



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 175

Lauren Palmer of Bloomsbury Farm on Sprouts, CSA, and Community Connection

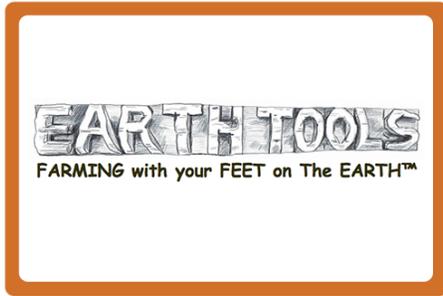
August 23, 2018



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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, episode 175, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard.

Chris Blanchard: Lauren Palmer raises 15 acres of vegetables in Smyrna, Tennessee, just south of Nashville. With year-round production, a sprouts operations, a 300-member CSA, wholesale accounts, farmers' markets, and on-farm events, Bloomsbury Farm is a thriving hotspot in the local food scene in Nashville. We dig into how Lauren has built the farm from the ground up since its start in 2009, taking a deep dive into Bloomsbury's sprout production, employment structures, and CSA setup. We discuss how she deals with extreme deer pressure and regulations, and how she navigated a farm divorce. And Lauren reflects on the value of four-season production and building relationships with her customers and community.

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- Chris Blanchard: Lauren Palmer, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.
- Lauren Palmer: Hey there. Nice to be online with you.
- Chris Blanchard: So glad you could join us today. I'd like to have you start off by telling us about Bloomsbury Farm, there in Smyrna, Tennessee. And where exactly is Smyrna in the state of Tennessee, and how much are you farming, and how are you getting that product to market?
- Lauren Palmer: Yes. So, we have a 400-acre farm just about half an hour south of Nashville. We are only farming about 30 acres of that. 15 of it we rest, 15 of it we are cultivating and harvesting. We go to farmers' markets year-round, we go to restaurants year-round, wholesale, too. We recently put in a farm stand on Fridays, which has been fun community-building. And yeah, we do CSA at all the markets and on-farm and stuff. So yeah.
- Chris Blanchard: So 15 acres of vegetables that you're growing there. Is that all vegetables when you say that 15 acres?
- Lauren Palmer: It is. It is vegetables. We do strawberries, some fruits. We do herbs, a little bit of flowers. So yes, over 100 different varieties of fruits and vegetables all year.
- Lauren Palmer: We're also certified organic and GAP certified. We'll talk about that, but yeah.
- Chris Blanchard: Great. And how long have you been farming there?
- Lauren Palmer: Next year will 10 years. And I'm so excited. I've already got the celebration already dreaming in my head about how we're going to celebrate that 10 years. So, yeah.
- Chris Blanchard: When you talk about getting ready to celebrate, it seems like events are an important part of your farm's operation.
- Lauren Palmer: It really, really is. I think I am honored every time someone wants to come out here. And whether that be to buy a vegetable, to get married, to take a picture in a field of our sunflowers, I am literally honored that people want to come out here and share in whatever that might be. So I welcome all of that.
- Chris Blanchard: And you mentioned weddings on the farm. Is that a big part of your business?



- Lauren Palmer: I actually have an office person that kind of doubles as an event coordinator and making sure all the contracting and money is handled appropriate. So, enough to have a person do that as a part-time gig. So yeah, we do about 10 paid weddings and some other dinners and birthday parties and stuff like that, too.
- Chris Blanchard: Wow. Tell me more about what goes into putting on events for other people on your farm. Because that's different than just having a CSA picnic on your farm, because you're really needing to meet somebody else's expectations about what things are going to look like.
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah, and I think we're kind of different. And all I am is a space. I don't have a staff that is going to walk you through from start to finish. All I'm offering is a space that we call our pavilion, and then what you see is what you get. And then it's all on them to dress it up or not dress it up however they choose. I just so happen to have a fun event space, and people want to celebrate here, so we book it like that.
- Chris Blanchard: And just to go back a little bit, then, tell me about how you got started in 2009.
- Lauren Palmer: 2009. Yes. I remember dreaming with my dad on the side of one of our hills here, which it's a very hilly property. And he comes from a dairy farm. He worked in landscaping for all his life, and is now retired and helps me maintain the property alongside me. But we were just kind of like, "What do you think if we grew some vegetables here?" And we kind of just talked about where we wanted it potentially, but it was just like a dream. And everybody's wanting local food. We knew some chefs in town, and I was in-between jobs, figuring out what my next step would be, and working part-time in town. But we just threw seeds in the ground that I thought people might want and I enjoyed eating at home, and went to farmers' market with it, and people loved it. So the relationship started from there.
- Chris Blanchard: Did you think that this was going to grow into a full-time business for you when you started off, or were you really looking at it as being a part-time, kind of a stop-gap sort of a gig?
- Lauren Palmer: This is what I always envisioned it to be. There's just been so many bumps along the way. I could not imagine myself doing anything else right now. I am truly living a fabulous life, growing vegetables and feeding people and having them gather here. I think this is what I always envisioned. How I got there wasn't exactly ... I didn't envision all of that. But this was definitely always in the back of my head, I think.
- Chris Blanchard: With 15 acres of veg, again 30 acres under cultivation but 15 acres in any given year that you're talking about having in vegetables, how big is your customer base? You said CSA, farmers market, stores and wholesalers that you're dealing with.
- Lauren Palmer: We deliver to three Whole Foods in our area, twice a week every week of the year. We send out an email to chefs the day before, and we ask them to please let us know by 2:00 so we can harvest that day for next-day delivery. And that email list is about 80 chefs. About 20 of them order on the regular, and we go to



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restaurants. Our CSA membership is 300 in the summer, and we'll do 175, 200 in the fall. So restaurants, whole foods, other little grocery stores around town. So it is definitely a full-time, busy, busy thing.

Chris Blanchard: How large of a staff do you have working with you on the farm?

Lauren Palmer: We have about 20 employees, and then there's a few market helpers that just maybe do one or two markets for us. And then we'll pare down probably end of the year to about half of that. So 20 in the high season, and about 10 in the wintertime.

Chris Blanchard: That's a big crew.

Lauren Palmer: It is. It is. Our farm is kind of set up in not so particularly like it's all in one spot. So we're pretty mobile. We're using ATVs and little trucks to move all around on the farm. There's some logistics involved, and that tends to take more hands than most.

Chris Blanchard: Wow. When you say it's not all in one spot, it's all on the same property, you're not dealing with multiple properties. Because it's all on this 400-acre property that your family owns, right?

Lauren Palmer: Correct. We have a two-acre plot that is fairly flat, and then there's a contour field that's on one side of the hill that's maybe two acres. So it's in chunked-up little sections, all kind of in the back part of the property. And then we've got hoop houses dotted along the way, so you can't all see it in one sitting. You have to be mobile to see it.

Chris Blanchard: I'll bet your organic inspector loves that.

Lauren Palmer: Oh, my gosh. Yes. All the fields have different names. We call one "Rocky Top," one "Hillside." So they all have different names and we visit all of them.

Chris Blanchard: When you talk about having half of your production ground in actual production each year, so, again, 30 acres that you're farming on and then 15 acres that you're actually growing vegetables in a given year. What's happening with the other 15 acres?

Lauren Palmer: We've got it under a cover crop, and we'll rotate it. We've got 5-year plans for some things and 3-year plans for other. We have had livestock in the past rotate on that. We don't currently, but we're cover cropping. We want to have solarizing and tarping a few little fields. But yeah, it's resting.

Chris Blanchard: And when you say resting, and you mentioned an active cover-cropping program?

Lauren Palmer: Yes, exactly. So we'll do clover and alfalfa. We've done some wheat and buckwheat, vetch, those kind of things.

Chris Blanchard: And what is the weather like there in Smyrna, Tennessee?



- Lauren Palmer: It's been dry for the last 30 days. Our first frost we kind of expect the end of October, and then our last frost is April 15th, historically. And besides this little patch of 30 days, we've had a pretty wet spring and summer. Every year is kind of being different right now. We can't go back on history and say, "Let's plant now." It's been ever-changing here in the last couple years.
- Lauren Palmer: We have 3 wells in the property, and we're irrigating with three different wells. We're having to move water quite a bit. So the hoop houses do help us grow year-round. With even like a double layer, we're able to do that.
- Chris Blanchard: Are you doing outdoor production year-round, or by the time winter rolls around, are you into the hoop houses exclusively?
- Lauren Palmer: There are a few things that'll make it outside for a little bit until we get a consistent freeze, and that'll be done. There'll be some root veggies that'll make it that are over-winter, but we're inside most of the time, January, February.
- Chris Blanchard: And then in January and February, your focus, then, is on serving your wholesale accounts?
- Lauren Palmer: Yep. Wholesale accounts. We are still going to one farmers' market year-round. We'll have some storage crops even, too. Like some sweet potatoes and the winter squashes and things that we'll continue to take, so some of the hardier greens. We're at farmers' markets year round.
- Chris Blanchard: That's impressive.
- Lauren Palmer: It is. I didn't want to make the leap right away, but when I did, that customer relationship ... You were getting to know people more on a one-on-one basis because it was a slower market. You hear what they wanted and how they wanted it, I guess. And you got to know your vendors a little bit better, and it wasn't all about having three people at your booth that are all taking money and handing out produce. So it's a little less hectic, and I think you also get respect, too. Because no matter what, rain, sun, snow, you're there. And people will continue to ... are regulars. So I think you get the respect. I think it slows down, you get to know people, and I just enjoy it. I get a big kick out of going to farmers' markets.
- Chris Blanchard: And it's always badass to be there in the middle of winter.
- Lauren Palmer: It is, yes. I kind of like to tough it just to say that I did it. There is that.
- Chris Blanchard: Now, with your CSA, tell me a little bit about how that's structured.
- Lauren Palmer: Let's see. A 24-week summer season, and then an 8-week mini-season in the fall. So from May to October is our summer, and then October to right before Christmas is the 8-week fall mini season. We just opened up sales today for the fall and are a quarter sold. And we're a whole month before we'd normally open it up for sales, so I'm super, super honored.



- Lauren Palmer: But we do a half-bushel with 10 to 12 different items in it, and then a keg with 6 to 8 different items. And I am a sprouter, and I do herbs. That's kind of just my shtick. A lot of people see me in Whole Foods with sprouts and herbs and wheat grass. So I'm going to put a sprout in every week whether they like it or not, and I'm going to put an herb in every week as kind of a little Bloomsbury touch. That's kind of what we do. And then you can do each of those sizes every week or every other week. A couple different options.
- Chris Blanchard: Talk to me about sprouts. Because I don't think I've had anybody on the show who's doing that at any significant level. What does sprout production look like when you're doing that commercially? I mean, I've done it on my kitchen counter with a mason jar.
- Lauren Palmer: Right. And that's how Mom and Dad raised me. That's how I knew sprouts were grown. We're just doing it in a huge tumbler that's on a timer that's rotating and germinating in this big tumbler thing. And I wouldn't suggest you get in the sprout business because of all the agencies that will now be alerted of you. And we get random ... the FDA will come in, and you're subject to so much more having the living ... The sprouts are just so susceptible to any kind of disease or something. That's why the people got out of sprouting, and we bought the business from out of Knoxville and brought it down to Nashville. But that's why they got out of it because they saw what's coming down the line, all the regulations.
- Lauren Palmer: But we are happily testing every batch of seed before it goes out. It's getting tested before it even comes to me, the seed is. And we're selling an awesome sunlight-grown sprout. A lot of people grow in a UV light kind of situation, and I like to say that ours are grown by the sun, and it gives them a little extra green and they taste better.
- Lauren Palmer: So we do an alfalfa sprout, a sunflower sprout, a crunchy sprout, which is like a three-bean, and then a spicy mix. So we do some fun sprouting. It just kind of opens you up to people peeking in on your business. Which has made us better, all the way around, actually. So, yeah. It's been interesting.
- Chris Blanchard: Talk to me about that. When you say it's made you better all the way around, what do you mean by that?
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah. Our systems in tracking items, how we clean our work area is tightened up. We have to document everything. It's crazy documenting. Where it goes, what customer it's going to, what date it was packed. And that helps streamline even the vegetables, too, because we're using the same systems for produce as well. So yes, yes, yes. We're shipping out in refrigerated vehicles, and everything is super-tight, and it's crazy.
- Chris Blanchard: Now, are you guys going to be fully subject, then, to the food safety modernization act, the produce safety rule?
- Lauren Palmer: We are. We're already compliant currently. I was just talking about that toady, about FSMA, that we're already in line for all of that when we're ever to get



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inspection for that, or have documents that we're doing everything we're supposed to be doing.

Chris Blanchard: That's great. I love it when people use an excuse like having sprouts on their farm to prompt everything else to fall into place. I'm not a huge fan of the regulations, but the fact that we all have to deal with them now, that you're able to use that as a prompt to go ahead and get everything else in line.

Lauren Palmer: Yep, it is definitely an excuse because we're doing it one place, it translates. So if we were to use even one of the employees to move over to the produce side, everybody kind of has the same, the overtone of this is how we operate.

Lauren Palmer: And I think the customers appreciate that, too. There's no other farm that goes to market with me that has both the GAP certifications and definitely the FSMA, but and organic. So I think that says a lot, too. I think that's kind of badass that we went ahead and did the dang thing. That's mainly what helps with CSA promotion. The chefs and other things, they just want a badass product. But for the customers, the people that are taking it into their homes, they want to know that food safety part of it.

Chris Blanchard: Do you really find that the food safety piece sells at market?

Lauren Palmer: It does. Because I get asked about it all the time, like how is it getting prepared? What do you use on your produce? How is it getting to market? Is it actually your potatoes that came out of that box? And I'm like, "Yes." So when I no longer have to tell people, I can just have it on the website, and people kind of know and are getting used to how we do things, yeah. Lots of questions get asked, and I definitely think that sells, especially when they come in on the farm and they see how we are doing things. They see how we're washing, and we're wearing certain clothes items to keep everything really clean and safe.

Chris Blanchard: So circling back to the sprouts, I'd like to dig in just a little bit more into what that production cycle looks like. You mentioned ordering special seeds for the sprouts.

Lauren Palmer: I mean, it's organic seed. But it's getting tested before it comes to us.

Chris Blanchard: Tested for what?

Lauren Palmer: For listeria, salmonella, E. coli, yes, all of the ... It's getting tested on a micro level before it even comes to us.

Chris Blanchard: And is that something that the seed suppliers are specifically selling you, "This is tested seed for sprout production?"

Lauren Palmer: Yeah. We have to buy from a certified grower. It has to come from a certain source.

Chris Blanchard: Not just organic, but actually a source that's testing for these specific disease organisms?

Lauren Palmer: Exactly, exactly.



- Chris Blanchard: So then you buy in those seeds. Do you have to take any special precautions when you're storing those seeds?
- Lauren Palmer: Yup. They have their own little special place. We evaluate every one that comes in. Just like with any semi load of cardboard or whatever, the packing that we might have. We make sure that what we get is what we get. And then it goes in a special, one of our seed coolers, and it has a label on it. Then when you take from that, you have to document where it's going after you take it out of there.
- Chris Blanchard: And then tell me about the sprouting. You said like a tumbler that you've got. Tell me what that looks like and how that works.
- Lauren Palmer: It's just like your jar at home, but it's flipped up on its side, and there's four quadrants in this thing. And it has sprayers along the middle part, it shoots out water every 15 minutes, and the drum just rotates. And then literally in three days we have product to wash and package. Then we let it sit in the sun for a day. Then we box it up, put it in the cooler, and it'll last ... I feel so comfortable with telling people it lasts two plus weeks once they get them. So they're getting a really, really fresh product. It's not sitting with us because we grow to order.
- Chris Blanchard: And you're doing that in a greenhouse, then?
- Lauren Palmer: In a greenhouse, yeah. A glass greenhouse. Which, the first year, we fried in there because the glass got really hot. Then we put in a wet pad in the back with two fans up front. Then we put two shade cloths over, because it still got too hot. So, yes, the other people that had it weren't growing in this tough situation, and we just did it and kind of figured it out as we went along.
- Chris Blanchard: Then, for packaging, are you just putting that into plastic clamshells?
- Lauren Palmer: Yes. And I've recently looked into getting a non-plastic container, but I think people want to see the sprouts. I'm going to have to still continue to use plastic, yes, and then we use a label that closes them tight. Yeah, so at my markets, I'm going to go paper and no more plastic. I would like to use it as less in the business as possible. But for sprouting, we use a "cup" is what they call it for the sprouts to grow in.
- Chris Blanchard: How does the sprout business ... because what you're describing is a very different workflow than growing vegetables outdoors. So tell me about how that actually fits into your overall business.
- Lauren Palmer: The sprouts almost help fund some of the vegetables outside. We're able to keep staff year-round because it's something that happens every week, two or three times a week no matter what, because the sprouts continue to grow. And we continue to sell them. So it keeps employees here. We can move the employees around the farm to harvest team or wherever we need, but it's a continual process that actually kind of keeps the lights on when we don't have a ton of outside produce happening. So, fortunate to have that buffer, always.
- Chris Blanchard: How long did it take you to get good at doing sprout production?



- Lauren Palmer: To get good at it? I feel like the last couple years, I'm like, "All right. I think we've got our growing condition kind of down pat. I think we've got the knowledgeable staff that we need. I'm able to sell it and tell people how we do it really well." So, actually, just the last couple of years sales have been really great. People are not scared of them as much any more, and happy to continue to grow them for them.
- Chris Blanchard: So to turn a little bit here to your outdoor production, and maybe dig into that some, because 15 acres is not a small amount of land. You mentioned you've been having to do a lot of irrigation. So maybe let's start there. What are you doing for your irrigation there at Bloomsbury Farm?
- Lauren Palmer: We have three wells, like I said, and we have three cisterns that we're filling up dotted along the property as well. So big, blue piping kind of going, and filling up a tank overnight. And then we're able to water that, another filled across our driveway the next morning. It's almost like a full-time job for someone to make sure that all of our little plots have irrigation, and there's not gaping holes in any of the tape. Then a well goes out, or the pump gets shot by lightning or whatever, so yeah, it's kind of a full-time job irrigating and making sure that everything is staying hydrated.
- Chris Blanchard: Are you relying on drip irrigation for most of your needs?
- Lauren Palmer: We are. There's maybe one of the acres that we don't. And then in our greenhouses, we do some overhead irrigating, which it keeps everything a little bit cooler in some of the hoop houses that way. But yeah, a lot of it's drip.
- Chris Blanchard: Is that because of water limitations that you have, or is that preferred technology for you?
- Lauren Palmer: That has worked for us, and I haven't been told any different, really. So it's working and that's what we're continuing to do.
- Chris Blanchard: Obviously, with 15 acres of vegetables, you're a tractor-based operation.
- Lauren Palmer: We are, yeah. So we have a Jang seeder that we'll push by hand, but we have a two-seeder planter that we do our big plantings on. We've got a few tractors, for sure.
- Chris Blanchard: And mechanical cultivation, then?
- Lauren Palmer: Yup. We've got a little cultivating tractor, yes.
- Chris Blanchard: You've got staff that are running that equipment, or is this something where you're the one who's actually out there doing that sort of work?
- Lauren Palmer: I have not even driven on the little cultivating tractor. It's the cutest one. I want to be on that one. But yes, I've driven. We have our red tractor, I will do that to move stuff around. But yes, I have staff to run, and it's just a couple of guys that we trust to be mobile like that. But I'll do the harvesting, the washing these days.



- Chris Blanchard: It sounds like pretty straightforward tractor-farming operation, then.
- Lauren Palmer: Yup. We're just dotted all over the place and having to keep the fields rotating in kind of a scientific way. But yes, that is how we're working.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you head up the harvest and the post-harvest handling, and you also mentioned that you guys are packing out product. You're getting orders one day, and harvesting, getting that packed and ready to go for delivery the next day. Tell me a little bit about what that looks like.
- Lauren Palmer: I used to just get orders by text message, or when I remembered I would send an email out. But it's really been nice to have a list of people. And I send it out before a certain hour in the morning, and then it's a little more scientific now. It's streamlined. I don't get an order at 8:00 at night and a chef needs this for tomorrow. You kind of have to teach the chefs that this is how you want to operate to get the best product, and at this particular time the next day. I like to see all the veggies before they go out and make sure that we're sending the best stuff.
- Chris Blanchard: So what does that pattern look like for you? When are you getting in your orders, and when are you doing your harvesting?
- Lauren Palmer: We will send what's available on a Monday, 8:00-ish, and then we hope to get orders in before 2:00. And we harvest all in the afternoon, and pack and ship out. My truck leaves out here at 6:00 in the morning on Tuesday, and then we do that again Thursday for Friday delivery. And then we harvest all day Friday for the two farmers' markets on Saturday.
- Chris Blanchard: Interesting to me that you're doing that harvesting in the afternoon in Tennessee. That's got to be a hot operation.
- Lauren Palmer: It is. It is. Some things that we know we're going to get orders on, like the kales, we'll pre-pick those first thing in the morning because I know I'll sell ten cases. So they kind of know that they'll harvest that first thing when staff gets here. But yeah, some of the other items we'll wait, and it does get a little hot.
- Chris Blanchard: And then what do you have as far as post-harvest handling facilities, then, for getting that stuff cooled down?
- Lauren Palmer: We have our brand-new packing barn. We were doing it in a hallway of my one barn. Then we built our packing shed, and we have a dock that all the vegetables come in off the dock. And then we have water tanks that we're cooling down in, then putting them in the appropriate coolers. So we have a 35 cooler, and then we have a 55 cooler. So depending on the vegetable, it gets put appropriate.
- Chris Blanchard: Great. And then are you doing a lot of mechanized washing of your produce?
- Lauren Palmer: We'll do the squashes and cucumbers, some peppers, melons maybe. We have a conveyor washer to do some of that. But then the greens are getting dunked in a tank, and it's all kind of by hand. Even the conveyor, we're having to push



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them through, so it's still very hands-on. I've seen this carrot tumbler that I kind of want to get that washes the root vegetables down. But yeah, no, it's all by hand.

Chris Blanchard: And is that something that you're involved in in a hands-on way?

Lauren Palmer: The processing, once it comes here?

Chris Blanchard: Yes.

Lauren Palmer: Yes. I'll be involved with that, yeah. Make sure that we grade things out. Like, this restaurant will be okay with a little bend in the cucumber, they're fine with ... Just making sure that everybody's getting what they signed up for.

Chris Blanchard: And are there specific crops that you guys are specializing in for outdoor production?

Lauren Palmer: This year's been kind of fun. We've had some more requests for the forage stuff. So we've sold wood sorrel for the first time, purslane in a bigger way this year. We have sold our wild blackberries for the first time. Just some other foraged items, which have been fun. And I feel like I show up to market with the purple carrots that everyone loves, and the green stripey tomatoes. So I like to keep people guessing and, "Oh, what does that taste like?" And, "That looks different." So I do like to keep it kind of fun and guessing at the markets and a chef offering.

Chris Blanchard: I think that's a lot of fun when you can do that. And I think one of the advantages of being able to be hands-on and be the person who's there representing the product.

Lauren Palmer: Oh, my gosh. Yes. You get to tell them, "This is what I did with this last night," and, "This crazy new cucumber has a tangy flavor this year." So I like educating, and people get excited about taking our products home.

Chris Blanchard: So it seems like, from what you're saying, that you're more accessible from a marketing standpoint than maybe a lot of farmers would be. That you're really out there hustling the product, whether it's at farmers' market or through your wholesale accounts.

Lauren Palmer: Yeah, absolutely. I want to continue to be the face and a go-to person for questions. I go back and forth between the two different markets, and I'm always here on Fridays to help if people want a one-off tour to kind of see where the tomatoes are growing this year. I think I'm pretty reachable to chefs. I feel like a chef is going to pass my name along to his buddy, because they know that I'll answer the phone, whether that be a Facebook message, an Instagram message, or just a text message. I feel like people trust that I'm going to pick up the phone and I'm going to say I have this or I don't have this, and I'll deliver when I say I am. I think that's so fun. I love the relationship that I can be a go-to for people. And then I'm going to go eat at their place. So it's super fun.

Chris Blanchard: That's always one of the advantages of working with restaurants, right?



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- Lauren Palmer: Right, yeah. I'm super-friendly with people who get to make some awesome stuff with my food, and then I get to go enjoy it.
- Chris Blanchard: All right. Great.
- Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to stop here, get a quick word from a couple of sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Lauren Palmer from Bloomsbury Farm in Smyrna, Tennessee.
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- Chris Blanchard: And we're back with Lauren Palmer from Bloomsbury Farm in Smyrna, Tennessee. So, Lauren, you mentioned that on Fridays, you guys have an on-farm store where people can come and buy your vegetables, right?
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah. It's very a loose farm store. It's like a farmers' market setup in our packing warehouse where we have, as the vegetables are coming in, they're also available for sale right then as they come out of the field. So we just have them ready for people to pick up and purchase.
- Lauren Palmer: The fun thing about the farm is that it's the number one spot to pick up, because you also get to pick what you want in your CSA basket. When you go to pick up at a location in town, it's already ready already. When you come here, if you don't want kale this week, you can pick a chard. So they're picking the different items, and they're the most fresh. Then the kids play in the lawn. And we'll go tour, we'll pick a cucamelon, no one's ever seen a cucamelon, in one of the hoop houses that are close by. We'll occasionally have some food out here, and we have a beer sponsor out at the farm, and it's just like a backyard hang with a side of "pick up your CSA."



- Chris Blanchard: Well how fun.
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you have livestock as well as the vegetables?
- Lauren Palmer: We have about 60 chickens, no livestock. We have had them in the past, but don't have any animals. We've got my horses that I used to show when I was in high school and college on another part of the farm, but they just kind of hang out right now.
- Chris Blanchard: At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned that the farm got started with you and your dad sitting on the hillside and kind of visioning what the farm might look like. It seems like the farm really is a family operation?
- Lauren Palmer: Absolutely. We had neighbors want to purchase items directly on the farm, and that's how the Farm Fridays with the family twist thing happened. So we started appealing a few people, and then we're like, "You know what, we need dedicated hours for this so it's not just people just drive up whenever." So we do a Farm Friday when people pick up their CSA, and we have some backyard hangs. And there's usually about, the kids outnumber the adults. So it's definitely a lot of fun.
- Chris Blanchard: And then is the farm ... do you own the land or is the farm owned by your family?
- Lauren Palmer: So, the farm is owned by Mom and Dad. And then I'm lucky enough to live and work here. So yes.
- Chris Blanchard: Do your parents live there also?
- Lauren Palmer: They do. They have a separate driveway from me, so I don't cruise up by them every day, but yes. It's a fun property that they live on one side of the hill, and I live on the other side of the hill.
- Chris Blanchard: That's a nice distance for grandparents.
- Lauren Palmer: It is, it is. I'm very fortunate to have Mom and Dad here to help with my four-year-old, and just, there's a limb down in the driveway and Dad's always here to do some heavy lifting and stuff. So yeah, it's super, super fortunate.
- Chris Blanchard: That's really great. Now, you mentioned a four-year-old daughter. Do you have a partner there on the farm?
- Lauren Palmer: I do not. It is her and I that reside on our side of the hill. And I had a partner in the very beginning, and that did not last. But yes, it is her and I. We are two strong ladies, though, that's for sure.
- Chris Blanchard: That's a lot of work to run a farm and single parent.



- Lauren Palmer: It is, but I have some fabulous staff that I feel like is family. A couple of them just live up the road, and so, so fortunate to be able to call on Danny and Dana at pretty much any time. They've got some little ones, too, that Palmer has grown up with. And yeah. So, very, very fortunate to have some great people and family, and of course the customers that keep coming back.
- Chris Blanchard: You started the farm with a partner, and then that changed. Can you tell me a little bit about that transition and how that worked for you?
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah. People used to see him and I at the farmers' market in the very beginning, so for him not to be there and having to educate people of why it didn't work out, that was a little bit tricky. But I was always the vocal and would go do deliveries and stuff, so you would see me more anyway. So when it was no longer ... and that I was the business part of it helps, obviously. And it was my family land, and I was going to take it and run with it from there. But transition and the growing, figuring out on your own definitely made me stronger.
- Chris Blanchard: Did you guys have a division of labor on the farm where you were really working on the harvest and post-harvest handling, and he was working on the production side of things?
- Lauren Palmer: He would do the heavy lifting part of it, and then I would do the marketing and take it from there. So, yeah, there was definitely a division of that. There was a couple farm managers that we've gone through, trying to figure out a good fit for the team. Almost year 10 and I think we're kind of clicking along now.
- Chris Blanchard: So, those gaps ... And I think any time, don't care whether it's a partner who's farming, or whether you are employing a farm manager, or have somebody in a significant role in a farming operation, when you have those gaps open up, those can be really hard to fill.
- Lauren Palmer: Right, yes. And plus it's just a tumultuous time in your life, anyway, so it intensifies everything. So you're trying to fill some big shoes, and then to realize that your role is just a big but just in a different way, it was lots of learning.
- Chris Blanchard: And you mentioned now that you've brought in a farm manager. What does that look like on your farm?
- Lauren Palmer: It's very cohesive. And he gets how I like to grow and sell, like what kind of different items, and to be the first to market with some really fun things. We totally are in sync. So it's been good. But literally we've probably gone through five trials of different people. So personalities, you've got to click with that person that you're day in and day out with. And lucky to have found the match here.
- Chris Blanchard: How do you have that structured? You talk about being clear with him about, "Well, we want to be first at market with the products that we want to be first at market with." How do you guys communicate about that, and how do you work through the planning process so that your manager knows what to do?



- Lauren Palmer: I ride around with him. Every Monday, we tour the fields together. What's going to be ready, so I can educate what's going to chefs and to market. We talk about what it needs to look like when it comes out, for harvest crew. I see him every day. We cross paths every day here on the farm, so it's just this symbiotic thing that it happens. But I don't know how it would work any otherwise.
- Chris Blanchard: Yeah. Do you have a lot of written communication, or is it mostly verbal?
- Lauren Palmer: It's mostly verbal. We'll sit down and do the seed catalog together, and if we have a problem we all come together, "What are we going to do? We lost this field," and then we all come together. I've got another guy who helps on the management side of the production team, too. We all just group up and make a plan and go from there. We're very tight ... It's tight-ish quarters, but we're talking on the daily, every day.
- Chris Blanchard: And so with 20 employees on the farm, and you're talking about delegating some fairly high-level responsibilities, are there other places where you've delegated at a higher level so people aren't just vegetable-pickers or weed-pullers?
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah, absolutely. I'm lucky enough to have a couple of CSA members turn farm employees. So I've got one of my lead harvest guys, who was a CSA member last year, want to come work on the farm. And I'm like, "Great." And then another one who lives up the road who's a CPA, was looking to get out of her big corporate job, come work with me. So now she does the accounting part of it and does the events on the side. So it's pretty sweet to have some super-educated people make it all click. We all do what we're best at doing, which is super, super lucky.
- Chris Blanchard: That's really great. And what does retention look like on your farm? Are most of your employees staying with you for while, or do you have a lot of turnover?
- Lauren Palmer: I feel like this year, I've asked a couple people to stay on for winter, and they're over the top. I preface the harvest team that, hey, when frost comes, you will be the first to go. But I've asked two of them to stay on, and they're just over the top. So just some really enthusiastic, "in it to win it" type of people. The harvest team will get different, like the college kids will come and then they'll come back to school. And then there's the driver situation. That's a whole nother, because we have weird ... We drive three days a week, so it's kind of weird hours. Some heavy lifting, so that doesn't always work for everybody. But I've got a great driver now. So that's where I see the most turnover is in the driving, actually. But most of the staff is in it to win it, which feels so good.
- Chris Blanchard: That's really great. The driving and logistics aspect of it must be kind of interesting, because you mentioned that you've got 80 different restaurants that you're sending out your fresh sheet too, but only 20 of them that are ordering on a regular basis. So you must have a different route every day.
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah. And then one guy will order this week and then not order the next, and then he gets shifted to west part of Nashville, and then he's back over to east side. But he's friendly and knows where to go, and I trust him to actually be the



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face who's delivering it a lot of the time. And then special deliveries I'll go out and make myself. Yeah. So it could be one part of town one week, and the next the other.

Chris Blanchard: How many delivery trucks do you have running? Is it just the one?

Lauren Palmer: We have a van that is like a little passenger van that we've fitted to have refrigeration in it. And then we've got a ... I want to say a 16-foot box truck. And then we have our very first box truck that we had refrigeration in. We took it off of that one and put it on a new one, so the old box truck just goes to one of the markets on one Saturday. But it's nice to have just in case the other one goes down. So yes, two legit delivery vehicles, and then one on the side.

Chris Blanchard: You can't discount the one on the side too much.

Lauren Palmer: You cannot. It is crucial. It's crucial.

Chris Blanchard: I'm looking at a map of your farm. It's actually an overhead photo of your farm, and I see that you're completely surrounded by woods. And not just some trees, but woods.

Lauren Palmer: Yeah. These are dense. They have not been milled or anything. They are thick woods. And there's lots of creatures that live in the woods. All of our fields have eight-foot deer fencing around them because I wouldn't be in business if I didn't have that protection. And even that, they will climb under, they will go over, so we just try to do our best to deter them with the fencing.

Chris Blanchard: Wow. That must be a lot of work for upkeep and maintenance on that. Is that electric fence?

Lauren Palmer: It's not. I've tried to get the least intrusive-looking, but it's black mesh. It's plastic. But we even have a deprivation permit to take some of the naughty ones off that still continue to get in our fields out of season. I have a guy who maintains the property in that particular kind of way, who watches the fields that have the sweet potatoes in them that they love, or the strawberries, and just protect them as much as we can.

Chris Blanchard: That must be an important part of your GAPs plan, because I would think that that would be something the inspectors would be all over with the kind of population density that you're talking about.

Lauren Palmer: The GAP inspectors, not really.

Chris Blanchard: Really?

Lauren Palmer: Yeah. Oh, you mean deer getting in and damaging the crops?

Chris Blanchard: Defecating on your crops, yeah.

Lauren Palmer: No. If anything, they care about once we harvest it, that the harvest vehicle is covered. I don't remember that being an issue. It was like, when we're harvesting, how is it treated? So I guess the deer fence is enough for them to be



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like, “Okay, that's how they take care of it.” But behind the scenes, they're still getting into the field.

Chris Blanchard: What other pests are you dealing with? Do you have other mammals that are causing you issues?

Lauren Palmer: Yeah, the raccoons love that corn, and a groundhog in particular that we have trapped and relocated. Lots of those guys. But other than that, we have a lot of annoying turkeys, but they don't really do any damage. They just don't move when you're trucking down the road.

Chris Blanchard: And again, I would think the fences probably do a pretty good job of keeping the turkeys out.

Lauren Palmer: Yeah, they do. They do.

Chris Blanchard: You've put a lot of infrastructure into the farm. When you talk about fencing and a nice packing shed, and the kinds of high tunnels and greenhouses that you've got. Has that been something that you've had to finance from the outside?

Lauren Palmer: All the hoop houses have been funded by a state program, and then we're able to get a big chunk of it back because we're organic certified. So we get a large portion of it back, but you have to pay that upfront and then prove that you've gotten it up and it's operating, and then you get the funds after the fact. So yeah, working with a bank to have some mobile, like the funding has been interesting. And the CSA helps with that. So you get that money in May or whatever, and then that way you can put some of those funds into some of the infrastructure. But yeah.

Chris Blanchard: When you're working with the bank, have you run into any resistance because you're a female farmer?

Lauren Palmer: I'm lucky that my mom has cultivated a relationship with a bank in town, and then they're behind me 100%, even to the fact that I get invited to their talks and different things because they are so proud of what they've been able to help out here.

Chris Blanchard: Nice. You've actually been able to use that to your advantage.

Lauren Palmer: Right.

Chris Blanchard: Great. Are you in a farming neighborhood?

Lauren Palmer: No. It's a very, like I said, rocky and hill and wooded. So there's a cattle farm across the street. There are no other vegetable farms super close by. I think the nearest one is a good 20 minutes-ish away. There's been three purchases to the land. Another reason why my family continued to purchase is because thought of subdivisions or something coming back here, and that's when we turned it to vegetables.

Chris Blanchard: And what's the market like in Nashville?



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- Lauren Palmer: It is booming. I'm very lucky to live in a city, like I'm half an hour to town. If a chef needs something in half an hour, not that I particularly like to just go on the fly, but I can get to most of them within a half an hour. Lots of new restaurants, everyone wants to know the farmers, and they want to be proud of where they got it from. So it's all very locally-minded, and conscious eaters and buyers.
- Chris Blanchard: That's really great. So you've had a pretty easy time of getting your product into the marketplace?
- Lauren Palmer: Yeah. And there's so many other little farms popping up and doing it to, and I am loving it. I love that so-and-so across town is doing mushrooms and they're killing it. I love to see what people are coming to market with and new little farms popping up across town. I think it all makes us better that I see so-and-so's tomatoes, and they're killing it. And I love that.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you see your farm continuing to expand and grow?
- Lauren Palmer: I do. The dreamy part about now that I'm a position, I get to dream about what is the next thing, which is super-cool. I see potentially doing some kind of forest school or preschool for small kids here. I think that kind of completes the full circle of the Bloomsbury, getting more people to stay on the farm and educating them maybe even in how we farm or how we prepare the food, doing more classes out here. Yeah, I think that's all a part of Bloomsbury's potential.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you think there's more acres and more vegetables in your future, or is it going to be more diversified enterprises?
- Lauren Palmer: I think we've almost maxed out the land part of it, unless we maybe get some of the livestock in to be in the woods more, or maybe we do an orchard that's on a hillside. I could see maybe a vineyard-type production here. I always want to do vegetables first. I don't want to be known as an event space. I want to be known as growing some awesome stuff and getting it to anybody. Getting it to our neighbor, getting it to a high-end restaurant in Nashville, and having it to the general public at Whole Foods. So I get a kick out of as many people getting it as possible, and just amping it up a little bit and being able to do a salsa class in a certified kitchen would be awesome. And having a preschool class during the school year would be awesome.
- Chris Blanchard: So with that, we're going to turn to our lightning round, but first we're going to get a quick from one more sponsor, and then we'll be right back.
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Chris Blanchard: Lauren, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Lauren Palmer: My favorite tool on the farm. I like the horseshoe hoe. I really like to use that in between the rows, that's my favorite.

Chris Blanchard: All right. Do you spend a lot of time weeding?

Lauren Palmer: I kind of get my therapy doing that. It definitely brings it all back for me. I do love doing some weeding, because you see what you've accomplished after that. You can look down the row after that, and be like, "I did that." So yes.

Chris Blanchard: What's your farming superpower?

Lauren Palmer: My farming superpower? If I could pick a power?

Chris Blanchard: Yeah.

Lauren Palmer: Guarantee ripeness on things. To guarantee this watermelon's going to be perfectly ripe when the customer takes it home, or I guess the ripeness of it. Because sometimes maybe I pick a little young or I pick a little later. So maybe that.

Chris Blanchard: And we didn't talk a whole lot about your daughter, Palmer. But what is Palmer's farming superpower?

Lauren Palmer: What is her superpower? Just her charming. Whatever she has in her hand, you want it. So, just the ability to make people want whatever she's got. She loves going to market and bagging things up for people, and saying, "Come back and see us!" And yeah. So all of that, that charming little four-year-old stage at a market. Wonderful.

Chris Blanchard: Four-year-olds are great for selling vegetables at farmers' markets.

Lauren Palmer: Right? Yes.

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

Lauren Palmer: I love all the root veggies. Give me all the carrots. From the greens to the actual carrot part, I love a good carrot or root vegetable.

Chris Blanchard: Carrots in Tennessee. I mean, I think of Tennessee as being a place where you have fairly warm nights and warm days, especially during the summertime. Do they sweeten up for you there?



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- Lauren Palmer: We do, yeah. We're able to grow pretty much all the different colors, and we had a long season this spring with the carrots, and some more in the ground right now that hopes to be ready in the next month or so. Believe it or not.
- Chris Blanchard: What would surprise people about you?
- Lauren Palmer: That I am a divorced single mom, and that this was my brain child. People think that maybe this was passed down to me, but it's me and my fabulous team now. And I'm so lucky to be doing what I'm doing.
- Chris Blanchard: Great. And finally, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Lauren Palmer: You know, I didn't like when I went to a farming conference, someone said, "Start small." And I'm like, "No, I want to go big. I want to come out of the gate big." But I do appreciate that person telling me, "Start small. And take the little steps, and not go hard." And then I was able to learn better that way, and not get hurt and then be like, "Alright, forget it. I'm done." So keep it slow, keep it steady has been a winner for me.
- Chris Blanchard: Lauren Palmer, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Lauren Palmer: Yay, thank you so much.
- Chris Blanchard: All right. So wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 175 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, and you can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episode's page, or just searching for Palmer. That's P-A-L-M-E-R.
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