

Andy Chamberlin: I'm your host, Andy Chamberlain, 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 farmers are building their business to balance success across people, profits, and our planet. Today's episode visits Amherst, Massachusetts, where we visit Kerry Taylor of Brookfield Farm. She shares with us [00:00:30] the background of how they run over a 500 member CSA, incorporate many interns for their weeding crew, as well as sharing the details on the challenging side of being a farmer and a new manager of a farm that's been in the community for so many years.

Kerry Taylor: My name is Kerry Taylor and we're at Brookfield Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts. And Brookfield Farm is a [00:01:00] long-running CSA that was founded in 1986. The farm is about 40 acres tillable of mixed vegetables, we have cattle, and we have feeder pigs, in the summer. We run an apprenticeship program, we have two apprentices, two managers, and an assistant [00:01:30] manager, plus a bookkeeper and administrator. And then peak season, we have a weeder crew of local students of about 10 to 15.

Andy Chamberlin: And this is The Farmer's Share.

Kerry Taylor: I don't know if you've heard about Brookfield Farm?

Andy Chamberlin: No, I virtually know nothing.

Kerry Taylor: Okay.

Andy Chamberlin: Give me a little intro or background.

Kerry Taylor: Brookfield started in 1986. It was a [00:02:00] early adopter of the CSA model, you could say. The farm was founded by this family of four the As who put this land into a trust, it's owned by a nonprofit. And then the nonprofit is the Biodynamic Farmland Conservation Trust and then Brookfield Farm [00:02:30] is the sole project of the trust. And the mission of the trust, is to preserve this land as farmland and educate the community through the activities of the farm around sustainable agricultural practices, that sort of stuff.

The main project of Brookfield Farm is the CSA. The farm is only [00:03:00] a CSA, we serve the local community and then we have Boston jobs, as well. We do about 525 summer shares, and that's made up of a full share and then senior shares is another thing, they started a couple of years ago, as they saw the shareholder base aging. [00:03:30] They added that as an option, to be able to keep those aging shareholders in the community.

Andy Chamberlin: Is that at a lower price point or what makes it different?

Kerry Taylor: It's less food. It's exactly half the amount of food. And obviously it's also a lower price point because it's half the share size. It's slightly more than it would cost for half a

share to cover overhead and all [00:04:00] of that. And because it causes slight inflation in share sizes, because you only have one head of lettuce that week, can't split that in half. The farm has grown and changed a lot. The previous managers were here for 26 years. And my husband and myself took over in 2021 from them. The farm is in transition I would say [00:04:30] to us as new managers.

And the past two years we've really just been acquainting ourselves with the systems and the problems and the opportunities that this farm offers. I was an apprentice here in 2007 to 2012, I worked here as an apprentice and then assistant manager. Met my husband, Max, [00:05:00] who was working at another farm in the area. And then we married actually here on the farm and then started our own farm in Connecticut where we found land. And then we heard the managers were retiring. We came back to take over.

Andy Chamberlin: What made you decide to leave that farm and move up here?

Kerry Taylor: Partly personal. We love the area. We would come up here to vacation because we still have a lot [00:05:30] of connections. Also, my mom lives in town and she has dementia, I wanted to be closer.

Andy Chamberlin: Fair enough.

Kerry Taylor: And we just really love the area. We have the connection to the farm, obviously having married here and me having been here. And then our other farm, we did not love the area. And [00:06:00] there were some other issues down there with our land base we hadn't really found. We were under a lease situation with four different landlords, which is not dissimilar from up here. We have a lot of different lease parcels as well. But it was looking like it was time to move for various reasons. And [00:06:30] that's how we ended up here.

Andy Chamberlin: Location, family. That makes sense.

Kerry Taylor: Location, location, location. We're really happy to be back. Our farm was created in the likeness of the Brookfield model. We were primarily CSA but also had wholesale. We had done farmer's markets, but our CSA was very much modeled as this one is. We were pretty comfortable stepping back [00:07:00] into the role. Although our CSA was a bit smaller, like 300 shares year round. We looked at it as a professional development opportunity to come here. There's some big differences in that it's a nonprofit. We were a partnership before, [00:07:30] that's pretty different. But fortunately again, I had five years of experience, I already knew to some degree what that entailed in terms of being a board and reporting and all that jazz.

Andy Chamberlin: There's a lot of similarities there.

Kerry Taylor: Totally. Another element of this farm that's different is there's a long-standing apprenticeship program. It's been running forever. We took that on and that's pretty new for us.

Andy Chamberlin: [00:08:00] Are those apprentices paid or is it thought of more as a training opportunity?

Kerry Taylor: It's paid, a paid training opportunity. We all live right there, adjacent to the farm.

Andy Chamberlin: That's convenient. What's your crew size?

Kerry Taylor: We have our assistant manager, came up with us from Connecticut. We have three managers, two apprentices. This year, we have a return part-time crew member from last year. [00:08:30] We have a bookkeeper who's been here for a long time, she carries a lot of that historical information because there's a lot of historical information to be known. It's a lot different than buying a business in that there's history, the transfer is different. We actually sold our business to our assistant manager down there. And that was a much cleaner, [00:09:00] this is over new business starting, except she did carry on our CSA. Anyway, our bookkeeper is our administrator, she takes care of all the financial management plus a lot of the administrative stuff, managing the CSA memberships that come in and filing the non-profit stuff for the state.

And she does a million different things, which is great. And then [00:09:30] on top of that, we have a part-time weeder crew made of local college students and high schoolers who come on at the end of May. And that's a gaggle, as many as I can get.

Andy Chamberlin: The more, the merrier.

Kerry Taylor: Gaggle of 12 or so, 12 to 15. But it's a pretty loosely flexible thing. They can come any days of the week throughout the season. Generally we [00:10:00] hope for about 10 people a day. We don't always get that.

Andy Chamberlin: That's quite a few.

Kerry Taylor: Get to gaggle and they just weed the crops. And then if we need help harvesting or other child thing, they'll jump into that.

Andy Chamberlin: I'm sure they're happy to help with something.

Kerry Taylor: Take a break from the kneeling on the ground. I think that's all our crew. Then we contract out what mechanical stuff Max can't do, we'll send out to mechanics and that's it. And then we get a lot [00:10:30] of volunteers. That's part of our outreach. We have people come on Mondays, work in the greenhouse. And that's also our board of directors, we have 11 people on our board and they do the oversight, budgetary oversight and programmatic oversight, fairly hands off unless we say, "We need help with this thing." And then some fundraising work [00:11:00] as

needed, advisory role. At home here, depends on how you measure, it's about, I want to say eight tillable acres. Because the field over there, it's broken up by this neighbor, but there's a field over there and then a bunch of forests. It's like a hundred and 50 or so acres, including the forest, which has some trails on it. But most of [00:11:30] our tillable land is all over town.

We have about, 10 tillable acres, about a mile away that way. And they purchased that before we arrived. That's just come into cultivation last year. We don't have water there yet. I'm working with NRCS. That's pretty dicey.

Andy Chamberlin: Is the power there?

Kerry Taylor: No. It has lines. It's a panhandle [00:12:00] field. It's a long way from the lines to where we will put the well, but the design that NRCS came up with is we can just drop up. It's an excavated well based upon test diggings. It's a process. Hopefully we can get that in the summer, but not in time. Maybe for the fall we'll have water. I really hope. Last year was really dry, we did plant and put corn and [00:12:30] winter squash in and then we bailed for fall brassicas because it was, I don't know about you guys, we were really dry here. Hopefully we'll get that. And then we have 1, 2, 3 lease properties that way of about 25 acres or so, 20 acres. We have cows on pasture. 20 tillable and then about 25 pasture. [00:13:00] And that's a mix of irrigatable and not irrigatable. It's wild. When we came, we had a record wet and last year was record dry. This year's like perfection.

Andy Chamberlin: It'll be the average right in the middle.

Kerry Taylor: I really hope so. I think that's all our land base and activities. We buy in pigs that come here at [00:13:30] the home farm, just feeder for the summer season to the shareholders to look at and eat them. Our CSA is June to the right before Thanksgiving, it's about 24 weeks. This main home farm is primarily pick your own. This garden, we have a lot of events for our shareholders, we'll have a planting day next weekend. [00:14:00] And this will be flowers.

Andy Chamberlin: And shareholders come plant?

Kerry Taylor: Exactly. We'll fill this up with zinnia's. The raised garden was a project of a shareholder who had a daughter in a wheelchair and they wanted to put it in accessible beds. That's where that came from. And we'll plant that with pick your own crops for people who can't make their way out to the field.

[00:14:30] And we have a backyard, which gets very well-used on Saturday morning shares, the play stuff.

Andy Chamberlin: Is it on farm pickup for the CSA?

Kerry Taylor: On farm pickup, yeah. On farm, we have three pickups a week here, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday morning. And that allows people to do whatever. Pick your own is in

season. [00:15:00] I can show you the shot. It's a mess. We're in winter mode. Everything, as you can see, we had a tractor go down with bad tires. It's fixed now but it took forever. Anyway, we just built this cooler.

Andy Chamberlin: That's beautiful.

Kerry Taylor: Which is exciting. Massachusetts has this food security infrastructure grant. Last year I got a grant to put that in, [00:15:30] partly because more space is always better. I'll just fill it up. Our root cellar is passively cooled, we have a root cellar, which I can show you. And passive cooling does not work anymore because it doesn't get cold right in the fall. I can't get it to where it needs to be when we start to harvest. [00:16:00] Part of this was to serve as a backup so we can start harvesting on time, because otherwise you end up, we would be in October, we can't do anything, November, maybe we can get our potatoes in. It's dicey. We put this in as a stop gap, partly for that reason. Also, just as backup cooling to our primary cooler. I don't know how people live with one cooler [00:16:30] alone. It's scary.

Andy Chamberlin: Risky.

Kerry Taylor: It's risky. But then also just additional cooling space so we can pop in our melons or if we have bulk harvest, pop them in there. This barn was built, God, I don't know, at the time, it was very modern. People were like, "Wow." And of course, now everything's different.

Andy Chamberlin: Learned some things.

Kerry Taylor: Now everyone's all dairy board and stuff. Maybe that's on our [00:17:00] project list. But these doors come up, the truck's back in and we just wash right in these high risk containers.

And then the cooler's here. You just load into the cooler.

Andy Chamberlin: Concrete benches, that's creative.

Kerry Taylor: I hate them.

Andy Chamberlin: Do you?

Kerry Taylor: Yes. I hate them. I want to to dump all them.

Andy Chamberlin: They're durable. They aren't going anywhere if they're falling apart.

Kerry Taylor: They're durable but they're wrong, they're only [00:17:30] a good height for very few people because we're washing in these. For most people you're like, and they're not adjustable.

Andy Chamberlin: Not at all.

Kerry Taylor: At the time people thought that was cool, but now we know. When they built it, that was in the olden days, there wasn't a lot of this sort of stuff happening. When did they build it? 90. The small farm thing hadn't really taken off.

Andy Chamberlin: 20 to 30 years [00:18:00] since this was put together.

Kerry Taylor: This whole farm is that way. It's interesting to inherit it and look at how times have changed with the apprenticeship program. It's not what it used to be in terms of now there's so many options for people to learn about farming. We're looking at how to modernize a lot of things.

Andy Chamberlin: Are you losing interest in the apprenticeship?

Kerry Taylor: There's less interest and more competition. [00:18:30] There's a lot of farms out there, you don't have to go far. Trying to figure out is it relevant? How do we make it more relevant to the youth of today? It works. Here's our root cellar. Do you want to see it?

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah.

Kerry Taylor: It's cool.

Andy Chamberlin: Absolutely.

Kerry Taylor: Ideally at some point we'll get active cooling [00:19:00] down here, but prioritizing the projects. It's pretty sizable.

Andy Chamberlin: Yeah, it is.

Kerry Taylor: And it's pretty great. We just have our winter share down here. We load it up. This dumbwaiter comes from up there.

Andy Chamberlin: Not too many farms have those either.

Kerry Taylor: That was some crazy thing. I don't know how they made that up. It is unusual. But, we [00:19:30] just packed this up and then set up the winter share here and self-serve in the winter.

Andy Chamberlin: That's cool. People fill their boxes right out of here and this is where all the crops stored.

Kerry Taylor: Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: You're just turn around, grab a crate and say, "Here's the next one."

Kerry Taylor: We don't staff it, but we do have to monitor it. And it's pretty cool. I'm into it. The rodents are a problem in the insulation. And I have a feeling [00:20:00] our value has gone down. You can see, I think they just didn't build it tight. They get in everything, but this area's not tight to rodents off of the stairs. But that's my biggest challenge is rodent control. And then funny enough, they didn't insulate these beans and this is our cooler, we get a ton of condensation off of those in the summer. [00:20:30] That's a challenge putting in the cooling is we're going to have to insulate everything. The walls aren't insulated, the floor's not insulated. But that will just be what it'll be.

Andy Chamberlin: That's not the end of the world. Moisture management is a huge challenge. Because Chris discovered somebody else's cooler who it was built well, they spray foamed it and they dairy boarded it and they were like, "Spray [00:21:00] foam. Good to go." Well, it was only a couple of years old and they realized it was raining in there and it was delaminating. And where the dairy board came down, there was a little bit of gapage between the wall and the sill. And moisture could get behind the drywall and the dairy board into the air cavity between the insulation. And it was raining inside the walls.

Kerry Taylor: Oh, God.

Andy Chamberlin: Like this, because it wasn't a full [00:21:30] cavity, there was airspace in there. And that needed to be fully rebuilt.

Kerry Taylor: Anyway, this is our showroom. This is not how it looks in winter mode. All this junk gets cleaned up. And these tables, we just put legs on the tables and have them set out. And then we have products, local products for sale. This is Glasdoor, this is where they're displayed. [00:22:00] And we have meat from our animals or other local farmers.

Andy Chamberlin: I like all the natural light in there.

Kerry Taylor: There's a nice barn for sure. There's this back porch. People like to hang out. People, they love it. It's pretty sweet. Kids hang out.

Andy Chamberlin: It's casual atmosphere.

Kerry Taylor: It's casual, yes. And that's a showroom. Equipment, [00:22:30] then we have a storage bay and toolroom, and then a workshop.

Andy Chamberlin: What is this piece of equipment?

Kerry Taylor: That is a potato cutter.

Andy Chamberlin: Potato cutter?

Kerry Taylor: Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin: Neat.

Kerry Taylor: They sit here and they put the potatoes here and then they ride up and these blades slice them and then they fall into your buckets or lugs or whatever.

Andy Chamberlin: To split them up before planting?

Kerry Taylor: Yeah. There's a lot of potatoes [00:23:00] in the area, it came out of some potato barn somewhere.

Andy Chamberlin: That's neat.

Kerry Taylor: That's great. It's pretty fast. And one person can cut all the potatoes in a day or two, two acres. My husband's the crop keeper tracker.

Andy Chamberlin: I see bioplastic. Do you like using that?

Kerry Taylor: We do. We're not certified. We use that and it's so much better than pulling plastic. It's so hard to get crews [00:23:30] to pull plastic quickly. Everyone just hates it and gets bogged down.

Andy Chamberlin: Let's not take all that.

Kerry Taylor: That's so much better. We've switched up. I think we used BioTelo but it fell apart, at our old farm especially. I don't know. Never really figured out why.

Andy Chamberlin: I've heard the soil type makes a big difference.

Kerry Taylor: And that must be it. No one has ever been able, they were like, "You must be laying it too tight." And we tried everything [00:24:00] and we would see some crazy stuff. We would see it looked like if someone took a laser and cut it at the soil level and it would just degrade right at the soil level.

Andy Chamberlin: Hard to bury it if it's just going.

Kerry Taylor: It was terrible. No, it was buried. And then literally someone cut it and then it would come off the bed. It was so strange. And we'd have to just go and pile soil. I don't know. That was at our old farm. Totally different. Super rocky. Probably [00:24:30] didn't have anything to do with it, but it's strange. And we haven't seen that here. But then we switched it up to little more durable degradable one. You get some trash, but it goes, eventually.

Andy Chamberlin: It does what it's supposed to do.

Kerry Taylor: And we use that just for hot crops, eggplant, peppers. We actually do our onions on plastic. We really like that. Our equipment's all over. We have [00:25:00] one, two, our tillage tractor is at John Deere. We primary tillage is triple bottom plow. We just

bought a new harrow this year. That old harrow down there was so old and time to replace. That was an exciting acquisition. We followed by this harrow. And then our bed preparation [00:25:30] is a Perfecta that is set up so it makes beds. We actually bought a Kubota, I don't remember the numbers. A bigger tractor, multipurpose, has a creeper gear, but can also plow and harrow. But that was CFAP money, which is pretty fantastic. And then we have a couple different utility type tractors.

We have a Deutz, [00:26:00] our other John Deere, same build as that one is just coming back to the shop. We have three tractors go down.

Andy Chamberlin: Oh, geez.

Kerry Taylor: We were without our tillage tractor, virtually the Kubota, which is newer. Really got us through the spring. But then we have these cultivating tractors. The 265, K265, John Deere 900 is heavily modified. We love that tractor. It's [00:26:30] modified so our beds are six fit and then that high, that platform.

Andy Chamberlin: It's up there.

Kerry Taylor: It's pretty funny. This is our electric G. We did the conversion. I heard dad actually did the conversion on that one. And then we have a gas G that's out in the field. Our gas G is, we have the basket eater on that. For tools, we have a flame weeder, we have some belly mounted shanks that you can see on [00:27:00] case. INJ on the back of that. We use the 900 for, obviously, very high clearance work, spraying. It actually has a fruit spreader on it right now or drop spreader.

Andy Chamberlin: That's nice and tall.

Kerry Taylor: That was a gem we found. I think it came from Rooters, RIP Rooters. We have a finger [00:27:30] set up that goes on the belly of the G. It's over there from Tumbler. We had set it up at a old farm and we brought it with us. We set it up specifically for rocky soils. It's got a lot of bounce and springs on it. But here we have the pack cultivator, the fingers on that thing. We haven't really been using it. That's pretty great. We've found the finger weeders to be pretty [00:28:00] transformational for weeding. We tend to use a flamer for stale bedding. The flame weeders come in really handy. This farm has very intense weed population and some of the fields have really intense nutsedge. And what do you do with nutsedge?

We planted parsnips into these beds. Our rotations are, it's hard to fit everything in. We [00:28:30] had to go in with parsnips into some nutsedge beds and we actually managed with a flame weeder, we just kept hitting it and it worked. It was every day we were flaming. And then nutsedge, it would put up new stuff, flame it. We just kept hitting it and it actually worked pretty well to keep it hit back until the seeds could come up [00:29:00] and we had a good crop. That was pretty cool because what else are you going to do in nutsedge? That was cool.

Andy Chamberlin: How many crops are you growing with CSA? I think it's probably a lot.

Kerry Taylor: How do you quantify that variety?

Andy Chamberlin: Exactly.

Kerry Taylor: Slantings, I actually have never counted.

Andy Chamberlin: The full gamut we'll say.

Kerry Taylor: The lot. I think it's like 23 seedings of greens. [00:29:30] I think he cut that back. But still it's a lot. It's a lot.

Andy Chamberlin: It is.

Kerry Taylor: It's a typical diversified farm. We try and group things by growing cult, what do you call it? Celery and celeriac this year. Because they all will be cultivated the same way. And they're all in the three row [00:30:00] spacing, that can help. It's hard because we're all over town, you're moving your equipment all over the place. If you can group it like that, but then we're also on a five-year rotation generally with families. That's going to influence where you put stuff.

And our fields are pretty diverse as well in terms of drainage. It's a real puzzle here. It's very wet stuff and some very dry [00:30:30] stuff. And it's nutty.

Andy Chamberlin: It's tricky.

Kerry Taylor: At different levels of irrigation because we have here, we have a home, we have a well and an aluminum pipe and drip plus this gun that I brought with me.

Andy Chamberlin: The water reel over there?

Kerry Taylor: Yeah. And some of our land is a good 20 acres, I want to say. We have a pond and then drip or pipe or we also have a traveling reel over there. [00:31:00] And then everything else is irrigated right now. We'll see. And then we have, our greenhouse for our ceiling production, we started a seeding cell here to raise money for education programs.

We're having that in two weeks. It's nice because it brings people out to the farm. Got to these tunnels are [00:31:30] we do tomatoes. And then that uncovered one, we'll put basil in now that diamond oil is a problem down here. And that works really good. That's just our basil house. And with a new improved varieties. Very long season. They're great. Long season for basil last year.

Andy Chamberlin: For your plant cells, is that mostly vegetable starts or all kinds of flowers and things too?

Kerry Taylor: People really like unusual flowers. Herbs are really popular [00:32:00] flowers, not bedding plants, not popular. And then vegetables. And then we have 10 events or 11 events planned for the year, for our shareholders. We have an artist who does crafts and art stuff during the events. Let's see, we have potlucks and music, and then we have a corn roast [00:32:30] and the pumpkin pick, of course. I have popular pumpkin picking and decorating and a potato dig in the fall with the potato roses. We have an annual harvest dinner at the local church.

Andy Chamberlin: Now, when I make these farm visits, it's usually at a time when the farm is not super busy, which often means that it's not necessarily presentable to the public. When I asked about checking out the greenhouse, there was some hesitation as it wasn't [00:33:00] in tiptop shape, we'll call it, especially with a little bit of overwatering as the student apprentices are learning. But we went in to check things out and that's where the conversation got a little deeper.

What's the time when you felt really challenged farming?

Kerry Taylor: God, all the time. We had a baby in the NICU. My son was born [00:33:30] at 26 weeks, he was in the hospital for 112 days. I just told this story at a story slam, an agricultural story slam. That was pretty challenging since we were splitting our time and the hospital's an hour away.

Andy Chamberlin: How long ago was that?

Kerry Taylor: He's seven now. I would say this past year, I think the transition to a new [00:34:00] farm has been extremely challenging to the extent that I think it's the first time I thought about quitting.

Andy Chamberlin: Really?

Kerry Taylor: Yeah. Our first year was record wet and taking over this operation was a lot of unexpected things that we were learning about. And last year was really challenging. Even these past few years, but especially last year because [00:34:30] labor markets are shifting so much. And like everyone, we were super shorthanded and we ran the farm with three people until the end of May. It was crazy. I've never worked so hard last year. I haven't worked so hard since our first year farming. I think last year was just brutal labor wise. And then everything's shifting so much right now. I feel like the market's really volatile. Climate change is really volatile. [00:35:00] I'd say these past two years have been very challenging career-wise.

We got our old business to a great point. We weren't working weekends. We had it exactly where we wanted it to be. And then we left that for a new career experience.

Andy Chamberlin: Right. [00:35:30] You're considering quitting, what kept you from not?

Kerry Taylor: God, what else would you do? It has its upsides and downsides. Why didn't we? I don't know. Because farming's pretty cool. I swore off cubicles.

Andy Chamberlin: Stupid addiction to farming.

Kerry Taylor: [00:36:00] I know. Why didn't we quit? I'm giving it five years. I feel like our old farm, not that I'm saying Brookfield's struggling, but our old farm, when we started it, we had taken over a situation and renovated it into a functional farm. And I think it takes five years to get to where you want to be. I'm giving it five years to get us to where we want to be again.

Andy Chamberlin: That's a safe number. You'll have a good idea whether it's trending [00:36:30] in the right direction or not.

Kerry Taylor: Or to make it feel like our farm. Right now, we feel like we're living in someone's house because people, farms take on the personality of the manager.

Andy Chamberlin: You got the historical shoes to fill, so to speak.

Kerry Taylor: And then make it comfortable for us. It's just part of the transition that's challenging.

Andy Chamberlin: If [00:37:00] these first couple years of transition have been, we'll say challenge. What was a really successful time in your farming career or something that made you feel really good?

Kerry Taylor: Wrapped up into those challenges, there have been a lot of successes. Even though it was such a challenging year last year, it was very good financially. We just look at the numbers, [00:37:30] you'd be like, "Oh wow, that was a fantastic year." But numbers don't reveal everything. But that's pretty great if you have good numbers.

Andy Chamberlin: That's good.

Kerry Taylor: Even if it was a struggle.

Andy Chamberlin: Struggle physically, mentally, all the above?

Kerry Taylor: Physically and mentally.

Andy Chamberlin: What are a couple of things that you're changing this year from last?

Kerry Taylor: [00:38:00] We are trying to not have the crew work on Saturdays, having a Saturday share makes that challenging. But we have hired someone to do the share and we've set up a structure of support for her that will make everyone Monday through Friday on the main crew. We're looking forward to that. Of course we work, but now with the crew and then the apprentices, the assistant manager won't have to work. And I think that's really [00:38:30] trying to prevent burnout. I think that'll go a long way. We're looking forward to that. We made some other changes. Of course increasing wages, prevailing wages here are 16 to 18 an hour. I'm working really hard to get our wages up and being competitive in that

way. And then just cutting back more hours. Our apprentices are in the share but I want their [00:39:00] work days on those days to just be the share, which is still a seven and a half hour day.

But I'm looking forward to those changes. What else have we done? Max would tell you all the cropping changes. I think big thing is trying to get water is so key. Taking these big projects and getting that project done is my number one concern. I don't know if I should record this. [00:39:30] One other thing, we've done some holistic farm planning with the organization down here called SEESA. It's a great farmer support organization. We do a lot of marketing and also technical support.

We've worked with them to try and wrap our head around this farm and figure out what our priorities are. One of those things is buying this new harrow and equipment improvements. [00:40:00] And that'll be a huge quality of life improvement because other harrows just really couldn't drive quickly on the road and break all the time. These quality of life equipment improvements are huge because we've been here two years. Your first year you're just trying to get by and learning so much. The second year, well, again.

Andy Chamberlin: The site, the infrastructure, the soils, the waters.

Kerry Taylor: The first two years [00:40:30] you were just collecting information and again, trying to survive.

Now I feel like we're in a year where we can start. We also were very conservative on spending money infrastructure wise because we wanted to assess and see where we're at. I feel like this is the year we're going to start to make decisions. Partly that's looking at, for example, the cow herd. When you have cows and it's not your [00:41:00] bread and butter, everyone wants to get rid of them and they're not wrong. Looking at maybe moving away from a breeding herd to just buying in some steers and then slaughtering. And that's another area of infrastructure challenge, drainage, again, equipment. They're not at our home farms. We have to go out and feed them every four days. And in the winter, how are you going to start a tractor where you don't have power [00:41:30] to plug in?

It becomes an infrastructure issue. And we don't want to be driving on the road from home to there in the middle of winter.

Andy Chamberlin: That's not great.

Kerry Taylor: Financially they lose us money. It seems like a no-brainer. But we have to get the community on board with that idea. It's an idea. Our compost area again is challenged. We have a combo-operation for just our own fields. We're looking at just [00:42:00] planning and addressing these issues that we have decided our priority this year or starting to address them. Finding money, grant writing, those sorts of things. And Max and I co-manage, we fortunately have done this for, we did it together for nine years before coming here.

Andy Chamberlin: That's probably good.

Kerry Taylor: This is really helpful [00:42:30] because it's been pretty stressful. That's rare to have that experience. We've always divided responsibilities the same way. I'm livestock, he's crops, all things crops. He does the crop planting and all the fleet work for that. I do all the administrative junk, the financial reporting and board management.

Andy Chamberlin: [00:43:00] Coordination.

Kerry Taylor: Coordination, all of that, all the communications. That's my department, website. Basically, I do all the everything else, buildings and grounds. Max takes Max's, we play to our strengths. He's very good at getting stuff done when something's on. But I'm doing the meaty stuff, the day to day drudgery, maybe I shouldn't call it that. But the day to day constant [00:43:30] maintenance and stuff. And we split personnel, but that's the only thing we really split. We generally don't split and then we just take charge and trust each other to have taken care of their different areas. And that works for us. And we appoint people to our crew for our particular areas. It works for us fortunately.

Andy Chamberlin: Yes. Some people can't work with their spouse. [00:44:00] You're a special couple in order to make it work and play to your strengths.

Kerry Taylor: I don't know. We got lucky I guess. I don't know. There's really no other way to explain it. Of course we've worked a lot on it.

Andy Chamberlin: Ongoing.

Kerry Taylor: I do the greenhouse too. He doesn't know anything about this place.

Andy Chamberlin: Do you have any advice you'd give to a beginning farmer?

Kerry Taylor: Oh my God. Make sure you really farming. Learn as much as [00:44:30] you can before you start. Work on a farm for an extended period of time. The more you know and the more human capital you have, you cannot farm alone. You need as much information that you can gather from other people as possible. Because it requires so much knowledge and you cannot farm in a vacuum, in my opinion. [00:45:00] And then lean heavily on the people for advice. I call people all the time. I just talked to a friend of mine last night for a couple of hours on personnel stuff for her, she's having problems with her crew. And it's so nice to have people because the loneliest you will ever feel is farming. It will make you feel so alone because [00:45:30] it all comes down to you.

Andy Chamberlin: Is that other farming peers that you've made friends with that you can talk to?

Kerry Taylor: Yeah. Extension, organizational support from nonprofits or whatever, neighbors, mechanics, marketing, because you wear so many hats, depending on the kind

of farm you're starting, but most people are now starting direct marketing farms. And then if you're doing that [00:46:00] quantity of knowledge you need is extreme because you have to know how to do, normal businesses have people who are just doing one job. They're doing the marketing or they're doing the bookkeeping and you have to do 20 jobs. It's insane. It's an insane thing we do. I think really pay attention to your numbers. Start with good numbers, check your numbers regularly. Know where your money's going and where you're spending. [00:46:30] And if you're not spending time making money, you have to justify that.

Andy Chamberlin: Selling herbs to pay for the cows?

Kerry Taylor: You could justify the cow. We're biodynamic. You can't have a biodynamic farm if you're not channeling the cosmos through your animals, which is unquantifiable.

Andy Chamberlin: Part of the system which works together and it works in your CSA. I get it.

Kerry Taylor: Unquantifiable, but to a certain degree. But then, you have to [00:47:00] do your list.

Andy Chamberlin: It's got to pencil out.

Kerry Taylor: To make sure it's fulfilling the goals that you need to fulfill. I rely so much on my mentors too. Actually, the thing that I was most surprised about when I started a farm was how anxiety provoking it was. I really struggle with anxiety. I'm sure a lot of farmers do, but it is emotionally difficult and you have to learn how to sleep again. [00:47:30] But the amount of nights I wake up in the middle of the night is insane. And that really surprised me because I came from a farm here where the manager didn't really show those parts. I didn't understand the extreme degree of stress that farming has.

Andy Chamberlin: Was that different on this farm versus the last eight years in Connecticut?

Kerry Taylor: When I started my farm.

Andy Chamberlin: That anxiety was at [00:48:00] the beginning.

Kerry Taylor: My first year of farming, I was surprised at how I was not prepared for that, the emotional toll that farming took. Maybe it's just me. I don't know. I don't think so.

Andy Chamberlin: It's not just you.

Kerry Taylor: I don't think so. Get a therapist before you start farming.

Andy Chamberlin: How do you find mentors?

Kerry Taylor: I worked for them. [00:48:30] One of my favorite farmers, I stumbled upon farming after college and I worked for her. She gave me some of the most important advice

when I got pregnant. I don't see her very much, but conferences, find people who are doing what you like and then just latch onto them.

Andy Chamberlin: Reach out.

Kerry Taylor: Reach out. I can say most of [00:49:00] my mentors I worked for or met through farming, other farmers, apprentices, former apprentices here have helped me so much. Gave me plant sale advice. And then Paul Bucciaglia, great farmer in Connecticut was an apprentice here. I met him through that. And your mentors, you don't want them to be too close because you don't want to be competing.

Andy Chamberlin: Not the next door neighbor, but two doors down maybe.

Kerry Taylor: [00:49:30] Not the next door neighbor. Of course you have to find people you vibrate with too.

Andy Chamberlin: For sure. Somebody who can understand what it is that you're going through.

Kerry Taylor: You could find someone who's in marketing, business, chamber commerce.

Andy Chamberlin: Anything.

Kerry Taylor: Make connections in your community. Fortunately the lovely thing about this farm is so many people are attached to it. I've made [00:50:00] connections to big time nonprofit, community foundation people have so much a wealth of information on fundraising.

Andy Chamberlin: Because it's had a reputation here for so long.

Kerry Taylor: Because they're involved in the community.

Andy Chamberlin: I see.

Kerry Taylor: Because they're attached to the farm, because of the community involvement on the farm. Those people, they may not be farmers, but they just have a wealth of life information [00:50:30] and that's useful. And then just human capital to help you get your website up, you just need so much information. It's crazy.

Andy Chamberlin: It's hard to learn everything you need to do.

Kerry Taylor: It's so much.

Andy Chamberlin: It's hard to find the people to delegate to.

Kerry Taylor: You need to know when you need to pay someone to do something and when you can do it yourself.

Andy Chamberlin: That's a hard line.

Kerry Taylor: Mechanics, we're like, "Okay, we can [00:51:00] do this much," and then we're just going to get it out pay the money because you don't have time or you are not going to do it as well or whatever. And then go for money. Find free money. Time-consuming is the only problem to find grants and stuff, but it can be helpful.

Andy Chamberlin: Last question. What does sustainable farming or a sustainable farm mean to you?

Kerry Taylor: Wow. Right now, like [00:51:30] I said, we're assessing what we have here and what's our vision for the farm going into the future. And we really believe being as nimble as possible is essential in this day and age because everything is so volatile. Having backups on backups, if all your systems should have backups, including generators, coolers, equipment. We have backups on all of our backups [00:52:00] because that'll just allow you to be nimble. And then being nimble economically, multiple markets, like a CSA, what people would consider diversified. But what about the CSA market starts to tank? We've seen it. There was a bubble when we left here in 2007. It was huge. And then it slowly, slowly tanked and then COVID, everyone went crazy. It's okay right now. But it's not stable.

Andy Chamberlin: It's not stable.

Kerry Taylor: [00:52:30] How else can you make money? Just to be diversified beyond direct CSA marketing. And then how are we going to be nimble in this time of environmental change, which is again, water. We need water and controlling drainage and stuff like that.

Andy Chamberlin: Bringing water where you don't have it and draining water away where you don't need it.

Kerry Taylor: Exactly. We're looking at just making the farm as nimble and resilient [00:53:00] as possible given how volatile things feel. What was your question?

Andy Chamberlin: I think you answered it. It was, what does sustainable farming mean to you? How are you achieving that?

Kerry Taylor: Okay. Right.

Andy Chamberlin: Being nimble, having backups.

Kerry Taylor: I didn't even talk about environmental stuff, what people generally think of as sustainable, but right now I really think this is what we need to focus on for, this farm has already been doing sustainable farming for since 1986. That's not at the top of my mind, [00:53:30] cover cropping and all of that.

Andy Chamberlin: Three legs of sustainability, economically and personally and environmentally.

Kerry Taylor: Right. That's what I'm pitching to people right now is let's get this farm. It just feels like a House of Cards a little bit right now. And I just want to sure up all of those legs. I feel like we're already there with the sustainable compost production and cover cropping and soil and all of that. [00:54:00] But these other legs, I want to make sure they're sturdy.

Andy Chamberlin: I'm Andy Chamberlain and that was The Farmer's Share. Be sure to follow us on Instagram and subscribe to our YouTube channel so you don't miss out on any of the free bonus content. You can also visit thefarmersshare.com to check out more episodes and interviews. If you enter your email on our website, you'll [00:54:30] get these photos and videos right into your inbox when the next episode comes out. This podcast is supported by the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association and the Ag Engineering Program of the University of Vermont Extension. If you're loving this show, I'd love it if you could leave me a review. It's easier than you might think. In Apple Podcast, just click on the show and scroll down to the bottom. And there you can leave five stars and a comment to help encourage new listeners to tune in. Thanks for listening.