
- Chris: You guys are farm managers at The Farm at Sunnyside, right?
- Casey: Yeah, that is correct. We've made a decision to, at least for the time being, manage farm property rather than make the decision to own something and take the risk of buying all the equipment, buying land. We like farming in this area and land around here is pretty expensive. This is where both of us had worked on a variety of farms in the area. We like the farm community here and we've decided not to branch out and try to buy something here or lease land here but opportunities have come up to manage other people's property.
- Chris: You said that you've chosen to manage properties instead of buying your own place and farming with your own equipment, taking the risks that are involved with that but I'm curious, was that a conscious choice where you went and sought out farms to manage or



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was this something that ... where these opportunities became available and you said, "Yeah, that's the direction that I think we'd like to head in?"

Stacey: That's a good question. I would say these opportunities have come up more organically just from being tied to the farm community here. Casey and I both worked as interns on farms on the area and we really embrace the farm community, touring other farms and getting to know folks that grow how we like to grow. After three years of working on other farms, we were approached by Potomac Vegetable Farms to help manage one of the branches of their farm. That was our first opportunity to dip our toe into the management world. We were there for four years and then this other opportunity came along so we returned to The Farm at Sunnyside where we had both previously worked as interns and, let's say, middle managers before.

Stacey: I think it's possible if these opportunities hadn't come along, we would have chosen to have our own farm but we haven't seen the need to do that thus far.

Chris: As somebody who managed farms for other people as well as had my own farm for a much longer period of time, I know that there are some really great things about managing a farm for somebody else.

Stacey: That's true. Casey mentioned I think we're both a little bit risk givers in terms of being in debt or spending a lot of money on an enterprise we're not sure is not going to work out so we've been very fortunate to adapt farm systems that already have infrastructure in place and already have equipments and we've been put on salary so there's definite benefits to all of those things.

Chris: Can you tell me a little bit more about the arrangement that you have with the farm owners?

Casey: Sure. We get to manage the day-to-day, make all the day-to-day decisions of what we want to grow, how we want to market it in general. Most of those things are things that we can decide. Some of those things were established beforehand and we've branched out from them or make little tricks here and there but we don't have any, as of yet, don't have any long-term equity in the business. Perhaps that might change in the future but our main benefits are having salary benefits and also making a lot of the hiring decisions and getting to run our crew exactly how we want to. There's not much interference there, and I think that's something that is not always the case.

Casey: We've heard of other situations where people are managing farms and there's a lot of interactions and interference from the owners or the board of a nonprofit farm or things like that. I don't feel like we have much interference there and we're giving a lot of leeway to make most of those decisions which we feel we're very lucky to have that situation.

Chris: What kind of oversight do the owners of the farm actually provide you guys then? There must be some expectations about how you're going to perform and what you're actually going to do on the farm?

Casey: Yeah, I would say that is very true. We do have regular meetings with the owners of the farm. Prior to us arriving here, the farm business was relatively new and still figuring things out, I think, and was not as of yet profitable. We've changed that dynamics so that it is profitable now and that was one of the main goals.



- Casey: One thing that I think we brought to the table is being a two-person team. We have very different skills and different responsibilities on the farm. Prior to us being here, there was generally one manager and I think it was a little too much for one person at times to manage the operation here.
- Casey: There definitely is some oversight but that was one of the main goals of us coming here, was to change that dynamic and luckily that has happened so far. Other oversight things that the owners work with us on are larger management decisions of what's going to happen with the business in the long-term, some of those things about equity and benefits and some larger scale staff decision as we would like to bring more people on the farm potentially that become of the staff and have some benefits so that's something that the farm can really support. Those would be the more oversight decisions that the farm owners would be involved in but all the day-to-day decisions and a lot of the marketing decisions are left up to us.
- Stacey: Just to go along with that, we do manage the budget and the bookkeeping. As Casey said, we were really happy we transitioned this business to be a profitable one. That entails me watching the numbers very closely and then if we want to make any big purchases, we have the freedom to propose those ideas to the owners of the business and they have to give us the green light but we've ... I think because of our performance, they trust us and we have a pretty good relationship where we can talk about what we need and why and how much it will cost and then we can go ahead and essentially spend the money that we have help put in the bank account from our hard work.
- Chris: Now the farm, you mentioned that it's got the vegetables but then there's also this apple and Asian pear and blackberry component, are you guys managing that side of the operation as well?
- Casey: Yes, we do oversee that part of the operation but we're lucky enough to have one other person on full-time staff here. His name is Alfredo. He precedes the Lapham and ownership of the farm. There was an operation going on here prior and they were actually doing even more things and have livestock on the farm. Alfredo has been here for almost 20 years now and he does a lot of the management of the orchard and the blackberry operation.
- Casey: We oversee some things there and make all the marketing decisions but he does all the pruning and most of the harvesting of that. We're very lucky to have him here and he helps a lot with the veggies side of operation as well in terms of tractor work and irrigation but that is another added part to this business for sure.
- Casey: We like having the certified organic fruit. There's not many people in this region growing organic fruit, and it adds a nice piece to our marketing outlets. Definitely, in terms of our seasonal staff and our management, most of our time is definitely dedicated to the veggies side of operation.
- Chris: The vegetables and the orchard exist within the context of a 400-acre property there and just judging from your website, there's a lot of effort that's going into managing that non-economically productive land or biodiversity and ecosystem services. Is that something that you guys are also involved in and responsible for or do you just focus on the crop production?



- Casey: We mainly focus on the crop production here. The Laphams have decided to hire a conservation manager separate from the farm business and he manages along with the Laphams. Nick Lapham has a background in conservation and environmental policy. That was a major reason for buying this piece of property, is the fact that it borders into a national park and also borders a lot of agricultural land making sure that, that transition zone is preserved.
- Casey: A lot of meadows have been put in on the farm to foster biodiversity. The idea is that agriculture and conservation land can work in concert together so a lot of those meadows are great habitat for pollinators that helped us in the orchard and our veggie crops. Also, great habitat for beneficial insects that we really do feel like there's a biodiversity here that helps the agricultural side of things. There's a lot of nesting boxes that have been put in on the farm for blue birds and that insect pest. There's barn owl and screech owl and kestrel hawks that deal with some of our rodent pests.
- Casey: There's a lot of work that we feel is helpful here on the farm and the ag side of things, but we are not managing that in addition to our vegetable and the ag operation on the farm.
- Stacey: But both Casey and I have backgrounds in biology and ecology. What we studied in college and our few years of work experience after college were really related to those things and our interactions with the natural world. We like the idea of coming back here and trying to integrate some of the conservation work with the ag work and see how we can push those boundaries a little bit.
- Chris: Just to tip things to a little bit more of a practical perspective, I do know that one of the challenges of integrating wildlife habitat with vegetables is deer, woodchucks, bears ...
- Stacey: Yes.
- Casey: Yes.
- Chris: ... all things that you don't necessarily want for a variety of reasons in your vegetable patch. How are you striking a balance there?
- Casey: Yeah, that's definitely true. We do have to deal with some of those wildlife pests. We definitely have fences on the farm that surround our ag fields. We have eight foot deer fences around almost all our veggie operation. We have highly electrified fence around our orchard because Shenandoah National Park has one of the highest black bear populations in the country and they definitely come down. We actually have two rows of honeycrisp apples on the top of our orchard. They seem to prefer those the most and they'll weather the high electricity fence and go under and get those, but they don't really make a huge impact on the rest of our orchard but we do have to take measures to prevent those.
- Casey: There definitely are certain areas on the farm where we have woodchuck populations and we do trap them but there's also some of the, the wildlife areas are kind of separated from the ag fields. There are actually corridors that have been made that's meant for wildlife corridors going from habitat to habitat so that they're staying out of our vegetable fields and using those corridors as a more preferential habitat to go field-to-field, not veggie field to veggie field but forest area to forest area or meadow to meadow.



- Casey: Yeah, there are certainly times that we have issues and we deal with those as needed but I think overall we have found that there's more harmony that can be had rather than conflict.
- Chris: When you talk about those wildlife corridors, and I'm looking at an overhead map of your farm right now and I can see that you've got three main patches of vegetables that are long and skinny and then two corridors that run through the middle of those patches where really they are pretty wide and they're pretty distinct. It's easy to imagine animals, wildlife, flowing through those areas and not being quite so distracted by the romaine lettuce.
- Stacey: That's what we hoped for but the sense of health as well. It's the combination of the corridors and the fences, but sure we're hoping the coyotes decide to trot down the corridor rather than trot into the field where our chickens are.
- Chris: That was actually something else that interested me when you were recommended about being on the show was the mention of the priority that you guys place on healthy soils and the work that you're doing with cover crops and crop rotation and the integration of the chickens into that. Can you tell us about how that system works in combination with the vegetables?
- Casey: Sure. Cover crops are really important to me and it's definitely something that we got some experience with Potomac Vegetable Farms where there is even a little more acres to play with. Sometimes I wish I had a little bit ... we have a lot of rolling hills here being on the foot hills of Shenandoah. We don't have maybe as much acres as I would like to play with in terms of soil building and cover crops but we do grow in about 12 acres of vegetables each year. We have about 15 acres or so that are available to growing vegetables, so about 3 acres each year is just in soil building cover crops.
- Casey: We have a relatively long growing season here so we try as much as possible to get our veggie crops out as soon as we can and go ahead and put a cover crop in if it is being cover crop. Then those three acres that are just devoted to cover crops will grow an overwintered cover crop and then a summer covered crop mix.
- Casey: Generally here, I would say our main winter covered crop would be, wheat mixed with crimson clover and then we'll take that out and fill it in and then we'll put sorghum-sudangrass and cowpeas and have that going and then mow it once or twice and get deeper root growth and then we'll put a fall cover crop there as well.
- Casey: If we're doing soil building in a particular year and just devote it to cover crops, then we'll actually let those covered crops grow in the spring much later and let them go pretty brown and even set seed and going more lignified so that the microbes are breaking those down but doing it more to build soil rather than just a green manure layer.
- Casey: We did just purchase a no-till drill as well. That's just the smaller no-till drill that's on a three-point hitch. I did borrow one a few years ago to try some things here where we were trying to reduce some of our tillage especially on those spots that we're just growing cover crop, like we can just mow a cover crop like that over a wintered cover crop and then go right ahead and drill into a summer covered crop or we could do something ... I've also borrowed and hopefully ...
- Casey: This is something that's continually ongoing and we're trying to get better and better at it but using a roller crimper to roll down some of those covered crops especially if it's



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- something like rye or vetch and that's another overwintered cover crop that I would use sometimes and then roll that down and then just come right behind it potentially on the same path. We have one tractor that has a front three-point hitch and we can put the roller crimp around front and then we have the no-till drill right behind us and then put that summer covered crop in right behind it.
- Casey: Those are some of the techniques that we use. Another thing that I really like is in the fall ... Our cropping system is a little bit different in the spring and summer and we use a lot of mulch at that time, but in the fall when there's less weed pressure for all of our brassicas we'll transplant them out and do cultivations on those and then we'll oversee crimson clover. It usually forms this wonderful mat that we're harvesting those fall crops much later than possible to get a good cover crops then establish in the fall and then we'll have a nice over wintered crimson clover. That's, I think, a great crop to flail mow and then do something using that no-till drill on and establishing another cover crop the following year.
- Casey: You had asked about the chickens as well and how we rotate those through the fields. We definitely noticed that a huge impact of having the chickens on the field in terms of weed pressure and just fertility, we try to move the chickens every two weeks basically. Moving them plot to plot on the farm and making sure that we're following both organic standards and food safety standards of not having chicken manure on the fields 90 or 120 days beforehand depending on the crop. We do move them throughout the farm and their fertility and just the work that they do in terms of pest then and weed control. We really feel like that helps a lot as well.
- Chris: When you're talking about the work that they do, weed control of course, again you said, "not in with the vegetables," but actually cleaning up weed seeds either after or before the vegetables, right?
- Casey: Yup, that's correct. Yes.
- Chris: Those chickens, they're making eggs and you're taking those eggs to market with you, right?
- Stacey: Yes. Our eggs are actually quite popular at market. We sell out very quickly and people always ask why our eggs taste different. We're not sure it actually tastes different or not but we've tried lots of other farms eggs but we, it's definitely a marketing factor that we can tell our customers about how we rotate the chickens through the crop rotation not with the cash crops but throughout our fields. We have a picture of that in the market and customers really like to see that as well.
- Chris: You mentioned the food safety aspect of having chickens around the vegetables. Of course, you're doing that egg handling and one of the things that I remember from the time that we have laying hens at my farm in combination with the vegetables was dealing with the eggs was always this particularly crazy element of, "Let's get this done on Friday night before we go to farmer's market at 3:30 on Saturday morning." I'm wondering how you guys are handling that egg process both from a time management standpoint as well as from a food safety standpoint.
- Stacey: Great. Good question. We have two people on staff that do all of the chicken care though they're just seasonal workers. We talk to the folks at the beginning of the season and see who's interested and then we pick two people that have said they're interested and we just train them really well hopefully. It helps with the time management a little bit that we know they'll be more efficient than having this rotation of all of our seasonal workers.



- Stacey: Those folks will feed and water the chickens everyday and then they collect the eggs every afternoon and we just wash them right away and then they go into their own separate refrigerator. They're washed in a separate room. The workers also wear different boots. We have them a set of poop boots that anytime you're going out to the chickens those are the boots you wear. You come back. They leave in this room where the eggs get washed and then you put on your other boots to go out to the vegetables. It's a daily process of selecting the eggs and washing them and putting them in their own refrigerator.
- Chris: I would like to thank you for the term poop boots.
- Stacey: Yes. We had a lot of big signs around the farm. There's a big sign of those poop boots where the boots should always be.
- Chris: Okay. Big signs around the farm actually points to another thing that I wanted to talk to you about which is that you have a reputation for being really good people managers. I'm thinking that the big signs around the farm are probably a part of that.
- Stacey: Yeah. I think that helps for sure. I mean, we're going into our eight season managing The Farm. Actually from my first season working on The Farm, I have some responsibilities of managing the rest of the crews. This is 11 years now and I think I've learned over the years that the more signs I can put up, the better that employees will understand my expectations or know exactly where things need to go and know the systems or have a point of reference to look back at if they need it. That's just helpful on a large farm.
- Stacey: We talked a little bit about ... you said you're looking at a map of the farm. Our growing areas are really spread out. Within these 420 acres, we do have four major growing areas and then there's a farm center in the middle. Our workers can be on any area of those growing areas. Casey and I aren't with them that often once the season gets started so if we can make sure we leave clients back at The Farm Center for how things should be processed or where things are going to go if we're not there then it just makes the process easier for folks and there's not that as much as "Oh, well, why didn't they do it that way" or "they put this in the wrong place." Just the frustration that inevitably is probably going to come out at some point during the season. The more we can just lay out the system so that folks know where things are going to go, then the better they feel it too, like they haven't made mistakes.
- Stacey: The next part is how I like to manage folks. It's just, I can be clear or put a clear system in front of them. Of course I feel like I'm doing a good job and they don't want to be reprimanded much for doing a bad job so we're just trying to give them the tools to do that.
- Chris: I actually think that's something, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. Helping people to do their job right in the first place and providing them with the backup system so that ... You've showed them the poop boots once but then there's a clear sign about the poop boots and even having a word like "poop boots" that makes it really clear what you're talking about, right? It's not ...
- Stacey: Right.
- Chris: These aren't the chicken boots, these are the poop boots because it's really, really clear that the poop does not belong with the vegetables. There's all kinds of, there's some coding in that as well.



- Stacey: Right.
- Chris: I really like that example of helping people to get things right. Really giving them the tools that they need.
- Stacey: That is important to us. We like to retain workers also just to make our jobs easier. I do feel folks appreciate that effort that we put into teaching them and training them and making them feel successful, like they are doing a good job and they are contributing to the progression of the farm over the season or even the longer term visions we have.
- Stacey: We actually have five people coming back this year and we're really happy about that. Our longer term goals are that people see this as a job option and it's not something that they're embarrassed about telling their parents they're working on the farm and then their parents are asking, "What are you going to do with that?" or "Is that really a career?" We're really trying to help some of our employees overcome that and just create a model hopefully that this is a job like how Casey and I, ourselves, worked out from being interns on the farms to being managers. If you choose to work in this line of work, that there's a path to follow and you could continue doing it for many years.
- Chris: You mentioned that you have somebody who's in somewhat of a management position with the orchard in the blackberry production. Do you have other people working in management positions under you guys?
- Stacey: Not currently. We did have an assistant manager last year. Unfortunately she got Lyme's disease and has taken some time off of farming but we brought on a couple, they're coming back for their third year with us and we're adding them on to salary and giving them health insurance this year. It's a new step for us so we're trying to figure out what kind of job title to give them but we definitely have ideas after having worked with them for two years of what their responsibilities will be and how to help us with them getting in the crew management.
- Chris: Now, when I hear you say things like putting them on salary and giving them health insurance, I'm imagining somebody listening to the show who's got their own farm and they're working to get established and they're building their own infrastructure and they're buying their own tractors, is your ability to do that a function of somebody else owning the farm or does this all actually fit in to the cash flow of the operation that you talked about earlier?
- Stacey: I think our ability to do it is based on some of our marketing outlets actually and the cash flow. We're in the Dupont Circle Farmer's Market in Washington, D.C. and I think it's one of the best farmer's markets in the country. It's kind of scared to have so many eggs in one basket. I mean, that market is 55% of our farm income so I think that helps us a lot to be able to offer this kind of positions and be able to think about how we'd like to have benefits for folks in the future.
- Stacey: It's a big step this year that we're adding health insurance for folks on salary so that there will be five employees included in that this year but it's taken time to get to that stuff of running the business for three years and getting to understand the numbers. We're taking these first steps and see how it works out and then hopefully we'll be able to do further things like retirement.



- Stacey: I think, back to your question, the market, it definitely helps us a lot. I'm sure there are benefits to this farm being owned by non-farmers. We are blessed with a lot of housing and I think that a part of why we can retain people is that there is housing here on the farm and so I don't want to overlook that aspect of it.
- Stacey: In terms of the relationship between the owners and the business, there are a few things that I wanted to mention. The farm business, the budget that we manage, we do pay rent back to the farm owners for use of the land and use of facilities. That was an amount that we decided on after our first year here. We are also paying the owners back for some capital expenses that went into help us buy market truck and a tractor early on.
- Chris: You're actually taking into account then, in your bookkeeping system or in your accounting system, the capital expenditures and the capital costs of running a farm business. You're not just strictly on cash flow then from the vegetable sales and the production expenses.
- Stacey: Yeah. It was something really important tot Casey and I when we moved to this farm and look over that. We really are trying to run it like a business. We don't think it would be a great model for anyone if we just say, "Oh, we'll just ask the owners for more money all the time." Or if we're really watching the books, I mean we came from the great business working at Potomac Vegetable Farms and we wanted to bring some aspects of that here and just create a farm business and teach our employees how to run farms in a way that makes financial sense.
- Chris: Great. I love that. Congratulations on that. I think it's really important for farm businesses especially because we so often serve as models for each other who, to really be conscious of the actual cost of running a vegetable farm, making sure that, that is incorporated in your accounting because that also makes sure that you're not in the position of going to the Dupont Circle Farmer's Market and undercutting people who own their own operations and who are making those investments themselves because you have actually accounted for that same set of expenses there.
- Stacey: Yes, that's very important to us to just be cognizant of our farm community and respectful of other vendors as well.
- Chris: All right, so I think this is a good spot for us to take a break, quick word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Stacey Carlberg and Casey Gustawarow from The Farm at Sunnyside.
- Chris: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company. Stacey had a few words to say about using Vermont Compost Company's potting soil:
- Stacey: "I like its consistency. I feel like we've always gotten these transplants out of it and this arrived in this big bag ready to go. Previously, we had been mixing components for a lot of our plants and that could be really variable with different employees doing it, different ways or the components not being the same each time and so I like that we don't have to spend time in the greenhouse mixing something and we get really great plants out of it. In our experience, the plants don't need additional amendments while they're in the greenhouse, between the time of seeding until the time of transplant. They're getting the nutrition from Vermont Compost, that they look great when they've gotten to the fields. I really appreciate that I don't have to ask additional amendments in the greenhouse."



- Chris: The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is also sponsored by Local Food Marketplace. Are you trying to scale up without the right systems? Instead of juggling e-mail and text borders, spreadsheets for harvest packing and delivery and a separate invoicing system, Local Food Marketplace's software platform will help your farm automate these tasks and decrease errors with its fully integrated system for online orders, inventory management, order packing, invoicing and payment processing. Easily configure the system for managing multiple sales channels, customer types, price levels and delivery routes. The platform also offers a lot number traceability system and an option to collaboratively sell products with other producers. Contact them via their website, localfoodmarketplace.com to schedule a free consultation on how Local Food Marketplace can help you efficiently manage customer orders from your packhouse to your customer's doorstep.
- Chris: All right, and we're back with Casey Gustawarow and Stacey Carlberg at The Farm at Sunnyside in Rappahannock County, Virginia.
- Chris: There's a lot of complicated pronunciation involved in your operation. Stacey, do you have signs for the employees to help them with this?
- Stacey: Did you say pronunciation?
- Chris: Yeah, that was a joke. We'll just let that one sit there like a lead balloon. Okay, before we went on break, Stacey, you were talking about the importance of the Dupont Circle Farmer's Market at more than 50% of your sales as being the economic driver of the farm that allows you to pay people well and provide them benefits. Can you talk a little bit more about that Dupont Circle Farmers Market?
- Stacey: Sure. Currently, we just go during the regular season. It is a year-round market but we aren't going in the winter. It's Sundays in Washington, D.C. It's a five-hour market. We think of it a little bit as a bell curve. At the beginning and the end of the season we don't need as many folks helping us there but in the peak of the season, especially with blackberries late July through early September we can need 12 employees there at market just to keep the display stocked and keep bringing customers through the line. Nobody likes to wait that long.
- Stacey: We'll have five cashiers set up at that point and then we can have a couple of people sampling and five or six people just rotating around and offloading more things off the truck and restocking. It can be quite busy at the peak and I think we've done well there because of the people we hire. We probably have half people from the farm come to the market each week and then other half of the employees are just folks in the city that have expressed their interest in working our stand or regular customers or we can know them through the restaurant community and they want to help us out.
- Stacey: We like to have folks that are happy and want to be there and like to cook and share ideas on how to use the food but most of them, they're happy. It's a lot of hours to be on your feet and the customers aren't always happy and you just got to let it roll off and move on to the next 10 customers that are happy and just create dynamic. Casey and I usually aren't ringing up customers. We're managing the stand and managing the back stock. When we get to market and offload, we'll probably still have a whole another vehicle full of food.
- Stacey: We bring a box truck and we bring a van and we don't have a very large area so we fill it as full as we can and then we're just constantly getting more inventory out and restocking it



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and making the display look really beautiful so my customers that are coming in the last hour will have something that looks not quite as nice as the first hour but it looks nice and that's important to us to really focus on those five hours and not putter out after the first couple hours.

Stacey: Part of managing the stand too is just managing the employees so recognizing when one of your cashiers is really sliding down on the math and she needs to take a break. Putting that person on break and rotating someone else and just making sure that the stand is really running well for a long time there.

Chris: When you talk about the farmers market being an economic driver for you, is that ... I mean, it sounds like it's certainly a volume issue. You can move a whole lot of vegetables here but is it also a high-priced market for you?

Stacey: Yes.

Casey: Yeah. It is definitely, I mean, Dupont Circle is definitely one of the higher priced markets in the region but it's also a high-quality market. There're a lot of great vendors there. It's definitely a center point of weekend activity in D.C. so there're a lot of people that come through that market and I think it's managed well and people are willing to spend the money there. I think that's something with the D.C. region in general, it doesn't see as much fluctuation as maybe the rest of the country with higher powered government jobs and all the jobs that are related to the government. I think that's one the reasons that we like this area in terms of marketing. It just, it doesn't see too much up and down. I do think it is a high-value market but we definitely gain the benefits of being in that one.

Chris: Being in a high-value farmers market is great. Being in a high-volume, high-quality market is great but it also makes it hard to stand out. What are you guys doing to stand out at the Dupont Circle farmers market?

Casey: I think there're a few things. I don't think anything is that complex that we're doing but I think as Stacey mentioned having really friendly people and the way that we've managed the people in this, our employees in the stand is a key part of it. I think another thing that Stacey didn't mention, she loves to make signs for all the vegetables and they're really wonderful so signs on the farm and signs at the market are really key for us. If you check the Instagram feed, a lot of the pictures on there of the signs at market and people, there's so many people that make comments about that so that's another thing that does make us stand out.

Casey: I think another thing is the variety of things that we grow. I love to cook myself and I love to try new things and things that ... colors that pop and different varieties of different things. I feel like we stock things that make our displays really wonderful and Stacey does a great job of envisioning that and setting it up and making the market stand easy to navigate but also really beautiful and well stocked.

Casey: We grow a wide variety within tomatoes and a lot of the summer crops, this region tomatoes and peppers and squash and cucumbers do wonderful for us and we try to have them for three months while they're doing well and we grow like 20 different varieties of hot peppers. We grow a nice mix of cherry tomatoes and varieties of different heirlooms and hybrid tomatoes.



- Casey: I don't think anything is hugely out of the ordinary that we're doing. It's just a matter of how we display it really nicely and keep that continuous display throughout market and don't let the folks that come later think that there are any less important than the people that came in the beginning.
- Chris: How are you guys managing the money at market? Stacey, you said that when somebody is getting tired and they're having trouble doing the math, that you're paying attention to that, you're not doing this with the cash register or with some sort of an iPad app or anything like that?
- Stacey: Nope. We're still old-fashioned, doing it in our head or with a calculator. It is challenging. We haven't thought about changing that yet. I mean, we think it works pretty well. It's just dependent on being able to continue to hire folks that can do math but we do, we also use money belts. Dupont Circle is a really high traffic area and folks have had cash boxes stolen so everybody is just wearing their money right on them so we know where it is at all times.
- Stacey: There is a little bit of an art of learning how to ring people up and manage the money in the belt. Whenever we have a new employee, help things at market either if they're from the city or from the farm, they definitely don't start out as cashiers because it takes a little bit of time to understand the market and learn all the prices. We'll work them into the rotation at the end of the market once it's a little bit slower so they can get a hang of it before they work a market whether ringing the whole market or right at the start where they're really busy.
- Chris: How are you deciding how much product to take to that market? I mean, again, because that's got to be a pretty high stakes decision for you guys.
- Stacey: Yeah, it is. We take a lot of food to them. We do have a Saturday market the day before which has been doing increasingly better for us each year, that's the Reston market. We'll take as much of that market as we think we can sell and a little bit extra and what comes back from that market get reprocessed on the farm. We look at it again with some things that needs to be and then it will go to Dupont for sure but Dupont is where we send everything that we have left at the weekends or that we've harvested that week and we've been holding it for the market because we do think that's our best shot to sell it all.
- Stacey: If we know we have way too much of something, then we'll reach out to either folks in our restaurant community or other folks in our farm community that might be running farms stands or a collective CSA and see if they want to take some of that extras off our hands. We really, I mean, we manage our inventory. We've got it written down from our first market here to the state. We know what we've taken to market. I definitely look through those records for what this weekend did in the previous years. This was a good weekend or a slow weekend and this matched those amounts and we definitely notes of we sold out of this that 10:00 a.m. so we need to bring more, just really looking at those historical records to see how much we can bring there and then we'll bring a little extra.
- Chris: You guys are a certified organic operation and I know that when you watch the debate about organic certification and a lot of people will say well, you don't need to be certified organic if you're selling at farmers markets because the customers know you. I'm curious why you guys decided to go that route since wholesale isn't such a big part of your operation.



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- Stacey: I mean the business was certified organic under the previous owner and that was maintained when the current owner took over and we have decided to continue with that because we actually do feel like it helps with that, our farmers markets in particular. Our Saturday market, the Reston market, I believe we're still the only certified organic vendor there and people do seek us out for that. We felt for that market that it was important.
- Stacey: At Sunday market, I'm not sure if it's that important. I do think we have some customers seek us out for that, but I think also some customers think everybody is organic. It's just another marketing thing we have to do to make sure we have it on all of our signs so that people know we are certified organic.
- Chris: I did notice that, that every one of the little signs that you have with each of the vegetables where it says rutabaga for \$2 a pound or fennel for \$2 a head, then it does say organic rutabaga and organic fennel and organic tomatoes.
- Stacey: Yes. One way we're trying to distinguish ourselves at our really busy market.
- Chris: With that signage, that's ... I mean I know and we didn't do anything as fancy as what you've got but just sitting down and making the signs for the products that we had at farmers market or we used to mark up a big chalkboard and try to have that look nice before we got to farmers market, that's a lot of work. How do you find the time to do that?
- Stacey: I really enjoy doing it. I will come home in the evening and work on it for a couple of hours if I know all the new hot peppers are coming in this week, we don't have signs for them yet then I'll work on it. It's relaxing for me but recently, this year, we spent scanning all of our signs. I'm trying to get smarter and work smarter not harder and just have this sign library in our computer so that we can just print them off and not starting from scratch. We've got quite a good collection going now.
- Chris: It looks like those signs are laminated. Is that something you're doing at home or is that something you're taking someplace else?
- Stacey: We're just doing it. We bought a laminator from the office supply store in maybe \$100 but that's way worth the investment for how much we use it. It's something our boys actually love doing. Just like the time they get to play office.
- Chris: Right.
- Stacey: I'll have a set of signs and then I've got three volunteers that want to laminate those. It does take time but I think it's worth it for what we get out of it at the market.
- Chris: One of the things that you guys mentioned early on in our conversation was that you have a division of responsibilities between the two of you, that you have distinct areas of the operation that you're managing. How do those responsibilities divide out between the two of you?
- Casey: Yeah. We definitely do divide our responsibilities on the farm and I think some of it comes with just where our skills lie. I definitely oversee more of the field management and planning, tractor and equipment purchase and overseeing any repairs that need to happen, overseeing the orchard and irrigation. Fertility, we make compost here on the farms so



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doing that and overseeing that and then any pest control so a lot more kind of the field stuff.

Casey: Stacey does a lot more of the HR and crew management things. We definitely share some of these tasks here and there and there's some overlap. I'd go out and lead a crew sometimes, especially on harvest days, but she definitely does more of the day-to-day crew management, a lot more with market coordination and making sure that's all going well and we're prepared for all of our market.

Casey: Greenhouse management, wash pack management and quality control, I would say that Stacey's in charge of all of those other things. I think there're probably some things that I'd left off here but that's the basic breakdown. There's definitely some overlap but we found that our relationship it helps to not overlap too much all the time and also, just in terms of responsibility, it helps to have a definite division of things.

Chris: I mean, Casey, you mentioned that Stacey manages the HR and manages the crew. Do you have people that are working under you with the tractor operation and the tractor maintenance?

Casey: Yeah. Alfredo who is another one of our full-time seasonal staff, I definitely manage him more and he has some of his own management roles. Then, for the crew we often on harvest days, Stacey and I are out there most of the time and I'll often lead one crew and Stacey will lead one crew or if there are other tasks that we're doing we'll often break up and I might be leading folks. Then if there is someone who has ... We generally don't have first year folks doing much tractor work but if there's someone who's been here second year, third year and giving them more responsibility in those areas, I would oversee them more.

Chris: How do you guys manage the day-to-day operations on the farm between the two of you? They get up in the morning and deciding what needs to be done today or maybe it's deciding what needs to be done on a weekly basis and the next getting that plan. What does that look like at the farm at Sunnyside?

Stacey: We definitely decide on a day-to-day basis. I mean early on the week we'll talk about what we are trying to get done for the week and we have a whiteboard in our meeting area and we just write it all down. Then, that's something we go over with our crew on Tuesday morning. We consider that the beginning of our week. Most folks have Monday off after going to Dupont. We just share that with them so they have an idea of what's coming down the pipeline for the week. Casey and I will just talk each morning before we meet with the crew and come up with an outline of what we're trying to get done for the day and who could lead what jobs and how we'll break up the crew. We start with an idea in mind but anything can happen once we get going.

Chris: Right.

Stacey: We do rely on walkie-talkies on the farm. If Casey and I aren't going out with the crew and they've broken up into two teams they can definitely be in touch with us. If something looks awry or they really didn't understand our instructions then they can just radio it back. We manage that way if we're not with them. We will regroup after lunch and have another meeting just to talk about what was done in the morning and they can bring up any problems. Something broke or something is taking way too long and then we'll just decide really what our goals are for the rest of the day and head out again for the afternoon.



- Chris: Before the break we talked about some of the signage that you have around the farm to help people get tools put away or help them get the right boots on for the right operation. Do you guys use a lot of written instructions when you're communicating with your employees?
- Stacey: We do both verbal and written. More and more I am trying to send folks out into the fields with the clipboard and just a checklist of these are the four jobs we said you all are going to do. They have something to remind themselves. We have a great variation in our workers every year from folks that have decided to be here for two or three years and taking it very seriously, and then folks that are brand new and they just don't even know what field they're going to and they're along for the ride at the beginning. We find that giving those outlines and sending them out to the field that makes it easier for everyone to make sure they're on the same page.
- Stacey: Verbally, we do like the walkie-talkies because it's just the way they can check in. If they're unclear or two people think something's supposed to happen one way and the other two think it's supposed to happen the other way, we can just help resolve any disputes and they can keep working.
- Chris: You also talked about managing people with the goal of having them come back year after year. You said you got five people returning from last year. What are you doing to create that really healthy workplace environment that encourages people or makes people want to come back?
- Casey: Yeah, I think there's a few things that we do, do. I think we have a pretty friendly environment with our workers and we are out there working alongside with them a lot and I think that that definitely helps in the big scheme of things. Some of the other things that I think help us are just setting clear expectations of what people should be doing and how it should be done and having that constant line of communication with them. Also, setting expectations of when they are going to be done with the day and that we don't run way over.
- Casey: Obviously, there are some days when a storm is coming and we have to get a bunch plants in. There are days that sometimes it becomes long days but overall, we have a pretty set schedule and people know what ... We meet with them in the morning and the afternoon, they know what they're going to be doing. Every once in a while there's a little curve ball but we don't throw too many curve balls to them. It's an environment that we really want people to learn a lot by being here but we understand that we're all in and we may work a lot more hours than they do but we're not expecting them all the time just to be like their end all and the only thing that is in their lives.
- Casey: I think that's a big portion of it. For people that come back we touched on it before but figuring out ways that our business can offer some type of benefits whether it'd be health insurance or retirement for more longer term folks or putting people on a salary. Generally, when you first get here we do pay hourly and then if we were to have you back for multiple seasons and it's something that we're still working with putting them on a salary.
- Stacey: Just a couple other things I would add is we do evaluations with our employees about halfway through their time with us. I think that's just an important thing to do and sit down and talk about these are the areas we think you're doing well in, these are the areas we can see someone improvement. Just to let them know that we are watching them, that they are



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an important part of the team and this is what you could do to be more efficient member of the team and then we hire a big crew. I think hiring enough people is a key component too so that your crew doesn't think, "Oh gosh. We're never going to get this job done. There's so much work."

Stacey: We do have the luxury of the housing to do that and I recognize that. I feel during the hiring season I'm always wavering like well, should we get one more person or not. Then I talked with Chip Planck from Wheatland Vegetable Farms many years ago and he said your employees will never complain about not working enough hours. That has stuck with me like, "Oh, if we hire one more person then that will probably mean less hours for everybody else. It's a double-edged sword that you have to be prepared to manage that few people. We've never had anyone complain about not having enough hours. We just try to make sure the schedule is reasonable for folks.

Chris: When you say have to be prepared to manage that many people, what is that ... I mean what do you mean by that? I mean what's the difference for you in managing four people versus managing eight, for example?

Stacey: I think just a lot of what Casey and I do is trying to be two steps ahead of the crew and make sure there are enough jobs for that many people. I'm sure you do that on any scale of farming that you are trying to keep your workers occupied. I hate if we have to wait and everyone's just staring at me. I want to have enough jobs find us that we know where they're going to go next and hopefully, we know the next jobs they're going to do. I think that's just part of it that you've got a plan for each day and then you also have enough tools for each person to use and that you have enough skilled people to show the unskilled people the jobs. It's definitely a puzzle that we work on every season and I like that we have so much seasonality that we can work out the piece.

Stacey: In April, I don't have nine employees here. It's just like a gradual we start with two at the beginning of March and then four by the end of March and then add a couple more mid-April and it's a way for me to work out for that peak of what do we have, nine employees and then you just figure out your systems with your current crew and who's good at what and then you add a couple more. It's nice to rev up slowly that way.

Chris: Yeah, that sounds a little bit different than what we have here in the Midwest where it's like you go from zero to 60 in a couple of weeks.

Stacey: Right. Yeah.

Chris: Casey, I want circle back to something you said because you mentioned the idea of setting clear expectations with your employees. I know from experience that that's easier said than done. When you say setting clear expectations, what does that look like for you and how do you actually go about doing that? I guess determining those expectations and then communicating those to your employees.

Casey: Yeah, I think that's one of the most important things that you can do. I think we're still learning how to do that and we will continue to learn how to do that throughout our career. I think for us going out one of the biggest things is being with the crew for ... No one's done it first or done the job or done harvesting of a certain thing, that you're out there doing it with them at least for 20 minutes or so and making sure that they understand what the job is, and then continually not ... I think there is a fine line of micromanaging and saying, being



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too much of a hover but going out there and making sure that they understand what you want them to do and being there with them for a job in the beginning.

Casey: Then having ... if we notice later on in terms of harvesting, for instance, if we notice things aren't looking right we don't yell very often here or pretty much ever. We're not big yellers and we're not that loud but it's like a more ... if we notice that the squash is coming in too big or too small and it's not meeting our expectations that we're not going to single out necessarily one person but bring a group in and say we've noticed this happened and here's what we're looking. Again, we're just revisiting this.

Casey: I think we still have some work to do but also setting, like making sure that people understand again and again this is what we're looking for and I think over time they definitely do get it.

Stacey: We're not afraid to revisit things. This just seems like it's not going well or pull aside that don't seem to be working the same way as other folks and let's revisit the goal and show them how to do the job the way we wanted them.

Chris: One other thing that you mentioned at the very beginning of the show that I wanted to touch on was Lyme's disease. You mentioned that your assistant farm manager got Lyme disease and is having to take some time now to recuperate from that. I feel like this is something that's becoming more and more of an issue pretty much all over the country. You guys are in a place where I think Lyme's disease is pretty common. Are there steps that you're actively taking on your farm to manage Lyme's disease and yourselves and your crew?

Stacey: As far as the crew ... I mean, our assistant manager was actually the third case we've had on the farm that really affected someone's health. We do take it really seriously with the crew and it's in our hiring materials and if we've hired you, it's in the arrival packet. You should prepare yourself for ticks and these are the things you can do. Hoping people read that information before they get here but then on their first day we talk about it again in person and we have signs up in the employee housing in the bathroom and then also in our farm center, in the bathroom just about checking yourself for a tick bite and what the signs are of a tick bite that might indicate Lyme's disease.

Stacey: We've got that signage, again, back to the signage and then we also provide in the farm center, we have bug spray if folks decide they want to use it, spray on their pants or their boots or whatever, we make that available for them as well. If we've been out in the patch and I come in with one or Casey notices one we'll just reiterate it like seems like there are a lot of ticks in this area, you all need to check yourself. Are you checking yourself? We do become parental in that way that I feel horrible about folks getting Lyme's disease here and we just want to make sure everybody has adequate information to watch out for it.

Chris: On that really cheery note, we're going to turn to our lightning around. First, we're going to get a word from one more sponsor.

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Chris: Casey, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Casey: I'd have to say, we have lots of favorite tools here but I'm going to pick an offset round bale unroller that we have on the back of our tractor. As I said before, we use a lot of mulch for our spring and summer crops. We'll have plastics mulch that we plant into but then we buy a lot of hay mulch, round bales and we have this tool that was developed by the University of Kentucky and our friends down the road at Waterpenny got one and we got one as well that rolls out these hay bales and have a nice thick layer then of mulch that is used for weed prevention and have nice moisture control in addition to the weed control, prevent disease.

Casey: That's one of our main growing systems and we've used that system for quite a long time at different farms and done it with square bales but having the round bale unroller that allows like one or two people to do it is a great time saver.

Chris: This bale unroller, so this isn't something that's grinding it up. Can you describe what this machine actually looks like?

Casey: Yup. Cattle folks use them a lot and they're just put behind the tractor to unroll the round bales of hay. This is just offset, so you're going over the plastic mulch and it's to the side. Just a simple weld is made into the side so you can ... hydraulically, you pick up the round bale and then move it up and down with the hydraulic top link. Then, it will just unroll as you go down the row. Rather than having people pushing a big round bale of hay, which can be a huge job or spraying out square bales, this just takes a lot less time.

Chris: We used to unroll the hay bales by hand on our farm and that was something that caused us to stop mulching because it was less than fun.

Casey: Yes. It's a good tool for sure to make people not hate mulching.

Chris: Is this something that you bought off the shelf or is this something that you had to modify?

Casey: It was modified, yeah. It is something that we were introduced to by a farm down the road. As I said, Waterpenny, an extension agent from the University of Kentucky knew that they did a lot of mulching, had seen them at a conference somewhere and then was excited about there weren't many people using round bales or mulch in Kentucky and he talked to them and showed them this prototype and then they got one and then we got one here as well.

Casey: It's a common piece of equipment, the round bale unroller but modifying it to be offset as the thing that ... and we just took it to a local welder to do that.

Chris: Right. Stacey, I want to hear you top that with your favorite tool on the farm.

Stacey: Mine would be unconventional a little bit. It's not necessarily on the farm but I just wanted to say my favorite tool is using our farm community, is that allowed?

Chris: Go for it.



- Stacey: Basically, I think we alluded to earlier that Casey and I really have like learning from other farmers in the area and we've attended a lot of farm tours and have gotten to know folks then just through building that network over the years really led to the job that we have. Also, I really rely on other folks for support throughout the season. We do bulk ordering together and also with this orchard, suddenly this year we had 45,000 pounds of fruit. Before we were on this farm, I've never sold a piece of fruit in my life.
- Stacey: Beyond selling what we could at the farmers market, it was just really nice to have this community of folks to call up and say, "Hey, we have organic apples, do you want to add any to you CSA?" or, "Would you like to sell some through your farm stand?" I feel like just maintaining those communities because those are helpful to us over the years, many years. I don't take it for granted for sure.
- Chris: Casey, do you have a favorite crop to grow?
- Casey: Definitely peppers and specifically hot peppers, I would say. We grow about 25 different varieties of hot peppers. Selling them a lot at market but then we also have a local fermentation company that makes hot sauce out of a lot of the excess peppers that we have. I do think, for us, it really brings a lot of people into our stand. During hot pepper season we have a nice display and again, nice signs of them and we're definitely known as the pepper people.
- Chris: If you could only grow one hot pepper variety, which one would it be?
- Casey: Oh geez, that's difficult. It might be one that now I've been saving seed for a while. It's called Jamaican hot chocolate and it's got this like smoky habanero flavor. I can't find seed anywhere but I've been saving them for a while. There's too many to choose but I'll choose that one.
- Chris: Stacey, is there a favorite crop that you have on the farm? Because you said community with the tools then you're not allowed to say all of them. You do have to pick one.
- Stacey: Okay. Okay, okay, I can pick one. I do really love growing basil actually. Unfortunately, it's getting harder to grow it in our area with the downy mildew moving in a little bit earlier every year. I'm not giving up yet and I just really enjoy the smell of it, harvesting it, having a group out there harvesting it and then we can sell a ton of it. I feel like it's something I appreciate because it is here for a short time and I just like when it's here.
- Chris: Stacey, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Stacey: I would say, if employees are doing something that's frustrating you, it's your responsibility to change the system. That's something that has taken me years to adjust to. Just having frustrations with workers and like they're not understanding this, they're not getting it then just this aha moment of like, well, you got to change it. It's my job as the manager to break it down to something that works and that they can meet the expectations.
- Chris: Casey, same question for you. If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?



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Stacey: This is a hard one but I think it's still something I'm definitely working on but if I could start even earlier just setting up systems to keep really good records and keeping things organized would be something that I would like to work on even before and continue to work on it now. It'd be helpful to have those skills and things set up earlier.

Chris: Awesome. Casey and Stacy, thank you so much for being part of the farmer to farmer podcast today.

Stacey: Thank you for having us.

Casey: Thanks for having us.

Chris: That was a nice, nice in synch finish there. I really like that.

Stacey: Thank you.

Chris: All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 160 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You could find the notes for this show at the farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Sunnyside, that's S-U-N-N-Y-S-I-D-E.

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