

Spencer Blackwell ([00:00:09](#)):

My name is Spencer Blackwell. We're on Elmer Farm in East Middlebury, Vermont. We're a diversified vegetable farm on the local market, about seven acres in cash crop production. Came from the other side of the state in East Montpelier. I grew up over there and moved to Burlington for a while, and then ended up down here in Middlebury. I've been growing vegetables since 1995, so that puts us pretty close to 30 years commercially. But really a lifelong grower as a gardener, since I had my own little plot when I was five years old.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:00:49](#)):

You had a green thumb for a while.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:00:52](#)):

Well, I don't know how green it is. But I had an interest in being out in the dirt.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:00:59](#)):

Playing in the mud, then.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:01:00](#)):

Yep.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:01:01](#)):

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. If this show has impacted you, I'd love to hear it via email or publicly as a review in the podcast app. Just scroll down to the bottom and that's where you can leave a review right in Apple Podcasts. The Farmer's Share is supported by the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association and the Ag Engineering program of the University of Vermont Extension. If you enjoy the show and want to help support its programming, you can make a one-time or reoccurring donation on our website by visiting thefarmersshare.com/support.

([00:01:52](#)):

Today's episode comes to you from Middlebury, Vermont, where we visit with Spencer Blackwell of Elmer Farm. He's been growing for over 30 years. Built his farm, which started as a homestead to a CSA and wholesale vegetable farm, growing over seven acres of crops. We start off with a tour, checking out the wash pack area, then hop in the truck during this rainy November day to look at the fields and various equipment. After that, we pull up a seat in the boiler room of the greenhouse and dig deeper into Spencer's farming history to learn how he's built the business it is today. Thanks for joining us here on the Farmer's Share.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:02:33](#)):

So this is our CSA shed here where we sell. We do about 25% of our business through a CSA, on-farm pickup only. In the summertime, we set it up like a farm stand. And everything is priced and people have a farm stand credit. And they come and they pick stuff out, and we check it out and it draws down their credit. We found that the box share, or even the come every week and get a certain amount of whatever stuff you want, was just too much of people not being able to make it and dissatisfied with their experience. So we're like, "All right, it's a farm stand. You just pay in advance." And it works out.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:03:23](#)):

Pre-buy program.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:03:23](#)):

Yeah, it works out pretty well that way. People are a lot happier. We sell a lot less produce. We move a lot less produce that way, but I'd rather have a happy customer than [inaudible 00:03:39].

Andy Chamberlin ([00:03:39](#)):

Is that good or bad, moving less?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:03:42](#)):

Well, the good part is that we don't feel obligated to have 102 of any one item or however many CSA members... It's like, "If it runs out, it runs out. That's your tough luck." We don't know if you're coming or not so, you know.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:04:01](#)):

Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:04:01](#)):

The flexibility of that is much better on our end. And so that we can have just a little bit of something, put it out. When it's gone, it's gone. Obviously, it's nice to sell more stuff, move more stuff. So it was a little disappointing that they don't want as much as we thought they did. But the other thing is, I think as a CSA as it was originally conceived, it's like you kind of want to have a wide array of items available. And we found that it's really kind of inefficient to grow a lot of those items that we weren't selling anywhere else. It's just like in order to have Brussels sprouts with the CSA, you got to have a hundred feet of Brussels sprouts out there. And whether they take them or not, who knows? I don't know.

([00:04:48](#)):

So we felt like with this model, we had more flexibility to be like, "All right. We don't grow this. We don't grow this. We don't grow that." Drop all the ones we were losing money on. Less of a commitment on both our part and the customer's part. It seems to work out. We've definitely... We've got a strong wholesale market in town, a direct wholesale to [inaudible 00:05:08] co-op, and we were able to sell basically the same amount of produce, just more through the store than was at our CSA when we switched. So winter CSA, that happens starting mid October. It goes till Christmas, and it's a self-serve. This is kind of, if you don't come this week, you're going to miss out, but you come in, you pick out an allotment of things. We have large, medium, and small shares, and you have basically everything that's sold by the pound.

([00:05:47](#)):

If you're a large share, you get five pounds of whatever mix of it you want, and so on down the line, bunched items, take three bunched items. It's kind of nice because we can move, say we have a bunch of small lettuces. You can't sell them to a store because they sell lettuce by the each. Well, we can put two of them in a bag and say, you take one bag of lettuce if there's flexibility of marketing different kinds of units this way.

([00:06:21](#)):

People seem to really like the winter CSA and it's all honor that they come and take what they are supposed to take. And some people have a hard time figuring out what they're supposed to take and probably either don't get what they deserve or get more than they deserve.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:06:35](#)):

But kind of balances out I suppose.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:06:38](#)):

We get the question all the time. So we get five pounds of each of these? We're like, are you crazy? How much money that would cost if you went to the store? Do a little math and-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:06:47](#)):

Yeah. Right, right.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:06:49](#)):

Figure out if that was a question you should ask. Let's do a little walk around here, and then we'll drive down the field.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:06:56](#)):

Sure.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:06:56](#)):

I think we're going to get soaked if we linger too much without the truck. This is the original homestead here. The buildings that are... You can tell which ones are old. It was farm. It was a homestead, really, and the last time it was farmed was in the 1950s by the owners, and they had a little of everything, made the syrup. They had a tight stall, 10 for 10 cows. They sold, I think they did tree foil when that was a big thing in Addison County. It was kind of precursor to alfalfa. People grew tree foil as a forage, and then a lot of people, there's a big seed industry around it, tree foil, so there's evidence of them having done that. Yeah. So in the 1950s, the Elmers stopped farming, and they leased it out to the neighbors, which was the Devoid farm, conventional dairy farm. They hayed the fields, grew corn on some of the land and stored square bales in the barn, kept the equipment in the barn and stuff like that. So they had leased for about 55 years or so.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:08:21](#)):

Oh, wow.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:08:24](#)):

Before we bought the farm. My wife and I in 2006 jumped on board with the Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access program and applied to purchase this farm, and it's got... So the development rights have been sold and it's got an agricultural easement on it that gives the land trust the right to repurchase it at ag value if wherever we want to sell it. So that basically cut the value of the property in half. In 2006, that went from 500 to 250. Now it'd be twice that, but it still will be half. It's always going to be at ag value.

([00:09:14](#)):

It has a little bit of limitations. That thing, we can't put a lot of money into our house fixing it up or anything because you can't really get that equity back. But other than that, it was perfect for us. We don't need a fancy house. So yeah, we started with pretty much bare land. This was a sloping hillside right here. So we built, starting with this was my first shed here. That was our wash station.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:09:44](#)):

This little one right in front of us?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:09:46](#)):

Yeah, the posts that I used to build it we're growing right there.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:09:50](#)):

Nice.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:09:51](#)):

You start up a business. We had been up in Burlington at the Intervale, and you just don't know what you're going to be able to do. I'm not of the mindset to throw a bunch of money at something before I know if it'll work. So we started with stuff like that as our infrastructure and it slowly built up. Our next infrastructure was a hoop house, which we put a makeshift heater in to do some propagation in, and before we built a propagation house, we dug a pond. Those were our first investments, put an irrigation main line in.

([00:10:29](#)):

And then about, oh, maybe six, seven years in, we were starting to make some money and have some, get a reputation for people wanting our stuff, and we bought a new tractor and built this barn, and that was kind of revolutionary to our growth and our ability to produce stuff. So just having a concrete floor, you can move stuff around on and pallet forks and a tractor that a novice tractor driver could make work rather than a 50-year-old beast that is oversized and doesn't work, right, which we started with. So yeah, this is our wash pack area here. I love making things to make life easier. So that's a bin that hoists up to dump root crops into the washer off the-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:11:39](#)):

Hoist to the I beam there.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:11:40](#)):

Yep, exactly. We got this. So we harvest our roots into this dump bin here, which has got a low, it lets you dump them out from the bottom of it so that they don't have it to drop as far. So we can harvest a thousand pounds of roots onto a front loader and then dump them without wrecking them, which you learn these things after you wrecked a few. You're like, okay, the bucket loader doesn't work.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:12:15](#)):

Yep. No, I really like your bin storage from a produce safety perspective. They're covered, accessible. They're not all in a big tall stack. That's nice.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:12:26](#)):

Yep. Yeah, we bring them in, set them on the pad there, wash them, and then they dry upside down, and then we stack them in to make [inaudible 00:12:35].

Andy Chamberlin ([00:12:35](#)):

What was your thought between this for this I-beam? You could hold up a lot more roof than that.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:12:40](#)):

My thought was my neighbor does steel work and he said, "Well, I got a beam that's rusting out back. You can have it."

Andy Chamberlin ([00:12:50](#)):

That works.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:12:50](#)):

Yep. He says, "It's probably a little bigger than you need, but I don't want it in my yard anymore."

Andy Chamberlin ([00:12:56](#)):

You could have a 10 story building on top of that beam.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:12:58](#)):

Yep. So why not? Sure.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:02](#)):

Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:13:03](#)):

Yeah. First, we built the barn and this pad, and then all that was still rocky slope and parts of that foundation. About five years later, we got sick of the rats living in the rocks and dug it all out, put drainage in behind that barn, and then built this stepped area, poured the pad that's back there, and now I'm feeling pretty good about it. About how-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:32](#)):

So all this design of the layers and whatnot was intentional?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:13:38](#)):

Yes. Well, we had to step down the grade to get from up there here to down here.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:39](#)):

Elevation change.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:13:46](#)):

And then I didn't have a plan for the root washer to start, but I just needed to do this part first to hold up the bank.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:56](#)):

Right.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:13:57](#)):

And then it all came together, and then we got sick of getting rained on, so we put the roof on after another year. So little by little it came together. This is the thing I'm most excited about here is this silt trap because when our first rendition, the mud just built up in this giant pile until it was impossible. Nothing drained. It was just a big mud pit. No, it doesn't look real great right now because we haven't cleaned it out yet this week, but it's super easy to clean. You can take the tractor bucket and scoop the stuff, most of it out of there.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:14:35](#)):

Oh really? You can get a bucket in there all right?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:14:38](#)):

Yeah, this just pops out.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:14:39](#)):

Oh, okay. Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:14:42](#)):

Scrape it up. And that gets the majority, and then gets a little bit of shoveling [inaudible 00:14:46].

Andy Chamberlin ([00:14:46](#)):

Yep. So that was nice. Frost protect all the water, a million different drains, which is a little hard to-

Spencer Blackwell ([00:14:57](#)):

No, there's a ton of quick connects. Not enough people use those.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:15:02](#)):

Yeah, they're a little pricey at first, but the amount of times to take the hose on and off is... Yep. And these cam lock ones are way better than the kind of ones you get at the hardware store.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:15:13](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:15:16](#)):

Yeah. This is a crew here right now, Jack Foster and Scout Eaton Field. Right? I don't never use your last name. Yeah. This is our main pack room here, the walk-in coolers. I originally kind of built the design because I had a van that fit perfectly in that space.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:15:44](#)):

Okay.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:15:45](#)):

And then for winter time it was kind of nice to pull it in so you could load it up.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:15:50](#)):

And one more covered space.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:15:52](#)):

It will be warm inside it when you pack, and then you could drive. It really doesn't. We don't drive far enough with that stuff matter. But yes, it was also a diesel, and it wouldn't start if it was below freezing, but that van is gone. The new van doesn't fit, so whatever. It seems to work out pretty well. We've got two coolers that are of different size. I got one that I can keep at a squash temperature humidity, and then the other one is like 33 degrees.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:16:25](#)):

Two zones yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:16:30](#)):

Yeah, try to get everything on wheels. This thing is a bin dumper, so that we put the 20 bushel bins on there, hoisted it up on the ceiling, and then you can bag out of them without bending over.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:16:44](#)):

Oh, so it leans it over? Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:16:44](#)):

It just pulls it up and brings it to waist height.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:16:49](#)):

Right because you can't reach in to a bulk bin very well.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:16:53](#)):

Well, you can. It hurts your back after a while.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:16:56](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Not ergonomically for a long time. Yeah. Oh, that's creative. Nice. How do you do your bin stacking?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:17:09](#)):

With a forklift, loader forks on the tractor. Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:17:12](#)):

Okay. Up right here on the pad. And then you'll [inaudible 00:17:16].

Andy Chamberlin ([00:17:16](#)):

Yeah, we have a little pad out here, wheel mount there and pull them off.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:17:21](#)):

And that your harvest wagon?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:17:23](#)):

Harvest wagon. Yep. All the stuff that, unless it needs to get sprayed or anything like head lettuce or kale or whatever, we just dunk it down the field and pack it right in the totes that never... We never put the red ones on the ground. They stay on the wagon that way. They stay clean. We send them right to the store.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:17:43](#)):

Pick them up, dunk them, set them in the red bins on the wagon and then you're done.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:17:47](#)):

Yep. And then send them to the store. Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:17:49](#)):

Nice.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:17:50](#)):

Summertime they never even have to go in the barn, back up to the van, up to it and send them away.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:17:56](#)):

Well, that's good. A lot of efficiencies built in here. I can see it.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:18:00](#)):

Yeah. I mean, that's the only way you can do this business. Yeah. Still figure out how to avoid labor.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:18:10](#)):

Like the truck with no door. It took too long getting in and out. So you just took the door off?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:18:14](#)):

The door didn't close right. Then it eventually fell off. Yeah. That truck has actually been around since six years now. I bought it for a thousand bucks. I was like, I've been running it for six years.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:18:29](#)):

Yeah. Hey, for a grand. Can't beat that.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:18:31](#)):

Never been over 10 miles an hour since I bought it. I just keep expecting it to die. This was an old ripper, welded a bar between the shanks for a bed lifter, and it works quite nice.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:18:48](#)):

Yeah, that's a heavy-duty bed lifter.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:18:50](#)):

Yeah. I was using it as a ripper too, just pulling those shanks off and putting different ones on. But I got sick of moving those heavy shanks around, so I took another toolbar and I built a ripper. This is a tool I'm pretty proud of here. This guy is a drop spreader for the fertilizer.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:19:18](#)):

Oh yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:19:21](#)):

This worked up a hydraulic motor to it, and it used to have a handle you move back and forth, but you couldn't reach it real easily from the tractor seat. So I put a cylinder to open it up, open and close it on there.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:19:37](#)):

So then you can apply right on top of a bed?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:19:39](#)):

Yes.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:19:39](#)):

And drop the whole field.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:19:40](#)):

Yeah. Or even just a row. You can block out the... And just do side dressing or whatnot.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:19:46](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:19:48](#)):

So it reduces the fertilizer use a lot. Yeah. I got a new drill. I was pretty psyched about. Just got that thing a few weeks ago.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:19:58](#)):

Oh, brand new.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:19:59](#)):

I started some [inaudible 00:20:01] with it, but didn't get a chance to do. I was supposed to come in June. I was all excited to do lots of things with it.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:20:07](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:07](#)):

All I got was my Ryan, but next year it's always next year. This is the old one that replaced. That thing costs a 10th of what the little one costs.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:20:21](#)):

Of course. Of course.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:22](#)):

But that's kind of how I started, was buying cast-offs from the dairy industry, so that thing they weren't using.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:20:31](#)):

Is that a no-till seed drill or just regular seed drill?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:33](#)):

It's not. It's a regular. I looked at the no-till. The no-till was twice the price of that.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:20:40](#)):

Oh geez.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:41](#)):

And I realized that it's really for putting seed into concrete.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:20:49](#)):

It's overkill.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:50](#)):

It's a little for me because you'll see when we go down the field, but we're all permanent beds and confined traffic, and so everywhere I want to plant seed is pretty fluffy and light. So even if there's a lot of debris on the bed, it doesn't take much of a disk to push into it. Yeah. I think it's going to be sufficient without being no-till. Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:21:13](#)):

So you like the 58 [inaudible 00:21:15]? Is this your primary tractor?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:21:17](#)):

I've got this and I've got a 5055 and they are both solid tractors. Yeah. Like I said, I was using really old tractors before and being able to control your speed really precisely is great for the fertilizing because the speed you're going at, it's not calibrated to your grounds. The drop isn't calibrated to your ground speed. It's like you have to do it manually. So I want to know exactly how fast I'm going to know how much is going to come out.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:21:55](#)):

Yep.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:21:57](#)):

That's nice. And then the hydraulic reversers on them is like a game-changer in terms of being able to do things quickly and efficiently. The other thing that it doesn't have to do with the tractor, but the quick hitches. That was absolute game-changer in terms of my farming, put a quick hitch on because I put six or seven implements on in a day.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:22:26](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:22:26](#)):

And changing them is a pain in the butt without a quick hitch. And a lot of times you put one on and you start using it and it's a little too wet for this one. I should have been using that one and back before the quick hitch, I'd be like, I'm using this. It's not where I'm going with it. Whereas now I can be much more-

Spencer Blackwell ([00:22:51](#)):

Nimble.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:22:51](#)):

... nimble, use the right tool for the job. And then the hydraulic top link there being able to really articulate the angle of a disc or even a spring-toothed harrow so that you're scratching at the right cant makes a huge difference in terms of being able to control the outcome of what you're doing.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:23:15](#)):

Did you have to change the setup of your implements to make that quick hitch?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:23:18](#)):

A few of them. A few of them I had to cut them and weld stuff on.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:23:24](#)):

Got a quick hitch this season thinking, oh, same thing. And make it much more efficient. Well, I found it only fit on our plows and nothing else. That's not very helpful then if it only works on one tool.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:23:38](#)):

Yeah. There's a few that I've had, so yeah, well yokes onto them that drop down or cut the pins off and weld something else on. But once it's done, it's done.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:23:53](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:23:54](#)):

It's not a huge deal compared to the benefit.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:23:57](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:23:58](#)):

So I have the CAT1. This is a larger CAT. This is a CAT2 I think, or CAT23. And the other one's a CAT12. And so I have half my implements that go on this.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:24:10](#)):

Okay. What was the other one live on the other tractor or you're swapping quick hitches?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:24:15](#)):

No, the other one lives on the other tractor.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:24:16](#)):

Oh, okay. Nice. That's a good way of doing it.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:24:18](#)):

Yep. All right. You want to jump on the truck and do a little tour?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:24:23](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:24:30](#)):

So this hillside here, we have a lot of different soil types on the farm. This hillside is kind of this Adams soil type. It's sand over rocks and so it's mostly sand on the surface. Not a lot of rocks on the surface, but it's excessively drained. It doesn't hold fertility.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:24:52](#)):

Sand and stone.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:24:54](#)):

And then this hillside over here is [inaudible 00:24:59] so there's a diagonal that goes from that bit of rocks down across here. So we just crossed over on so the [inaudible 00:25:10]. You know that soil type?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:25:10](#)):

No, I mean not.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:25:11](#)):

It's clay.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:25:12](#)):

Okay.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:25:13](#)):

It's probably the most prominent soil type in Addison County.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:25:17](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:25:19](#)):

And then down basically the center. It's not exactly, it's a diagonal, it's not rectangles unfortunately, but there's clay on that side and sand over clay on this side. So that's Elmwood soil type down where you see the [inaudible 00:25:33]. And that's our prime growing area. It's about five acres or so of absolutely phenomenal soil because it's not river bottom soil, but it probably came when a glacier was retreating and left a pile of sand on top of the clay so it doesn't drain like a river bottom soil would, like a deep sand. So we put drainage tile in it for heavy rain and for springtime when we have a lot of hydraulic pressure pushing up from underneath. But now that it's drained, it's phenomenal. And our carrots will grow down three feet. You'll pull up root tips on the bottom of a carrot that's three feet long.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:26:21](#)):

Whoa.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:22](#)):

And they're going down into that clay to get the nutrients, but they pop right out of the sand, like the sand soil. So it's pretty awesome. Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:26:30](#)):

Wow.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:32](#)):

Unfortunately, we only have five acres of it, but the rest of it is clay. Also drain tiled, great soil for some things, not carrots. Anything you don't have to pull out of it, it does pretty well with.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:26:48](#)):

That explains your heavy duty bed lifter then?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:50](#)):

Yeah. Yep. The heavy duty bed lifter. I mean, that's just because that was a dairy farm cast off.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:26:58](#)):

Right. It was a [inaudible 00:27:00].

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:59](#)):

I had the toolbar there. Yeah. But yes, it's helpful. It's always helpful. Bigger the better.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:27:04]

Interviewer ([00:27:00](#)):

... there, yeah. But yes, it's helpful. It's always helpful. Bigger is better sometimes. Like that chisel plow there, that was, I don't know, a 12-shank chisel plow or something, which is bigger than my tractor can

pull. But pull enough shanks off of it, and it can do it. One of the issues I had had sub swelling was all the debris that would build up in front of it, so I put ... that's an old frame from a plastic mulch layer.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:27:32](#)):

Okay, yeah.

Interviewer ([00:27:33](#)):

We stopped doing plastic mulch, so I repurposed the frame, and I mounted some coulters on the front of it to cut the debris. And now we can rip a much trashier surface with the tines or the shanks closer together.

Interviewer ([00:27:53](#)):

Yeah, that's a custom-built, custom-designed piece of equipment.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:27:56](#)):

Yeah. So, I have ideas for making it into more of a strip tillage tool where I put on coulters behind, the fluted coulters behind the shanks there to smooth out the soil to plant into, but I haven't got there yet. Bed former, that's one of the main tools for shaping our beds. Yeah, so everything is grown on a eight-bed system, which we try to keep them permanent. They get messed up. Sometimes, we plow them up the next year, so it's not permanent at all.

Interviewer ([00:28:37](#)):

Reset.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:28:38](#)):

Sometimes, they last for five years or whatnot, or I have some that I've never messed with once they were built, 25 different sections, eight beds. It's got a harvest lane between them, and yeah, the harvest lane is great for getting in when it's wet. You can go down there and pick things out when it's ... you can get equipment close to your crop when it's crappy conditions. Grow a lot of cover crops. We have about seven acres of cash crops and about 15 acres of permanent beds. So, any given year, more than half of them are in cover crop-

Interviewer ([00:29:29](#)):

Wow!

Farmer (respondent) ([00:29:30](#)):

... at any given time. And that seven acres, also, some of that's acre counted twice because we plant two crops in it in the same year, so it's actually even more cover crop acreage. We've got a great market in Middlebury.

Interviewer ([00:29:49](#)):

That's awesome.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:29:51](#)):

We were able to get a good high price for what we're growing, and there's really ... I haven't figured out how to make it worth it to grow the stuff, like a higher volume of stuff for less money.

Interviewer ([00:30:05](#)):

Right.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:30:07](#)):

Some people do. They send their stuff out to Deeproot or whatever, and they send piles of it, and it works. The volume makes up for the lower price. But we've got enough of a high-price market that it doesn't make sense for me to try to plant all my acres in any given year. And I've been finding I don't have a lot to compare to because I'm only on my farm.

Interviewer ([00:30:33](#)):

Right, right. You know what you have.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:30:35](#)):

But I have found that since we've gotten more and more cover crops and less tillage, we're getting less pest pressure and higher qualities, higher yields, and just so less work.

Interviewer ([00:30:49](#)):

That's a win-win.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:30:51](#)):

Yeah. I don't have to spend ... if the beds are all perfectly formed and they didn't get messed up the year before, I don't have to spend that extra whatever, six hours an acre driving around on them. I just plant them. I'm really inspired by the neighbors who are conventional dairy farmers who have gone to no-till entirely. They're like, "I don't know what to do with myself. I've got so much time on my hands. We just plant."

Interviewer ([00:31:19](#)):

Said no farmer ever. Right?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:31:19](#)):

I know.

Interviewer ([00:31:20](#)):

I like to hear that. Yeah.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:31:21](#)):

I know.

Interviewer ([00:31:21](#)):

Whoa.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:31:23](#)):

So, I was like, "That's what I want.

Interviewer ([00:31:23](#)):

Yeah, right, especially on clay-type for much of your acreage. That says a lot.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:31:31](#)):

Yeah. You don't want to touch clay when it's wet.

Interviewer ([00:31:36](#)):

That's true.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:31:36](#)):

So if we can avoid doing that, all the better.

Interviewer ([00:31:39](#)):

And you can't touch it when it's dry, right, because it's concrete?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:31:41](#)):

And it turns to concrete. Yeah. So, keeping the soil covered, keeping living crops, growing in it at all times is ideal. We all have this infatuation with perfectly controlled surfaces like this. I just planted garlic in these, that's why they're bare.

Interviewer ([00:32:02](#)):

Okay, yeah.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:32:06](#)):

When I started, that would be like, "If I could just make everything look like that, I'd be so happy."

Interviewer ([00:32:12](#)):

Yeah, chocolate cake.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:32:13](#)):

Finally learned how to do that now. Actually, I don't want that. I want stuff growing in it. I want trash in it. I want-

Interviewer ([00:32:20](#)):

Cover it up again. Get rid of the exposed dirt.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:32:24](#)):

Exactly. So this is just waiting for maybe two more weeks before ... let the garlic start to get some roots set. So we'll heat it up, and then we'll mulch it like that. That doesn't have anything growing in it. That

was carrots, but they came out after I could seed any rye in the end of October. So, as long as I have the rotten silage, I'll cover every bed with that for the winter.

Interviewer ([00:32:53](#)):

So this was a carrot bed, and then ...

Farmer (respondent) ([00:32:55](#)):

And then it just got rotten silage put on top. I reshape it. I did this to it. I reshaped it after it because that lifter makes a mess. It's heavy tillage just lifting them, and then-

Interviewer ([00:33:05](#)):

Right. Yeah, it really is.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:33:06](#)):

So, chop up the tops with a mower, put it back into shape with a disc and a bed former, and then cover it up so that next spring, I can just lightly scratch through the top of the mulch and plant, keeping the shape.

Interviewer ([00:33:24](#)):

Yeah. What would you do to scratch that up in the spring?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:33:27](#)):

Maybe that ripper, just not very deep. So, those wheels will cut through the mulch, and then it'll just put a couple of furrows in there.

Interviewer ([00:33:34](#)):

Disturb it a little bit, but-

Farmer (respondent) ([00:33:36](#)):

Enough to get down to the soil efficiently with our hands, or a seeder, or whatever. Yeah, as long as the shape is good, my uniform shape, then all the tools will work with it.

Interviewer ([00:33:50](#)):

You're doing your best to stay in the same wheel tracks.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:33:53](#)):

Yeah.

Interviewer ([00:33:55](#)):

So, is your disc like a six-foot disc?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:33:55](#)):

Yep.

Interviewer ([00:33:58](#)):

Or does that disturb everything?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:33:59](#)):

Nope. I do have some big tools to flatten this whole section out and start fresh again.

Interviewer ([00:34:06](#)):

Yeah, to reset.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:34:07](#)):

Because, yeah, sometimes, perennial weeds come in, and there's nothing really you can do but plow it all up. And then, when you do that, you get all that compacted wheel track mixed in with the nice stuff that was in the middle. And then, you really got to beat it up in order to be able to make it nice and smooth and uniform again. So, I'll flatten the whole section out with a spring-toothed harrow. And then, once I set the beds, I do that with that ripper. The ripper pops the centers off the wheels. Push the sides down, and that starts it. And then I'll disc it into a little mound in the center and then bed form it flat, and that's what that turned into.

Interviewer ([00:34:51](#)):

Oh, nice. Okay.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:34:52](#)):

And then, everything's got to be a six-foot tool on it so it doesn't mess up the bed next to it. That's why I'm so excited about that new drill just because ... big drill.

Interviewer ([00:35:06](#)):

So that's a narrow drill, so it would stay-

Farmer (respondent) ([00:35:10](#)):

So, it just does the bed.

Interviewer ([00:35:12](#)):

Okay. I see.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:35:12](#)):

The other drill, I hooked it up offset so that it would do two beds and have a wheel in one of the wheel tracks.

Interviewer ([00:35:20](#)):

Okay, yeah.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:35:20](#)):

But the other wheel was down the middle of the third bed. Just that little bit of a dip that that wheel presses into here, next spring when I have a cover crop growing in it, and I mow it ... I try to mow that

just as tight to the surface as possible to kill the stuff, whatever's growing there. And that wheel track, whatever's mowed is an extra two inches taller, and it grows like crazy because it's not uniform. So, now I won't have that problem. Yeah, we do about an acre and a half of carrots, so three of these locks. That's our one big crop, really. Everything else, 39 other crops that are just a little this and a little of that, a couple of beds of everything.

Interviewer ([00:36:08](#)):

Yeah. You don't have GPS set up yet, do you?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:36:10](#)):

I would like to. I would like to build these beds with-

Interviewer ([00:36:13](#)):

Yeah, it seems right up your alley.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:36:13](#)):

Yeah, yeah. No, I haven't figured that out, but it's on the wish list.

Interviewer ([00:36:20](#)):

Yeah, because then you know you're staying on the same wheel tracks.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:36:24](#)):

Yeah. Well, with that, it gets hard, though when you're mowing a ... over here, I can show you. I like to mow my ... well, I like to mow all my cover crops, but this is oats, peas, and radish. I like to mow them in the fall to break it up so in the spring, it's more manageable, but it's really hard to see those wheel tracks.

Interviewer ([00:36:48](#)):

Right, right. Yeah, you lose track of where you're at.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:36:51](#)):

If I start on one, I can normally make it through there by just doing one bed next to the ... just turning around and going back on the same, next to the bed I just did. I can normally get across there without messing up, but then I get impatient, and I want to just go around in circles, and I mess it up. Yeah, neighbors are great. Having dairy farmer neighbors are great. Those are piles of their rotten silage they get to me out there. Yeah, it's so much easier to farm when you've got farming neighbors, just a group of people to support the equipment dealers, the fertilizer dealers, all that stuff.

Interviewer ([00:37:41](#)):

Yeah, it feeds everybody.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:37:42](#)):

I know people that are in other parts farming that just like, "Where do you get this stuff?" I was like, "Just found the store." They don't have the stores because the farming industry has just left them.

Interviewer ([00:37:56](#)):

Yeah. So, is all your growing acreage here? Do you have more elsewhere?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:38:01](#)):

It's pretty much right ... yeah, you're looking at it. Yeah, down to the piles there is about as far west as we go.

Interviewer ([00:38:09](#)):

Pretty darn flat.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:38:10](#)):

It's very flat, yeah. This is all irrigation mainline. The green posts there are hydrants.

Interviewer ([00:38:18](#)):

Oh, okay. Nice.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:38:18](#)):

And then the blocks are all numbered. I've got a record-keeping system so that I can keep track of where I put fertilizers per bed because I don't have a real good rotation or any sort of rhyme or reason to where stuff goes. I just like to look at what's growing there and decide in the moment, okay, this is a good block, or whatever, at this moment.

Interviewer ([00:38:46](#)):

Yeah, see what's open or opening up to the next spot.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:38:48](#)):

Yeah, what's opening up. So this one here has got a ton of dandelion and curly dock in it. And I was like, "I'm going to plow that one next year." The beds, either going to plow it, or I'm going to cover it with landscape fabric and plant cucurbits in it.

Interviewer ([00:39:05](#)):

Okay.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:39:06](#)):

That's another way of ... depending on how well the beds are spaced. So, as I remake them, sometimes the harvest lanes change, so this is where a GPS would be nice. So, if the beds ... I think the beds are a little messed up on this side of it. I'm probably just going to plow that one.

Interviewer ([00:39:26](#)):

The grass is [inaudible 00:39:27].

Farmer (respondent) ([00:39:26](#)):

If the beds were perfect but it was full of weeds, I would use landscape fabric and put cucurbits in it. They seem to tolerate the-

Interviewer ([00:39:36](#)):

Are they all about the same length, your bed for single [inaudible 00:39:40]?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:39:39](#)):

Yeah, these ones are the longest. They're about 400 feet. And then I have some that are ... other side of the property.

Interviewer ([00:39:48](#)):

I was just thinking about your planning and rotation stuff. If you said your eight-bed blocks, if they're all pretty consistent-

Farmer (respondent) ([00:39:54](#)):

They're close enough. It's not perfect. They're 300 feet to 400 feet.

Interviewer ([00:39:58](#)):

Okay.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:39:59](#)):

Yeah.

Interviewer ([00:39:59](#)):

Yeah.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:39:59](#)):

I don't know. I'm not quite precise enough with my fertilizer applications to-

Interviewer ([00:40:04](#)):

Right.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:40:04](#)):

I put a bag of fertilizer on each bed, so the longer beds get less fertilizer. But they tend to be better quality soils over here, so maybe they don't need as much. I don't know. So this area here from this side up is our pick-your-own for our CSA. So they have, as an option, our CSA gets is they can, for a flat rate, they can sign up for pick-your-own. And we grow peppers, and tomatoes, and kale, and parsley. We had peas there, beans, cilantro, dill, basil, cucumbers, watermelons, and then a ton of cut flowers, charred kale, ornamental corn. Just looking at some of the things that were here. But this corner of the farm, there's a parking lot up there they can park in, and they can walk down here seven days a week, daylight hours we say, and pick an allotted amount per week. We'll put a list out and say, "You can take up to a quart of cherry tomatoes and a gallon of beans," or whatever, whatever's available, and people love it.

Interviewer ([00:41:26](#)):

So do you divide that out by how many people you expect from, or ...

Farmer (respondent) ([00:41:34](#)):

Yeah, it's really hard to get ... so the consequence of that is there is a lot of waste. We grow more than they are going to pick.

Interviewer ([00:41:42](#)):

Right. Most of your cucumbers are three blocks down, and you're clear picking them, but you leave for people that want to pick their own.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:41:47](#)):

Yes. Yeah. We have our own areas that we'll pick for our wholesale production or our farm stand, but we have the ... yeah, cucumbers are a particularly difficult one because they go by so quickly.

Interviewer ([00:42:01](#)):

Yeah. What percentage of your CSA members do you think utilize this as an option?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:42:06](#)):

About two-thirds.

Interviewer ([00:42:07](#)):

Oh, wow!

Farmer (respondent) ([00:42:08](#)):

Yeah. We have about 150 members total, and about 100 of them are pick-your-own.

Interviewer ([00:42:13](#)):

Oh, wow. That's cool.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:42:13](#)):

There's two tiers of pick-your-own, some of it just is flowers, and the other includes the vegetables. But yeah, they get the whole families down here, and they just ... Yeah, it's like people have this bountiful garden they didn't have to tend. They like that, so that's been popular. It works because we're so close to town. We're basically right in town here, four miles to the center of Middlebury. So there's a lot of people driving by anyways, and they like it. And we keep them over here so they're more or less contained, and they don't bug us too much. We had to build a separate parking lot before. They were coming, parking up by the farm stand there, and that was getting annoying with them walking through the yard.

Interviewer ([00:43:04](#)):

Asking you questions.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:43:05](#)):

Yeah, like, "Oh, how's it going?" It's Sunday morning. So that's that drill in the pretty heavy residue.

Interviewer ([00:43:20](#)):

Oh. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:43:22](#)):

Comes in no problem. There's another thing I'm psyched about, that drill so I can block out individual rows, and then it's set up so that the seed units are on the same spacing as my vegetable crops. So, hopefully, I'll be able to grow cover crops interseeded with cash crops.

Interviewer ([00:43:55](#)):

So you could offset it a little bit and then-

Farmer (respondent) ([00:43:57](#)):

Well, yeah, it is set up so that in this bed, the cash crop rows were blocked off, so the negative space is where the rye is growing.

Interviewer ([00:44:11](#)):

Oh, I see.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:44:12](#)):

So next year, we can ... I was hoping to have the drill earlier so I could set it up to two different crops at the same time, so seed the radish in where the cash crop will go next year. And then that'll winter kill, and then the rye will be vigorous in the spring and hopefully fill that space a little bit. And then I can crimp it, and then it'll be enough space between the root mass, the plant, without it interfering as much as it does if you try to crimp it and plant into that heavy-duty root mass.

Interviewer ([00:44:48](#)):

So, if you're crimping, you're not cultivating it, and that's your weed strategy?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:44:52](#)):

Nope. It would be crimped, and then we add mulch on top to help.

Interviewer ([00:44:57](#)):

Okay. Do you cultivate at all?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:45:00](#)):

I do, yeah. Not if I did that, though.

Interviewer ([00:45:06](#)):

Right, right. Yeah, not that.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:45:07](#)):

We have mostly cut flowers up here, a little more artistic for the pick-your-own. I put the beds on arcs instead of straight lines.

Interviewer ([00:45:20](#)):

It's a pretty big area for cut flowers.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:45:23](#)):

Yeah, it's really, really heavy soil and not tile drained. Very challenging to grow on this hillside, but so close to their parking area that what I need to do is put more drainage tile in there, but I haven't got to that yet.

Interviewer ([00:45:40](#)):

It's eye-catching because it's the closest thing to the parking lot.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:45:43](#)):

Yeah, so they park right here, and then they walk down there.

Interviewer ([00:45:48](#)):

Okay. Yeah. So now that we've had a tour of the farm, we pull up a chair, have a seat, and learn more about how he built his farming career. Welcome, and thanks for coming on the show.

Farmer (respondent) ([00:46:05](#)):

Yeah, you're welcome. Thanks for the invitation.

Interviewer ([00:46:08](#)):

So, what got you started? What got you into farming? How'd you get started?

Farmer (respondent) ([00:46:13](#)):

I started needing a job in college. And I went to UVM, and during the summer, I was looking for work. I was living up in Burlington for the first time on my own. And the only thing that caught my eye was a vegetable farm hand on a farm in Charlotte, and it was called Bingham Brook Farm. Jay Vogler is the owner, and he had maybe ... I don't know how many acres he had, maybe five acres in production, but predominantly head lettuce. We grew a ton of head lettuce, like 50 cases worth a week. Yeah, worked for him in the summers. And after I went back to school, I was like, "I am never working for him again." Not for him in particular. That was hard, and I remember I didn't make a lot of money and never want to do that again. And then in the spring, I'd be like, "Wow, kind of like to do that again."

([00:47:19](#)):

So, I was with him for five years. When I graduated, fall came around. I was like, "Well, don't have to go back to school. I guess I can stay here until he fires me." After that, I eventually left Jay's because I moved back down towards central Vermont. I lived in East Montpelier again. And I worked for Alan LePage at the LePage Farm for a summer. And at the same time, I had a girlfriend who lived in Burlington, and so I was going up there a couple of days a week to see her. And she was working at a cut flower farm in the Intervale. And I went down to help out there, and they appreciated my services and hired me. So, I was working at both places, both in Barre and in Burlington-Intervale. And I ended up getting paid exactly twice to work on ... I think it was \$14 an hour versus \$7 an hour working in Burlington versus Barre.

Interviewer ([00:48:26](#)):

Oh, wow.

Farmer (respondent) (00:48:26):

And so, the following year, I just worked in Burlington. On LePage's Farm, I learned a lot more there. He was a phenomenal grower. He grew all kinds of things that nobody knew you could grow in Vermont, like peanuts, and sweet potatoes, and fava beans.

Interviewer (00:48:47):

Yeah, those are unique.

Farmer (respondent) (00:48:48):

But yeah, he had his systems down, and he didn't really need anybody. He just needed laborers. Whereas in Burlington, the people that I was working for were not as experienced with the growing side of things, and I got a lot more flexibility to do things other than just the manual labor for eight hours at a stretch. So, I got to do a lot of the tractor work, and I got building skills, so I was building greenhouses, building sheds. Yeah, and ended up that my skills were recognized up there as I was working at the cut flower farm. And then, the Intervale Center hired me as a facilities manager or assistant facilities manager at first to manage their equipment, to repair the equipment that they leased out to the incubator farms, and to maintain all their infrastructure. So that was a good job, the best job I'd ever had in terms of benefits and salary. But it was not really my long-term goal to be in Burlington and to work for a nonprofit. I really was bent on having my own place.

(00:50:18):

And so, for about 15 years, I was looking for my own place. Luckily, I had a few places fall through before they happened because it would've been disasters, either rocky hillsides or next to rivers, poor places to farm, really, not that next to Rivers are necessarily poor, just the one I was looking at was particularly flood plain, like every year. And so, yeah, it was about 15 years of working for other people before I found the Elmer Farm, which was for sale through the Vermont Land Trust Farmland Access program. And they solicited proposals for farming the land, and of about seven applicants, they selected my wife, Jennifer, and I's, and we started the Elmer Farm. We kept their name, the family name. Elmer family had owned the property for 200 years or so. Everybody knew it as the Elmer farm, so we kept the name, and we started growing vegetables, which had never been commercially grown on a large scale or even the medium scale that I am on the farm. It had been dairy and had been used by a dairy farm before.

Interviewer (00:51:50):

Fifteen years of trying to find your own place and do your own thing seems like quite a long time. Were you comfortable doing what you're doing? Were you antsy? Were you looking very hard?

Farmer (respondent) (00:52:03):

No, I was young. I was in my 20s. I was living well. I was looking for my own place. But really, land is not easy to find, most decent land. For vegetables, you need very good land to grow profitably. That high-yielding prime soils rarely go on the market. If they're up for sale, somebody's neighbor is buying them before anyone knows they were ever for sale, so that good land is hard to find. And we got super lucky because I had never really ... I mean, I'd been to Middlebury, but I didn't know anything about Addison County or Middlebury, and it is a great community. They really wanted our stuff, and I guess the Land Trust knew that, and that's why they selected us.

(00:53:02):

But yeah, it's a nice piece of land and productive soils and in a really good market. I was always thinking I would be back in central Vermont, which had at the time, and probably still does, a much stronger culture around organic vegetables and homesteading kind of lifestyle than Addison County does. And it turns out that would've made my job of selling those things a lot harder. One, there was probably more ... the dairy farms in Addison County were more profitable, are more profitable, and stayed in business longer, so there was not as many places available for vegetable farmers to start farming over here. And in central Vermont, being a hilly area, there was quite a number of startup farms trying to get their way in the market over there. And then there's also, I think, probably a ...

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:54:04]

Spencer Blackwell ([00:54:00](#)):

... over there. There's also, I think, probably a much higher percentage of people with gardens that are do-it-yourselfers and aren't buying vegetables. Whereas Middlebury seems, especially in the college town, there's a lot of people that appreciate the fresh produce and organic production style but aren't really interested in doing it themselves.

Speaker 1 ([00:54:26](#)):

Those are interesting observations and that you didn't really know that coming into it.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:54:30](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Got lucky. Totally got lucky.

Speaker 1 ([00:54:33](#)):

Because you didn't know that, which was maybe if you did, I don't know if it would've changed anything.

Spencer Blackwell ([00:54:43](#)):

The land was really... When we came here and we walked around the farm, we didn't even look at the house that we would have to be living in. When you go buy a home, you normally look at the home. We brought a shovel, and we went down, and started digging holes.

Speaker 1 ([00:55:01](#)):

"It has a house, great."

Spencer Blackwell ([00:55:03](#)):

I walk in the house like, "Ooh." It hadn't been updated since the 1950s and there was tons of water damage, and cracked plaster, and lots of inhabitants, four-legged ones. The house needed a ton of work. We gutted it. They had absolutely zero insulation except for what the squirrels had brought in, [inaudible 00:55:27] and so we insulated it and put a new heating system in it, did all new plumbing, all new electric, and made it pretty decent. It's still an old farmhouse with a sloughing foundation and whatnot, but it's a very livable space now.

Speaker 1 ([00:55:49](#)):

That's important. What did you envision your farm would look like when you started?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:55:58](#)):

That's hard to say. I don't know if I really had a big vision. Honestly, I'm a small-scale organic grower. You don't really think of what... My vision was acres and acres of monocrop. It's like that's what we're... As young American boys at least, we like big equipment and massive control over the environment. We're bred to want that so that's what I wanted. I used to watch TV as a kid, and my parents would said I had to go to bed at 9:00. I would force them to let me stay up late enough to see the intro to Dallas, because there was a giant tractor with a disc harrow in the intro to Dallas. That was like, I just loved that. That's a massive piece of machinery pulling harrows through a totally barren landscape.

([00:56:56](#)):

That's what my vision was, and thankfully, I've learned that that's really not what's best for us all, or not in my opinion anyways. My vision has changed quite a bit. I still like the order of that control over the environment, but I try to share. Let nature take its course wherever it suits me. In order to do things mechanically, you have to have a certain amount of order because it's all based on linear systems, and so where it's necessary, I try to maintain order, and where it's not, I try to let chaos reign.

Speaker 1 ([00:57:51](#)):

It's nice that you're open to change. What pivoted that change? Was it an inspiration or an influence?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:58:00](#)):

Well, growing organically is a... I started growing in the early '90s when organic was just really starting to take off in terms of its popularity. That, at least in Vermont, was the only avenue for a profitable business growing vegetables. Not knowing anything really about commercial growing, I spent a lot of time going to conferences, and workshops, and farm visits, learning about how to grow organic. You find a lot of emphasis on diversity and all these things that are not monocrop and not barren landscapes as the root to success.

([00:58:54](#)):

It just became clear that it's best to let nature take its course to the best extent you can through that. The other aspect is just economics. I mean, it costs a lot of money to create a barren landscape. You need to have big equipment, and I didn't. It's like you start with very little stuff, hand tools, and you just can't control the environment like that. I've just kind of cheap and never wanted to spend money on anything, so I would buy equipment that only marginally worked, and it was impossible to achieve that total destruction that maybe I started out wanting.

Speaker 1 ([00:59:46](#)):

Has there been any significant mentors or individual people who have been an influence for you?

Spencer Blackwell ([00:59:53](#)):

Yeah. Well, I guess the first most significant mentor, I was in the interval and I decided that I wanted to be self-sufficient. I've been growing all these vegetables but not going to really sustain me during Armageddon. I'm going to need a pile of more hearty stuff, so I tried to grow some grains. I started a little hobby project called the Intervale Bean and Grain. I didn't know the first thing about it, but I decided I was going to grow soybeans and make tofu out of it. I called up the extension, UVM Extension. They said, I think I spoke to Jeff Carter, and he said, "Ah, we don't know anything about that. But there's a guy in Orwell, his name's Kenny Benhasenga. He's trying to do that." Kenny Benhasenga became a mentor. I went down and visited him, and Kenny was quite a character. He's passed away as of a couple

of years ago, but he's a really, really generous individual. Loved to talk about growing, very ecologically-conscious grower, a very lazy grower. He really liked the let chaos reign because it meant he didn't have to do anything.

(01:01:25):

He wasn't necessarily known for his highest quality crops. There was a lot of non-target species in his yields, but he did have a real reverence for the environment, and for letting nature be nature, and trying to get what we can out of it without making a big mess of things. Yeah, he was a big influence. I would go down to his place, and he loved me because I would crawl into the silos and shovel out his rotten wheat. He was a big guy. He had a hard time getting in the silo. Yeah, he'd send me crawling into his combine, places he couldn't reach, to open up... Pull out plugs of debris that got stuck in there, whatnot, but he taught me a lot. He taught me about how to use combines, taught me how to fix them. He had junky equipment too. He wasn't a new equipment kind of guy, so I learned about a lot of mechanical stuff from him. Yeah, yep.

Speaker 1 (01:02:43):

He was doing, we could say, easier to do larger scale stuff, soybeans and whatnot. How did that influence you, because you're not growing soybeans now?

Spencer Blackwell (01:02:58):

At best, it was a hobby that I maybe paid for some of my equipment with. I didn't make any money growing grains. What I learned in the process was growing stuff is one part of being a grain farmer and handling grain is 80% more of the job. At the interval, there was zero infrastructure. I did harvest some things, but I ended up having to store them in a dump truck because I didn't have silos and none of this stuff existed. In Vermont in general, there's very little infrastructure for processing grains, very little market for it at all, maybe a little more now than there was in early 2000s, but it was too much of an uphill battle.

(01:03:57):

I did have some luck selling things like harvested winter rye, oats, and black beans. Well, not the black beans, but the run rye and the oats, I had some luck selling that as cover crop seed because I knew a lot of vegetable growers who needed that. Any money that I made came from doing that, and then I grew black beans, which were really popular, but very... The market for black beans is just... I would've needed to sell them for \$ 10 a pound to make it worthwhile. Nobody wanted to pay that for them, or I didn't even ask them because I assumed nobody would want to pay that for them.

(01:04:41):

During this period of experimenting with grains, we found the Elmer Farm and moved down here. It became very clear that the money was in vegetables, and so I kept growing the beans for a little while. I kept the combine for a few years until it broke, and then, for a while, I harvested the black beans by hand, and brought them up, and threw them into the stationary combine to thrash them. It was all just too much work. For the amount of acreage that we had, that was good enough to really grow high value crops on, it was a total waste to put grains on them, because doing well, we could get... If we got \$1,000 an acre worth of beans off, we would've been thrilled in terms of beans and vegetables. We're shooting for more like 35,000 an acre, so with the small acreage, it was a no-brainer to drop the grains.

Speaker 1 (01:05:42):

Yeah, yeah. You've got essentially a 30-year farming career at this point. What does sustainable farming mean to you, and how are you structuring your business or doing to achieve it?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:05:58](#)):

Yeah, that's a big question. The answers changed over the years. Sustainable farming, initially, for me, was all about the farming, about how are we treating the land, what externalities are we passing on to the greater population by the products we're using and whatnot. I've always been conscious of trying not to support industries I don't think are doing sustainable things in terms of the environment. But as I've grown in my career, I see more and more of the importance of the sustainability of the farmer. I've seen a lot of my peers who have given it up over the years, and it's a really challenging business. It's a business that we have a...

([01:07:09](#)):

I think most of the people getting into organic growing aren't doing it for the money. They're doing it for their values and that's also a values-based business. It really, there's sacrifices that you make for those values to continue. When you're in your 20s and 30s, it's one thing to sacrifice an income, and financial security, and your time for this passion you have. As you start to get older, you're like, "Is this really sustainable? Can I continue to not be able to afford health insurance and stuff like that with the work I'm doing?" That's a whole other aspect of sustainability that's been opened up to me in the last decade. What was your question about it?

Speaker 1 ([01:08:17](#)):

Yeah, just what was your viewpoint on it? Because sustainability, you touched on it. It has three levels. The business has to be sustainable, the farmer has to be sustainable, it has to work out environmentally, and financially, and socially within the community. All three of those have to stack up in order for the business to succeed, and for you to keep going, and all that. I was just wondering what your viewpoint on it was.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:08:48](#)):

Yeah. I would say that I feel like we're successful. I feel pretty proud of our environmental sustainability with what we're doing. There's always things you'd rather not do. I'd rather not use any plastic for my greenhouses, but to market in the climate in Vermont, we have to use plastic on some things. We have to use diesel fuel. There's things that I wish I didn't have to use, but I feel okay with it, because I feel like having local production and food is more worthwhile and there's no good alternative to it in terms of buying food from somebody. Nobody's producing it without those inputs, and a lot of them are a lot worse. The environmentally, I feel good about that.

([01:09:39](#)):

The business, pretty much since we've started, we've had insatiable demand for our product. We've been able to have a business that we can sell our product. That hasn't been a problem. The profitability aspect of it is improved greatly as we've matured as a business. We've invested in better equipment and efficiencies. Yeah, I'm a very efficiency-minded person. It's like everything is very ordered in the way I've set up my farm. The unsustainable part though, I'm finding, is that the order is really specific to me and my understanding of how things work. It's really hard to translate that and pass off my burden to other people without being an unpleasant person to be around. It's like there's so much nuance to the business, and to the production techniques, and to making things flow in a way that, well, the business remains profitable.

[\(01:11:18\)](#):

There's so many steps and so much information. I feel like I'm always playing chess. I'm always trying to look three moves ahead of what I'm doing and trying to prevent bottlenecks and situations that are just hard to fix. In order to train people, who I can't really pay very much, I don't have a big enough farm or a big enough market to have a huge, well-paid staff, I don't know if anybody does, it is hard to have a very transitional staff and to have such precise way that things have to happen in order to remain profitable. That's my biggest challenge. The biggest threat to the sustainability of my farm is to be able to slow down as I get older and still be able to impart my farming techniques in a way that remains profitable enough to be worth doing.

Speaker 1 [\(01:12:24\)](#):

What crew size do you have right now?

Spencer Blackwell [\(01:12:27\)](#):

Pretty small. I have a three-person full-time equivalent kind of. We have two full-timers, one part-timer who are working from the beginning of April until mid-December. I've had about 10 very part-time high school, either part-time in that they've worked for three weeks in the summer or part-time and they'll come Friday afternoons for two months or something like that. I think last I looked, we have about 5,000-hour annual payroll.

Speaker 1 [\(01:13:10\)](#):

Oh, that's an interesting way of looking at it. I haven't heard of anybody else say it that way.

Spencer Blackwell [\(01:13:15\)](#):

Yeah. That would include my hours as well.

Speaker 1 [\(01:13:17\)](#):

Yeah. You made a comment about being a pleasant person to be around. What did you mean by that? Just that there's so many moves in the chess game that you're always stressed or what?

Spencer Blackwell [\(01:13:33\)](#):

Well, the best way for me to make my moves, as I put it, I guess, is to use people as tools and be like, "Okay, you go there and do that, but I'm doing this and I need this amount of time to finish this before you'll be ready to do that. I don't have time to tell you why [inaudible 01:14:05] is working." With a young crew that just doesn't have a lot of experience and they have a lot of questions, I used to spend all my time with the crew in the field doing everything they did together. As I've gotten older, I don't have the energy for that. Not because I can't spend eight hours bunching carrots or whatever, but I can't spend eight hours bunching carrots and then spend another eight hours making beds, or fixing the shed, or doing all the things that I used to do.

[\(01:14:41\)](#):

A 16-hour day was totally normal when I was in my 30s. As a 50-year-old, I'm like, "Eh, I'm done with that. I'm fixing the shed during the height of the day while I'm feeling fresh, and they can go bunch the carrots. That's something they can do. But to be able to teach them how to think about how things are flowing through the broader workings of the farm... It's like 40 different crops. It's a complicated amount of things. Every time you take six people from one job to the next, it costs you 50 bucks,

because I pay good wages, anywhere from... Well, the youngest kids get 15 bucks an hour and the best are getting upwards to mid-20s, so it costs a lot of money for six people to meander halfway across with a farm and start something else. It's like, "I need you to think this through clearly so you're not meandering back across the farm in 10 minutes."

Speaker 1 ([01:15:45](#)):

"The dollars are flowing by the minute, guys. Let's go."

Spencer Blackwell ([01:15:48](#)):

They do, they do. Yeah. People don't want to be thought of as tools. They don't want to be thought of as dollars moving from one place to the next. It's just unpleasant, but it's the reality.

Speaker 1 ([01:16:02](#)):

Right. How do you find the balance of training and educating them to have that efficiency mindset and to get the work done, but not just explain so much that... It's important for them to know the big picture of what's going on and everything else that you need to do so they understand why you're not bagging carrots with them, but how do you find that balance or what are some techniques that... Where do you draw the line that set them up to go?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:16:38](#)):

I would say I have definitely not mastered that process. We just had a crew meeting yesterday, and they said that was the biggest problem. "We just never knew what was happening and we felt like we were being inefficient because you didn't explain well enough." I own that. I know I didn't explain things well enough. Yeah, I'm lucky. I have people that really want to do a good job. They want to make the farm successful, and they're not just here because they need to do something. They're here because they want to be, and that's huge. I want them to feel included and all that, so I have a learning curve to do there.

Speaker 1 ([01:17:19](#)):

No, I didn't mean to pull out one of your weak points but-

Spencer Blackwell ([01:17:24](#)):

Yeah. No, no. It's like we're not all perfect and that's one of mine. I tell you, anybody who's worked for me will tell you that.

Speaker 1 ([01:17:30](#)):

Communication is hard for a lot of people. Yeah, I would imagine. Going back to sustainability and sustainability as a farmer for yourself, what do you do to separate yourself from the never-ending to-do list or working a few less than 16 hours a day?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:17:54](#)):

Yeah, I've gotten much better at that. One is that my infrastructure is pretty well-built for what I absolutely have to do now. I don't have a lot of things that are just kicking me to be fixed or built at any given time, so that's helpful. I've graduated into a working model in some regards. Every year, you pick up something that chops hours off of a task. It's like 30 years, I chopped a lot of hours off, so that's

helped. But that said, there is always that, "Oh, I could be doing this right now." I think part of it is just not caring.

([01:18:46](#)):

It's not starting not to care. It's like the finances of my business have been so consistent over the years. It's like at this point in the season, at our one store, we're \$150,000 in sales so far, and I think we're like \$1,000 over sales and maybe like \$3,000 over six years ago sales. It's so steady that it just doesn't matter. It's all going to even out somewhere.

Speaker 1 ([01:19:22](#)):

That's great.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:19:24](#)):

Yeah. There's always winners, there's always losers, there's always things that fail, and there's always things that just come out of nowhere and make you money.

Speaker 1 ([01:19:32](#)):

Yeah, right. If you've been in it long enough, you know if you don't get that one thing addressed, it'll probably be okay.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:19:41](#)):

Yep, exactly.

Speaker 1 ([01:19:43](#)):

You know the impact of your decisions.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:19:45](#)):

I've been in it long enough to know too, that, okay, it is worth doing this right now. That little bit of effort will pay back big time and I'm just going to do it even though I don't want to.

Speaker 1 ([01:19:56](#)):

How many years into the business do you think it took or do you feel it really took to get that flywheel spinning and your infrastructure underneath you?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:20:04](#)):

I would say about 10 years. About 10 years in, everything's got really consistent.

Speaker 1 ([01:20:12](#)):

That seems to be about the number. I've talked with quite a few people, and it's that seven to 10 years, they finally feel like they've got their markets dialed in, they've got a good handle on the crops. They've got that infrastructure, they've got the barn, the greenhouses, the heat and the tunnel, and whatnot. It's just interesting to hear that. You mentioned about part of your environmental sustainability is not using a lot of plastic. When we walked around your farm, I observed you do not have a lot of greenhouses and you don't use black plastic.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:20:50](#)):

I used to, but I dropped that.

Speaker 1 ([01:20:54](#)):

I think of the many organic farms that I've seen, a lot of them either have a lot of tunnels and/or a lot of black plastic, so you're-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:21:04]

Speaker 2 ([01:21:00](#)):

... And or a lot of black plastic. So you're sticking out to me as somebody being different.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:21:06](#)):

Yeah, the tunnels is probably just a preference thing. I guess the tunnels are most valuable in the off seasons, and I never had a big market for tomatoes. Middlebury had, that was one thing. Everyone had a tomato plant on their porch, and there was other growers who were selling to our stores, so I never had a big market for tomatoes. So that would be one thing that will grow houses is tomato market, and I've always just had enough market in Middlebury not to be looking outside of town for more markets. So tomatoes never pushed the house construction, so the only reason was the off season early and late production. And we had a lot of wind here and my tunnels were poorly situated when we first built them, and we had two or three, we had one collapse of a snow load, wind loaded to one side, collapsed the greenhouse, a brand new house. I'd actually never grown it in it.

([01:22:19](#)):

And then I had two plastics blow off, and so that made me not suck.

Speaker 2 ([01:22:27](#)):

Sucked the fun out of it.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:22:28](#)):

Sucked the fun out of greenhouse growing yeah, hoophouse growing. We've reoriented them since and put them in a better location and they've held up much better, but they still are not my favorite space to grow in. Everyone likes being in a tunnel when it's cold and snowy outside, but all the other time I really just don't like being in there. It's too hot in the summer. It's a hard space to use the same system that you use in the field in because of the structure impeding your work. We have got a good market for root crops, so I can maintain some winter income through storage crops, which seems easier than me. And yeah, I just can't deal with the venting and the uncovering and recovering of things all winter long. It's just like I need a break.

Speaker 2 ([01:23:28](#)):

Yeah. So aside from selling some roots, do you largely take the winters off?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:23:32](#)):

We put up quite a bit of roots. You didn't see my cooler that's full of roots. We normally try to have roots to last through January and then more or less take February off, do my taxes, do a lot of

bookkeeping stuff and farm planning and all that happens in the winter. And then we start the seeds in March. So it's definitely a time I look forward to, but I wouldn't say it's off.

Speaker 2 ([01:24:03](#)):

No. Right. Yeah, I meant that as a... Yeah.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:24:07](#)):

Yeah, I'm not-

Speaker 2 ([01:24:07](#)):

Slower time.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:24:08](#)):

I'm not harvesting and selling stuff every day. Yep.

Speaker 2 ([01:24:10](#)):

Right, right. I saw a roller crimper out there. Can you share your experience with that? Do you use it a lot? Do you love it? Hate it.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:24:20](#)):

I want to love it. The roller crimper was a whim. I never should have spent money on it, but one of those things that end of the year I was like, had a good year and I was thinking I could write off a lot of it and I try it out, sounds so cool. My neighbors had just built one, like a 30-foot wide one. Theirs is also in the hedgerow now. I liked the idea of it and I thought I'd try it and I figured I'm pretty willing to take the cutting torch to things and repurpose. I haven't done that yet to the roller-climber, but the thought has crossed my mind. It hasn't become very useful yet. I do have some ideas for how to make it work better in our environment, but my issue with it is that it doesn't kill the crop like it's supposed to,

([01:25:16](#)):

I don't know if my soils are too soft, so I'm not getting the right kind of crimp or if the cover crops and the high fertility system that I have, they're so vigorous that they don't die, but for whatever reason, they're either maturing too long and going to seed or just popping back up all crooked and out of whack. And I've done daily crimpings, like one bed each day for two weeks through the period [inaudible 01:25:52] find the right spot and there is no right spot. And yeah, the amount of biomass that you have there is also very hard to deal with in terms of getting the next crop started in it. I haven't figured that out. I have heard that people have had luck with Tapping over the roller crimp to really kill it. So that's something I would try, but Tapping is not an easy job, so I've not gotten to that yet.

Speaker 2 ([01:26:26](#)):

More plastic use.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:26:27](#)):

Well, yeah, we have the tarps. I use the landscape fabric, which also is probably not as good as black silage tarps. But yeah, it's just the manual labor of laying it out, keeping the wind from blowing it away and all that, that makes it just too much work. So yeah, I haven't figured a use for the roller crimper.

Speaker 2 ([01:26:49](#)):

Was that a front mount, rear mount?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:26:52](#)):

It's a rear mount, ye.

Speaker 2 ([01:26:53](#)):

Yeah. Is that six foot to work on your-

Spencer Blackwell ([01:26:57](#)):

Yep.

Speaker 2 ([01:26:57](#)):

Okay. Yep. Share a little bit about how you utilize mulches and mulching.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:27:05](#)):

Yeah. Well, mulching, it's got millions of benefits that are well known, but the primary benefit I go for is weed control. I have a source of chopped haylage, so it's very well processed hay that's been ensiled in a silage bunk and then started to rot because some air got into the bunk and so it's wasted from a dairy farm that they bring to me and most of the bunks have a layer of rot somewhere in them, and it's a big enough farm that they have a pretty good volume of waste.

Speaker 2 ([01:27:52](#)):

Some funk that's no good for feed [inaudible 01:27:55].

Spencer Blackwell ([01:27:54](#)):

Yeah. I think it probably could be fed to some animals, but they don't. They choose not to use it. So it flows very well when it's fresh anyways, before it's further rotted in a pile out in my field, when it fresh comes, it is a very flowable, there's no piece longer than two inches, it's very well chopped. And I built a spreader that has a containment box on the back and I can spread it over a crop that's already planted and it leaves rows of mulch around the crop. And some crops you can even just broadcast the mulch right over the top of it, over the top of the crop, and it'll flow down between the leaves and mulch well between the plants. So that has been great for weed control. It's also because of its consistency, it's fine flowable structure that if weeds do come through, I can still cultivate, I can run basket weeders through there.

([01:29:02](#)):

I can run cultivating shanks through. So it's been a really, really nice addition to my farm. There's a lot of variability in the hay that I'm getting. Some of it is very lignified and does not have much nutrient in it. It's a little slower to break down and perhaps even sucks a little nutrient out of the surface of the soil. And then other of it is very lush. It was probably a high protein feed that imparts a lot of nutrient and I've done some testing to determine, and it's just as I suspected, some of it's not given the soil anything immediately anyways, and some of it actually is leaching nutrient into the crop, so I'm getting better at knowing what I'm spreading. But that's a learning process. So there's some fertility benefits, there's weed control benefits.

(01:30:06):

And then there's the micro-erosion, which is a little bit of a new thing for me to recognizing is that erosion isn't necessarily only big furrows running down towards the brook. It is also the surface of the soil, the fines getting blown into the low spots and then forming the crust that you'll find on a bare soil. So even a very light amount of mulch will prevent that surface erosion from if you have a heavy rains storm, like this summer I had just seeded some carrots and then we had a prediction of a three inches of rain and I went and I spread very light, you could still see the soil poking through in places through the mulch over those beds, and the structure of them held up way better than the previous rainstorm, which I hadn't mulched.

Speaker 2 (01:31:05):

Yeah. Wow. So you're not really counting on the fertility necessarily as part of your equation. That's just like a bonus. If it is,

Spencer Blackwell (01:31:13):

It's a bonus, yeah and I think it does, especially over time. It's going to build up some fertility.

Speaker 2 (01:31:19):

But have you noticed an organic matter increase with all that?

Spencer Blackwell (01:31:22):

Some of it, yeah. One of the tests, there was a pretty significant bump, a couple percent after a couple of years of using the hay on it. Yeah.

Speaker 2 (01:31:34):

That's awesome. And a unique opportunity to using your location.

Spencer Blackwell (01:31:37):

Not a couple percent, a couple tenths of a percent. Yeah. Sorry.

Speaker 2 (01:31:42):

It's more like it. No, yeah, that's unique. I don't think many people have the opportunity to be right next to a dairy farm and be able to capture some of that waste, so that's sweet. If you were restarting now, what would you do differently? Knowing what you know?

Spencer Blackwell (01:32:01):

Hard to say, I guess I haven't really thought about that too much. I do sometimes think about starting over, moving back to central Vermont and working on a hillside where I grew up. I don't know, I feel like I've been pretty successful in this location, in this rendition of a business. There are things that I would like to try that are totally different, like incorporating animals into my system. But yeah, I feel like we... And if I were to start again in the same location with the same market, but with all the knowledge I have now in the same place, then yeah, I would put a lot of money into all the things that have worked immediately, but I didn't because you don't know what's going to work until you start to see things happen. And I'm very much of an incremental developer, little by little tweaking things rather than trying to throw down the perfect system out of the box.

Speaker 2 ([01:33:22](#)):

Yeah. What advice would you give to a beginning grower?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:33:28](#)):

Yeah, I would say that right there is good advice. Don't throw a lot of money into a big idea that's not tested. And maybe to some extent, the time that I was starting my farm there was less, like the Vermont Vegetable Berry Grower Association hadn't done a whole pack wash food safety decade it seems like, of exploration of how to do this. So maybe I could have just started out with a bigger setup. But I think just being really careful about what you're spending your money on and making sure that it is contributing directly to more income versus just things like roller crimpers, which feel fun like, "Oh, cool, it's like the new trend or whatever." Stay with the tried and true things that invest in, start with the basics. I think I said earlier, the irrigation source, the drainage, those two are the primary, and the farm itself has got to be in, you got to have decent land to do what you want to do.

([01:34:53](#)):

I mean, there's different farming applications for all kinds of different types of land, but don't try to grow vegetables on Rocky Hillside. It was small acreage, whatever. It's like you're going to be fighting uphill, literally, but maybe that land is great for grazing on or something like that. So make sure, don't just try to force your vision onto something that's not going to accept it well, and yeah, be careful what you invest in and make sure there's market for what you are doing, even if you think what you're making is the most amazing thing, it won't help you if you can't sell it, if nobody else around you does. So yeah, let your market drive your decision-making. That's what's worked for me.

Speaker 2 ([01:35:51](#)):

What was a time that you felt really successful farming?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:35:55](#)):

I feel successful when I look at my fields and I just particularly, those times it is amazing how much, what the weather's doing, what your crops are looking like affect your psychological well-being as a farmer, you can feel really crappy when you've just lost the whole planting of something. You can feel like a very unsuccessful grower. But when I see a successful crop that makes me feel like I know what I'm doing and when I see a successful crop that not only is it like a high-yielding, high-quality crop, but I also didn't really do anything to make it happen. I basically planted it, walked away and came back to a bountiful crop. So that's happened on occasion. I wish I had the magic formula so I could repeat it consistently, but there's so much variability in all these, the weather and the timing of everything and the ground you're planting in. There's so many variables. It's really hard to consistently have that, but that's my goal and that's what makes me feel successful when I can plant something, walk away and come back and harvest it.

Speaker 2 ([01:37:18](#)):

Well, I guess when you are growing such a wide range of crops, some things win and some things lose. As it shows in the books, you said you're very consistent at the end of the year so the house is out.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:37:30](#)):

And we'll lose. Last summer, we lost a whole month's worth of lettuce. Lettuce is our second-biggest crop, and yeah, it impacted our gross sales for the year by very little, less than a percent. But that's a

benefit. There's a huge benefit of having diversity in that you're spreading your risk. The drawback is the complication for what I was talking about before, about keep getting a crew to be able to manage all those different crops efficiently.

Speaker 2 ([01:38:05](#)):

And on the contrary, what was a day where you felt really challenged by farming?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:38:10](#)):

Yeah. Anytime things fall apart, the crop dies. The greenhouse blows apart. It's like you just like, "Why am I doing this?" Last summer, the whole 30 inches of rain in six weeks, every single day I'd be like, "Oh, I'm just going to replant it. Won't do that again." And then two days later, we get three more inches of rain. I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" That was probably the lowest point I've had farming. It was just like I said, it psychologically affects you. You just start feeling down and depressed when you see things dying and it's your income just, I don't know. It's more than that though. It's all your energy and effort went into this and it just died, and so 30 days in a row, I watched stuff die last year, and that was my lowest point for sure.

Speaker 2 ([01:39:02](#)):

Yeah, and it's out of your control.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:39:04](#)):

Out of my control. It didn't even flood. That was just like rainfall. I can't imagine a lot of these growers who are on the rivers and are just watching massive amounts of water just cover their land.

Speaker 2 ([01:39:20](#)):

Yeah. Did you have any tactics, strategies, hobbies, supportive wife that was able to help you through those hard times?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:39:31](#)):

Yeah, I don't know. Try to not take things too seriously and try to remember how everything balances out in the end. Yeah, I do like to get out in the woods and just breathe. Breathe that woods smells. They help. My family is, my wife and I are separated, but we run the farm together and we have three kids together, so we're still very connected. My kids are just a constant source of enjoyment for me. I just love them all so much and so proud of them.

Speaker 2 ([01:40:15](#)):

Is there anything else that you'd like to share that I didn't bring up?

Spencer Blackwell ([01:40:20](#)):

I can't think of anything. I think we covered a lot.

Speaker 2 ([01:40:23](#)):

We did.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:40:24](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I appreciate the conversation. Always fun to reflect on your life.

Speaker 2 ([01:40:31](#)):

Well, thank you for your time. Thanks for coming on the show, and thanks for sharing your story.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:40:35](#)):

Okay, you're welcome, yeah.

Speaker 2 ([01:40:35](#)):

Appreciate it.

Spencer Blackwell ([01:40:37](#)):

Yeah, thanks for putting your Farmer's Share together. I know a lot of people are thrilled to hear all these stories.

Speaker 2 ([01:40:42](#)):

And that was the Farmer's Share. I hope you enjoyed this episode. Learning more about Spencer Blackwell and how he runs Elmer Farm. The Farmer's Share is supported by a grant offered by the USDA Specialty Crop Block Program from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets. This funding helps to cover some of my time and travel in order to produce these podcasts for the next two and a half years. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service supports projects that address the needs of US specialty crop growers and strengthens local and regional food systems. I have no doubt that this podcast will meet those needs and help educate growers to support the industry. This show also is supported by the Ag Engineering program of the University of Vermont Extension. If you enjoy the show and want to help support its programming, you can make a one-time or reoccurring donation on our website by visiting thefarmersshare.com/support.

([01:41:47](#)):

We also receive funding from the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. The VVBGA is a non-profit organization funded in 1976 to promote the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of vegetable and berry farming in Vermont. Their membership includes over 400 farms across Vermont and beyond, as well as about 50 businesses and organizations that provide products and services of all types to their members. Benefits to members include access to the VVBGA Listserv to buy, sell plants and equipment, share farming information, and tap the vast experience of our growers, access the community Accreditation for produce safety, also known as CAPS. This program is designed for growers by growers to help you easily meet market and regulatory food safety expectations. You can access the VVBGA's Soil Health Platform where you can organize all the soil tests and create and store your soil amendment plans and records.

([01:42:50](#)):

Access to webinars for growers in the VVBGA annual meeting, an email subscription to the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Newsletter, comradery, enhanced Communication and Fellowship among commercial growers. Memberships are on a per farm per calendar year basis, and annual dues this year are \$80. These funds pay for the organization's operating costs and support educational programs and research projects. These funds also support projects that address grower needs around ag engineering, high tunnel production, pest management, pollinators, produce safety, and soil health. Become a member today to be a part of and further support the veg and berry industry. You can visit the

farmersshare.com to listen to previous interviews or see photos, videos, or links discussed from the conversation.

[\(01:43:43\)](#):

If you don't want to miss the next episode, enter your email address on our website and you'll get a note in your inbox when the next one comes out. The Farmers Share has a YouTube channel with the videos from several of the farm visits. We're also on Instagram, and that's where you can be reminded about the latest episode or see photos from the visit. Lastly, if you're enjoying the show, I'd love it if you could write a review, in Apple Podcasts. Just click on the show, scroll down to the bottom, and there you can leave five stars in a comment to help encourage new listeners to tune in. I'd also encourage you to share this episode with other grower friends or crew who you think would be inspiring for them. Thanks for listening.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:44:30]