

Jon Cohen: Jon Cohen, Deep Meadow Farm, Ascutney, Vermont, planet Earth.

Andy Chamberlin: This is the Farmer's Share. I'm your host, Andy Chamberlin, and I take you behind the scenes with growers who share their strategy for achieving the triple bottom line of sustainability. These interviews unravel how they're building their business to balance success across people, profits, and our planet. Today's episode comes to you from Ascutney, Vermont, where we visit with Jon Cohen of Deep Meadow Farm. Our conversation starts off by the farm stand and wanders towards the greenhouse, before moving to Nebraska Field. Jon shares what he likes and dislikes about the wizard vacuum cedar and reflects on his career as a farmer. I hope you enjoy this episode.

Jon Cohen: The struggles are the same struggles I think we all deal with in some ways, it's never enough time. We're trying to do everything we can in six months that we should be doing in a year. Let's do it. You'll have to guide me. I'll walk and talk with you. I'm going to do more of a farm tour, but I'm going to do a farm tour behind the curtain. Okay.

Andy Chamberlin: That's exactly what I want.

Jon Cohen: We've been here for about, I think it's our 12th season being on the land here. Came here having a fairly successful business, working about 12, 15 acres in Westminster. Hit the ground and quickly realized that the equipment infrastructure we had wasn't even close to what it took to get this thing moving. We ended up, I think, first year replicating that 12 acres that we did in Westminster or so out of the 50+ acres that we have accessible here. That was fascinating, and with four people doing that, four or five people. It was a quick learning curve.

Then there are just great things out there like Verne, who just is really good at certain things that he does. He, after the first year, connected us with this amazing program that Castanea Foundation was doing. They were funding ... they didn't want to give out grants, they wanted to specifically buy equipment and offset the cost of that equipment over a five-year period. That quickly gave us a large tractor, ice machine, wash line, pallet jacks and some things that we were in dire need of just to even get started with. That was the initial gamechanger that we started to say, "Oh, this is what it takes to farm 50 acres." I think it's actually taken us about 10 years to fully vet out what it really takes to do that, and I think last two years we've just begun to see what the infrastructure and the labor force looks like to not just be successful, but to have it thrive, so to speak.

Part of that's been a lot of experimenting and moving. This greenhouse is a great example of that. It's been our foray into doing bedding plants and early retail sales. I would say, like many things, it's all about labor. As the farmer, we're always spread thin, so taking on a new project can somewhat fall into what I do, but it's just not the resources for it. We've experimented a little bit in that domain, buying in, bedding plants, growing out seedlings and stuff. We do

that two years. We realize that it's not what we do specifically. We can grow it, but our location doesn't support a huge growth. This past year, we cut back probably 70% and did everything from seed and actually sold out of everything that we grew. We scaled down and was much more successful, less resources.

Andy Chamberlin: Scaled back, what aspects?

Jon Cohen: Hump production. Production, how much we produced. We bought nothing in, we did everything from seed, only the things we can do from seed. We probably did 30% of our flowers and veg. Bedding plants-

Andy Chamberlin: Bedding plants, you dialed back 70%?

Jon Cohen: Yep, significantly and seedlings, veg seedlings. I think we're pushing about 50 acres of veg right now. A little mixed. We probably, it's six greenhouses, some raspberries, quite a bit of strawberries. Fallow, we run about two acres a year. We're really pushing quite a bit. In terms of cover crop, we are probably covering about 30 acres for winter rye every year, and then the rest, it's a combination of things. This year, we're receiving a no-till drill seeder and that will be a gamechanger for us. It'll give us the ability to start coming in right behind crops and seeding after that.

Andy Chamberlin: Is that 50 acres including the cover crop or on 50 acres of production?

Jon Cohen: That's including the cover crop. We're probably around 46, 47.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. No, that's impressive.

Jon Cohen: Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: That's a lot.

Jon Cohen: That's a lot. It's a lot.

Andy Chamberlin: You're just a bit retail here and mostly wholesale, right?

Jon Cohen: No, we do ... I would say we're probably running about 25% to 30% retail. We do a significant number. We do two to three farmer's markets a week. We're doing three farmer's markets, two of them, we are fairly the anchor farm of those markets. We do the winter market in Brattleboro. We're also the anchor farm of that market. Then, we do more of roots. We supplement at Norwich, and that's more about keeping employees on year round. That's been a big push for us. We now are at two. We're trying to figure out how to get a third person on year round, and that's just that part of that whole thing of keeping people on and keeping training staff and keeping staff.

Andy Chamberlin: Two people in addition to you and your son.

Jon Cohen: Two people in addition to my son and I, yep. Then, we have four H2A workers. We were bidding on a house across the street. They got way too much money for it, so we're looking at renovating the basement into two more bedrooms, so that it would give us six H2A workers. Yeah, we'll walk and we'll talk a little bit about this here. This came about just as a way to do that, but we also didn't have enough prop space, so half and half and it gave us, we're pretty much between these two houses. We're able to get everything started. It's still a little of a crunch, but with fuel prices, that's been a big challenge right now, and we're running a combination of propane and oil. Prop house, a little bit of, we're not using a tray filler, which would be helpful, but we are using a vacuum cedar. Then, little things. You ask about things that make a difference. Love these things, [inaudible]. This is all 3D printer.

Andy Chamberlin: Where'd you pick that up from?

Jon Cohen: Somebody's making them out. I don't know, the Midwest or something. We'd actually talked about making them ourselves, but what's interesting was is that, and it was fine, but I didn't realize that we were paying for the prototypes to get the right size. I think I would have ... I didn't realize that was part of what we did, so we figured it out. The [inaudible] could have been a little deeper, but I will say, in terms of germination, it's been great, just getting that right size.

Andy Chamberlin: I've heard that because it helps not only get consistent depth, but it also centers the seed.

Jon Cohen: Right. Less about centering. That's that's never really been a problem as much, but it's the depth and getting people to adjust to that thinking. This is probably our fourth greenhouse manager and he's still struggling a little bit because it just has to be, they have to be done perfectly. Anyway, typical prop house, hardening off outside.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, that's a little bit different. Your space between the greenhouses is utilized uniquely.

Jon Cohen: Then, that's just a roll down top coal frame. We've been working with Becky quite a bit, Becky Madden quite a bit on nutrients here. Our big problem obviously is heat in the greenhouses like many of us and dealing with gray mold or botrytus. We're having pretty good luck right now with a product called Stargus. It's a bacillus-based product. We're not seeing the same kind of damage we've seen historically. We're also doing heavy nutrient loads much more than we ever did. We are fertigating quite a bit, nitrogen and potassium. We've already cut, we've gotten two full cuts out of this already. This is now we're coming to our third.

Andy Chamberlin: It's a pretty good third crop of basil we're looking at.

Jon Cohen: It is. We've actually talk about pulling cucumbers out of here, because we do so well with the basil. The cucumbers, we need a house just for cucumbers. Usually, we're picking week-to-week, back and forth. Actually, a funny story, that second greenhouse there, that little one, the 17-foot ledgewood I bought from Ed. He had just started his business back in, I think this might have been '87, I bought it, or they were just getting off the ground and it was a 20-foot by 17. It was our first greenhouse on our first farm. Since, obviously, we added the other 80 feet to it, but that was the 86 feet. Then, some of these houses were just like NRCS, where people getting rid of old houses originally. It was like back years ago, it was just scrounging for everything we could before NRCS started doing the houses.

Then, we had those two big 144 foot houses. Those are NRCS houses, which was, again, every piece here has been, I think, an expansion and a gamechanger. One of those houses we use for winter crops and then we do tomatoes and the other house is just the three seasons. It's the shoulders and the winter. We, actually, we're getting ready to till everything there under and done. It's asparagus in between. What words of wisdom? Stay on top of your weeds. Do everything you can. Interesting this year, and I think it's the first time, we've been in the position to be able to do this, but we started off not being able to find anybody at all.

Employment has just been a disaster. Slowly, we've been finding people trickling and looking for work and we're overhiring. We've never done that before.

Andy Chamberlin: Like bringing on more people than you think you need?

Jon Cohen: Yes. But I will tell you something, we're still running below estimated budget, but we're covering more hours than we've ever been able to cover by doing that, because people don't show up every single day. People don't stay, people come and go and it's allowing ... Unfortunately, it's like a gamble, but it's been much more effective in terms of managing the threshold of what we need for some of those tasks that you just need people for like some hand with weeding out on plastic.

Andy Chamberlin: That seems like a new idea.

Jon Cohen: It is new idea.

Andy Chamberlin: Was that a tough pill to swallow thing? I'm going to bring on somebody else, I don't know that I need?

Jon Cohen: It is right. We're dealing with it right now, but I haven't gone above on a bi-weekly payroll, we're still where we need to be. But we decided we were going to borrow more money if we had to, only because it is now where we really need the help. We figured, "Okay, you know what? Maybe you have to let people go sometimes." But it was better to have the help that we needed when

we needed it than to be scrambling all the time. I will say that we're seeing some of the results in terms of our weed management.

Andy Chamberlin: Interesting.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. That was a little very hard to ... sometimes you got to take chances.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: But I decided that this year, because what we saw the past two years with the pandemic was such a struggle. I was doing 60, 70 hours a week and I just don't have it in me anymore. I used to, he does, and I'm still doing 50, but I'm still working seven days a week.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. That's one thing.

Jon Cohen: Not like I was during the pandemic. It's got to be a little too much. But I would say, being on land, it's the relationship between, it's the observation and the relationship of the farmer and the land. Having worked at other places, I think it takes a while to learn your land, learn your rotations. We're now in our third rotation on the property, so we have history. We have that history of knowing our income and our sales a little bit. You need that. Without that, every year is just a gamble and a guess. We learned very quickly. The name of the game here was water. It wasn't necessarily nutrients. We probably had the nutrients, we were getting it down, but we just couldn't get enough water to the property. For example, we're on sand. We probably have out here about 15,000 feet of plastic. We have a well that pumps substantial water. Becky dropped off a meter the other day. We run it for 12 hours. We had pumped 90,000 gallons in that 12 hours. Everything was about where it needed to be.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, yeah. That's a regular day.

Jon Cohen: That was mind-boggling. That's just about 8 acres or so. That's what it took.

Andy Chamberlin: Eight acres in plastic on drip.

Jon Cohen: About that, yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: 900,000?

Jon Cohen: 90,000.

Andy Chamberlin: 90,000 gallons of water.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. That's to get things to a place where there's water.

Andy Chamberlin: You run that every day?

Jon Cohen: No. We run it because it's plastic, maybe once a week to once every two weeks.

Andy Chamberlin: Okay. Oh, that's not ... that's okay.

Jon Cohen: No, but it was just the glimmer into. We know here that we have to water, and so for example, we had no germination this year on our parsnips. Second year in a row we bought this new wizard cedar, which is we love, which we swear by. We've had them for a couple years now. I swore it was the cedar, I swore it was this and that, and then, we started to run static irrigation on the outside of our blocks and all of a sudden we were getting better germination. I was like, "All right. Well, this is stupid." But because I think what was happening was this. The wizard is so precise that we're not planting as deep as we were or we're not planting as something as we were or we're not dropping as much seed as we were, we used about 40% less seed, but we weren't getting germination. Now, every time we do direct seeding blocks, we set up static on either side and just run it every other day if we need to.

Andy Chamberlin: Until it gets going.

Jon Cohen: Until it gets going, yep. Little obvious things, we should know that. We knew that all along. But I think part of it is having a guy who is committed to making sure that irrigation goes on. Then what are you taking away from if you do that? That's the game we play. I think all the time is, it's like we're using, if you use resources here, what else is not getting done? I don't know that there is an answer for that. I think that's the dilemma we all face. I would say, from the smaller farm, when we were doing the 15 acres and there was four of us or so, semi-mechanized, it was the same issue to being bigger. The difference between bigger is we have more to do, but at the same time, you can, many hands make the work go faster, you can get more done. I think that's the difference is we can get a project done here pretty quickly.

If we have to get something done, it's an emergency, we can mobilize to that. There is something about being bigger that really makes resources more available to you. It also allows for greater losses in some areas because you can cover them through diversity. Also, there's a great gamechanger for us was a harvester. This is just the fortune of Bruce Kaufman said to me one day, would you be interested in a harvester? I said, "What are you doing with yours?" He said, "Well, I'm going to sell it to you for a great price if you're going to use it." I said, "Sure." It was a little bit ... and this is what we do. How do I get it here? What is it going to cost me? What's the resources? But simple gamechanger.

Andy Chamberlin: It was pretty easy to adopt the practices that you needed to change in order to implement into your system.

Jon Cohen: Absolutely.

Andy Chamberlin: Because you were already harvesting by the bin and moving stuff by the [inaudible], no?

Jon Cohen: Not like this though.

Andy Chamberlin: No? Not at that point?

Jon Cohen: Not at that level. The answer to your question is yes, but not ... we were still digging potatoes with a Checchi, picking them up into black boxes and then dumping them into bins.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: Same with carrots.

Andy Chamberlin: Yes.

Jon Cohen: A lot of harvesting at that level, but still manual. Now, we're basically, we use that, they go right into those, the 20-bushel bins, the Gaylords, and that's it. What is the biggest resource? Other farmers. That is the biggest resource. Having somebody either you've worked on another farm or you know another farmer or you have somebody to bounce ideas off of, having been in Westminster and being able to work around, Harlow's was just instrumental in bringing us some of the systems that we use. Everything's done on raised beds. Most things are done on raised beds. Obviously, we don't do our winter squash and raise beds, but all of our transplanted crops, our main ones are done on double rows, 15-inch spacing and then 12-inch in row for the most part, maybe cabbage is 14. We alternate 24-inches of Brussels sprouts.

But so far this year, I would say, for where we've been able to keep up with everything, it's been a great growing season. Good. We are thrilled with what we're seeing. We've had some really, really wet seasons. Like I said, we're not seeing ... usually we're hammered between flea beetles and botrytus or black spot, and so far so good. I'm just not seeing the same disease pressure that we typically see in the wet seasons we've been dealing with. It's funny because we hear a lot about strategies to deal with climate change. I don't know what we do differently. For me, there is nothing. There may be some subtle things that we're already doing, but when it's wet, it's wet. There is no option. I'd rather be drier, it's been pretty dry and pumping water than wet.

Andy Chamberlin: Well, you're on a pretty big river, so water shouldn't be an issue.

Jon Cohen: Water is not a problem. Water's a problem to the extent that we have to get it onto the field.

Andy Chamberlin: There's an energy expense to that.

Jon Cohen: There is an equipment expense. We have two static lines, we have one traveler. We have a grant for underground irrigation and for buried line. We have not yet been able to get the pipe because of availability of equipment. Then again, for us, it was dialing into cultivation. The tool that I use for this is just for this. It's just for that high kale. It's just old school, three shovels.

Andy Chamberlin: Nothing fancy.

Jon Cohen: It's nothing fancy. It's blind cultivation. Because this is going to sit here all season long and we're going to keep stripping leaves, it's just quick cultivation.

Andy Chamberlin: It looks like a fairly aggressive cultivation.

Jon Cohen: It is.

Andy Chamberlin: It's deep hilled.

Jon Cohen: Right. We're an inch or two below the surface, but I'm throwing soil, because I can't cultivate in row, so for the shovels to throw enough soil. I'm running probably an inch or two inches into the soil, versus this, which is at some point here, there's just no point in cultivating anymore. We're at the point where another two weeks and we'll pull our garlic.

Andy Chamberlin: Because the garlics out competing it?

Jon Cohen: Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: It's not worth it or because it's too big to get in there?

Jon Cohen: I think that it's not as important at this point because all we're doing is bulb formation at this point, so we're outcompeting it. Now, the only problem is is that, so here's a great example. Where are you going? We could have cultivated this again. You choose your battles. What I know is that we're going to get the yields we need to get from this right here and the sizing we need to get.

Andy Chamberlin: Uh-huh. It's past the point of having significant impact.

Jon Cohen: The only thing we're dealing with here is weed bank.

Andy Chamberlin: Right.

Jon Cohen: That's a choice. But we've also had two tractors down.

Andy Chamberlin: That plays into the decision-making.

Jon Cohen: It does, yup. The next succession, same thing. This is probably how to, I ran baskets, which is pretty standard for us. Pulled within a week or two after

transplanting. After baskets, we're running a till more finger weeder, which is what I did today.

Andy Chamberlin: This is fresh today.

Jon Cohen: Right, but now, they're coming back and they're cleaning up whatever the Tilmor didn't get. I'm a little bit late. You can see some places, the weeds had already gotten a little too big, and that's what they're just doing. They're just going behind, they're cleaning it up. Then, we're back to, that's probably it until it gets, that'll probably get canopy and we'll just keep running our shovels after that to just go through the season. Three successions, this is our second, and then we'll do one more sometime here soon, carry us into the fall. It's usually into early November, late October.

Then, just running some rears for tire tracks. We still haven't gotten the Tilmors dialed in perfectly because we're running it belly-mounted. But again, it's one of those things we're playing with. We love these finger readers. We do have a crest. The nice thing about the belly mount on the L245 is it's one person, the crest requires two people. I have to be very honest, our crest hasn't come out of the barn for two years now, because of the belly mounting Kubota setup I have. The crest worked better, but it takes two people, and that's a huge difference.

Andy Chamberlin: The convenience of just somebody hopping on and going.

Jon Cohen: Yep. Yep. Usually me.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. Well, like you were saying, things that never change. Labor has always been a challenge, so that right there is why that tool wind out.

Jon Cohen: It's labor. It's qualified labor. What I would give for ... what I want is not equipment. It is another person who is committed to cultivation and tractor work besides my son and I. They come and they go. But somebody who could do that, that is the greatest gift that we could find for ourselves at our scale, is that tractor person who, I have somebody on the tractor constantly every day, 5, 6 days a week, they come in and they do something, whether it's cultivating the edge of plastic or running this or spreading for us or something.

Andy Chamberlin: Dressing things up,

Jon Cohen: Yes. But this cleans up ... the Tilmor finger weeders are a gamechanger. For the most part, when the weeds aren't too big, they're cleaning up everything in row. The problem is they work really well on brassicas. They throw dirt, so you really can't use them in lettuce as effectively as, so it's pretty much lettuces still. I won't walk you over to lettuce, but there's about six acres of lettuce over there.

Andy Chamberlin: Because the brassicas are taller or they're textured just the dirt doesn't stick?

Jon Cohen: The primary, the growth habit is up of a vertical versus the lettuce and bottom rot. If you're building up lettuce in the bottom, building up soil in the bottom of lettuce, you're creating that environment for bottom rot.

Andy Chamberlin: Yep. You said you can get people who like to do tractor work and then they move on. Are they moving on because they're college kids or they go to a different farm?

Jon Cohen: Let me think. The last guy who went to go work for a well company who poached him for about \$10 more an hour, so that was one person. Another person, he was semi-retired and just decided that he just didn't want to do it anymore. He's actually decided he was going to stay home more and create a big garden. I saw they were selling strawberries on the side of the road this year, so that was fun. But still, we're still friends.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: It was various reasons. I think that some of the age-old adages, people start their own farms, people go onto something else, but yeah. Anyway, lots of stuff out there. Potatoes, we're not going to talk about potato beetles right now because nothing we're doing is working anymore, it's our second year. Entrust is, we're completely resistant to entrust, so we are waiting to see if the whole crop goes down again.

Andy Chamberlin: Are there beetles on it now?

Jon Cohen: Oh yeah, it's bad. It's spread from a corner. Kyle's going to actually try to spray, it's going to be our last spraying of Entrust. We've been using Entrust and PyGanic, very little effect. I think that after this year, it could be three to five more years before we plant potatoes again. I don't think we have a choice. I think we're out. It's a big crop for us. We've done 30,000 to 40,000 pounds every year. I don't have the answer. I called Harlows the other day just to check in with them and see what they were doing. Corey said that they were still not having problems. Entrust was still working for them. I don't know the answer. But yeah, there's beetles, there's larvae, there's plants that are starting to look fairly desiccated. We're going to try to spray at the end of the day today to see if an evening spray works any better. I'm not very happy about it. That was interesting.

Andy Chamberlin: All the way at the end?

Jon Cohen: All the way at the end, yeah. Anyway, that's been, that's their highs and their lows, that's a disappointment for us.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, because it's not just disappointing for this year.

Jon Cohen: It means we don't grow our potatoes anymore, which has always been a big part of our winter production. We'll figure something else out. We were talking about doing less and covering, actually putting down fabric and having to manage the fabric, and that may get us through my impression that fabric would work. The beetles are crawling across the land and if they can't get in, they can't get in. We'll see.

Andy Chamberlin: Well, they come out of the ground a lot, right?

Jon Cohen: Well, they come out of the ground from somewhere near where they last were, and then they crawl to wherever the new place they're going to come up is, then they can fly. But that first immersion, my understanding is they crawl to wherever they have to go. They will crawl half a mile to get here and it's just astonishing to make. Anyway, there's 5 acres of potatoes out there. There's probably, I don't know, 40,000 leeks, parsley, celeriac, and all of our direct-seeded carrots and beets and stuff. They're trying to dig out Parsons from the weeds right now because they were germinating so slowly that the weeds got ahead of them. That's what the H2A workers work magic out here on some stuff, so we'll see how they do.

Andy Chamberlin: This is all prepped for the next-

Jon Cohen: Yep. We're a little bit behind. We were going to put in quite a bit more delicata., that's all delicata here. But we only put in, I think we put in another, so that was 50 trays, 2,500 plants. Then, this is all going to be for, this is all kale collards and fall cabbage.

Andy Chamberlin: What was here before it?

Jon Cohen: Nothing. Cover crop. Yep. It all just got plowed down about two weeks ago and then I've been I just, I just went through with the perfecta and getting it prepped out, so I'll start making beds tomorrow morning.

Andy Chamberlin: It's a nice clean bed.

Jon Cohen: Well, that's because it was just cleaned yesterday.

Andy Chamberlin: With the perfecta.

Jon Cohen: Yep. Here we are. All of this stuff we didn't have when we got here, so it's just been incrementally,

Andy Chamberlin: It looks tilled and raked. I didn't know a perfecta could get that smooth. I guess it's your sandy soils sure helps out.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. Yep, yep.

Andy Chamberlin: That must be a tool you quite enjoy.

Jon Cohen: Love it. Well, there's nothing like a level seed bed.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: This, we've been using for about two decades now. We had a pan welded for us that does mix all these beds. That's just a welded pan. It's great. Works great. But we're actually, I'm trying to remember the name of it, but we've been talking to Brooke Dale about a reverse rototiller thing that actually bed forms and will bury cover crop at the same time. You've heard about these things.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. We actually put an order in for one and we're hoping ... Our problem is that all of this is done ... so that's a two-step process, but we ridge with the L245 and then I come back through and I pull the beds out. The problem with this new piece of equipment is I don't know if it'll work on a 27 horsepower tractor. Right. If it doesn't, what we're going to end up doing, I think, is we're going to end up having to offset it to one side. We'll offset it going back and forth, but my feeling is that we're probably not going to get, our spacing is going to be a little bit more challenging to stay with the same. I think it's 42 inches on center.

Andy Chamberlin: To keep with your cultivation-

Jon Cohen: Well, that wouldn't be necessarily the biggest issue, because if our tire track was bigger that, we would just create a bigger rear or something. But that space utilization, the reason we do this narrow gauge is because we think we're getting more rows in per thing. Maybe not for direct-seeded stuff because we use the same cultivation for direct-seeded. We probably could go a little bit wider and maybe get more with three row, but we're set up on two row. The thing about two row that we loved was that you're never picking into the center and you don't have to weed to reach into the center. That's really what was one of the-

Andy Chamberlin: Ergonomically.

Jon Cohen: Ergonomically, yeah, you got it.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, you're right.

Jon Cohen: Right. You're never reaching to the center. You work one side of the bed at a time.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: But, again, it's one of those things, it's like when we started, I don't think we had the wisdom to think, "Okay, where are we going to be in 20 years? What do we want to have?" There's some things we would change. We do our corn on the same system here, so we're doing corn two rows every 12 inches. We get decent yields, but I think that I would prefer to do two rows on two and a half foot spacing and running some Lillistons and hilling that stuff and just being more aggressive. Instead of, I just ran the corn, so again, baskets and finger weeders and then into those shovels, those three shovels, which throws a lot of dirt. That's the nice thing about those. Then, plastic, lots of plastic. Onions and shallots and cucumbers and squash.

Andy Chamberlin: We got a lot of space between your plastic.

Jon Cohen: Well, we run enough, so we can drive a truck up and down between it and harvest out of it. There is a opportunity where we are actually at the space that we'll be able to run that drill seeder that if we want to start doing cover crop, but we've done both here. The advantage to cover crop is wonderful. The problem with cover cropping is, is that it's more work. We've run cover cropping between the rows. I'm in for a mower at that point, so then, I'm mowing. The question is are we going to mow and have more tilt to our soil, and add that in or are we going to keep doing what we do? It's a good question, I don't know the answer yet. I think old systems are hard to change sometimes. Vernon and I have this conversation often. Vern says exactly the same thing, "That's a lot of open bare soil that's sitting bare during the season."

For me, on this particular field, our weed pressure is so heavy that every time we've tried to do something we can't outcompete the weeds. I've been inclined to, and we usually ... I'll start running, I have actually a nice setup that cleans up the edge of this. Am I going to fight the weeds for the next crop that's not on plastic or am I going to keep hammering them and try to get them under control? I don't have an easy answer.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: But the onions look good and thrip damage isn't too bad yet.

Andy Chamberlin: No, everybody has a reason for doing things. It's just [inaudible].

Jon Cohen: Yeah, but there's convenience and then there's what we know works. In an ideal world, this would be cover crop and we would be mowing it or it would be easier to control, but I don't know. I look at other land nearby and our weed pressure seems to be intense. Our bug pressure or our weed pressure, our disease pressure. No, I'll tell you though. Two years ago, we tried to do our onions on the same spacing we do our strawberries and we ran weed mat. We do our strawberries on plastic weed mat, pretty standard. That works pretty well for us, and they stay for a long time. We tried to with onions and it just

didn't work as well. It was a big pain in the ass, so we just went back to our old systems.

Andy Chamberlin: Well, there's that too. If it works, it works.

Jon Cohen: If it works, it works.

Andy Chamberlin: Don't fix what ain't broke, right?

Jon Cohen: But in an ideal world, like you said, how much would be in cover crop? That whole area up in there, although, we let our window ride go for a while, but it would've been a mix, and that's where I think, that's where the drill seeder is going to make a difference is. We're going to be able to do some more things rather than just broadcast spreading rye. We'll be able to, as soon as I'm done, where are we coming up undone? Our first two lettuce plantings are almost done over there, so I'd come in behind those now and maybe seed out to something. I don't know. It would create some options for us. We're in July, we'd still be able to get maybe a mix of grass and some legume or something.

Or even buckwheat. One of our problems is planting stuff is getting cover crop on where we're direct seeding next year. Really, we would then be able to maybe go to buckwheat instead of rye, so that we get winter die down and then it breaks down a little bit quicker in the spring. Obviously, rye takes forever to break down.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, especially if you let it go late.

Jon Cohen: Yeah, that's right. Especially if you let it get woody. Here's another piece that I could show you actually. This is what we roll out our beds with for doing field greens.

Andy Chamberlin: It's a heavy implement.

Jon Cohen: It is. It's an old ski slope groomer.

Andy Chamberlin: Oh! I like that.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. It's just basically three point mounted, rototill a bed, roll this out perfectly flat surface. Actually, I'll show you.

Andy Chamberlin: It looks like the Johnny's roller on large scale.

Jon Cohen: Well, we have one of those actually.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: We use one of those in our greenhouse. They're hard to use. Greens beds, rolled out greens beds. We'll flame weed those before we seed them. Then, I just put in two new beds for now and those will get rolled out. Then, this is probably one of the more labor-intensive processes, but it's rototilling, rolling out the beds, fertilizing the beds. Johnny's six-row cedar irrigation, greens harvester.

Andy Chamberlin: What are you using for a harvester?

Jon Cohen: The drill greens harvester.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, the quick cut.

Jon Cohen: Quick cut, yup. Then, just going through, before we start, the grass that doesn't respond well to flame weeder.

Andy Chamberlin: It doesn't care.

Jon Cohen: Nope. Custom-made tractor, tractor-mounted flame weeder.

Andy Chamberlin: This isn't rolled, right? That's just tilled?

Jon Cohen: Nope. This is me coming off the edge of the ... so I'll roll, that'll be the center of two beds like that, I'll roll these beds. There's two beds unrolled.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, because I can see the corrugation here.

Jon Cohen: Exactly. That is what that gets turned into, and you can just see that nice firm bed for planting.

Andy Chamberlin: This was previously tilled.

Jon Cohen: I just tilled that today, yep.

Andy Chamberlin: Yep. Fluffed and packed.

Jon Cohen: It's nice, huh?

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: Gamechangers.

Andy Chamberlin: Flat.

Jon Cohen: Flat. Flat, so when you run your Johnny cedar across, you don't get stuck, it doesn't get hung up, you just go boo hoo right down.

Andy Chamberlin: I was talking with another grower who has the stone barrier with a roller on the back, which is the same corrugated pattern. He said that he liked that a lot because it doesn't just leave it flat and smooth. That little bit of texture keeps it from just turning rock hard.

Jon Cohen: It does. It was a huge difference.

Andy Chamberlin: When it rains, it doesn't-

Jon Cohen: A little flower patch. It's like the necessary flower patch.

Andy Chamberlin: Right close to the customer.

Jon Cohen: Exactly. It's close to the farm stand. Hopefully, they'll bunch flowers and sell them, but you never know. Behind here is a 15-foot ceiling room. That now, we can put 46 bins in back there. That's what we ended up doing. As its own refrigeration, it's got everything. That's our fall. We start loading it in October and that's what we did just far as we went. Kyle and I have been talking about what's next, but you can't have it all, so you make do. I'll tell you something, one of the things about that is just keeping debt down. It's keeping that return on investment to how much, it's not a question of whether you take on debt, how much debt at any one given point in time, because we could probably service more debt and it probably would pay for itself. But, to me, that's not the way I play the game.

Andy Chamberlin: Is there a certain-

Jon Cohen: Two years.

Andy Chamberlin: Okay. Yeah. I didn't know if there was--

Jon Cohen: Ideally.

Andy Chamberlin: ... a certain percentage that you're comfortable with.

Jon Cohen: Well, I like to see a return on an investment that's two years for most things. But, if we could have another good season like we did last year, we're talking about taking on a 50,000+ tractor. We have a 90-horsepower, we really need that 105 that's a little newer, that has forks on it, that we can move around a ton at a time. We've been able to get by with what we have. I think we're at the point that that's not necessarily working.

Andy Chamberlin: That would go along with the 20,000 bed former, row shape or plastic layer all in-

Jon Cohen: Those all shape for themselves in a year or so.

Andy Chamberlin: Nice.

Jon Cohen: Well, because the bed former, I'm the only one who can do it right now or who does it. It frees me up where I can send somebody else out who has a piece of equipment that's just easy to use. We freed me up if I do it in half the time. I've saved myself hours, so that paid for itself that quickly, so I think that's it. Bed former shapers, that piece and everything. Our mechanical transplanter, first year, we're putting in 10,000 plants a week thing or less than a week, but that's a gamechanger. Those are the perfecta. Actually, I bought that for 900 over in New York state. It cost me another 500 to get all the tines and bearings replaced. In one year, we're just moving through crops, less struggle, less ridges to go cultivate, it's a gamechanger.

I think that's the measure of things. What changes the game? How quickly, in what regard? Then, there's the repairs. How much time we're going to spend on it? That spreader out there, we make our own compost, we're buying in manure, we're making our own compost. There's no other way to get it out there, so then there are things you have to buy. It's the new tractor and does the new facility go right there? But that's 400 to get that thing the way it needs to be. It's probably around 400, so that's two big storage units, they both can be adjusted between 50 and 32, full wash lines, loading dock. It's not happening for less than 300 to 400. That's my thinking.

Andy Chamberlin: We were on a couple calls with people the same way. We came up pipe dream. This would check all the boxes and they're like, "We can't spend a million bucks." They just can't.

Jon Cohen: They're thinking a million.

Andy Chamberlin: It was between that, 500 and a million line, and it's like, "Yeah, they could probably do it, but it's a big pill to swallow."

Jon Cohen: The problem is with that is, when things go bad, what are you doing? Losing everything to have the best doesn't make sense to me.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, it's too much risk.

Jon Cohen: It's too much risk. It's just too much risk. 500,000 is 5,000 a month.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. That's what they did too. They were looking at what loan they would need in order to pay for that and they're like, "Holy moly."

Jon Cohen: Well, you figured that's the rule of thumb. Is it 1%? Whatever. But usually 500,000 is 5,000, 1% a month in payments. I don't have that. That's every other week payroll. Could we someday? Yeah, possibly. 18,000 got us that. 40,000 would get us that thing we talked about, but that doesn't give us storage, and really, it's all about storage at this point. We packed through, you saw. All that

stuff today came through here. That's a small order right now. We're just coming into our green season. But as soon as we get up and running here, we'll pack out, so hang on. That's 100, 150 cases every two days to just deep root, not including Black River, not including our local stuff.

Yeah, so those are tough calls, but here's the other side of it. I'm 60. Ten years and then he gets to decide what he wants to do. He wants to put more greenhouses. That's where he sees the next thing for himself. Two, three more greenhouses. I think I can make do with what we have for the most part. I think that back room in there just added, we now have enough storage where we can bring in most of what we pick. The other side of it is push it out the door as quickly as possible. Then, things like potatoes, we've been just sticking out in other rooms and stuff, but it's an interesting game.

Andy Chamberlin: Do you have a transition plan in place or you just still plan it by ear at this point?

Jon Cohen: I think it's very simple. If he wants it, it's training him to do what it takes. It is, next five years him learning everything we can. Five years of letting him manage, and then at 70 he can do what he wants, but he needs to pay me what I draw from the farm.

Andy Chamberlin: Okay. Yep.

Jon Cohen: That value, if he paid me that, if I lived till 90, he didn't get a good deal. If I lived to 80, he paid less than it's worth. I'll still work. I'm here. I'm not going to help out, but I'm not getting up, I'm not running out of bed every morning to make sure that the farm stands covered. Then he gets to decide. He decides he doesn't want to do it. Yeah, it's called transitions, it's called sell.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: That's a perfect transition. I have no attachment to any of it really. I think I was able, very fortunate to be able to do what I wanted to do for quite a while and looks like I'll still get to do it for a while more.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, that's awesome.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. I'm not saying there's nothing in that that said that it was easy.

Andy Chamberlin: No, no, no.

Jon Cohen: It was just that I love what I do. I hate some of the things you have to do to do it. It's like somebody said the other day, "So you're busy." I said, "I'm busy all the time and sometimes I even work." But yeah, the hardest part is there were some real steep curves in scaling up in terms of learning how to manage. The farming piece was somehow those problems can be solved much more easily than how to manage other people. That was the bigger challenge. Definitely, the

bigger of the challenges. But it took me a while and I think we're getting the hang on it, handling it. That's the one I don't know. I think the difficulty is some people come by it more naturally and intuitively, and some of us have to learn by being beat over the head, and some of us, I don't think ever get it.

Andy Chamberlin: Learn the management side of things.

Jon Cohen: The management side of things, yeah, but that's been the challenge. I would say very much so. That's the way it goes. Wizard Cedar, right there, yep. This is our fourth or fifth year using one. Everything is done. That's your seed hopper scissor in here. This is your seed plate. You have lots of options for different plate sizes. Obviously, vacuum, so it's a lot more latitude in the size of the hole that you would use for different things, but knowing the range is helpful. This is a mechanism here that actually pushes down against the seeds and separate, so you can singulate seeds, so things like when you're doing raw carrots and stuff, less of an issue with pelleted seeds. That's when your plate gets put in.

Andy Chamberlin: How many seeds are left in the bottom when it's run out?

Jon Cohen: I'm going to show you that in a second. None.

Andy Chamberlin: Nice.

Jon Cohen: That's because you want to buy the attachment. That is your plates on this side here is your gears. I taped that in there. Basically, that is your spacing. All your gears are right here. These flip off. Separate those and you're good to go.

Andy Chamberlin: All tool list changeover.

Jon Cohen: All tool list changeover. This is your depth right here. That's your depth range. When you're done for changing out seed, this is your seed hopper, and for you too can buy one of these at-

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. Where did you get it? How much did it cost?

Jon Cohen: I think I paid around 4,200 for it delivered when I bought it. I think they're a lot more now, but yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: Probably.

Jon Cohen: I don't use this. This just stops the vacuum from running. If you take this and you sink that down into there and you can watch it through there, you can suck all your seeds out and then you'll open it a little bit just because nothing falls out and you just push those last few seeds into here. Take that out and all your seeds are now inside of here.

Andy Chamberlin: Nice, and there's just a small handful or are you meaning when there's extra.

Jon Cohen: If any are down at the bottom.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: It gets almost all of them.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: That's just hooked up to another vacuum feed here. There's nothing else to it. The trick to it, there are definitely things that matter. It's a step-by-step changeover. You go out to the field and you're doing cilantro and beans and stuff, you're bringing out four or five plates, you're changing over, there's all of that changeover. You want to make sure the bottom of your seed hopper is closed, so you don't start pouring your seed in and you go, "Oops!" Not that that's ever happened to me.

Andy Chamberlin: Just in theory.

Jon Cohen: In theory. That's pretty much it. We ended up having to chop one of these down. We just cut it ourselves, but it was cheaper than buying theirs. That's it. It's loud. There is a learning curve in terms of, you can buy the vacuum gauge that comes with it, because the smaller the seed, the greater the vacuum. It's harder to turn the drive wheel. If you're on lighter soils and you run your vacuum too high, you're going to find that you didn't get to good germination because you weren't looking behind you and your drive wheel wasn't turning.

Andy Chamberlin: The wheel was dragging because, A, it was fluffy, and B, there's just so much pressure sucking the plate in?

Jon Cohen: You learned before you go to waste some seed and turn to your drive wheel. You also learn to, you're [inaudible] to make sure that your holes are getting filled, either through sizing or singulation. But when it works, you'll have a 400-foot row of radishes and you have 400 times 12 and they are all an inch apart and it's like any vacuum seeder. I'm sure that all of them do that, but you go out there and you're like, "Wow!" Or when your green bean plants are exactly two inches apart. Everything is just singulated perfectly.

There's some things like when we do our fall beets, we'll go to one and a half to one and three quarter inches where our spring beets were at one to one and a half inches, but it's a learning curve, and it's planting at the depth that you're setting it out. It's not like the Planet Junior that it ... Some reason it seems to be less forgiving. I'm not the only one who's experienced that. Germination. I think that you're not using this for heavy seeding. I do not plant peas with this. I have my Planet Junior, old Planet Junior mounted, and we go the biggest hole and we let as many seeds fall out as possible and we just hammer peas as much as possible. This is definitely, you are planting your beets, your carrots, your beans.

I'm sure there's other things people can do, corn. We can't direct seed corn here. We can, but might as well just throw the seed out there, feed the crows.

Andy Chamberlin: Because the birds will eat it or because you can't.

Jon Cohen: Well, what happens is, as soon as the plants start to germinate, they pull the seed, so yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: Mmm, [inaudible] corns.

Jon Cohen: Exactly, all day long.

Andy Chamberlin: Yep.

Jon Cohen: But it's a little loud. It whistles. I wear a headset and that's it. But I have to say, I'm learning it better and better. I wish I had some, all of our drexia stuff's way out there, not walking. It works really, really well. The other thing is that, it's because our soil's really sandy, I take an air sprayer to this thing at all, a pressure and spray it down all the time, constantly cleaning it up. Oh, that's in back, I'm here myself.

Andy Chamberlin: Do you always use this planter in perfect conditions like we were seeing out there?

Jon Cohen: Versus?

Andy Chamberlin: Maybe not perfecting, I guess if that's what you've got.

Jon Cohen: I don't do anything except on ... I would never direct seed onto flat ground, bare ground like that. Everything's done on beds. Everything is done onto a perfectly made bed. I've never used it on bare ground.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. Doesn't look like you have much stones for it to send it for a ride either.

Jon Cohen: What do you call that thing?

Andy Chamberlin: Stones.

Jon Cohen: Did you see that one out there? One at the end of the bed? No.

Andy Chamberlin: It's a beach out there.

Jon Cohen: We don't have rocks.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: There's some out there and you bump along and you go, "Whoa! There's a rock." But I think I hit two rocks yesterday. We're sand. Yeah, there's no rocks. We probably one day could probably clean all of our rocks out, all of our stuff. But it's a delight to use. Again, it's like anything else. There's some modifications, but of course you still see this hanging on the wall here. I haven't used that in a while.

Andy Chamberlin: Old earthquake.

Jon Cohen: But it used to be handy. It used to be great for things like cilantro. It just had that great plate in it. I found that the Planet Junior just didn't do as well. I used to push. When I first got here my first year, I had only push. I had a Planet Junior and I would do 16 400-double rows of onions. But I have to tell you, I got better germination then than I have with this. Then, that's pretty much it. The other thing is that we had this made or made a combination of both and just real simple tractor mounted. It's a two burner.

Actually, it's two, three-unit burners, but I think a little wider, a little bit more would've been helpful. Everything's a modification. It's things like this. We putting a valve in on a sprayer that didn't have one, so you can spray one side over plastic. Then we were like, "Wow, that's great." We're about to put one on each side here, so you can just spray the center row and go across potatoes, so you're not wasting all this spray all over the place. It's the subtle little things that make all the difference.

Andy Chamberlin: Fine tuning.

Jon Cohen: Fine tuning.

Andy Chamberlin: What do you consider a key factor to building a successful farm business?

Jon Cohen: Capital. The problem is I think that you can't just be any one thing. You almost have to be a jack of all trades in some ways, because I think you are going to run into so many different scenarios. You can be a great grower and terrible at sales. You can be great at sales and not have the tolerance for crop loss or weeding. You can be great at sales and growing, but just not understand how the science of growing impacts what you do or be more of that observational noticing all those details. I think there's just too many elements to it. The other thing is that I think you have to be ready that it's your life. It's not like you get to ... I never really get to shut the door on it. It does, it'll shut the door on itself at some point, but it's an ongoing thing.

I think successful is determined different ways. I know people who do half an acre and delighted with what they do. Actually, maybe all they do is they do fall crops and they sell them in the winter or something. I think it's relative, but we're talking about this operation. To be successful here, I think you have to just have a high tolerance for all of the changes and all the details and the volume of

things that are shifting all the time, and actually enjoy it to some level. Because if you don't enjoy it, it's a killer in its own way. The rest, I think, there's all kinds of people. I think also, you have to be willing to constantly learn because you have to be willing, and I would say enjoy it because that's the part for me, I wake up every day.

Today, it was just even fixing this disc hair and my son was like, "How'd you get that off of there?" I showed him, he said, "It's not coming off," you're just going to pull this. I said, "Yeah, it's just stuck." He's like, "Oh, okay. I didn't realize that." It's just the experience of knowing that and bringing that experience to the table. Then, we discovered that the bearing's blown out and he says, "Well, the new bearing's not fitting in here." I said, "Because you haven't punched out the old race from the old bearing yet." It's like being a mechanic, but it's little things like that, and the problem, the difficulty or whatever you want to call it is that, here we are 30 years later and now we know what we needed 30 years ago, but it's not the way life is anyway.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, exactly.

Jon Cohen: That's just the way life is. How do you convey that information? I think, as I said earlier, you have people around you that you're willing to bring you that are both willing to support you and just are people you can tap into. We have good people around us. I know my friend, who's also helps working on tractors, that I could bring this to him and say, "Okay, I'm not really understanding how this is fitting together," and he'll say, "Boom, boom, boom, boom," or the guy that's welding for us who is going to stop all, it's a big company, but he's going to put us at priority ahead because he understands what we do.

My heart goes out to all these people because they're the people that make it happen. Those four men from Jamaica come here every year who are grateful to have jobs that we are a lot indebted to for making this thing happen, because without them it doesn't happen. What does it take? I don't know. It takes a lot of things. But for me, a willingness and appreciation, gratitude, humility. I don't think you have to be a great business person.

Andy Chamberlin: Are those the type of things you would tell yourself when you were getting started?

Jon Cohen: Never. You mean the beginning of my career?

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. What would you say to a new farmer now?

Jon Cohen: Oh, consider the actions you take because you may look back on them and wish you've done differently.

Andy Chamberlin: Do you have an example?

Jon Cohen: No. That's funny.

Andy Chamberlin: I feel like something came to mind there.

Jon Cohen: Well, I just think back to ... that's funny. What came to mind? I was just thinking that all of those people are resources. Keeping all those relationships open and in good standing and having ... I don't know if I had the humility to always ask the question, I wish I'd asked along the way. I want to figure this out myself. I think that's part of the challenge is, you don't need to. You don't need to. I'll forever be indebted to Paul Harlow, because Paul was nothing but generous. He would answer any question no matter how stupid it was I had. I don't know that, I was always as generous to other people.

I think I learned that later on, but he was always that way. It was just that piece of it for me, generous in all kinds of ways, and I wouldn't be here if his that way of being helped me to grow a business. He let me use Kestrel, he let me use land there, he let me barter a way into it. Let me use the infrastructure and let me ask a lot of dumb questions. Or weren't dumb, but learning along the way. He had to learn somewhere. We all have to learn somewhere, but I don't think we see it that way.

I don't know that that's the easy answer, like It's nice and wrap it up tight, but that's why I say it's the relationships with people around us and we're all getting there however we need to wherever there is. It's quality of life at the end of the day. I don't know anybody who says, "Shit! I'm going to make a lot of money. I'm going to be a farmer." I think we're all in it for our own personal and maybe philosophical, maybe metaphysical reasons to do this. I don't know if that answers your question. I don't know if I have a nice easy answer to it.

Andy Chamberlin: It doesn't have to be an easy answer.

Jon Cohen: Perfect.

Andy Chamberlin: What fulfills you in this career?

Jon Cohen: Feeding people, watching things grow. The magic of how we can produce food from seeds, that I was gifted enough to be a steward of this amazing piece of land here at the county in Vermont at the base of Ascutney on a river. What an amazing, amazing gift that is to be able to have that, wakes me up every morning.

Andy Chamberlin: It's a pretty good reason. Is the farm you have now anything that you ever imagined what you thought you would have when you got started?

Jon Cohen: Never.

Andy Chamberlin: When you got started, what'd you think that you might have someday?

Jon Cohen: 15 acres, 20 acres. 5 acres of woods, 15 acres, maybe 10 in cultivation, maybe a little bit more rural. Never considered that I'd have to have employees. I wasn't thinking like, "Oh, this is a business that has employees." I was thinking like, "Oh, it's going to be a farm and we're going to make it happen." It just didn't dawn on me. Didn't dawn on me that where we are today, that year-round production model. I'm not sure I saw that in it the same way. I probably saw something a little more homesteady having with an income of some sort.

Andy Chamberlin: Homesteading with an income, that's everybody's dream, right?

Jon Cohen: Not mine.

Andy Chamberlin: Not anymore.

Jon Cohen: No, it hasn't been for a long time. You asked me what I thought. I was sitting at the beginning what I would've said. Nope. I remember the day Mike Gia brought me here. This is part of the story we haven't talked about a whole lot, but I had a farm viability plan. We were at the end of the five years of that plan of which, at that point, we were going to buy something. I wasn't financially in a position to buy anything, plus it didn't matter, I was still at that point. Mike Gia called me up and said to me, "Have you seen the RFP on the property in Weathersfield?" I said, "How many acres?" He said 70 something, 74, I think. I said, "Which property?" We talked about this and I said, "That property, I called about that a couple years back. They want a million dollars." He said, this isn't about what the cost of the property. What this is about is going through the process, so you begin to understand what it takes to buy a property.

It's through the land trust. Some of these things get worked out, it may not be the property for you. Your job is to go through the process at five years, that's the next step. I said, "Okay." He said, "All right. We're going to go up and look in it. They're having an open house on Saturday. We can go up and walk the property and look at the land." I said, "Okay."

Andy Chamberlin: Here we are.

Jon Cohen: That was a fascinating journey of its own. Now, there, I would say is, if you are dealing with the land trust, have a farmer mentor you through the process not the land trust, and I am adamant about that. Not that they didn't do good by me, but there were things that were not directly in my interest as the farmer that should have been handled differently.

Andy Chamberlin: Because they had a conservation mindset?

Jon Cohen: Because ... well, that's an interesting question. I've never analyzed their position on it. No, because their mindset is one of bringing as many parties to the table as possible, so that it's a community endeavor. This didn't need another party involved in this. It would've been fine on my own. Leave that there. I just can't

say more about that. But I think that's part of it and the cost that was incurred as a result of some of the legal ramifications of that component. That's an interesting piece, which I just think it's a part of the puzzle.

Andy Chamberlin: You didn't have a farmer mentor at the time?

Jon Cohen: No.

Andy Chamberlin: I see.

Jon Cohen: They don't connect you with something like that. Would've been helpful. But I don't know that my scenario would have necessarily applied to anybody else. That's the problem. I ended up having to assume a lot of the legal costs of the negotiation because I was the owner of the property. There's some challenges to that because the flip side to that is I wouldn't be here without the land trust. Do you know what I mean?

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: But I didn't have a lot of money to spend to begin with, and I ended up having to pay these legal bills that were part of trying to figure out the ramifications of the decision the land trust have made. On behalf of me as the owner of the property, because they can't do it, they never become the owner of the property. It's a little complicated.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: That's another conversation of its own. Anyway, then what happened, just basically the rest of that story though is, I just kept taking the next step. We found ourselves owning a property that I had \$5,000 in the bank. I had the infrastructure to farm 12 acres and no cold storage and just didn't have any of the things that were going to be needed to make this happen. I had the land and none of the infrastructure. Here we are 12 years later, and that's what we've been doing is building the infrastructure. I'm 60 now, so I started this at 48. My son will have it much better off than I did because he's got the infrastructure and debt's been serviced, systems are in place. You can't necessarily speak to that, but that was our journey in this.

Andy Chamberlin: Okay. Obviously, this is not your first career, so what made you want to get into farming?

Jon Cohen: That's interesting. In 1986, I was still working on a Master's in Counseling. I leased to own a 23-acre farm in Durham, New Hampshire. The endeavor was about producing food for ourselves. That's a whole another story, but basically, that became we had such an abundance of food that it was, "Okay, now what do we do here?" Then it was like, "Oh, let's sell some to the restaurants." "Oh, we'll do the farmer's market." "Oh! Wow, I really love this thing. Let's farm

more." This guy came next door, had a tractor, he turned over more land, we planted more. The next year I had two acres of vegetables and by the third year, I'm already on the board for New Hampshire.

Andy Chamberlin: You got sucked in.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. It was all about food production for ourselves. Same point, dual careers, I'm also at that point involved in doing mental health work, therapy work. Did both for about seven or eight years. Stopped farming for about seven or eight years. In 2000, decided I was just wanted to do this, and in 2000, at that point, moved from Maryland to Vermont to return to farming in New England. That was my intention was to farm, so here we are 22 years later. Essentially 30 years later, but 22 years later.

Andy Chamberlin: Sounds like it was a passion move, you just enjoyed it.

Jon Cohen: Yeah. Yeah. Much more so than anything else I was doing. Just to be clear, in '91, when we were moving, my ex-wife got scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania where we we're moving to Pennsylvania, '91, '92. At that same time, before she got her scholarship, I had looked at three farms in Vermont. I was ready to go to do farming back then. It was more that I think there was this pause and I was always interested in like, "Okay, I'm on a farm and how can I include some therapy work at the same time?" It wasn't like I wanted to give that up, but I knew that's what I wanted to do. It was more that her journey took us somewhere we went and then I said, "Okay, that time's up." Time to return to what I wanted to do. But clearly, passionate about it.

I think being where I am now and knowing what I know now, this is fine. I just had no idea what it really took to make this happen. I remember being here the first year or two and going, "What the fuck did I do? What did I do? This is so far beyond me. I can't even imagine what this takes to make it work." But again, there's a lot of support out there. FSA said, "We can reschedule loans, we can do this. There's some grant money. We can help you build a storage here," and that's just happened over and over again. The systems that we often complain about certainly have supported my and I think they support agriculture quite a bit in a lot of ways. I'm not sure what the cost is to us at the end, but at the moment, I think that it has served me, it has served this operation quite a bit.

Whether it was a land trust helping us buy the property or Castanea foundation, helping us get equipment, or Verne being an unbelievable resource in things, or Paul Harlow being there, or then the Department of Ag giving us a grant to build an \$18,000 storage facility to them that we've built so far, or some money to buy just pieces of equipment that have been integral to what we do, or actually even people in the community loaning us slow money at times. I had somebody who was very generous at a 2% loan who loaned us 5%. Sorry, loaned US money, yeah, quite a bit that we paid back. I have anything but gratitude.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah. It's time for our special segment. What's in your pocket? What's in your pocket? What do you not leave the house with in the morning?

Jon Cohen: Oh, interesting. My pockets are almost always ... pocket knife. A gift from my partner every day. There it is.

Andy Chamberlin: Nice.

Jon Cohen: My wallet, which basically, you talk about men's wallets. That's it.

Andy Chamberlin: Nice. Thin.

Jon Cohen: No credit cards. Haven't had a credit card in 25 years.

Andy Chamberlin: Not at all, huh?

Jon Cohen: What's that?

Andy Chamberlin: You don't Have one?

Jon Cohen: Don't do credit. The whole thing is just as little debt as possible. Some cash and my phone.

Andy Chamberlin: It's pretty light.

Jon Cohen: That's how I travel. That's it. That's it. I fished around in the back of my truck. That, for me, I would say in the past five, now that we've gotten to a point, so come, we'll walk a little bit.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Jon Cohen: This is the piece of equipment that really matters. I would say now that we've hidden some modicum of success, I put in probably a good 16 years of just grind. I would say in the past five years, we have come to a little bit of, "We're okay." We're okay that we're covering our bills, I think we're going from year-to-year, we're not doing terrible, so this is it. That's sanity.

Andy Chamberlin: As we're walking and talking, we get close to a shed near his house and he points out a kayak. I'll just describe this kayak is, it's good size, there's a paddle on it, it's got footholds, a cup holder, placemount your phone, comfy seat, you can tell that this kayak is just set up for relaxation.

Jon Cohen: Trying to get out on that as much as possible. I also now have a motorboat that my dad passed away left me some money. I bought a motorboat, in every January, I've been going down to ... every January, going down to Florida and going fishing for two weeks in the Everglades. Yeah, we're doing okay, and I

think it's that learning curve of what does it take and we're islands. It's so nice that one day, I think two years ago, Mark and-

Andy Chamberlin: Christa.

Jon Cohen: Christa, came down here for some reason in the area. We walked and talked and they looked at my stuff. I'd love to go up to their farm because it was just like, they, so much, I think just to see what other people do. We don't get that enough in the middle of a season or some point to what are you doing? Oh, wow! What do you doing? We're making it up as we go along so much. I think, even I don't have time to watch it, like you might say, "Wow, there's all these," what do you call what you do?

Andy Chamberlin: Podcast?

Jon Cohen: Podcast. I don't have time to watch them. When I sit down at night, I can't sit down and something and concentrate. I'm going to read up about Colorado potato beetles because it's a necessity. But I'm not going to start watching podcasts, I might do it in the wintertime or it might come up on a search somewhere, or if I was looking for something or it might come at glimmer, it's like snippets. Snippets are really good for me, but having to actually sit through a whole article, it's like I got a stack of Grower magazine inside. I've read the past freaking four months of them, they're sitting there, and I'm probably, I'm not going to read them, maybe I'll read them next winter. But it just doesn't happen. By the time I'm ready to get there, I'm done. It's not happening.

Bottom line is that, it's just taking some time, it's huge. We don't get a lot of time, and the smaller we are, I think the workers, I watch Karen and Ryan and how they've shifted a little bit and my hat was off to them. It's working for them. However, it's working for them. We don't get sit in judgment, "Well, maybe they do this and this," Who cares? They made it happen. They're living their lives. We get one pass through, in my opinion, and just go sit back and honor that and say, "God, good for them, good for us."

Andy Chamberlin: How do you get past that mental block of, "Ah, I could be out cultivating because there's always something to do on the farm, and I got to go on vacation"?

Jon Cohen: I'm not going to do that. I don't know the answer. I think it's experience of like, "Wow, we let that go last year and we did okay." It's like, "Oh my God, we lost four acres of our six acres of potatoes last year and we still made money. Holy shit!" I think you have to have it some experience to base it on. Maybe it's like, I watched Paul Harlow after the Katrina floods or whatever the floods were, and he is still in business and he lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Well, he made it happen somehow. I don't know the answer to that. I think that it's ... I think a lot of it is experience. I think it's just having been through something and

acts of faith. We plant seeds, that's an act of faith. We grow vegetables, that's an act of faith.

I've got out there, so every one of those that were in three broccoli plantings, so that's 40, 100, 160, which is 16,000 broccoli plants. Our experience for the past three years is we've lost our broccoli plantings every single time. We're still planting again. We're now treating with oxidate and copper. We had some success last year. I see no black spot on anything out there. Good growing season. Well, it worked. Will it work again next year? Not necessarily. We also have 80,000 heads of lettuce planned for this year. Will that work? Hopefully. If that doesn't. I think it's more of that diversity of planting and I think you keep pushing ahead. It's like people come here and say, "Oh my god, you're taking all that to compost? I'm like, "I don't know."

Andy Chamberlin: Diversity of planning, some people have focused down a bit and they're like just doing roots or fall storage crops or whatever. How many crops are you growing and have you narrowed that down?

Jon Cohen: Yes. we grow at least two less than we used to. I think where it's less is, I would say that we grow, can't knock our carrots, can't knock our onions, can't knock our beets. That's a big portion of it. We don't do the direct seeded stuff as much, so we're only doing radish, cilantro and green beans, in addition to the three that I mentioned. That was a big narrow down. We don't do dill anymore. We don't do baby bokchoy, they weren't making money and we don't need them. We'll do spring bokchoy, we'll do fall bokchoy, we'll do some winter bokchoy, some patsoy, done. We don't do as much field greens. We try to keep up with some production of arugula every week, every week, no more. We just don't do it anymore. Somebody else will pick that up.

But brassicas are big. We've expanded our spring and fall plantings of cabbage. We're still pushing broccoli because if we can get our broccoli, it's a big crop for us and we're keeping our fingers crossed. I don't know if it'll continue. Kale is a big one, lettuce is a big one. We grow four varieties lettuce, five actually, but four, we used to grow seven. I'm not sure we're growing less. We're growing more peppers than we ever grew, but same variety, it's just more volume. I don't know if we've scaled down. We expanded this whole flower thing, which we're probably not going to continue a whole lot of. That's I think where we are.

The answer to your question is an interesting one because the farm stand has been hard to staff. It does fairly well. It probably makes about 10% of our income or so. But if I didn't have to deal with it would be a gamechanger for me. That means I no longer have to worry about anything on the weekends at all. That means I never have to worry about hiring somebody to do that stuff. That's something we've talked about. My son says, "Leave it running," he'll start taking it over, so we're considering that. Things are in flux a little bit in that regard, but we're still doing the same rotation, same crops. We have so much land, we're doing the same rotations for the most part. Hasn't changed a whole lot.

Variety's changed. We're going to probably pull one of our tomato varieties, we don't love it anymore thing. We're not just doing, it's beginning to end.

We're still doing asparagus to winter squash or potatoes the whole way through. We do more. We probably increased our kale this year by 30%. We last year increased our lettuce by 40% and sold 60% more. Some of it's shifting too. Things aren't shifting by crops so much, I think it's shifting a little bit by demand. I will tell you that right now, our demand is exceeding our supply in a lot of places, which is not bad. That's what I got for you. Enough story for your-

Andy Chamberlin:

No, that's excellent. Thank you so much. I'm Andy Chamberlain and that was the Farmer's Share. Be sure to follow us on Instagram, subscribe to our YouTube channel, so you don't miss out on any free bonus content, or visit thefarmersshare.com to check out more episodes and interviews. This podcast is supported by the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association and the Ag Engineering program of the University of Vermont Extension. Thank you for listening.