



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 169

Nate Fingerle of River Ridge Farm on Four Seasons of Fresh Vegetables in Rural Indiana

July 12, 2018



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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast, episode 169, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard.

Chris Blanchard: Nate Fingerle has been farming with his family at River Ridge Farm in North Central Indiana for 10 years. With one and a half acres of production and 10,000 square feet of high tunnels, River Ridge provides vegetables to its customers year round. River Ridge has found success in a rural agriculture community with a combination of farmers markets, an on-farm retail store, and restaurant sales. We dig into how Nate and his family make all of this work and some of the details of how a lot of hustle has helped to cobble together a successful business in an unlikely marketplace. Nate also shares his straightforward production techniques, including fieldwork, fertility planning, transplant production, irrigation, weed control, and how he makes season extension really pay inside the high tunnels and out. Please, note, as you're listening that this episode was recorded in March of 2018 as Nate makes a lot of references to what's happening now on his farm.

Chris Blanchard: The Farmer to Farmer podcast is generously supported by High Mowing Organic Seeds, the first independently owned farm-based seed company proudly serving professional organic growers with a full line of 100% certified organic and



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Nate Fingerle: Thanks, Chris. Thanks for having me here. Yeah. I've listened to you guys for years and, yeah, I'm glad to be a part of it today.

Chris Blanchard: Excited that you could join us. You and I were chatting a little bit before the show and you were like, "Well, how the heck did you find me because ... " because you're not very visible online, but yours is a name that has come up again and again when I talk to Indiana farmers. When I was just at the Indiana Small Farms Conference at the beginning of March I had two or three different people come up and say, "You've gotta get Nate on the show."

Nate Fingerle: All right.

Chris Blanchard: So, now I've set the expectations really high for you. Sorry.

Nate Fingerle: Sure, thanks.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off by having you tell us about River Ridge Farm. How many vegetables are you guys growing? What are you doing that's special there? How are you selling your produce? And, also, where are you guys located there in Indiana?

Nate Fingerle: Very good. Okay. We've been in business 10 years. We dabbled in it and about 11 years ago, we started to experiment at farmer markets, and ... yeah. Found out that was gonna be wildly successful. Anyway. We are farming on ... I own three and a half acres here because it was where I was actually born and raised, and we have an acre ... I'm cropping out about an acre to an acre and a half. If you include the pathways, we're an acre and a half. If you include just the production zones, we're exactly an acre square footage-wise. And we have 10,000 square feet of high tunnels that we grow in and that's ... we're year round. Kind of our motto is ... four seasons of fresh vegetables is our motto here on our logo.

Nate Fingerle: As far as where we're at, we are located in North Central Indiana. We're an hour south of Ben Hartman's shadow in Goshen, Indiana. He and I are good friends. We've actually done a SARE project together for the university. So I got to know him real well. We order some things together in Vermont Compost. So anyway, we are kind of in his shadow. Everybody knows Indiana farmer Ben Hartman and that's great. I am glad he gets the limelight. As far as where we're at, we are located in Northern Wabash County which is a very rural ag community and county. The city of Wabash has got a population of 12,000. The city of North Manchester, which is where we are close to is, I think, 6,000 people.



- Nate Fingerle: The one advantage we have there is it has a liberal arts college, Manchester University and that brings a whole dynamic set of what I call the city crowd. But, it's interesting in a sense that they're the foodies that come to our place, our store here, but we also have just your regular farm people. Just the common everyday people and they're home gardeners, they don't necessarily buy from you in the summer time always but they know what good food is and they know what it tastes like and they want it year round.
- Nate Fingerle: So anyways, that's kind of a little bit of the background. We are on a half mile dead end road on the north bank of Eel River. So we're kind of hard to find. Some people if they're here at the store, because we have an on farm retail store, "If you're here because you want to be or here because you're lost?" Most will say, "lost." Because you don't just stumble on us, you just don't. So, anyway, my wife and I have got ... we have ten children, we've been married 20 years. They range from, our oldest is 17 he is a pile of help here on the farm and then you get down to our baby at a year and half. Before you think we got crazy we actually adopted four in the middle there.
- Chris Blanchard: Okay.
- Nate Fingerle: Large family, they help out tremendously on the farm and that was part of the vision of even doing what we are doing. I was a very lazy kid growing up. I grew up here on the river and I loved to fish, I loved the outdoors, and I could have cared less about school, and could have cared less about working. I worked just enough to get enough money to buy more fishing gear. Anyway, people that know me when I was a youth think, "Man, you've been doing this?" We have an acre and a half of produce, we have 10 children, my wife home schools and they are like, "what are you doing?" I'm like, "by the grace of God we do what we do." And we love it, absolutely love the life. For about 12 years I worked for the RV industry in Northern Indiana and made a pile of money, made a crazy amount of money but was never happy. I was indoors on a production line, in the service department, made ridiculous amounts of money 80-100 thousand dollars a year but I was away from the family, I was away from my wife. I'm like, "This stinks."
- Nate Fingerle: I've been around, back when I was in high school, to give you the lay of how I got into this. When I was in high school, I preface by saying I was lazy as a kid, and in 9th grade I took an intro to ag class, the FFA class was intro to horticulture and intro to landscaping and it was probably in late February, I think. About this time of year and they took us out to the local greenhouse to do some ... we transplanted a flat and I walk into this greenhouse, it was cold, it was snowy, I walked into this greenhouse and it was like 55 degrees. It was moist smelling, there were flowers in bloom, I was like this is awesome, I don't think I'd ever been in a greenhouse. I absolutely loved it.
- Nate Fingerle: So I fell in love with it, worked for the guy that owned the greenhouse was a very large company. They had a wholesale division plus retail. I worked there for four years during high school, graduated and I worked there for the next year out of high school. My wife actually was in a plant nursery just up the road from here, so we both have a little bit of background in greenhouse and horticulture but couldn't make a living at it. We actually ended up starting, when we first got



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married, we ended up having a greenhouse. Had three greenhouses, grew flowers and the whole mix, bedding plants and all these things. As we were, we done it six or eight years and realized we either have to get very large, move from our location where we're at. We actually love it, it's very wooded here on the banks of the river.

Nate Fingerle: We really didn't want to move away and so I sold the greenhouses off to one of my customers said, "Well you ought to keep the greenhouses to grow vegetables in them." Well, all I like doing is flowers, forget vegetables, I hated vegetables as a kid. Anyway, after that I was still working at the factory and I hated being indoors especially in springtime. The doors would be open, the birds would be out there singing, and I'm like, "I'm inside, I hate this." So anyway the apex for us was I remember getting Organic Gardening magazine back when I was a teenager. I remembered seeing in there a picture of the guy, he had a sock hat on, he had a coat on, he's in a greenhouse, he's bent over these rows harvesting greens and there's snow outside. I had no idea what it was. I went down to the basement dug through all my books ... through all my magazines and found the article on Eliot Coleman. And lo and behold he has this book called The Four Seasons Harvest.

Nate Fingerle: So I rushed and bought the book. Instantly it was like, wow, there's actually a possibility. This would have probably been October 2006 or 7. We end up digging some broccoli plants out of the garden putting them in the greenhouse, because we did keep one of our greenhouses when we sold the flower greenhouses off I kept one of the small ones. Put a cold frame over top of it. Then I started heating lettuce and we had lettuce, it would have been October and some time by Thanksgiving time we had fresh lettuce come out of the greenhouse. I'm like, wow, this is pretty cool stuff, so we experimented, planted some more. I even planted some mache for back then. Ended up taking, it was an eight foot cold frame. More than my wife and I could eat. Started taking the excess lettuce up to the factory where I was working. One of the guys in the service department was like, "man you hate working here, you hate being inside a building, why don't you do this for a living?" And that was like it clicked. I was like, "Hey, why don't we try this?" So we ended up going to the farmers market.

Nate Fingerle: That would have been the summer of 2007 in our local community towards Manchester Farmer's Market here and there was an old time organic farmer there, he's been doing it for 30 plus years. They got all the business. He had just gorgeous stuff and I had a couple bags of lettuce and I had some early summer squash, and a couple early melons in June because I had planted them in the greenhouse early. We were like, well this isn't really going to work so we went to the city of Wabash which is about 20 minutes south of us, our county see here.

Nate Fingerle: The first Saturday we had one little measly table off the back of the truck and the people were like "Wow" lady after lady would come through and like, "Now this is a real farmer's market" because some of the people there are actually buying in produce from an auction somewhere and then they re-selling it. Or it's the old time, good old boys in town that are raising zucchini the size of your arm and everything overgrown. The beans that are lumpy and selling them for dirt cheap. So we came in with bonafide garden fresh, picked in it's prime, produce.



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So anyway, that's kind of how we got into the farmer's market and we've been doing that for the last 11 years.

Nate Fingerle: Then we have an on farm retail store, which I can get into more of that later. Let's see, what else? We do about four restaurants, we have the most of them are here local. There is one about a half hour from us. We've got Manchester Community Schools, which we do on a limited, limited basis. We do over there wholesale some lettuce and carrots for them. Some tomatoes, cherry tomatoes. We do that, we are fairly limited on that just because of our scale operation. We also, if we need to, we do an email delivery system, kind of modeled after Paul Alice at [inaudible 00:10:56]. System of sending out an email, customers order, and we drop it off at two local coffee shops and people pick up the produce. So anyway, that's kind of the long of the short of it. I can get into a whole lot more. I love farming and love what we do.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me more about that on farm store. Is that a significant part of your business?

Nate Fingerle: It is. I don't have the exact sales figures but we tell people when they ask and definitely 50% if not probably closer to 75% of our total sales in a season are sold right here off the farm. In the sense that ... so we started out, 10 years ago ... I had no idea, so when we started out 10 years ago, all I wanted to do, I knew I didn't want to work at the factory I wanted to work at home. I wanted to teach my children to be much more of a diligent worker than I was because I was not that way as a kid. So we started out and I figured I would be going door-to-door with my little red wagon asking people to buy my produce. It has ... they have literally, you know how the old motto goes, you build it and they will come. We are a half mile down a dead end road and they beat a path to our door.

Nate Fingerle: The first summer, we set up in our garage. We cleared out an area and I hung up some white fiberglass paneling and we had a little refrigerator in there, a couple tables set up, and we were doing business. They'd come in the driveway, you know, and if we had five customers in a day we were busy back in 2008 when we started. That was great through the summer time and then we realized, hey, it's going to get cold now what are we going to do? We had one greenhouse and we were building a second tunnel by then. We were like, we got to do something. So we had a little mudroom in the back of the house and we ended up insulating it and putting tile floor down and painting walls. It's an 8 X 16 foot room and we ended up plumbing it and putting a triple basin wash sink in one side and on the other side we had two tables and a refrigerator. So we had a nice little tiny store in there and the worked for a couple of years.

Nate Fingerle: I think we built the store in 2012, our drive's probably 200 feet long ... foot long drive, so we actually built the store right out at the roadside at the edge of our drive. So basically, at 2012, from 2008 when we started to 2012, our customer base obviously picked up tenfold. When the store was in the back of our house, if we had our hours sign posted from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM and you could look right in from that room into the kitchen and we would be in there getting supper ready and they would knock. People come at 8:00 at night and we were like, well what do you do, you're there, yeah, we'll sell you produce. So now with the store, number one it's out at the end of the drive when 6:00 comes the sign says closed, we are closed. There's no obligation to go out now.



Nate Fingerle: So as far as, yeah you had asked, very significant part of our income in the sense that farmer's market would run from the third Saturday of May through the 3rd Saturday of October. So we do the farmer's market, those Saturdays I think its 22 Saturday's that we do farmer's market. The rest of the year and even during that time our store is open Monday through Friday 8:00-6:00 and then on Saturdays 8:00-2:00, and then we're closed on Sunday. We would still easily ... So in the summer time I would match, if sell \$2,000 worth of produce here at the store in the summer time we can guarantee I'll sell at least that much if not twice that much at the farmer's market.

Nate Fingerle: Even our restaurants, I sound kind of snooty when I say this, but with the restaurants I didn't actually pursue them, they came to me and said "Hey," ... most of these are all local farm to table restaurants and they said, "Hey, we heard about you, can we buy your stuff." And I'm like "Well, sure. Number one I'm not a wholesaler because I'm on an acre and a half. Number two, I'm selling everything I can possibly produce at this point at retail. If you want to buy it at retail price and you want to come pick it up at the farm, I don't have time to deliver it, if you want to come pick it up, great."

Nate Fingerle: So, we've had anywhere from four to six. We have two of them that actually kind of come and go in the spring, summer, and fall we have abundance of it they come. This time of year we back out. In the wintertime we back out and don't sell the lettuce to them. Yeah, people have literally beat a path to our door. So earlier, we had five or six people in the summer time in 2008. Now if we have 20 or 30 people that's a good ... that's a busy day for us. I will say this, the one part that does hurt.

Nate Fingerle: Basically, it's farmer's market 24/7 while we are here working. So, we're out in the back 40 and we get the radio alert gives off saying that we've got a customer, that means somebodies got to get up and go take care of them. Which, we're getting now, so when we started out in 2008 we had, our oldest was seven. We've added obviously quite a few children since then. It was basically my wife and I and it was like, oh man. Sometimes we were just always, constantly it seemed like going and taking care of a customer. Now that we've got, I think four or five of our oldest children can take care of the store. One of our employees can, too. We all have these handheld radios that interface with the alert system so we can contact back and forth who is going to get them, who's not going to go. So anyway, those things have all worked out very well. However, it is kind of a pain that at times we do have to stop. Even mealtime, we can eat our lunch at 11:00, we can eat it at 12:30, we can eat it at 1:00. I can just about guarantee, we haven't had anybody all morning and all of a sudden we'll have a flood of people come over at lunch time. But, anyway that's just part of having a store on the farm.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about that store on the farm you guys really are on a dead end road. It is something that people, you really couldn't stumble on this place. I'm looking at the map. So how do people find you? What's your outreach and how do you actually get people out to the store?

Nate Fingerle: So, on outreach and getting people here. We say it's viral advertising. It started ... it start ... it goes virtually by word of mouth. It started, I would say so, we



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started out in 2007, back I the day in 2007, when we were at the farmer's market toying with it. One of the radio stations came through and all piled us together ... one of the radio stations came through and done a one minute blip for all the vendors there. I happened to mention who we were, where we was located, and that we were wanting to do this full time and we were putting up greenhouses and we were going to have lettuce and so forth in the winter time. One of the men that was listening to the program that day was the business director from the local community schools. Incidentally, his daughter was actually in the same class as me in school and he recognized my name and he came down to the farmer's market the next Saturday and introduced himself, and said, "Hey, I'm the business director for the community schools."

Nate Fingerle:

He had read Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal Vegetable Miracle* and he was really interested in getting local produce into the schools and he said, "I'd like" ... he just on a handshake said, "I will buy your first winter's production of lettuce out of the greenhouse." So we were like, bingo, there it was. So we started selling produce that very first summer and winter in 2007 before we actually officially in business started selling produce to the schools mostly lettuce mix. From that it was a quality of lettuce they had never seen before. All of the staff was like, "Wow, where did you get this stuff?" So the dietician, the head cook, so they told her where they got it from.

Nate Fingerle:

She actually for about two weeks would put orders in for the staff and after two weeks she said, "Nate, we gotta do something different this is not working out. It's a financial disaster. I can't keep the school's lettuce separate from the staff orders so she said is there any way you can come in on another day?" So he was doing ... would actually drop produce on Tuesday at the school and so she said how about you come in on Thursday? So that's actually ... we got started immediately by bringing fresh lettuce to the schools, whatever they had ordered, on Tuesdays and coming back in with orders on Thursday's via email for the staff and it just so happens because we have Manchester University right here. It's a small liberal arts college in our community there's a lot of cross over. So maybe one of the spouses worked at the school as a teacher and one of them was a professor at the university.

Nate Fingerle:

So then it kind of snowballed from there. So within the local community, very rapidly, people started finding out about us. Then when we went to the farmer's market down there in Wabash we were kind of the new kid on the block and we had a top quality produce that most people hadn't seen. Fresh lettuce mix in a bag and we used Johnny Seeds and we went through the catalog that we had from day one we always had the best variety the best flavored. We picked and often on size.

Nate Fingerle:

That all snowballed and then people when the farmer's market ended, where can we get this stuff. Actually we have a little tiny store at our farm, you can come up there and get things in the winter. It just kind of went from there. A couple years ago we got a Facebook page for the farm. River Ridge Farm. We guarantee our customer's well do a weekly post at least. It actually ends up being more now, when we first had it I was like, I'm not a technological guy I don't really care for it so I had stopped doing posts, actually. Then ladies would be like, "Man, we really like seeing your updates on what you're doing on the farm." and it kind of becomes the promotion. We are the face of the farm. They



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can actually, whether they come to the farm or not, they can actually see what we're doing. Then we had a local farmer had dropped 40 watermelon out of his garden. He had way too many watermelon and he said, "can you sell these things?" I said sure, we will sell them for you. So, I took a picture of them as a Facebook post and by the end of the day all 40 of those watermelon was gone which is a product I don't normally sell. A number of people said, "I saw your Facebook post." That's why they came out.

Nate Fingerle: So, that was kind of an alert to us that hey this social media is something we need to do a little of a presence in. Anyway, I will say this too, I was going to mention that on the farm store. So I'm kind of all over the place on that. On our store, we do produce and we do produce well. We sell that here. We actually have another farm locally that's a certified organic farm he got into doing what we was doing because of what we were doing, he saw our success, he put up ... I think he has three tunnels.

Nate Fingerle: He doesn't always sell his stuff so in the wintertime he actually supplements my lettuce and spinach production with some of his own. We sell it on commission for him. Then we also partnered with, we look at ourselves as an aggregator here at the store because we do vegetables and we do them really, really well. We've got a family that does pastured beef and we sell their beef here in the store. We have a family that does pastured pork, we sell that here. We have another guy that does chicken and turkeys, we sell that here. We have a farm raised venison, it's all local, all these are local products within the county or the next county north of us. We have an Amish farm that does some eggs for us. We have a few eggs ourselves mostly just for the kids to have chores to do. We have a farm that does goats here locally and we sell their goat's milk, goat's milk cheese, their goat's soap here. We do some honey production ourselves and we've also partnered with another guy that has a hundred hives. We sell his honey here. We do maple syrup. We've got some assorted syrup and this is all local Wabash County or Kosciusko County products.

Nate Fingerle: That's the cool thing we've kind of aggregated, because of our success or our farm store we've actually given impetus to a lot of other smaller farms. They are like, if we don't want to retail or we have extra we can go down to River Ridge and sell it at their store. Another local farm, a CSA farm actually and they got into doing they had red fly wheat flour, we do some rye flour from them, we do artisanal rolled oats, and we also do blue corn meal from them. All these are products these farms actually sought me out. I didn't ask any of them to do this, they all came and said, "hey, can you sell this for us?" And every year, every couple months we'll add another product as it comes to us. We've got some sunflower oil, we got a guy that roasts coffee beans locally, his wife does wax candles we sell that, we've got some Amish that do jams and jellies and pickles for us. Another family does granola.

Nate Fingerle: Then, so that's just the retail products, as far as the food products. Then we got into, because we grow organically as much as possible, we say we are all natural. We are not certified organic and people would start coming and like where do you get your compost? Where do you get your fertilizer? Where do you get your amendments? It's horribly expensive to ship it in if they pay postage or freight. So I said, well actually it's a better deal for me for my supplier if I buy by the pallet. Well I get a better price and so we actually, in the



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springtime especially we sell organic soil mix by the pallet full it seems like to just local home gardeners that want to do it organically and then along with that we have a have a organic seed racks.

Nate Fingerle: But anyway, we kind of have our fingers in a lot of different things, but we're the aggregator, like I said. If for some of the another product and we are just selling other products for them. But we do 99% of the vegetables we sell here do come from us`. We do supplement from the Amish up north of us. Our winter squash, we just don't have room for the vine crops, we buy several bins of winter squash from them. We let our customers know we did not grow the winter squash, this came from a local farm but we didn't grow it ourselves. So anyway, yeah. It's been pretty awesome. It's been a wild ride in the last 10 years, I'll tell you. And we love it.

Chris Blanchard: That's a pretty neat set up to end up having. Especially in your location.

Nate Fingerle: And that's the big thing, too. Our customers tell us all the time, they're like, the more stuff you get, we become a one stop shop. We've got meat, we've got cheese, we've got flour, we've got produce. There's a lot of ladies that say, "I hardly ever go to the grocery store." You know, just to get some of the other staples, salt, sugar, some of that other stuff they maybe go. But there's a lot of ladies that say, "We hardly ever go." Or they'll come out and confess, "Yeah, sorry I wasn't here last week it was really busy and I went to Kroger's instead." I'm like, "Hey, that's fine." I don't have enough products for the entire county to come but it is pretty cool to listen to the customers.

Nate Fingerle: You know, we went into business, if I can say it, selfishly we were focused on ourselves. We wanted it to do something for our life for ourselves, our family, give my children something to do work wise. We were basically self-focused and my customers niche is awesome. Every day we get positively reaffirmed. They're like, "We don't know what we used to do before you were here. Don't ever go out of business." We had an accident, we had a car accident several years ago and we had an outpouring, thousands of dollars came in from customers that just gave money because they were like, "Oh, your van's completely trashed." Which we did have insurance. It was just really cool that whole community that begins to build around the fact that we have a store that provides a service and customers love it and yeah. We reciprocate the blessing back and forth. It's awesome, we love what we do.

Chris Blanchard: Now, from your farm store are your customers able to actually see the production areas on the farm?

Nate Fingerle: Absolutely. The first garden literally almost abuts right up to, there's a four foot gravel pathway and the first garden starts and then the three of the tunnels are very visible. They are right out there, 200 feet from the road or less. I invite people. A lot of people think that it's all off limits so I invite people. My customers come, I'm like, by all means you're welcome to walk out there anywhere you want to. We have ladies now that, it's kind of neat too, we are getting to the point now where family ... so my customers that are routine here and they've been here. Their families from out of state come and they are like there is a farm you've got to go see and they'll bring people out. Even that's the cool thing about having it. Our stuff is fresh because we have so many



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customers coming and we're on a ... if we need more lettuce we go out and cut it for the next morning. So it's only a day or two old when it leaves.

Nate Fingerle: Beyond that if we are out of romaine lettuce or something in the store, ladies can actually go out and pick their romaine. We try to limit that. In the early days we thought that was really cool. Hey come out and pick out your own romaine. We are busy enough now we try to keep it in stock and we've been at it ten years now, for the most part know about what we can sell, and that's the neat thing too. We know how many bed feet of eggplant we can sell. We know how many bed feet of romaine. We've got our production dialed in fairly close to what we need. Outside of things we just can't produce enough of. Ladies can actually come out there and pick their romaine if they want it. Some are like, "Well, I really don't need a full bunch of dill, can I get a half bunch? We're pretty compact as far as, we are no more than a few hundred feet at any point.

Nate Fingerle: Like I said, we're three and a half acre total acreage. We are only farming on an acre and a half of that and the store is right here. It's very compact so yeah, customers can walk in the greenhouses and see what we're doing. I actually encourage them to go out and see what we're doing. Yeah, that what I always say when they ask if we're organic. I say, well we don't use synthetic pesticides, we don't use chemicals of any sort, we use all natural. We're not certified. We're customer certified. They are able to go out and see that we do have nothing to hide. Walk through my buildings. And they can, they come out and that's the neat thing too. We have ten children and they've watched Carson, our oldest was seven when we started, 17 today. They've watched literally grow from knee high up. My little ones come in and they're taking care of the store now. A lot of times I don't even see customers all day. I haven't see Julie or whoever for a couple weeks, is she still coming? And they're like, "Oh yeah she's here every week." Because the kids interact with them. So yeah, everything is accessible here on the farm.

Chris Blanchard: Do you feel like your four-season presence is an important part of making that farm store work?

Nate Fingerle: Definitely, we would definitely not have the sales that we do. We sell in vegetables alone, we look at the meat and everything else we sell as just kind of filler, we sell in excess of \$100,000 a year in produce. We are usually between \$100 and \$120,000 in sales. Every year just off, that would be farm store here, restaurant, and also the farmer's market. But if it wasn't year round obviously you're going to drop a lot of people off.

Nate Fingerle: That being said we have noticed because we are four season, because we have so much product here, we have what we have our core customers. These are people that come, I can count on them, I know them by name. I can count on them being here every week. If they go on vacation they'll let me know, "hey Nate, we're going to be gone for two weeks to Europe or we're going to Florida for a month." Just because we have that much connection to them and we are their food source. I don't know, I don't have a number for how many. There's a good bulk of people this time of the year.

Nate Fingerle: Then we have our others that are still in that core group that come every couple of weeks, maybe once a month and pick up stuff. Then we have what I call my



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summer crowd and they're the ones that are from Memorial Day to Labor Day for the most part. It's funny, even after ten years I have people are like, "Hey we just found out you're open year round." I'm like, "Yeah, we are, we are a four season farm."

Nate Fingerle: You know, there's a certain constituency that's more of our rural ag community people. They're the ones that want the tomatoes, they want the cucumbers, they want the bell peppers. You're warm season traditional crops. With our four season presence too, because of our season extension we'll have tomatoes by late April, first of May we are picking tomatoes and we'll carry them clear into November, same with bell peppers, and cucumbers, all those things we'll have early. So people have found out about that, that definitely draws in by being able to extend the season early and then also late. As far as being year round. If we didn't have the vegetable production we wouldn't be selling the meats. We wouldn't be selling some of the other things that we sell here in the store as well. So definitely being a year round and definitely a four season by all means makes a huge difference for us.

Nate Fingerle: And it gives us cash flow, I've got two employees, I didn't mention that earlier. We do have two employees that have been here ... both ladies have been here ... They're single ladies. They've been here probably, I think ones been here four or five years and the other is five or six. They have been a huge asset as well. So on the whole keeping people... being a year round farm that also gives my two employees work even through the winter time. Which obviously it's slower this time of year, there's not as much to do in the dead of winter. December, January there's not as much. As we get into February and March and on out that we really ramp things up. But yeah, just having greenhouses and four season keeps my employees busy as well.

Chris Blanchard: I'm a little bit surprised that you're having this kind of sales success. These kinds of numbers based around a town of just over 6,000 people. I mean, liberal arts college or no, that's just not a lot of people to be as engaged as your community is in coming and buying your organic vegetables and basically this whole array of hippie food.

Nate Fingerle: Right, we do not charge, I usually for the most part charge supermarket prices. I mean, the early years we vacillated back and forth on what to charge and we have definitely bumped our prices up. One thing I do do in the last couple years we start charging a winter premium price. So our baby salad mix and our spinach in the summer time is \$4 a half pound bag. In the winter we bump that up .50. We bump all our herbs, our bunching herbs, everything we bump up .50 a bag. Because we are limited on production and in the early years we would run out of product but last couple years we got it dialed in enough that we're usually able to ... with planning were usually don't run out. We don't charge, I look at what the local organic farm that goes to the Fort Wayne farmer's market, Ft. Wayne is a huge city, and he gets the big city organic prices. I'm like, I would love to get 3 bucks a bunch for carrots. I get \$1.75 versus him.

Nate Fingerle: So we're not actually charging outlandish prices. We're supermarket comparable prices. A touch more, especially on our bagged greens because they are so fresh they last for two weeks in the refrigerator and customers go crazy over. I will say that too, that has been a part too, because so many people are



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used to getting commercial, stale, shipped in produce to the grocery stores. They open the bag up over and over.

Nate Fingerle: Number one, I opened it up and there were bad leaves in it or we had it and three or four days later it was all rotten. We've actually had the college, the university, has actually called us a time or two and said we just got a shipment in from Piazza, which is a big supplier of wholesale food. The whole case of lettuce was bad, can we come out and buy some lettuce till we get fresh? What I'm getting at is, the quality of it. We work on mineral balancing, making sure the soil is as fertile as possible so that is one aspect. The second aspect is it's fresh picked, fresh washed, fresh packed product. So when it leaves it is only hours old or maybe a day or two old so it's a fresh product. For some of the lower income people that come they might only buy one bag of lettuce a week but they are like, "yeah, your stuff I can eat on it for two or three weeks and it's still good."

Nate Fingerle: So that has driven too, the awareness of what actual good, fresh, healthy produce is and how long it lasts. That has been for it too. Probably a bunch of other things as well.

Chris Blanchard: What are you doing to get that shelf life? That was actually something that, when I was looking at the limited amount of information that's available online about River Ridge Farm. There were several comments about the shelf life that you're getting and I know that shelf life isn't just a function of, "I picked it yesterday." There's got to be something more that you are doing to make that work.

Nate Fingerle: Yeah, we are ... like I said earlier, I was a lazy kid in school, I was not stupid. I probably could have graduated in the top 10 of my class. I did not focus in on chemistry, I didn't look at soils, that would have been boring to me. Today, I'm an absolute soil nerd. I absolutely love soil fertility. We have read all of Albrek's books we have Neal Kinsey's books. The guy up there in Wisconsin, has Otter Creek Farm, can't give you his name now ...

Chris Blanchard: Gary Zimmer.

Nate Fingerle: Yeah, Gary Zimmer, yeah his books and others. So we actually have really focused on soil fertility, getting our soil as mineral balanced as possible, we have our soil tested every fall and a lab in Ft. Wayne reads it for us. We used to send our analysis off to Morgan Compost in Michigan's done it a couple times. We had another guy in Saltman, Michigan do it a few times. Then I'm like, "Well, this is crazy, I'm paying guys to do this and I'm beginning to understand how all these different nutrients work together and how to balance them. We got onto, it was called Acres Publications sells a book or a booklet called the Ideal Soil Handbook. I got that and he really walks through a lot of those mineral balance and principles and we have started using that here. Balancing our soils out. They're not perfect but they're really getting close.

Nate Fingerle: Our calcium saturation, or potassium saturation, everything is really, really close to what I would call and what all the researchers show as ideal. Obviously the more dissolved solids you have in that plant the better flavor it's going to be and the longer lasting it is going to be. I really attribute it to that. I'll back up and say



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this, when we started ... before we had everything ideal I bought an injector so we could do a drip line. We started using that harvest fish fertilizer. One thing I had been discouraged is by summer time my tomatoes ... by July my tomatoes in the tunnels were really, really getting smaller. Part of that was I didn't understand how to irrigate. I was letting them go too dry before irrigating again. We started irrigating with Neptune's Harvest fish and injecting it into the lines.

Nate Fingerle: We all of the sudden we were like, "Man, I think our tomatoes actually, are tasting better than they've ever tasted before." We started having ladies were like ... and on top of that the fruit size thing just huge, all through clear into August and September. I didn't tell any of my customers what I was doing. One lady said one day, she's like, "What are you doing different, are you planting different kinds of tomatoes?" And I said, "Well, no." and I thought I knew where she was going with it and she said, "Well, always `by this time of the year your tomatoes used to be small the flavor this year is like, way better than normal." I said, "No, it's big beef, I've always grown big beef as my red slicer." And I told her what I was doing was injecting the fish fertilizer into the soil and she said, "Well, whatever you're doing, keep it up, because it tastes great." And we have.

Nate Fingerle: I mean, once we started really dialing in on supplementing with fish. Which I really don't even supplement with fish very much any more, we do on occasion just to plus up things. Really the focus on getting the soils minerally balanced and we do a lot of composting. We actually put a ... invested in a compost pad, like a 60 X 60 pad, concrete bunkers. Bought a skid loader and produced, we produce a ton of waste as far as vegetable waste here. The local rabbitry that supplies us with manure and bedding. A local guy here, just across the street from us has a hobby farm for his grandkids. He brings all his manure over. We compost all those things and we try to add as much compost back to the soil as possible. Not near as much and Eliot Coleman, or Ben Hartman, or some of those guys do. It's my goal.

Nate Fingerle: Going back to your original question, I really feel like it's the mineral balancing and really focusing on soil fertility that makes a huge difference in the longevity of the product.

Chris Blanchard: I was expecting your answer to be something that you were doing in terms of post harvest handling. Do you guys have refrigeration and is-

Nate Fingerle: We do.

Chris Blanchard: Is getting field heat out of your product an important part of what you're doing?

Nate Fingerle: Right, we would have two walk in coolers. We built the first one like 9 feet by 9 feet by 9 feet tall. I thought, that's plenty of space, that would have been 2013. We maxed that thing out. So anyway I actually bought another commercial stand up unit, put it in the back end, the retail store is up front. The backside of the ... a full barn and we have our other walk in cooler there plus a couple other fridges. Then the real deal portion we would have a triple door glass retail case as well. We would focus, like when we are out there harvesting we would focus, if we are doing radishes, we tell the ladies, my employees. We need 30 bunches of radishes or 50 bunches or ... depends on what order we are going after. Then when they bring them up we hose them off immediately and then we've got



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people up there ready to start bunching them, putting bands on them. The produce does not come in, once it's out of the ground, it's not out for less than an hour and it's back in refrigeration. We put them in bags and crates then we stack it up in the coolers in age order's first. We know when farmer's market comes, these need to go out first and sell these.

- Nate Fingerle: Everything is, because we are an acre to acre and a half farm, and we do have adequate cooling space. It does, things come out of the ground, rapidly is washed, and it is back in refrigeration very, very rapidly as well.
- Chris Blanchard: Looking at your farm and your farm layout. You mentioned that you're pretty close to Ben Hartman, and somewhat are farming in his shadow. Have you adapted some of his lean techniques and his thinking about how to lay out a farm and how to organize things there?
- Nate Fingerle: Yeah, we do. A lot of people ... We get asked that all the time. Do you know Ben Hartman? I sure do, we are good friends. We have, if I was to redo it, he moved from his original farm that was outside of Leesburg, eight miles from Doshen. He actually just bought a new farm and is redesigning it exactly how he wants a lean farm to be. If I was to do it again, yeah I would redo some things for sure. One thing that we had implemented definitely is just the fact that ... he goes over the whole spaghetti diagram and he said look at where you are going. It used to frustrate me. I had one bed preparation rake from Johnny. It was a 30 inch bed prep rake. It was kept in the back of the shop if I put it away.
- Nate Fingerle: And you know, I would be like, "Oh, where's it at?" so I would search and search and finally I'm like, after talking to Ben, and reading his books. I'm like, "Well, that's dumb. I'm going to invest in eight rakes so each tunnel has two rakes. One on the east end and one on the west end so no matter what garden plot I'm in, I've got a bed prep rake within 50 to 100 feet." Have a shovel in each greenhouse, have a shovel if I need it. So those things are some things we've done. We've gotten rid of a lot of our, well he talks about getting your harvest tools only the ones you need. We've discarded quite a few of those. Farm layout wise, we're kind of landlocked here. I really can't redesign things per se. But it definitely just the ... I've told people thinking of lean, just that fact of understanding I don't want wasted motion, definitely, we looked at that. What can we do? We're actually redesigning our work area outside. How can we do this? How can we make this the most efficient? So we are doing the least amount of traveling as possible.
- Nate Fingerle: Even in the early days, Eliot Coleman would talk about like, when you're harvesting tomatoes, don't just pick one, pick one or two or three in your hand. He would talk about when you are picking spinach. Don't just pick one spinach leaf, put it in your bucket, you get a whole handful. I do that with my employees or my children who are harvesting. Some of those things we are already doing to begin with, as far as waste product. Because we are ten years into it, kind of like I mentioned earlier, we kind of know about that we can sell everything so we really don't have too much over production. So no, we definitely use some of Ben's principles and I look for in the coming future as we plan and reevaluate. Which we do constantly, definitely will be things that we implement of his lean thought pattern there.



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- Chris Blanchard: Alright, with that, we are going to take a quick break. Get a word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Nate Fingerle from River Ridge Farm.
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- Chris Blanchard: Alright, and we're back with Nate Fingerle from River Ridge Farm, in North Central Indiana. Over near North Manchester there if you're looking on the map. So Nate, I'd like to dig into what you're doing from a production stand point? We talked a little bit before about what you're doing as far as the soil amendments, and the fertilizers that you're using on the farm, but I'd like to kind of back up, and just talk about your overall production system. What does it actually look like, getting a field ready and getting a crop in the ground, there at River Ridge Farm?
- Nate Fingerle: Right, so we use BSC equipment, we started off with Troy Bilt and used that until we run that thing through the ringer. Haul an acre and a half of produce, we ended up a couple of years ago investing in BCS Filler with a flail mower, as we do a ton of cover cropping. Whether it's buck wheat, an idle bed, or whether it's a clover under seeded into one of the crops, which we do quite a bit of under seeding, or obviously in the fall time we see a lot of rye and hairy vetch in production, and so we use the filler mower for that, we get beds ready were always, and I've made out these bed charts. We would have ... and what I call are west three way areas, a 60 X 60 plot, the rows are 60 feet long. We have another plot ... we have two plots that are 30 feet rows, and it would be about ... the other one is the 30 X 90, the other is 30 X 60. We have a 75 X 50. We have two 80 X 80 plots, and then we have a 50 X 130 feet long, is our outdoor



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production, plus our 3 foot by 96 foot tunnels, and our starter greenhouse which is our 50 X 96.

Nate Fingerle: They're getting it ready, we would go ... all my beds are already laid out, I have a chart for every single growing zone outside, even each tunnel and each ... there's a line that corresponds for every bed. Our beds are 42 inch bed top, approximately 30 inches when you go ... it's 42 inches from aisle way to aisle way in the center but gives us about ... roughly a 30 or a little over 30 inch wide bed. We would ... so I know what's going to go into that bed, when I sit down in the winter time every bed is scheduled, and that's partially how I make a acre to an acre and a half of produce for the paper, so we do a lot of tight scheduling, so we do seven plantings of green beans, they're a good cash, they take a long time to pick, we get a premium price for them but, the other thing that's awesome is that they're legumes, they're fixing nitrogen all that bio mass is going back into the soil, on top of that we also know that my early plantings are going to get followed by fall spinach, fall radishes, it might be Chinese cabbage in the fall time.

Nate Fingerle: On the flip side, my later June and July plantings I could get spinach, and radishes, and a head of those, so all my green bean beds, every single one of those, will see at least two crops of, sometimes even three, in a season and so I absolutely love green beans because of that. One of our other beds we would do a lot of succession planting of things, and I know exactly ... every week I know exactly whatever crop is going to go, there's never a day of like, okay, we're just going to go, where is it not going to go, and we know when I go out to plant them. When I have my employees or my children go out to plant, we know exactly what bed what plot, and when it's going to [inaudible 00:47:08] on a calendar. Most of that stuff now it just from year to year I used to transfer everything to the next year calendar, now we just have one production calendar. We tweak it a little bit, here and there but like I said earlier, after 10 years we have fairly much dialed in for the most part on most crops to what we can sell.

Nate Fingerle: We're at max production on most of our crops, to what we can sell, I mean out side of things like lettuce mix obviously that we in the winter time especially run out of. So then, we'd come in, we already had our soils samples taken, we knew exactly what each ... because we have ... what? We're an acre to acre and a half of production, and we had actually had what I call free fertility zone, and even on a small amount of an area we've actually seen a difference in soil fertility, in what each zone needs. It's all fairly close, but a mass different that we wanted to tweak it as much as possible so we'd know what every bed, I mean I've got it down to the tenth of an ounce per bed and we mixed all that with custom leaded, some of that stuff together, and we've been doing less of that as we get our soil balanced we're doing no where near as much. Where now we do a lot of just going out with wheel barrow, spreading compost, working in with a rake, sometimes we till it in, kind of depends on what's been there. If it's been a lot of heavy crop residue obviously we did till it, sometimes we just rake it, and then go right back into it.

Nate Fingerle: We do a lot of ... we do very little direct heating anymore. We use spaniel bases to send baby leaf lettuce and that's a whole other area. Yeah, this is a sales pitch for Salanova ... Salanova, when we went from direct heating baby leaf lettuce to



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transplanting Salanova heads I mean it completely revolutionized our farm. Not only did we increase production by 50%, just because of switching from direct heating baby leaf to Salanova. The disease issues went away, our harvesting time went up by ... it used to take us sometimes ... we'd get so much disease in our baby leaf it'd take us half an hour to 45 minutes to cut a bucket of lettuce. Now if we cut ... it takes 15 minutes to cut a bucket of Salanova lettuce, we're like, "Wow, what is going on?" Yeah, there was aphids in it, or it's too dirty or whatever. So at the plug for Salanova it has revolutionized what we do here.

Nate Fingerle: But beyond that, what I was saying on starting trays, we do a lot of trays in the greenhouse, because we know ... because of the scheduling I do ahead of time, I know what's going to go in, what day I need to seed it. I know exactly how many flats I need. I know where it's going to go when it comes to maturity in 3, 4, 5 weeks. So we do a lot of ... even our beets, our scallions, I'm trying to think what all ... almost all of our crops I guess the only crops we'd actually direct heat anymore would be our sugar snap peas, our green beans, radishes roots still, and our salad turnips we have direct feed. And even that occasionally I will spill, especially early season, we'll start trays of radishes, and salad turnips in the greenhouse, and transplant them out, just because I have a four week old transplant like this time of year here, in March I've got a four week old transplant that's a live growing plant ready to go into the soil, and also with that is just the whole thing, what weed control, is well I used to direct heat my scallions, and everything, they would germinate at the same time the weeds did, and we had a mess. We had a chaotic mess.

Nate Fingerle: So we went very rapidly. Especially with Eliot Coleman, hey transplant the things. We can do our scallions in bunches, we can do everything in bunches, and transplant it into a ... into clean soil, it's a four week old transplant when it goes in, and it is tremendously helped of weeding, that being said also, on a production stand point of weeding, we take Eliot's philosophy if there's a weed it needs to get pulled, and we have seen in 10 years time, we have seen our weed seed bag drop tremendously. I mean we're not Eden yet we're not the Garden of Eden by any means we still have weeds, that doesn't mean we don't have weeds we do have them, but the weed bank has come through, our employees are like, "we don't have a fraction of the weeds that we had in the past."

Nate Fingerle: Even chickweed in the greenhouses in the winter time, we have been really diligent for ... there was years we'd have to tell a whole better spinach, or mosh under, just because the chickweed had taken over. Some at least four or five years ago, I said, "This is enough." So we would go out there and we would spend two hours out there in a house, cleaning every little chickweed seed out, and we still had chickweed's, but it almost never goes to seed on us. And we have seen our first house we put up, that was in what? 10 or 11 years ago, it's rare to even find a chickweed seed in that house anymore. Just because of being very very dogmatic on weed control, and we do some plastic mulching we're starting in with ... starting to use the fabric, the groundcloth fabric with the holes in it.

Nate Fingerle: So those are things we do for weed control, we use hula hose, do some hand pulling, and again that means that too, with out sound over production, by going from direct seed and redirecting of this stuff you had at least four weeks



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that had to grow until it got to cut-able size and often grow a little longer than that the weeds are in there, we had the weeds and when you cut it the weeds grow in a row, if you weeded it you'd uproot what is plant, if you didn't weed it then you had to pick all that out of your ... the handful that you cut. With Salanova if there are a few weeds that come up, your cutting the head or grabbing the main part of the leaf ... the head of the leaf, and out it comes and the weeds if there are any there, never really affect us.

Nate Fingerle: We plow the bed down we get a fresh clean bed again, so anyway those are things we do and definitely weed control is huge. No matter how we do it. We used to use some organic mulching leaves from the city, we used some straw, we knew very little about any more because we're doing so many succession planning so rapidly that we really don't want to mess with the mulch and the way we would do some multi our ... multi season crop, our kale, our swiz chart, our collard greens that we do outside, we would mulch it with straw, somewhat for weed control, and moisture control as well. Weed control is definitely huge on the farm.

Chris Blanchard: With transplants being so important for your farm, how are you doing your transplant production?

Nate Fingerle: We are using anything from a 24 cell tray, we use some 38, some 50's, some 72's, a lot of 128 cell trays. I mean a lot of our products anymore and we use those different ... I think you would obviously use some 200 cell tray's as well. Most of those we're looking at again, because my beds are so scheduled out, and I know how many transplants I need per bed, we figure out some of our crops, like our spinach, and our collard rabe transplants all of those we can put in a 200 cell tray even though it's a very small and limited and root based, and we know exactly where it's going to go, so if I need 400 plants I know I need 200 cell tray's, so I used the cell tray size to dictate for the most part how many ... well how ever many transplants I need in a bed, I usually look at the size of the plant I need, the age of the plant I want it to go in the ground at to dictate what size the cell tray it goes into.

Nate Fingerle: We've looked at the paper pot trans planters. Ben Hartman thinks I'm a lunatic not using them, at this point because of our production space we would have to completely retro set our greenhouse to fit in those larger trays, the paper pot trays. The other thing is we do ... for me I don't think the paper pot would pay off for us, I mean I know like I said, Ben thinks I'm crazy, for whatever reason i just don't think it would for us. We did invest in one of Johnny's bed roller dibblers and that marks out our bed, we can change the spacing very fast, on that. Whether it's six rows of salanovea or four rows of beets or whatever and we could also do the in row spacing that way as well.

Nate Fingerle: Another thing that roller dibbler's been huge for is our onion transplants, we do probably six or eight thousand onion transplants into black plastic, and before we'd go through with a stand up planter and just dabble a hole all the way down to the bill, and last year we put the thing with the bigger cogs on it and rolled that thing right down and yeah my children, the employees were like, "Now we're talking!" The hole was there it was evenly spaced, and yeah they ... we planted onion beds in literally half the time or less, with less people. And even in the old days we would have an eight foot row marker with six inch increments



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and some person bent over the rows going down making holes, somebody'd come back there, with a transplant spill it, and now we have one person walks the didler down, marks the holes out and then two of us come back in and very rapidly plant the beds. We can plant the beds very very rapidly. That's just with the roller dibbler and then two people transplanting by hand, and somebody coming right in behind and watering right in behind us. Then we'd get beds planted very very rapidly, at this point.

Chris Blanchard: What are you doing for irrigation?

Nate Fingerle: Irrigation, we do mostly we use Toro Aqua Track with a six inch spacing for a drip tape, we have a header line, and one inch header line goes in every bed. We have figured out on our well pressure we can irrigate about 2,000 lining feet and so some of these zones I can turn the hose on full blast, and it waters all 2,000 lining feet some of these larger zones are split into half, and my larger zone has actually got three zones, and we can run depends on what wherever we're at we can run two hoses at a time. We have a very staidly lone soil which drains very rapidly. Which is awesome this time of year, when nobody else... with clay soil you're just sitting there, we've got a pile of stuff on the ground already direct seeded and also, transplanted but on the converse side if we get a lot of rain, and it also drains very rapidly as well, that being said if we have a drought or it's dry, we irrigate... we can get two inches of rain, and three days later I'm irrigating something, and we've learned over the years to make sure we're always keeping the soil moist.

Nate Fingerle: We use ... 99% of the time we're irrigating with grip tape, we occasionally would use a overhead sprinkler irrigation system, and a very very seldom do we use that anymore. We used that back in the early days but anymore everything is almost 90% on drip tape.

Chris Blanchard: With the drip tape then are you moving that drip tape around in the fields or are you just laying that out using it for a season or using it for a crop and then taring it out, and taking it to the land field?

Nate Fingerle: Yeah, it stays in for the entire season, we lay three lines so we have about a 30 inch wide bed. We use three lines per bed, except in the tunnels we get four or five lines in a bed which is a little bit wider beds in the tunnels. It stays in the entire season, we have a very high iron content in our soil so it does begin to part in meters. Usually not the first season usually about a year and a half later when we really need the water then it starts to plug up, so we have I hate it, that is the one thing I do not like about what we're doing here on the farm is, and the amount of dirt tape we go through. We do ... yeah at the end of the season we pull the tape up and replace it. There are some things we will eventually have to look into whether it's a ... reverse osmosis is what we completely cost inhibited. So I probably will not do that. There are some ... we had thought about using injecting some hydrogen peroxide in the lines, not sure if that's effective number one, and number two, it's going to kill microbes in the soil, and we're trying to do everything we can to promote soil life, so at this point we haven't found a better way then to use it for a season, and pull it out.

Chris Blanchard: I always think one of the interesting things about drip tape is that it is, it's designed as a disposable product it's not designed to be used year after year



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after year. So I think you know, there's always that balancing act for anybody whose in organic farming. So, you mentioned the importance of weed control, what kind of tools were you using for weed control on your one and a half acres of vegetables?

Nate Fingerle: So we would use ... the first and foremost that I'll start with is our, it's from Johnny's sales rack, glaser wheel hoe, and I can remember it would have been 10 years ago we were looking at these long beds, back then my wife and I had this notion that her and I ... and she I ... I failed to mention this in the beginning, she is a super woman. I married my childhood sweetheart, she's awesome, and she is fully behind me, she helps out where she can here, and we were both out there weeding one day, at that point our 130 foot plot was actually we were going into the rows 130 feet long. Today we flipped that zone, is 130 feet by 50.

Nate Fingerle: We have now flipped it so it's 50 foot rows, and we were standing there one day we both had who hoes in our hands, we were staring at these weed infested 130 foot just the aisle way, we weren't even looking at the beds, I mean the weeds were so thick in the aisle ways they were taking over, and I literally stood out there and cried, I'm like, "We can't do this, I mean our grain is shattered." And I don't remember if it was her or I we remembered seeing in Johnny's catalog this glaser wheel hoe, so I went running in there and got it opened up the book in the catalog and sure enough they had that eight inch blades and they had twelve inch blades, and I immediately got on the phone and called Johnny's and I told her, I was probably still crying I don't know and she said, "You know what? I'm going to send it to you." This is how awesome Johnny's is, she said, "I'm going to send it to you." she said, "When you get it, I'll send an invoice and just pay it when you get it, so that if you don't like it send it back."

Nate Fingerle: She said in the years she worked there she'd only had maybe one sent back. It came and it was a god send answer. It was exactly what we needed, I mean we used wheel hoe's on every aisle way down it's actually one of the boys chores every week is to go through and cut the aisle ways down. It's a miracle tip, we love it. That would be how we keep our aisles clean.

Nate Fingerle: Beyond that, we do a lot of the ... like we mentioned back there the who hoes and the spare hoes Johnny sells them, we've got tons of local hardware store, and we use quite a few of those. I have actually made a wire reader, actually I made two different kinds of readers, so one is just a basic nine gauge wire that I bend into a handle, and then I also have a very ... 90 degree ... now the two inch hook at the end of it, it's kind of modeled after ... well earlier we talked about wire readers or Johnny's even sell it. Johnny's is ... I never liked theirs it was too thick of a blade, and so I'd take it and they had this hand ones and all of my employees they love them. We have dozens of them, they're cheap to make, and they fit our hands the feed right down the aisle ways. Now on top of that what I've also done I took that as I had ... as they say the quote goes, "The necessity is the mother of invention."

Nate Fingerle: I was working at my carrot rows, even my salad mix we're probably three inches apart, or your spirit posts most of them are wider than that. Most of them are four to six inch and I had some shipping strap here that is like the metal band that goes around your greenhouse, when it comes with a kit. I seen it land there and it was bent because when they go around the edge of the pallet it's like a 90



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degree bend. And I'm like hey, I can take that and our vice at the end of shop, and I can make whatever size tool I want. So I actually went through and we got a couple of them that they put them on flat pieces of plastic epoxy wood trim type I got it from a local lumber counter in here, and I have cut them into six foot handles and so then I actually will bend a two and a half inch one and the blade is two and a half inches wide and the other is three inches wide and then I screwed the drill holes and screwed them and I screw them on to that ... the wood handle at the same angle that Eliot and all Eliot's tools are whatever that degree is ... there's a certain ergonomic degree there that it's perfect for weeding.

Nate Fingerle: The way I've done it is the one blade off the end faces one direction, the other one faces the other so I can actually flip it just in my and I can take the ... my tool took it from a two and a half down to a three and it always ... the cutting blade is always at the right angle and the right side. So what I'm doing, when I'm cultivating carrots, we'll cultivate them that way. The other thing talking about carrots, we do stale bedding, and then I also got a ... oh yeah, the five quart flame weeder from flameweeder.com out in West Virginia that has been a huge thing too, I mean we flame weed our ... seed our carrots, let them come up for ... well let the weeds germinate, water them really heavy let the weeds germinate and then flame it off about day five.

Nate Fingerle: We have, the illustration of that is, and I tell ... I sit down I do a farm tour here, we do and in the fall time we would do 12 beds of carrots, that are usually clippers and one of the eighty plots, we have 12 80 foot long beds, there's 4 to 6 carrots on a bed, depends on the carrot that I'm growing. We used to spend hours literally I mean, crazy enough to start hand weeding, and about the flame weeder actually before that, I just bought a propane tank and a flame thrower, like a hand held just a single nozzle thing and I thought, well I want to see if this is really working, and so I left, we had flamed off 11 beds, left the 12th one and didn't flame it. I spent probably I don't know if I spent an hour maybe, two hours at most flaming the first 11 beds, we spent about six hours hand weeding that last bed, and that it just ... and I've even done it occasionally if I'm doing a farm tour for tools, I've actually done a few of those.

Nate Fingerle: I actually leave a section of the bed un-flamed, just so the people can see that the beginning farmers, or even the experienced farmers haven't had experiences with flame weed can actually see what it does, it is yeah, all those things revolutionized ... and I always say this too when I'm talking on tools, especially when I do the small farm tool presentation, the fact that the neighboring farmer, when he has a 40 horsepower tractor, I'd be a fool to use his tractor on my property, acre and a half you'd be a fool to till his thousand acres with my BCS on the same thing. We had a small farmers especially today, I mean 10 years ago, there was some tools, today in 2018 we've got piles of tools, from companies that are designed to make scale appropriate tools for the farm, so I say to beginning farmers, or for anybody, for the small scale, on 10 foot vegetable operation there's a wealth of tools that are scale appropriate for us, and that's yeah ... it's been a blessing to us really.

Chris Blanchard: It really is amazing what's happened with that, in the last 10 years.



- Nate Fingerle: And, the stories with that I mentioned earlier, that where we got to Johnny's, I had gotten really frustrated, before they came out with that I one day I sat down and I'm like, "There's got to be a better way, then planting our sound of a plug by hand, bent over the row with a row marker. So I sat down and I figured out how to cut a disc out of plywood, I cut two of those out. I connected them by I think, an inch and a half by inch and a half, it was a 30 inch wide, then I took a PVC and cut them into the inch and a half PVC pipe that I cut an inch and a half long ran a bull and a washer through it, and I made this rolling dibler.
- Nate Fingerle: They were just ... they were six rows in a bed, at six inches for our Salanova, and I had done a small farm tool, presentation or two here at the farm and people were like, "Oh, you got to patent that thing." And I actually didn't have enough time to do that. I actually I'm like hey, this is something, and then guess what? The next year Johnny's catalog comes out and somebody else was already banking it. So that's happened more than once, on tools I'll design here at the farm and then the next year there's already somebody else is thinking about it. So it's kind of neat how our minds work together as you'll look at a problem and you think how can we fix this? And that's the neat thing about the small farm world today, there's so many minds, bright minds, that are thinking about these things that there is just a wealth of information a wealth of tools out there that's available.
- Chris Blanchard: I agree, absolutely. I'd like to talk about your winter production, and season extension more broadly, and about how are you managing your high tunnels?
- Nate Fingerle: Yeah, so we have ... we finally have three started at 96 foot tunnels, and I have told people that frankly I'll probably never get to this because I hate managing plastic, but I wouldn't hesitate to have my whole acre to acre and a half covered at some point. I probably never will, just because of finances and I like there's just advantages to outdoor production. That being said I always tell a farmers not only beginning farmers too which we do a pile of tours here. I always say if you're getting into farming, do not start with open soil, put up a high tunnel and then go outside if you have to. Because the control is so much better, the quality is so much better, and your season is almost unlimited. So what we do with three tunnels is now we're able to ... three of the larger tunnels are able to do a lot of the succession planning and also the sequencing.
- Nate Fingerle: So, two of those houses are unheated houses they're just what I call passive, so we have to roll the sides up to ventilate, and then we use a lot of rode cover to cover up in the beds. Then our other big 96 foot tunnel is a heated house or heats a 32 in the winter, and then my grocery house which is the 15 X 96 is heated also, we start our trays in that year round, and then I also do some hay and herb production in there in the winter time. So what were able to do is we would take our two unheated tunnels and starting back in September, we would start feeding spinach in there. We'd start doing some sequence planning of Salanova. We'd also have some mescaline south bud that would direct seed in there. We do multiple plantings in those houses and once those houses fill up usually by later October we're done planting in there. Usually by mid October we would be done in the unheated houses by later October through most of the month of November we planted the minimal heated houses and get theirs filled up.



Nate Fingerle: So basically it keeps up in the winter time with continuous flow of our salad mix. Because until it's too cold in the unheated houses, which usually is right around Christmas time it's about too cold for lettuce production in the unheated houses, however we do have spinach, and mache both grow very very well in our unheated houses, and we have a fair amount of that in there. Then because we have the three houses, so like this time of year our two heated houses are fully planted now to tomatoes, and peppers, and cucumbers, and eggplant, and basil. All those warm season crops, so we're getting a far jump on those crops. So we always tell our customers, "If your a gardener, we'll be producing the right crops, we'll be picking ripe tomatoes in May, when here in Indiana you're just now normally planting your tomatoes outside." That's kind of a gage for them to know what we have coming up.

Nate Fingerle: Then, we also, we'd do a February or a March finding the new heated houses, and then in our one unheated house we would do another planting of tomatoes and peppers, the whole nine yards of the warm season stuff. We would do inside in mid-April, and then obviously outside in mid May. Then the other house, our ... we have a ... a couple years ago we put up a ... our third big tunnel and we actually are going to start using shade cloth on that, in the summer time for ... to extend our sound of production, we ... we're to the point now where summer salad mix nobody produces it here, and we can sell hundreds of pounds of this stuff a week. If we have it. So we are going to continue to do our production. Were also going to do a 96 foot bed every week inside the greenhouse with the shade cloth on it. where you use 30% shade cloth on top of that.

Nate Fingerle: So, that would for the most part cover it and even this time of year I should mention that as we have beds finishing up, so as we have lettuce mix, the salad would finish up in our heated houses, we'd actually have trays in the greenhouse waiting to go back in. So we don't hesitate here in Indiana, we get ... we've had some nasty cold. But even in December and January we'll go ahead and replant those beds, so if we could get a couple of day window, that it's going to be really sunny, and maybe not quite as cold at night, we'll go ahead and plant, water them, and then we'll lay row cover over the top of it. That's something that we came out with was producing grain that Ben Hartman and Dave Robin and I worked on was looking at ... you know Eliot would always say, "Use your nine gauge wire wicket. Hold your row cover over top of your beds." And some other farms through that Frozen Ground conference have been looking at the impact of laying your row cover right on top of the bed.

Nate Fingerle: So, one of the things we noticed was to look at what is the production difference and we actually had monitored, day to day stool temperature gauges, we put air temperature gauges. The PAR light meters, we had the whole nine yards of moisture meters and so what we now know the beds we take as well the mix, and also the spinach, and we would do an uncovered bed section, we would do a section covered with what we call the blanket, where it lays right on top of the crop, and then we also do sections where it was held up on top of the crop with our wickets. We had done multiple ... repeated tests inside the greenhouses that way and we found out that the lane blanketing it right on top, definitely keeps the crop warmer than higher production, so what I'm driving to that is even in the dead of winter here in cold Indiana, we do not hesitate to



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seed, or even put transplants in, and this winter here we had two weeks solid that the temperature would go down, it was negatives every night and we would not even get out of 20 degrees is our high.

Nate Fingerle:

Every single morning I would go down there and pick up that double herb cover and it's a bed that's blanketed right on top of a baby transplant. It hadn't even been in a week. We'd look underneath there and the plants were never froze, and the soil never froze, and we had some really really cold temperatures, this winter really tested that theory, and we have never had a better winter yet of lettuce production, just by using that road cover, a double air road cover blanket right over the top of the bed. We had just really increased production that way. Then we also, as mosh finishes up, as some of the beds finish up, we'll go back in and direct fetal or even transplant them. Radishes or salad turnips are very quick turning crops that when your seeding my tomatoes and peppers my April planted house, we are beginning in the unheated house now behind the mosh, we're beginning to pull radishes, we got salad turnips, we got scallions coming out, that in years past I just kinda let it set when the bed was done it was just done until my warm season crops. Now we got to looking at, hey how can we pack another crop in? So like, my beds of peppers, and tomatoes, and eggplant, all those things we would run. Yeah you'd have to see a picture to understand it but ill explain it, so like when my tomatoes ... we'll plant rows of cherry tomatoes, and big beef slicing tomatoes right down the center of the road, of the bed in the greenhouse, of the tunnel. Then we'll come in and I have flags of beets that we transplant on the south side, then we have head lettuce, with a romaines, and our mire lettuce the gentle lettuce which is on the shady side. And we'll actually get \$2.50 to \$3.50 and if we fit 96 to a bed, or well 90 actually you get off your walkways at the end, a 90 foot row of lettuce times an average of \$3.00 we're looking at multiple hundred dollars per bed. We'll have six rows of that in a tunnel, and then you have your beets on the south side, at \$1.75 a bunch for four to five beets.

Nate Fingerle:

There's another several hundred dollars in a bed, so what we're looking at is with our cash crops our tomatoes, it will produce thousands of pounds out of the house at a high crop, at a high price, but we've also got romaine lettuce, and we've got our beets and actually were starting things from arugula, we can transplant the arugula right down the pepper rows. Right down the center and before those plants ... before the tomatoes and peppers needed the space we've got extra crops coming out at close to a thousand dollars per house just in our ... actually it's multiple thousand dollars just in arugula, romaine lettuce, and beets. Which is just fantastic.

Nate Fingerle:

We would do that in both of our March planted house and our April planted house as well. We have not yet done it outside, I keep saying I'm an acre and a half I love it because I am not, we haven't dialed our fertility yet, and we have not dialed in our multiple plantings. I can even do that on my tomatoes, and peppers I could easily have arugula in my outdoor peppers before they produce, and we start planting those in May. I always love it as a farm we haven't even tipped ... were just at the tip of the iceberg for production, even though we do so much succession planning, we do so much planning before the season even starts there is so much more we can get ... even do. Which is just exciting to me. Then outside on season extension we would do ... we use a lot of Johnny ... we've got Johnny's quick cube spenders, and we have several hundred of the



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double roll covers, and also the single row covers, and we would do ... like this time of year we've got here in Indiana in early March we're still pretty cold, and we've got cold rabe, we've got beets, we've got scallions, we've got cabbage, we've got peas, carrots, radishes, you name it.

Nate Fingerle: We've got all those cold season crops either in the ground seeded coming up, or we also have them transplanted, then we use the row covers and sand bags. We sand bag the snot out of things to keep them held down, and we spend our season by tremendous amounts, that way to the point that actually self some of those systems do some of our home garden customers that come here, they'll see these little white tins everywhere are like, "What are those things?" And they'll also watch just a pen to a piece of condo that we've bent, and so where can we get them, so we've ended up selling systems of ... I'll sell them X amount of the who's and ill set up road covers for them, sell them the sand bags, and customers here are just amazed by what one piece of Agribon thirty and some sand bags will do, it's just incredible.

Nate Fingerle: Especially for my home gardeners, didn't recognize some let alone a commercial farm like what we're doing. The one other secret that I'll share that we do, on season extension is and this is an Eliot Coleman spin off, is in late November the first of December right before ground freezes up, we'll seed a whole row of teas, and mostly two beds of carrots, and a bunch of spinach and cilantro. Then cover those with hoops and the row cover, and sometimes when you splash, this time of year we're almost ready outside of Indiana to start harvesting spinach and cilantro and within the month of April we will start pulling carrots, and peas, just because we seeded them. Right before winter hits they set as a dormant plant and usually definitely by February they have terminated or actively growing and those are crops that we ... they were just kind of out there doing their thing. When April comes and we need to cover the beds we got a A fresh product ready to go, so we use a multi factitive approach to season extension here.

Chris Blanchard: I love that, I always think those tricks of doing things like seeding the peas in the fall and getting an extra early crop out of that I think it's just such an elegant use of the biology that goes into our vegetable plants because so much of that ... so many of our vegetable crops were actually bread or evolved in kind of this Mediterranean climate, which is the same latitudes that we're at here but with really different temperatures. But a lot of times they were really "designed" to go through the winter and to come up in the spring. And I really love that idea of taking advantage of that.

Chris Blanchard: Alright, with that were going to turn here to our lightning round but first were going to get a quick word from one more of sponsor.

Chris Blanchard: Hey Nate, you're using Vermont Compost Potting Soils on your farm, I wonder if you've got a couple words for us about what you like about it and why it's worth getting that shipped to Indiana.

Nate Fingerle: Yeah, we ... for years we used just your standard pro mix and we always told people we raised good plants I used some fish fertilizer to supplement, we had good plants. The plants looked nice, but they just weren't what I thought they could be, and we were ... I had a grant project with Purdue University and so Ben Hartman was one of the farmers in that grant project, and so we used his



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farm for a farm meeting, and I went into his greenhouse and I saw his tomatoes, and they were the nicest most gorgeous tomatoes the same age as mine, and I'm like, "What in the world are you doing Ben?" He said, "Using Vermont Compost." But in my mind it was too expensive, and he says, "You'll never regret it."

Nate Fingerle: So we called and got a pallet of ... I think two pallets actually the four that he shipped in and it completely revolutionized ... I mean we went from okay transplants that were okay, but they weren't as healthy, near as they could be to being these vibrant lush plants. Hands down it is by far worth the money. And it's actually when you start looking at trying to add ... because I actually used to do some soling for my own improvements in adding compost and adding stuff in, and we got some stuff that was really close to Vermont Compost quality, but I even showed when Jennifer was here a year ago, I showed her my custom soil blend versus Vermont Compost 4V and the 4V was still beating even the best stuff I could produce. It's hands down, it's just worth it. It's a consistent product and it grows awesome plants.

Chris Blanchard: There you have it, vermontcompost.com. Nate, we talked a lot about tools, but what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Nate Fingerle: Alright Chris, well I'm going to tell you that that's completely number one that's unfair and that's also a million dollar question because there is no way I can limit myself to one tool. But I can go through a very lightning quick rundown of some of the tools that I do use, very rapidly. I really can't say there's one tool that I use, BCS definitely, the walking tractor with the tiller and the flail mower is huge, the Johnny's ... I mentioned earlier the Johnny's bed prep rake is revolutionary for us, we use the earth way seeder the old humble earth way seeder and the Johnny six row seeder works excellent on our farm, the five porch flame weeder that we use, and then we actually bought a skipper a couple years ago to turn our compost, and unload our semi, when they come with supplies, those are probably the things that I would use, but I cannot just limit it to one. I use too many different things here on the farm and love every one of them.

Chris Blanchard: And I'll bet you're going to say the same thing about you're favorite crop to grow.

Nate Fingerle: Yeah, it's ... if I was picking one to eat it would be tomatoes, or if it was one to sell it would be lettuce.

Chris Blanchard: Okay, alright. Why is lettuce your favorite one to sell?

Nate Fingerle: Just because it is the crop that I tell is our 52 week of the year crop, we have ... there is never a week that we do not have fresh lettuce available, whether it's a head or mostly our bag salad mix, and it's beautiful, you look at our rows it's actually on the one Facebook group on the lettuce production in challenging climates, Michael Kilpatrick actually used an aerial shot of our farm because of our lettuce production, because our transplant to Salanova, and my hand we're not using a paper trans planter, we have ... and my employees actually do this because number one, it's pretty and number two, it's how we harvest down the road, when we're harvesting the Salanova we'll go through with our five gallon



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buckets and we'll look at a red head, a green head, a read head, a green head all the way down the road, so we're getting a mix at the different times.

Nate Fingerle: It's actually aesthetically pleasing, we actually have airplane pilots like the guys that are flying the Cessna's will say, "We love flying over your farm, we'll actually show people from the air your farm because it looks like a patchwork quilt down there, with all these different lettuce colors, and sometimes our whole beds ... whole 80 X 80 bed will be nothing but lettuce, in red and green tapestry and it is gorgeous, so yeah and it's a hot selling product, so anyway we love lettuce.

Chris Blanchard: Love it.

Nate Fingerle: It's kind of our calling card when we said lettuce has been our, it is what we're known for, we started out day one with lettuce production, and we are known as a lettuce farm, and that being said to when I was planning the farm out in the beginning, 11 years ago, we went from broke, we quit back cold turkey, and I said we're going to make this thing work, and so we spent a lot of time. But we get a lot of [inaudible 01:22:43] books she had handbooks, and we looked okay, so what are the high value crops, lettuce mix, spinach, those are really high dollar costs. What are some other ... what else goes with that?

Nate Fingerle: Well you've got your radishes, you've got your scallions, you've got your carrots, cucumbers, bell peppers, those are all things that people eat on their salads. They're high value crops for us so those are things we looked at. I would say from a production financial stand point, there's hardly a better crop in my mind then peppers, and cucumbers simply because we still command a dollar each whether it's a green pepper or a cucumber all season long, even when other guys are \$.50 a piece, we will sell hundreds literally hundreds. Especially, in early season, when I do and I just love it.

Nate Fingerle: You go in there and you see these cucumber vines post up, they're eight feet tall, they're loaded cucumbers, it's not uncommon to pick 4-500 cucumbers twice a week. And every time I grab a hold of one and cut it off, it's a dollar in the bucket. It's a dollar in our container, and we hardly ever dump any of those, as far as compost, we sell so many of those because people come to the farmers market they're early they're fresh, and so we love cucumbers and peppers simply because it's a one dollar ... every one that goes in the container is one dollar. Then tomatoes, we get \$3.00-\$3.50 a pound for most of those, most of the season. Another crop we produce thousands of pounds as we prude them, as we learn how to grow them. Those are all high value crops for us, we like too. But if it was just one it would definitely be Salanova Lettuce, or the multi cut lettuce we use some of Osborne's and High Mowing's multi cut lettuce as well.

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

Nate Fingerle: Yeah, I'll pass on what was passed on to me. So there was a pastor at the Church we used to go to, he was actually he was raised in a construction business, he didn't want to be in construction anymore he wanted to be ... kind of like what our vision was, and so he said you have to figure out ... ill pass on two things, he said you have to figure out if you want to work at home, or if you want to work



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for yourself, he said vegetables are ... well anyway we went with that and he said now, the next thing would be this. Well, no that was what he passed on to me, he passed on these two thoughts. The number one was, just wrap it in your mind right now your not going to get all your work done in the beginning, eventually you'll get to the point where most of your work gets done, just sell it in your mind that your not going to get all the work done so that helped us in the early years we realized the first couple years we were in over our heads.

Nate Fingerle: We realized it's going to get better because his second point to me was, he said, give yourself five years and if I were to write a book it would be titled, 'The First Five Years' because he said, as he quit the construction business and wanted to go into dairy farming, he said he felt finally spaced the first year when he said I had dead cows everywhere, I didn't know what I was doing, and he said but at the end of the year, I would look back and say, hey, next year it's going to be better. He told me so Nate, when you get to the end of a Year and you have no hope for next year, you have nothing you can do to make it better, get out and get out fast. But if you get to the end of the season and you've got hope for next year go at it again. We have used that and I've looked at it because at year five I arrogantly thought we had arrived, because the first year we sold \$30,000 of produce in 2008, and every year it increased by multiple thousands of dollars, and so by year five, I'm like hey we got our ... our planning calendar is getting close, then our production ...

Nate Fingerle: I look back now at 10 years and I'm like, I'm embarrassed at what I thought I knew are year five, because we learn so much every year. So don't give up learning, that's another thing I'd pass on. Never give up, connect yourself to other farmers, and learn as much as you can and go out and apply.

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

Nate Fingerle: You're welcome, thanks for having us, and we appreciate all you do Chris, and look forward to listening to you and more podcasts in years to come.

Chris Blanchard: Alright, so wrapping things up here I'll say again that this is episode 169 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, and I'll note that you can find the notes for the show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for Fingerle, that's F-I-N- G-E-R-L-E. 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 gardening tools in North America, and by Osborne Quality Seeds a dedicated partner for growers. Visit osborneseed.com for quality seed, industry leading customer service, and fast order fulfillment. Additional funding for transcripts is provided by North Central Sare providing grants in education to advance innovations and sustainable agriculture. You can get this show notes from your Farmer to Farmer Podcast right in your inbox, by signing up for my email newsletter on farmertofarmerpodcast.com also please head on over to iTunes to leave us a review, if you enjoy the show, or talk to us in the show notes, and tell your friends on Facebook, were at purple pitch fork on Facebook. And hey when you talk to our sponsors let them know how much you appreciate their support of a resource you value. You can support the show directly by going to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate. I am working to make the best farming podcast in the world, and you can help. And speaking of helping by going to



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farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate I'd like to start a tractor and thanks to Matt Arthur, and Patricia Nolte for their support of the show. Finally please let me know who you'd like to hear from on the show through the suggestions form on farmertofarmerpodcast.com and I will do my best to get them on the show. Thank you for listening, be safe out there, keep the tractor running.

