



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



## **EPISODE 171**

**Caroline Pam and Tim Wilcox of Kitchen Garden Farm on Scaling Up, Value-Added Products, and Wholesale Marketing**

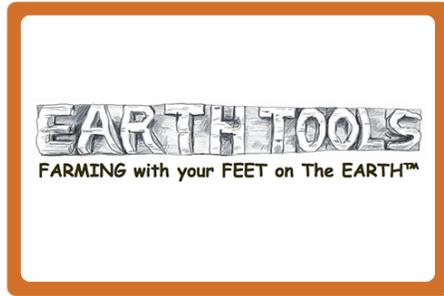
**July 26, 2018**



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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer To Farmer podcast, episode 171, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Caroline Pam and Tim Wilcox farm 50 acres of vegetables at Kitchen Garden Farm in Western Massachusetts. Starting with an acre of produce in 2006, Caroline and Tim have steadily expanded the farm's scale and added fire roasted salsa and a naturally fermented sriracha to the farm's production. We discuss the value added products and how those fit into the work and overall business of Kitchen Garden Farm since they account for a significant portion of the farm's revenue. Tim and Caroline dig into the process of scaling up their operation including how they manage a multitude of different locations for production and they share how they developed a wholesale only marketing strategy and the nuts and bolts of how that works on their farm.

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Chris Blanchard: Caroline Pam and Tim Wilcox, welcome to the Farmer To Farmer podcast.

Caroline Pam: Thanks for inviting us.

Tim Wilcox: Hi, thanks for having us on.

Chris Blanchard: So I'd like to start off by having you guys tell us about Kitchen Garden Farm, there in Sunderland Massachusetts. How big of an operation do you guys have, what are you guys growing, how long have you been in business and all of those kind of details, just set the stage for us.

Caroline Pam: Well I could start a little bit. We are growing 50 acres of certified organic diversified vegetables, lot of specialty vegetables, we kind of specialize in a lot of things. So, peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, roots, radicchio, Asian and European varieties, our brand is variety and exceptional quality. Tim, you want to talk about where we are?

Tim Wilcox: Yeah so we're farming here in the Connecticut River Valley, there is a great community of other farms around here. I went to Hampshire College and that's sort of how we both ended up here. I was there from 2001 to 2005 and we started the farm just shortly thereafter in 2006, we were on one acre of rented land originally and over the last five to seven years, we've really started scaling it up. So we, starting in 2015, we were growing around 30 acres and so we've been adding some new land and a lot of new infrastructure and equipment, pretty rapidly over the last couple of years.

Caroline Pam: I guess I should also mention, the thing that I always forget to say right when I introduce the farm, is that we also make sriracha and salsa and we have a full line of value added products from our own ingredients that we make ourselves that have become a really big part of the business as well.

Chris Blanchard: How big of a part of the business? Is it half of what you're doing, is it a quarter of what you're doing?

Tim Wilcox: Yeah it's about a quarter.

Caroline Pam: I think it's about a quarter.

Chris Blanchard: Okay, so pretty darn significant. I do want to come back to that because I think there's a lot of interesting things to talk about about having a value added line and especially on a farm of your scale, I feel like the value added things, like the salsa or the sriracha or people doing pickles or jams and jellies, tend to be with smaller operations. You guys are ... 50 acres of vegetables is, that's a lot of vegetables and having a value added enterprise on top of that, that's a pretty significant undertaking.

Tim Wilcox: Yeah, we went to work a lot.

Chris Blanchard: Okay.



- Caroline Pam: Yeah and we're just embarking now on a big investment into the value added so that it can scale up to be somewhat more comparable to the scale of the vegetable operation. So that's the next phase for us, to have both of those parts of the business be pretty sizeable.
- Tim Wilcox: The sriracha and salsa is sort of the latest incarnation of a real effort since we've started the farm to have a culinary focus in one way or another. So there was a time where we were doing a lot of farmers markets and we had rented a kitchen, we had a kitchen staff that was making prepared foods ready to eat at a farmers market, we don't do that any more. We had a CSA that was a pre-Blue Apron kind of recipe box thing that we were doing for a while and we sort of scrapped that and so now this is the thing that we have ... as we scaled up the farm we've been able to get really good at growing a lot of a lot of things, but we can go out and bust out a whole truckload of peppers in an afternoon and take them up to the processing facility the next day. We've kind of figured that out as something that is really kind of cool and exciting.
- Chris Blanchard: When you say take those peppers up to the processing facility, that's your own processing facility right? You guys are actually doing that processing?
- Tim Wilcox: We do the processing and hopefully by sometime this winter it will be our own processing facility, but we currently are using a community food processing center, it's about 15 minutes away, it's called the Western Mass. Food Processing Center in Greenfield.
- Chris Blanchard: Interesting.
- Caroline Pam: But this year, we're building our own kitchen on the farm, so this is a huge next phase for us. We've got grants lined up, loans, we're closing on tomorrow all the plans and the works and the contractor's going to show up any day now to start demo and start construction, so that's where we're at, that's the next step.
- Chris Blanchard: Why have you guys decided to bring that processing in-house rather than continuing to rent a facility?
- Tim Wilcox: Well, the community food processing center that we use is a great place to get started and they have all this equipment, pretty small industrial size processing equipment, like the big steam kettles that we use and the bottle filler and all this kind of stuff that we wouldn't have necessarily wanted to buy when we were just starting out. So it's a great place to start but working in a shared facility like that with such a seasonal product has been challenging. In order to get any sort of flexibility with the scheduling, we have to have all of our dates actually booked in January. So if the crop is a week early, there's no way of getting an extra day, for example, because it's a pretty high demand facility. So those are the kind of challenges that we're ... We're hoping to have our own facility where we can process when the crop is ready, every day during the harvest period, because we get about six weeks of the pepper season and we're doing something like ... Last year we did 19,000 pounds of hot peppers processed. So it's a short window to do a lot of stuff.



- Caroline Pam: Right. We've had to do crazy amounts in a given day because we only get so many days in that space. And so, we've not had a dedicated kitchen team, we've been pulling our production crew off the farm to go to the kitchen, and work on the farm is not happening on those days when we're processing. And so we're looking with building our own facility to have a dedicated year-round full-time kitchen crew that is not interfering and drawing resources away from farm operations during processing time, but can be happening in tandem, simultaneously and have the convenience of not having to move the peppers 20 minutes of site and gain more control and a little bit more sanity. Which, I'm sure it won't end up feeling that way when we have this other parallel business at full steam, simultaneously, but we're just looking to streamline it.
- Caroline Pam: We've recently made a big investment of a new barn and washroom on the farm and that brought home cooler space that we had been renting off site and just the amazing increased capacity and efficiency that we've gained from that investment just inspired us to want to do the same for the value added part of the farm.
- Chris Blanchard: Are you guys marketing these things at a farmers market? Are they going through a CSA, or this all going wholesale?
- Caroline Pam: With the exception of a small percentage of our overall sales that we do just direct on our website, it's all wholesale. We no longer do any farmers markets, we no longer have a CSA, we're a strictly wholesale farm operation at this point. So now we're entering this market with the sriracha and salsa that's sort of like the national, regular mainstream food products market. It's not really being marketed through the farm per se. So we are selling to a distributor that sells to Whole Foods throughout the Boston area. We sell to a lot of stores and farm stores in our area direct, but we also ship directly to specialty food boutique shops, retailers out in San Francisco and in Minnesota and across the country. So it's sort of got a life of its own, it's not just a farm product.
- Tim Wilcox: Yeah, it's almost like we kind of have two separate businesses that we're kind of operating simultaneously. So on the one side, we're doing 50 acres of veg wholesale sold locally and then through distributors, to sort of like a three hour radius around from Boston and Cape Cod, to Rhode Island and Worcester and the Berkshires and New York City. So the value added marketing is like a whole separate thing with a different distributor and online sales and we do some trade shows and stuff like that.
- Chris Blanchard: Wow.
- Caroline Pam: Yeah, so the sriracha and salsa are through all of the same channels as the veg but in addition also through more mainstream specialty food product distribution channels.
- Chris Blanchard: And it sounds like that value added aspect was something that when you guys started, or at least very early on in the business's development, that that was something that felt important to you?



- Caroline Pam: I don't think we identified value added products as the way that we would express our interest in food through the farm, that really happened by chance in 2013 when we made the first five gallon bucket of hot sauce for our Chilifest and we were like, "Let's make something we could sell at the festival." But I had gone to culinary school prior to deciding to farm and had been a restaurant critic and a journalist and I'd been very interested in food and that's what brought Tim and me together first and before we decided to pursue that through farming.
- Caroline Pam: Once we decided to do the farm, and were growing vegetables we were always experimenting, like Tim was saying earlier, with ways to have food that we prepare be a part of the farm and that we did farm dinners and lots of other ways of approaching that. So we didn't know that we wanted to have a bottled product on the shelf at Whole Foods, that was never really the specific goal.
- Tim Wilcox: Yeah, but we've always been looking for that unique sort of way that we can express our love of food and cooking with people. Back in the early days, we would go to farmers markets with recipes and we would talk about what their grandmother used to make and it was awesome. We sort of tried these various iterations to express our culinary knowledge and skill and appetite and passion and this is kind of the latest thing ... it's the thing that stuck the most. So we're rolling with it.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you anticipate that with the construction of a new facility, specifically for doing the value added processing that you're going to expand your product line?
- Tim Wilcox: Yeah, that's definitely part of the goal. We have some ideas of other type of stuff that we want to do. We want to get into doing dried peppers and smoked peppers in the short term and then in the longer term, we could see doing processed tomato products or pickles or other types of things to expand out the processing season. So currently, we're processing tomatoes, tomatillos, onions for the salsa, mostly in August and then peppers just from September 1st through the middle of October. So we're really only processing veg out of the field for two and a half months. But if we had a cucumber product, for example or a cauliflower or carrot product, or both, we could have processing happening in five, six months of the year, or pesto.
- Caroline Pam: Or pesto, mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Tim Wilcox: So yes, that's definitely part of the goal.
- Chris Blanchard: What kind of a season do you have for your fresh vegetable operation? Do you guys do a lot of season extension with that?
- Caroline Pam: Yeah, we're growing year round. We have several high tunnels. So we're doing greens in the winter and we do a lot of storage roots. We were able to expand our cold storage facilities quite a lot when we built the new barn two years ago. So we are working all through the winter, selling orders, shipping orders and then of course, processing sriracha and salsa, keeping the crew busy in the kitchen that way and then selling those products and then doing the bulk of the marketing for that during the winter time because we have a little bit more



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time. But yeah, it never stops. So we're growing greens for harvest in March, and in January and the only time we ever shut the farm down is for one week in February when the kids have their school break and we take a trip.

Chris Blanchard: Nice. How many kids do you have?

Caroline Pam: We have two.

Tim Wilcox: Son and a daughter.

Caroline Pam: Our daughter, Lily's 10. Yeah, Lily's away at sleep away camp right now, she's 10 and Oliver is eight. The farm came first, then we got married, then we had kids and we've been growing the farm and the kids at the same time.

Chris Blanchard: Was that intentional to grow the farm and the kids at the same time? Or did it just kind of happen that way?

Caroline Pam: Everything just kind of happened.

Tim Wilcox: I was actually listening to another episode of your podcast today, trying to get my brain wrapped around how to do an interview when I've got so much going through my brain about the crops and the heat and the dry weather that we're having and how to plant this two acre field of Brussel sprouts without any irrigation. So my brain is incredibly cluttered, but I wanted to focus on this podcast, so I was listening to your interview with Siri and Jason from Local Roots Farm.

Chris Blanchard: Out in Duvall Washington.

Tim Wilcox: Yeah and honestly, if you want to get to know anything about us, you should relisten to that episode because they're like our doppelgangers.

Caroline Pam: We've been Instagram buddies.

Tim Wilcox: We've actually never met yet, that's the power of the internet. But yeah, we have a similar outlook and I thought what they were saying about raising their children was very similar to what happened on our farm. Which is that everything about how we started the farm was extremely naïve and incredibly idealistic, so we had this vision of, "Oh, we're just going to ... we work at home so it's no sweat to have children." And after one season of schlepping the baby to the field and to the market, we were just like ... Maybe you want to speak for yourself Caroline, but it was kind of like, "No way."

Caroline Pam: Right. Our daughter was born in February, so that first spring we had a baby we would just carry on and carry her in the carrier and roll the stroller out into the tunnel and put a garbage bag over it when the rain came and shove in under the truck for shade. Bring it to market and put it in a crate with a wet burlap and try to keep her cool that way-

Tim Wilcox: And by it, you mean our daughter, right?



- Caroline Pam: Yes, our daughter. I know, it was just sort of like, "Okay, I have this thing with me right now." It was a very, very challenging year just trying to pretend that I didn't have to change anything and obviously nursing all the time and my mother coming out two days a week to spend the night and give me a free hand to do my work. I'm kind of a workaholic and really found that I wasn't doing the best for my child by just bringing her out into the field with me. That that wasn't actually ... the vision wasn't matching what I thought it was going to be like.
- Caroline Pam: So we've decided to not have our kids run free on the farm with us, we go to work, they go to school, they go to daycare when they were younger and they're not exactly farm kids. They come on a weekend to help us water and they come and help weed-
- Tim Wilcox: Grudgingly.
- Caroline Pam: ... pick some carrots. They don't love it, they're way more into skateboarding and guitar and piano and gymnastics and all the other stuff that they're into. So yeah, we'll see. They find it interesting, they've become food snobs which I'm very proud of. They will not eat non farmed carrots, they are very discerning-
- Tim Wilcox: Or tomatoes.
- Caroline Pam: ... yeah, no, they love a real tomato.
- Tim Wilcox: But having children and coming to the realization that neither one of us was going to be a full time parent definitely was a driver for our expansion, which is sort of what I was picking up on in other interviews that I've listened to today because, childcare's expensive, it's like 12 grand a kid a year for the preschool that we were in and so it's kind of like ... we were growing seven acres at the time and it's like, we'd be lucky if our net was \$24,000 and now we just need this for childcare. Like, okay we've got to figure out a way to farm more which at the time we had purchased our main farm which was just our tiny farm house and seven acres of land and we put in greenhouses and built a pretty rustic barn.
- Tim Wilcox: We built a rudimentary pack room in there so we kind of had built this little farm up from scratch and we were plugging away with our Farmall Cub and we were just hitting this wall of we really need to expand and land here is so ... Number one, it's expensive but even if you had all the money in the world, it's not for sale. It's some really, really good farm land and it took us a long time to get access to, first of all, any land. So in 2012, we were able to rent 12 acres of nearby land that was extremely challenging to go along. So it was extremely heavy in places and then extremely sandy in other places but fast forward, eventually, we're able to buy some other land and that led to more access and more leases and we currently farm 56 acres but we're farming in 11 different locations all on fields under 10 acres. So as small as half an acre.
- Chris Blanchard: Wow, I just winced, wow.
- Tim Wilcox: We really, we piece it together.



- Chris Blanchard: Wow.
- Tim Wilcox: It's insane. And we have 20 person crew, so it's chaos all the time. Except it's a managed chaos because we have a lot of different managers and people really know how to make a farm work really efficiently.
- Caroline Pam: We have people who've been working with us for now ... their fifth year some of them and so people really do know the farm inside and out and can help us get everybody else on board. Like, "What field are we talking about? F one, two, three? Whately one, two, three? Baseball 208, 232?" Just the nomenclature of the day of training.
- Chris Blanchard: Right. How do you manage so many different plots? It's enough of a challenge when you can stand in the field and look out over everything that you're growing and it's all right there. Having things scattered all through the valley, how do you keep track of what needs to be done where?
- Tim Wilcox: It's one of the interesting things about this area is that we had the vision that okay, you buy a farm and that's your farm but we started looking around at our neighbors and where our main farm is is this giant ... they call it meadows here which is a flat sort of river bottom soil, big extensive fields but they're carved into these little strips. So we have one seven acre strip and another six acre strip and then there's another farm in the next bit and that's another 10 acre strip and then there's another farm in the next bed from their farm. So it's this open land but it's chopped up and everybody who's farming here is farming crazy in the way that we are. So maybe we're just kind of like, "Well that seems insane but I guess that's what we do."
- Tim Wilcox: Honestly, having all these small fields that are in different locations is actually great for rotation. It's challenging here in the valley because there's a kale farm that grows 200 acres of kale and they're right next to us. You can't really rotate that well. Or there's potatoes everywhere so you're going to have potato beetles no matter what. But for brassica pests in particular, we have two main locations that are five miles apart and we try to do all our brassicas on one of the sites whenever possible, like every other year. So brassicas just end up being everywhere. But when we had only this one plot, it's much harder to do effective rotation for pests than it is if you got land all over the place.
- Caroline Pam: When it's all contiguous.
- Tim Wilcox: Then also scaling up, we'll prep the whole field and then we'll plant it within a week and somehow that seems easier to me than having ... What we used to do on our smaller scale which was like, "Okay well these two beds of lettuce are done over here but the parsley we planted next to them is not done yet so now we have this field that's all chopped up and we're trying to double crop it and it's a mess." I feel like it's much easier to have all these different fields like it's an acre of this, it's an acre of that and you got to just go and it's still a mess but it's easier to me in some way.
- Caroline Pam: Tim and I have this division of labor where he manages more the production, the tillage, the planting, the cultivation and then I manage everything from



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harvest forward. So it's just a lot of logistics because we have ... all of the fields are on two different sides of the river so we just have crews that are split, the Whately crew, the Sunderland crew, the Home Farm is what we call it and you really hope that you don't come home from Whately and discover that you're two bunches short of carrots because it's a real time-suck.

Caroline Pam: So it's just a lot of forethought and managing of the crews and you just have to drive around and physically see what's happening or depend on your team to report back to you accurately, when we're trying to forecast availability or determine if the crop is done, or if it's ready. We do a lot of driving around, so I'm trying always to increase efficiency by managing as little transport, 20 minutes each way with five people. It's a lot of labor. So that's definitely always on our minds.

Chris Blanchard: And because you emphasize quality so much when you're harvesting so far away from home, you talk about harvesting 20 minutes away from home, how are you maintaining quality on a product that you're picking that far away?

Caroline Pam: A lot of trips. So we have wet, we have shade and we have adjustments for getting all of the cool leafy crops in the morning and then all of the harder, bulky crops in the afternoon and just shuttling them back to the washroom for processing immediately in waves throughout the day. That's the best we can do until we have some sort of relief or harvest vehicle.

Tim Wilcox: Yeah, something that's unique about our farm is that we may be the largest farm that's run like a tiny farm. We just are doing the same farm that we used to do 10 years ago, but we're on two acres, with 20 people. We're all just doing more of the stuff that we used to do the exact same way, it seems like. We've added some equipment, we've put in a lot of washroom infrastructure that's made it possible to wash a thousand bunches carrots and beets and onions at the end of the day when they come in at 5.00 and be out of there by 7.00. So we have built some efficiency into it but we're still bunching carrots. We're doing pretty finicky stuff and we're doing a lot of it. So I think we're just insane maybe, that's how we do it. You're always asking these questions like, "How do you do this insane thing?" And it's just like, "Well you just have to kind of be insane."

Chris Blanchard: Well I think there is something to that right? It is just being willing to deal with the situation that you find yourself in. It's kind of like your decision to scale up, it's like, "Well we've got kids and it's not working, so what are we going to do? We're going to grow the business." In and of itself, that's kind of an insane proposition right there. I do think the only way out is through when you're dealing with something like that.

Tim Wilcox: I'm reminded of this great quote from The Terminator that I watched with my son and daughter recently, because I'm trying to educate them in 80s pop culture. The guy that comes back from the future to save the mother of the future revolutionary leader, he says to her, "You have to be stronger than you know you can be." I just feel like that is the perfect metaphor for farming, at all. It's like you don't have any idea what you're willing to tolerate or what you're able to accomplish until you are in that moment and you have to do it. You just have to do it. At this time of year, it's July, everything's crazy, we're so tired and



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our crew is tired, we had a heatwave last week, we had seven straight work days in a row of over 90 degrees-

Caroline Pam: Inhuman.

Tim Wilcox: ... and I feel like this thing we're teaching them ... 100% humidity, I feel like the main thing we're teaching them right now is just how to deal with hard stuff. I don't know.

Caroline Pam: And yet, today was the first real big pepper harvest. We had jalapenos and shishitos and padrons and pepperoncini and Corbaci and Cubanelles and purple peppers and all kinds of stuff on the list and we're hot, it's the afternoon, we've been working hard and we're still just so excited because they're so amazing and they're so perfect and shiny and brilliant colored and we just don't somehow lose passion even when it's hard, and find people who are inclined to be receptive to that and can really run with that and feel that. So I don't know, every day there's a moment like that, even though there's a lot of hard moments during the day, there's a time where you are finding something looking as good as it could possibly be, or forming it into the best version of itself that it can be and taking pleasure in that.

Chris Blanchard: That's great. Tell me about the process that you went through when you scaled up the farm, when you guys realized that that's what you needed to do. You talked about you were farming with a Farmall Cub on a pretty small amount of acreage. When you guys set out to start expanding, how did you go about doing that? How did you decide what tools you needed to get and what infrastructure you needed to put into place?

Tim Wilcox: I'd always been very conflicted. I ended up being the production guy on the farm but I don't have any background in farming. I guess I can't say that any more because I've been doing it for a while but when we started out, I had no background in farming. I had no mechanical inclination whatsoever and I was extremely conflicted. We knew we needed to grow but I didn't want to have to purchase equipment, I didn't want to have to operate equipment, I certainly didn't want to have to fix any equipment. So we actually took on a business partner who was another guy managing his own, independent farm and we merged our two farms together because he had some equipment that we thought it would be pretty smooth if we were to just absorb him and his farm into our farm and then we'd have all the equipment, we wouldn't have to pay for anything.

Caroline Pam: And he had also lost access to his land.

Tim Wilcox: Right. So he had a business and he had all this equipment, but he had no land and we had gotten this other lease and we needed equipment and we were like, "Hey, let's just farm together, this is going to be awesome." So that was step one for our expansion and that partnership was pretty short lived, only lasted for two years. By the middle of the first season, I had sort of come around out to, "Maybe this isn't so bad, farming," at that time we were farming about 20 acres. "... and maybe I do have specific ideas about how I want this veg shaper to be set up or whatever."



- Tim Wilcox: So we were having compatibility issues with our business partner and ended up parting ways. It was all very amicable and they started up their own independent farm again with their CSA business and it was at that time that we stopped doing CSA, so this was in 2014. So then we were really just kind of farmers market and wholesale and we continued to expand. So there was a small contraction there and then we've grown the farm every year since 2014 with a lot of the same crew. So we sort of got a chance to start over, a new chapter of the farm and just grown it from there.
- Caroline Pam: Through that partnership experience, I think you really learned a lot about how much you actually knew and what your capabilities were and the vision that you had for the farm. I think we learned a lot about just the culture we wanted to have on our farm, that when you are forced to share something that's so deeply personal with somebody else and then it's not meeting your expectations, I don't know, it's a very eye opening experience to know, "Okay, we have a very clear vision for what we want our farm to be." Then we had that reset moment in 2014 where we were like, very intentionally, "This is the farm we're going to now do and it's going to reflect who we are and what our priorities are." It was a really important moment, turning corner for us.
- Tim Wilcox: At that time, we were so close to shutting the farm down. We had actually interviewed for jobs, both of us, the end of 2013 we were just so kind of like, "Oh my gosh." We had a bad season that year, it was really terrible weather, and we lost money and we were like, "Oh my God, what are we going to do for this farm?" Because it was a hard thing to do, and we went out and I interviewed for a restaurant group that was going to do a farm and they were going to pay me \$50,000 a year, which was more than I'd ever made farming up to that time, and I was tempted but at the end of the day, we had to make the decision of, it's too risky, we don't want to move, we have these kids, we have responsibility, we like where we live and we've built this thing with every ounce of our selves for the last seven years and we're going to double down and we're going to get deeper into debt and we're going to go all in and we're going to leverage everything and we're going to buy new equipment and we're going to do it. I haven't really fantasized about quitting farming ... It used to be an annual ritual, you can talk to other people who worked for us back in the early days, but I was just like the Debbie Downer all summer long. I was like, "Why are we doing this?" Sleep deprived, young kids, infants, I was like, "This is a terrible lifestyle, this is not what I signed up for." And I was very vocal about this. But now, I feel like we sort of survived and now that we're completely leveraged and in debt up to our eyeballs, I have this sort of inner stillness about our choices and it's like, "This is just what we're doing now." We're doing some cool stuff, we're pushing the edge and we're proud of what we're doing and maybe we're making money, I have no idea. I like to think that we're making some money but I honestly think that success for me, in farming, is just getting the opportunity to do it for another year and surviving and just convincing our creditors to give us more money to keep going because they believe in us and it's just the most amazing feeling just to keep going.
- Caroline Pam: Yeah, I feel like at that moment when we recommitted to the farm and decided we were going for it we, for the first time, truly identified that the best thing we could possibly do, the mission that we had in life to make food for people, we



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had so much pride and investment in the farm that we had already started and built and it had so much impact and meaning to the people that we supply and serve and that there was nothing that we could do that would be more meaningful.

- Tim Wilcox: Yeah we'd take a job, get a paycheck, pull a paycheck, get some health insurance, that's overrated. Who needs that? That's for lazy people.
- Chris Blanchard: Did you look at your operation and say, " This is where we're going to be in 2018," and that's how you've built it since then? What did that vision look like and how does it compare to where you are now?
- Caroline Pam: I feel like we do a lot of annual analysis and planning and do a lot of multi-year forecasting but I don't know that we've necessarily followed a straight path. I can't remember what a specific vision that we might have set forth in 2014 might have been, but I feel like the general goals are the goals that we are achieving, of just making the food that we grow available more widely, reaching markets that we weren't able to serve directly through distributors. I feel like there's a lot of meaning in the fact that the food that we're growing here in this little corner of Massachusetts is reaching a lot of people and I feel like that's one of the goals for me.
- Tim Wilcox: Looking back to where we were in 2014, and sort of hitting the reset button and looking at where we are today, I kind of think that we sort of knew at that time where we wanted to go and I think that the milestones that we've crossed, we got on better land, that was number one. I remember writing this up for our loan officer, because we do this annual report, I write up this whole narrative thing about, this is the spread of enterprises and these are the percentages and this is the growth or contraction and so I wrote this thing up like, "This is what we need. We need better land and until we get better land, we can't build better infrastructure so we need land and infrastructure and we've done that."
- Tim Wilcox: At the same time, we had decided that we were going to stop doing prepared foods and catering, which we were doing. We were doing events, catering, prepared food at markets in 2013, and 2012 to some extent, and we'd scrapped that and we were like, "We're going to focus on this value added product." And that's what we did, we did all of those things, so I kind of think that we were where we thought we were going to be, even to the extent that last winter, or maybe it was two years ago, we had a sort of a visioning session with our staff who was returning about, "We've done everything we wanted to do. Now what?" Do you remember that?
- Caroline Pam: I do, I was just putting that together that we had sort of laid out these goals and then we accomplished these goals and then we were having this conversation with them, "Okay, so now what should the next phase look like?" Bringing our crew into conversation with us like, "You're on this team with us, what should our next set of goals be that is going make this farm the place that we all want to be putting all of our energies into?" That was where the idea for building the kitchen at the farm came from. We had not really identified that as a specific absolute necessity because we had this facility we were working out of, but it became clear through that conversation that the energy that being the farm that grows the peppers, that makes the hot sauce, that makes the salsa, that



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that just was such an energizer for the crew and something that people were passionate about being a part of and that that was really a direction that we should put a lot more energy into.

Chris Blanchard: Great. All right, with that, I think we're going to stop here and take a quick break, get a quick word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Caroline Pam and Tim Wilcox from Kitchen Garden Farm in Western Massachusetts.

Chris Blanchard: The Farmer To Farmer podcast is supported by BCS America. BCS two wheel tractor is the only power equipment a market garden with need with a PTO driven attachments like the rototiller, the flail mower, the power harrow, the rotary plow, the snow-thrasher, the log-splitter and more. You name it, you could probably run it with a versatile BCS two wheel tractor. The first time I used a rototiller way, way back in 1991, it was mounted to a BCS two wheel tractor and it spoiled me for life. When you get behind a BCS, you can tell that it's built to the same commercial standards as four wheel farm tractors and it has many of the same features. I've used other tillers and mowers and I spent most of the time that I was using them thinking of how much easier it would have been with a BCS. Check out [bcsamerica.com](http://bcsamerica.com) to see the full lineup of tractors and attachments plus videos of BCS in action.

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Chris Blanchard: All right and we're back with Caroline Pam and Tim Wilcox from Kitchen Garden Farm in Western Massachusetts. So you guys are doing all of your marketing round now through what I think of as wholesale channels. So selling to restaurants, selling to grocery stores, and I think you said selling to wholesale distributors and that's for your fresh produce as well as for your value added products. Can you tell me for the fresh produce what that marketing actually looks like on an annual basis and on a day to day basis?

Caroline Pam: Yeah, we are working with some of the same customers that we started out delivering to when we just a tiny one acre farm with a little pick up truck and then we're also working with a lot of much bigger buyers nowadays. So we have a local route that goes out on Tuesdays and Fridays to stores and restaurants and co-ops in our general vicinity. Aside from the local customers that we work with directly, we work with a number of other businesses that we were lucky at that moment, in 2014, when we decided that we were going to expand into



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wholesale and really focus on going in that direction and stop CSA. At the time we still did some farmers markets but really put a lot of energy into wholesale. We were just very lucky that at that same time, a couple of new farm-based distributors came online.

Caroline Pam: So we've been working with Myers Produce that is based in Vermont and brings a lot of product from there down into New York City and now off to Boston as well. We've been working with Lettuce Be Local which is a similar serving restaurants primarily in Worcester, Farm Fresh Rhode Island serves restaurants and stores and institutional buyers like RISD and Brown University and hospitals in Boston and Rhode Island. There's a number of others that I could mention, Marty's Local, serves the Berkshires, and we just sort of have been in the right position at the right moment, at the right time when we were ready to scale up our availability to meet the demand of these new distributors that were serving similar types of customers that we sell to directly, the stores and restaurants, but in urban areas like Boston and New York and just a higher volume. Because that was one of our issues, our area is very competitive for farming, there's a lot of large scale organic farmers here, and conventional but at a certain point, if you want to get bigger, you've got to find a market elsewhere, because there's just ... The River Valley Co-op in Northampton can only have so many suppliers of bunched carrots and pickle and cucumbers.

Caroline Pam: So we've been really aggressive at working with an online software program that was not really adapted to a single farm using it. We work with Local Food Marketplace that's based in Oregon, I believe, that was designed for food hubs to source from multiple farms and then sell direct to consumers but I found that the software was the best for my needs of anything that I had found and that's really what has also enabled us to really add the number of customers that I'm managing without being constantly at my computer. Because I basically have no time at my desk, whereas I used to have 20 hours a week where I would be sending out my email list and receiving the orders and compiling them into spreadsheets and various formatting for the tack list, for the harvest list, that was a whole lot of work that this software now does automatically and that's been another big factor in being able to ramp it up.

Chris Blanchard: Tim had mentioned earlier your similarity to Jason and Siri at Local Roots out in Washington State. One of the things they described was that they really had a very high touch marketing system, where they were very much in the mode of emailing and calling and text messaging with everybody that they were working with. It sounds like you guys don't do that?

Caroline Pam: I definitely built up the wholesale business by the main farm number is my cell phone, that is always on my person and I'm never without out, and I would be calling up my chefs and buyers on schedule to get the orders and then scribbling it on paper that was in my pocket out in field. That was my mode for many years. And now that we have the online ordering system, I still have a lot of communication with my buyers, but primarily the smaller direct buyers are in the habit and in the routine and it doesn't require a lot of checking in. However, I do know what they want and I know what they like and so if I have something that comes available that I didn't have on my list, or I end up with more tomatoes than I anticipated, I know exactly who to call. I can, with a text, in a second, get it spoken for.



- Caroline Pam: So I definitely have developed a lot of those relationships with our chefs we've been working with for a long time. And now I have that also, but it's more of a business to business relationship with the distributors, there's a lot of forecasting and testing the waters. I have a buyer who's looking for so much cabbage, "Would you have any of that, or would you have all of that?" So I'm definitely doing a lot of the constant communication with these buyers and this is a new phase for me. I've been training a sales manager on the farm, somebody who's been working with us for a couple of years already, with my washroom manager, which is the next position which sees which customers need the various quality grades. The stores really need it to look perfect, whereas the chefs maybe they could take it with floppy tops that they're not going to use, the onion tops, just a lot of the judgment calls. So she got trained in seeing it from that aspect with all of the insight that I had into what my specific customers' needs were that I would then communicate to her there. So now I'm training her to know all of the intricacies of what my customers would want that they didn't even tell me that they want, but I just know. So that's been an interesting experiment to see how much of that I can download onto somebody else.
- Tim Wilcox: She's a pretty sharp cookie but I think that the online platform, the greatest innovation was having a transparency of how much inventory we have because farms are not exactly inventory based businesses. We don't actually pick anything, hardly, unless we already have an order for it. So the online platform really forced us, in ways that seemed insane when we started, forced us to stock, essentially, an inventory, and that's actually allowed our buyers big and small to see what's available and when something sells out, it's gone and it doesn't appear on the list anymore. So that has been tremendous efficiency gained, of not having to call people and say, "Actually, we got too many orders for tomatoes," whatever, because it's all just transparent and everybody can see it when they log in.
- Caroline Pam: Of course there is a lot more nuance to it, because I've trained a lot of my people, the customers, to tell me their wishlist. So we do a lot of forecasting, I've been training my harvest manager to scope out every field and produce a number for how many bunches of Walla Walla onions do you think are remaining in this bed after we get through today's harvest? What should I be able to offer for next Friday's harvest? That's a real skill, to look at a field and come up with a number, and we've got systems in place where we have the spreadsheets with the planting schedule and the record of how many trays of 228s were planted in that field, so theoretically how many plants are there? And then how many per bunch and then there's some math to back it up. But that's too slow if you're actually trying to crop by crop consult the spreadsheet and then come up with a number from math, it's a skill that I just have built into me at this point of just looking at a field, "I think I have about a thousand fennel that I could sell tomorrow if I needed to."
- Caroline Pam: So I'm trying to get my staff able to do all of the things that I do because I'm anticipating when we have the kitchen facility, and when we're even just in construction in the near future, having my attention a little bit diverted, and it's going to be an amazing thing when I can have all those operations happening



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without me being focused on them specifically on a day to day basis, if I have to be on the production line bottling sriracha or stuff like that.

- Caroline Pam: So in answer to the question about the transparency of the inventory, we post a number of how many are available and when it sells out, it sells out, however, then I also train all of my most important buyers to say, "I would actually take 20 more flats of heirloom tomatoes if you had them." So that when I do stretch, and I love to stretch and if I can get more, I will get more and I will make that customer happy. I know who wants it and I don't even have to communicate again in order to send it to them.
- Chris Blanchard: How do they do that through the online platform? If I'm ordering on Amazon, you order one of something and then you don't really have an option to say, "But I would take three more if you got them."
- Caroline Pam: Yeah, there's just a little area called Order Notes, and they are just putting in a little note to us that we're scanning at the beginning of the day, "I was only able to order two cases of picklers, but I would love 15." And that makes it easy for me to try and make it happen.
- Tim Wilcox: More often than not, we fill the order. It's kind of insane but Caroline is very good at that kind of thing.
- Caroline Pam: I really love to try. I love to do as much as we can possibly do and I really hate to disappoint a customer, so I love not having to cut orders, so that's what's really awesome about the inventory function, but I also love to be able to exceed their expectations, and so that's what I try to do through that system.
- Chris Blanchard: It's kind of nice to have that as something that's built in, that exceeding expectations. That knowing that you can do that more often than not, that's a nice little marketing edge right there.
- Caroline Pam: When I first started working with, say Myers Produce, or some of these other distributors, we weren't really at the scale that they were needing, but I would stretch and after a season of more often than not, actually getting the quantities that they were looking for, then making those winter conversations where you forecast, "Well, I would definitely love to continue to buy this and I have buyers for more than what we did this year for this particular crop." We just sort of tailored our planting plan to meet this kind of growing demand from these bigger distributors. I think that they definitely love working with us because often I get a call like, "Oh I got shorted by this farm, do you have this?" And yes, I can do it and I don't often put them in that position.
- Tim Wilcox: This is kind of like something that is built into our DNA as a farm, because of our modest origins. So when we had our first season, we didn't know anything, we didn't realize how crappy the land that we were farming was and we had terrible stuff to work with but we would go out into a 20 foot bed of parsley and get 100 bunches. Even if it's crappy looking. That's just what we do and we just make it happen.



- Caroline Pam: Well the end result would not be crappy looking but if you were look at that field, you wouldn't be able to imagine the beautiful bunches of parsley that could be generated from it.
- Chris Blanchard: It's actually one of the horrors that I have when I look back at pictures from the early days on my farm, how often we were picking out of garbage, trying to make something beautiful.
- Tim Wilcox: We just are really good at that.
- Chris Blanchard: Are you still really good at that or has your skills in production grown so you're not ... now you'd be picking a thousand bunches of parsley out of 200 feet and when you guys go out there, do you have good looking stuff or is it still a struggle to try to come up with stuff to meet those quality demands that you have for yourselves?
- Tim Wilcox: We really have upped our production game a lot. We're doing a lot more pest management, we're selling to grocery stores, we're selling to processors, we sell our stuff to Real Pickles. So when we sell Napa cabbage by the binful, it can't be just infested with bugs. So we have gotten a lot better and my production manager has really taken the lead on the pest management stuff. I do think that we are achieving a much higher baseline quality through more focused attention on growing. That said, it's July, there's weeds everywhere, it's crazy and we still have to work with what we have and it's not always perfect, it's rarely perfect.
- Caroline Pam: I would say most of the time, I am just blown away by how beautiful the bunches of kales are, the size of the Walla Walla, I'm just thinking of things that I handled today.
- Tim Wilcox: Maybe rarely perfect is not fair, but I tend to undersell myself.
- Caroline Pam: Yeah, he undersells himself. But I do also work with my harvest crew a lot because they'll get spoiled. They'll go out and have the most amazing, bodacious fennels and then we'll pick through the biggest of the big and then we'll need to downgrade the size expectation for the next day's harvest because they're just going to be maybe a slightly smaller bulb that is available that day. They're like, "Oh my God, there's no good fennel here." And it's like, "Well actually, the fennel that you were just harvesting is amazing and couldn't possibly be any better." So there's just quality standards-
- Tim Wilcox: Doesn't even fit in the box.
- Caroline Pam: ... yeah, quality standards are flexible day to day, the conditions in the field change every day and so that's been one of the hardest things to train people on is to sort of be able to evolve to understand the various versions of the thing that are beautiful and acceptable. Then there's also the factor of taking something that may not look ideal in the field but transforming it into a beautiful bunch and something you can be very proud of. But yeah, I think that being able to spot that and to see where the good stuff is in a field is a real skill that I spend a lot of time working with people on.



- Chris Blanchard: Just to circle back a little bit to the harvest forecasting. I know that that's a skill that is ... well it seems like it should be easy to look out in your field and go, "Yes, there are this many bunches of that out in the field." But it's another thing entirely to actually go out and do that and get it anything close to accurate week after week, after week, and especially if you're dealing with needing to forecast more than 24 hours in advance if you're needing to deal with changes in the weather, changes in pest conditions, things like that. Can you talk a little bit about how you actually do the forecasting process?
- Caroline Pam: There's just a lot of familiarity with the length of the bed and of course they vary in all the different fields to some extent, but the size of the plantings that we typically do, so a lot of it is habitual. If I am heading into a new lettuce field that we haven't harvested yet, I feel fairly comfortable with the amount of heads that might be in it. I guess it gets trickier when you already have harvested half of the field and the conditions on one end of the bed are different from on the other end and then you're trying to figure out how many are left of the certain quality that you require. I've been trying to put this into words to train other people to do it and it is hard to communicate. But often what I do is I sort of overreach and then try to make it happen.
- Chris Blanchard: So you guys are selling to a lot of distributors as well as to some larger grocery stores. Have you run into any requirements from your buyers as far as GAP certification or any other kind of a food safety requirement from your buyers?
- Caroline Pam: Massachusetts has a Commonwealth Quality Program which is an integrated food safety program that has absorbed GAP so the MDAR staff that manages CQP is authorized through FSMA to be the food safety inspector and auditor and certifier. So GAP is sort of obsolete in Massachusetts as a result of this. So yes, we have gone through the Produce Safety Alliance training for food safety and the CQP audit annually and now have the certificate that I can furnish to Big Y when they want to know that we have third party auditing for food safety. So Massachusetts, in this way as in many other ways, has made it a little bit easier for us that way.
- Tim Wilcox: Massachusetts is the best state to farm in. I have never farmed in any other state but our state department of agriculture is just a dream, they're awesome, and our state reps are good and there's a lot of support here in this community, there's CISA, who was one of the first buy local campaigns, that's here. There's just a lot of institutional support here and it's made stuff like FSMA compliance just that much easier than other states, so we're very grateful for the help we've gotten from the State of Mass..
- Chris Blanchard: This being the first year that the produce safety rule was in effect, have you guys had to make changes on your farm to meet those food safety requirements?
- Tim Wilcox: Well it was pretty convenient that we just built a brand new building with a brand new wash/pack facility in it and we were able to design it in a way that would be compliant from day one. So they came out and they were like, "Oh great, you're building this all into the building, that's awesome." And that was pretty much the end of it, it was great.



- Caroline Pam: Yeah, we had the ability to plan for that from the beginning with that building design, but I would say that also, some of the organic regulations that we learned how to do when we became certified in 2014, even though we never changed our growing practices, we were always organic from day one, but when we decided to move more into wholesale, we decided it would be worthwhile to do the certifications. I felt like a lot of the record keeping and some of that compliance made it easier to do the FSMA as well. I mean, there's water testing, that's more than was required by organic certification for FSMA but not a whole lot of new stuff to do. We had to have a food safety plan and we had to do food safety trainings for our staff, but honestly, all of that is sort of a good idea. So far, nothing has been too onerous. I'll let you know.
- Chris Blanchard: We'll talk about it in a couple years, yeah.
- Tim Wilcox: Yeah, we were kind of like of the opinion that, "Well these regs are coming down ..." and you kind of have to be a stick in the mud and complain all the time or if you want to expand your business, you've kind of just got to get on board. Honestly, after we did the stuff, it's all good stuff. Spraying down the tables with bleach and changing the water that we're washing in with crops from different fields, it's all a good idea, and just building it into the core of what we do in our washroom.
- Caroline Pam: It was easier to incorporate those systems into the washroom because we had the experience of working in the shared kitchen facility making the sriracha and salsa, and there are some serious rigid sanitation procedures and just rules in general for how you operate in that kitchen and there's a whole other food safety training for food processing that I just went through in May or something, so a lot of that got drilled into us working in this food processing environment. Then it's like well why wouldn't I want to do a lot of the same safety measures and cleanliness standards in my food processing area at the farm?
- Chris Blanchard: I took, as part of my professional development around food safety, because I've done a lot of work with fresh produce food safety, both on my own farm and then after I stopped farming. I took a training that was actually designed for processors rather than for fresh produce growers and I felt like there was a lot of the procedures and the paperwork that they had and the way that things were laid out that was actually more useful than a lot of the examples that I felt like had been developed for produce growers. That actually seemed to add more value to the process of helping people say, "Here's what you need to actually do to get things done and to get it done the way that it's supposed to be done."
- Tim Wilcox: Yeah, no, absolutely that mirrors our experience of doing food processing and having to comply with an even more rigid HACCP plan and those things that just make you more conscious of the risks and it just makes you less likely to make mistakes. But yeah, I feel like the regs on produce is almost trying to play catch up with people. It's like, "Well you can't have dust from the loft falling down onto the fresh lettuce." No, you can't but that's your washroom but we have to put a band aid on it. Whereas we had the experience, to take that experience we had in a clean kitchen and do a farm, sort of practical farm version in our



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washroom, which was pretty great timing when we were designing our washroom.

- Caroline Pam: And the washroom is still fairly simple in design. We've got floor drains and we've got sinks and we've got a stainless steel bagging table and a root tumbler and a rinse conveyor and another stainless table for packing out things. There's not much to it but the materials are all compliant and it's very easy to clean and there's a door where the dirty produce comes in from the field and there's a door where the clean produce leaves the dock and the cooler is there in the middle. It's all very logical.
- Tim Wilcox: People come to the farm and they're like, "You designed this?" And we're like, "There's not much to it. It's just an open room with some stuff and a directional flow."
- Chris Blanchard: So to take a little bit of a pivot then, although food safety and employees kind of go hand in hand together, but you mentioned that you had several of your employees who've been with you for quite some time. Can you talk about that a little bit?
- Tim Wilcox: Yeah, we have a sort of division of labor that we talked about between Caroline and myself, so we have different employees who report either to me or to Caroline. So we have essentially two teams, there's a harvest team and there's a production team. So this year we have five people and myself on production and we have something like 12 plus Caroline on the harvest team. So harvest team really includes everything from sales and packing and anything happening with harvest. So when people come to work for us, often they'll start off on the harvest crew. My two tractor operators actually started on the farm in 2014 as harvesters, and then two years as harvesters before they were got on a tractor. So we use the harvest team to gauge people's commitment to a farm and it's a good way of introducing people to what the farm is all about. So, this is the quality we're going for, these are the kinds of customers that we have.
- Tim Wilcox: One of the things actually I'm very proud of is that nobody on our whole farm, basically, has any kind of farm background. So we've trained ... myself included. I've basically taught myself how to operate tractors and how to use all the equipment, and I've taught everyone who works for me how to do it. So I'm sure there's some gaps in my knowledge and there's stuff that we're really not doing right but I don't know, because I only know what I know and the people who work for me, with the exception of ... My production manager has really gone out of his way to educate himself independently. So he's always on YouTube looking at how to fix stuff, which is the best thing that I think has ever happened to me in my life, having someone else who's bringing more knowledge to the table on the farm than I'm capable of. So that's been great.
- Caroline Pam: We have a pretty awesome pipeline for employees in this part of Western Massachusetts because we have UMass, which has an agricultural ... the Stockbridge School, and a sustainable agriculture program, so a lot of our employees graduate, having done a little bit of book-learning about farming and then some of them have worked on, say, the student farm at UMass, or might have done a season at another farm. Then there's people who've studied farming at other schools like Green Mountain College, or Hampshire, or-



- Tim Wilcox: Wesleyan.
- Caroline Pam: Wesleyan, yeah. So we primarily hire college graduates who have had a little taste of it, who know enough that they aren't too green when they show up, that they know what they're getting into and still have an interest in learning more. But for the most part, we're teaching them just about everything, but they're very passionate, they're very smart, very competent. We rely on our team to make a lot of judgment calls, to really do a lot of problem solving, to just go out there and take work independently and work collaboratively, and ... There's a lot of complexity to what we're doing with managing our harvest list and our loads coming and the fields and there's just a lot of logistics and it requires a lot of thinking. So we're super psyched that we have people who are not only really competent and really passionate and eager to learn, that this has been an amazing source of employees for us.
- Tim Wilcox: I would add to that over the last five years that we've been expanding, our crew have grown with us and that we, every year it seems, we create another role that we can move someone who already works for us into to give them more sense of ownership, more responsibility, professional development and a pay raise. We kind of see it as integral to the success of the farm to keep expanding so that we can pay our employees more and, through the process of expanding, create more roles. We're going to have a kitchen manager role in the next year that we're going to put somebody in. It's exciting, I feel like we're creating these opportunities in real time for real people that are with us and it's probably the most gratifying part of the job, for me at the moment.
- Chris Blanchard: Awesome. With that, we're going to take a quick break, get one more word from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back for lightning round.
- Chris Blanchard: This lightning round is brought to you by FarmersWeb, software for your farm. FarmersWeb makes it easy to work with your buyers, saving you time, increasing efficiency, reducing mistakes and streamlining order management. FarmersWeb helps you manager orders from buyers, who place them online but also those that order by phone or by email. Use FarmersWeb to generate a product catalog for buyers, allow buyers to view your real time availability on line, and create harvest lists and packing slips for your offers. FarmersWeb helps you inform your buyers of delivery routes, pickup locations, lead times and more while helping you keep track of special pricing and customer information. You can also download detailed financial reports. FarmersWeb offers a free account type and a flat monthly fee on paid plans. You can pause, cancel, or switch plan types at any time. Check out a demo video and FarmersWeb guide to working with wholesale buyers at [farmersweb.com](http://farmersweb.com).
- Chris Blanchard: Caroline, what's your favorite tool on the farm?
- Caroline Pam: I would say a scale, it's kind of silly but when we're driving across the bridge to another town to do harvesting, you want to make sure that you have everything that you need before you drive home and this was an innovation that I did not come up with but we now bring scales out into the field with us to make certain that if we're trying to hit a number, we definitely hit that number and don't have to drive back again to get an extra pound.



- Chris Blanchard: Nice, and Tim, how about you?
- Tim Wilcox: So my favorite tool is the pump, the irrigation pump. So we have this little point wells in various fields and so we can set up irrigation just with a small engine, two inch irrigation pump, but we figured out that when we were farming five miles away and we didn't have any water there, we were like, "How are we supposed to fill the transplanter?" So we came up with this idea, by copying one of our neighbors, but we're able to pump out of groundwater into this tank that's in our box truck that we use to move transplants around. So we can go to any field that we have, hook up the pump to the well, pump the well water into a 250 gallon tank, it takes like a minute. Then we fill the transplanter also quite rapidly and you can drive it anywhere. So that was something I was pretty proud of and I kind of think reflects the weird way that we farm.
- Chris Blanchard: Nice. How did you guys get started in farming?
- Caroline Pam: I had been working as a journalist in Manhattan at The New York Observer, back in 2000s. 9/11 happened, and I was really interested in food but didn't take it seriously and finally got the push to go to culinary school. As I was working in kitchens and cooking at home and being really inspired by food, I found myself at the farmers market as the source for the best ingredients and just had my eyes opened and got the bug to go have an experience working on a farm in Italy and try it out and I also, post culinary school, worked at the farmers market as a manager and doing chef's demos. That is how I met Tim, who had been taking time off from Hampshire and was working as a market manager. The day before I got my job, he went off to work on a farm in Italy, so we had this sort of parallel, missed paths experience. Once he returned, we hit it off. That's sort of like the pre story. That was before I actually farmed.
- Tim Wilcox: So I had spent one season working on the Hampshire College farm, this is in 2001, that was my first farming season. Then I took a summer job at Green Market in New York City and I spent the whole time talking to all these farmers. It was my job to go around and just chat people up and collect the checks and take out the trash and it was an incredible experience to meet some of the top growers in the North East and really kind of pick their brains. I remember all of them were saying, "You shouldn't ever start a farm, it's terrible, it's horrible, it's too much work." And I just went and did it anyway but I don't think either of us would have done a farm if we hadn't met the other person because our teamwork thing that we have together, I think is pretty important. I think if Caroline and I weren't a thing, I don't think the farm would be a thing.
- Chris Blanchard: Caroline, is that true?
- Caroline Pam: Yeah, I definitely would not want to do this alone. Tim and I have different approaches to the work that we do but we have, from the first minute that we met, shared this vision of enjoying food, being excited about the food that we grow and just an unparalleled pleasure in eating what we produce ourselves. I would say that some of that was an experience that I had in Italy, working on this farm and eating the big communal lunch in the middle of the day and taking time and really wanting to recreate that experience in my life every day back at



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home, and that's something that we share and that we have been doing every day.

Tim Wilcox: Yeah, from the very first moment that we were conceiving the idea of the farm, it was about creating our own private Italy. We just wanted to bring that sense of the world that's food-based, this is our food, and this is our community and we sit down and we have a meal every day and we've been doing it for 10 plus years on our farm, every day with our staff. I think maybe the intensity is a little different than our experiences in Italy-

Caroline Pam: Mm- hmm (affirmative).

Tim Wilcox: ... but we try to preserve as much of the quality of life as we can.

Chris Blanchard: All right, and when I ask what's your favorite crop to grow, Tim, is that going to be a reflection of your experience in Italy?

Tim Wilcox: Well, it's funny because I actually did my college thesis on radicchio and early on, that was really my passion and I actually spent time in Treviso, a whole summer interviewing farmers and working on radicchio farms and ... this was back in 2005, so maybe I was ahead of my time, because we actually had stopped growing it for several years and it was only sort of like, to my friend Chris, who owns Campo Rosso Farm, he was like "Oh, I really want to start this farm about radicchio." I was like, "Maybe I should do that again." But anyway, radicchio isn't really my favorite crop any more, we're really into peppers now. I feel like I'm halfway decent at growing peppers, I feel like radicchio's still a very challenging crop, it's always bolting or getting mildew or whatever, but we've had really good success with peppers. Currently, it's kind of taking on extreme obsession levels. So we're currently growing 150 different varieties of peppers this year.

Chris Blanchard: Wow.

Tim Wilcox: I think we have just 40 alone of this super hot variety, the ghost peppers and 7 pot scorpion peppers and in every color imaginable. Those indigo rose tomatoes, there's peppers that have that that are in the super hot category, we're growing those. That's something that's just this crazy amateur breeding scene, so we're sort of a little tapped into that and we have this pepper festival where we set up this ... one day a year, or a whole weekend-

Caroline Pam: Two.

Tim Wilcox: ... we set up all of the peppers in this incredible array and we have a festival, there's bands and food trucks and beer and people come out and burn their faces off on peppers and it's hilarious. So yeah, hot peppers in particular, that's what I'm really passionate about right now.

Chris Blanchard: And how about you Caroline? What's your favorite crop to grow?

Caroline Pam: I really do love picking peppers, it's really just so gratifying but I would say, kind of ironically, radicchio is really a personal favorite because when it's really good, it looks like hell and you have to have the eye, you have to have the experience,



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and you have to be able to recognize that when it's like kind of slimy on the top, inside you have this amazing, dense, red, crimson head. It's not for the faint of heart, at least in our climate, I don't know. Maybe in the Pacific Northwest, radicchio looks pristine in its natural state in the field, but it's one of those really touchy vegetables that doesn't show its true colors except to those who really appreciate it.

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

Caroline Pam: The thing that we've really had to learn the hard way over many years is the farm is a business, but the farm, really what it is for us every day is a community, it's a group of people who are just pulling for each other, looking out for each other and enduring difficult things because we care about why, we care about the goal, we care about the product, the result, and we care about each other. It was very personal at the beginning, I didn't really think about a farm as being more than something that me and Tim were doing, and maybe our family, but it really is about so many more people than just us.

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

Tim Wilcox: I would tell my former self to borrow more money earlier. I really feel like I've seen it a million times on other farms, people are so risk averse and they are hesitant to take on debt and their farms don't thrive if they're not well equipped and have infrastructure and all of that stuff costs a ton of money. I really don't think that farms are going to be ultimately be sustainable if they're lacking good equipment that's reliable, infrastructure that is a sane workplace, good systems, production capacity, all this stuff you need to spend the money upfront and the best way to do it is to borrow it unless you have it of your own. That's the one thing, I just wish we had invested earlier.

Chris Blanchard: Caroline and Tim, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer To Farmer podcast today.

Caroline Pam: Thank you.

Tim Wilcox: Thank you Chris, I really enjoy your program and I think it's just a great thing, and I love ... can I just stroke your ego for a second?

Chris Blanchard: Go ahead, I won't complain.

Tim Wilcox: What I love about your podcast is that it's not like, "This is how you do things." Or you're bringing people on that have all the answers and having them tell other people how to do it the right way. I just feel like the greatest thing about your podcast is that you're asking hard questions, you're getting people to tell a real story and there are a lot of things that make all these farms very similar but there is no one way to do it and everybody sort of has their own challenges based on their land, and the markets and it's just great to be able to hear from other growers. It's a wonderful thing you've created, so thanks.



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Chris Blanchard: And I'm so lucky that people are willing to take part of their Thursday afternoon in the middle of July and share their farm with me. Thank you so much.

Caroline Pam: This was awesome.

Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 171 of the Farmer To Farmer podcast, you can find the notes for this show at [farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://farmertofarmerpodcast.com), by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for Kitchen Garden. That's K-I-T-C-H-E-N G-A-R-D-E-N. The transcript for this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk-behind farm equipment and of high quality garden tools in North America, and by Osborne Quality Seeds, a dedicated partner for growers. Visit [osborneseed.com](http://osborneseed.com) for high quality seed, industry leading customer service and fast order fulfillment. Additional funding for transcripts is provided by North Central SARE, providing grants and education to advance innovations in sustainable agriculture.

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