Tim Taylor (00:00:00):

It's Tim and Janet Taylor, and we started Crossroad Farm in 1980 and we're in Thetford, Vermont in the village of Post Mills. And we grew from a card table to two big stands and wholesale accounts, and still small, but about 50 plus acres of vegetables and 20 some odd greenhouses or 20 greenhouses out there. And yeah, that's who we are, and we did it for 42 years, I guess, before we sold the farm to the next generation who had worked on the farm already for about 17... well, how many years? 20 years. Yeah, anyway, so that's us.

Andy Chamberlin (00:00:56):

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 Farmers 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.

(00:01:46):

Today's episode comes to you from Post Mills, Vermont, where we visit with Tim and Janet Taylor of Crossroad Farm. They're recently retired from a 40 plus year farming career, growing on over 50 acres and 20 high tunnels of diversified vegetables. What started out as a garden turned into a business that was able to be sold and retired off of. The first half of this episode goes into the history of building things up, and the second half goes a little deeper on how they managed to keep it sustainable for their entire career. The story is always best told from the farmer's mouth, so let's get right into it, and I hope you enjoy this episode of The Farmers Share. Thanks for listening. One of the questions right off the top is just how did you get started farming?

Tim Taylor (00:02:35):

Well, I guess it might even go back earlier than when we actually started farming. I would start by saying that when after... So we were married in 1973. We started the farm in 1980, so there's like seven years there, and that seven years involve some travel to Europe, some study in Europe. Eventually I applied from Europe to law school and got into Vermont Law School and matriculated in the summer of 1975. But what was interesting about that experience was I spent pretty much the entire time, as well did Janet, trying to do other things that were outdoors. Like we took on a project of rebuilding a cabin and learning all kinds of carpentry skills. One summer we walked the long trail from start to finish.

(00:03:36):

We spent 32 days in the woods from Williamstown up to Troy, so we were doing all these other things, and it became, even though while I was doing law school, it just became ever more present and clear to me that I wanted to do something other than sit around an office all day long. So after I graduated from law school, did a clerkship for a couple of years and we bought a house over here. And in 1978, the year I graduated and it had 15 acres of land, my folks had built a house on Lake Fairlee back in 1969, and I had always grown up with a fairly large garden to help weed and take care of and that kind of thing. And so they took a great interest in the fact that we had this extra piece of land and we started to have a big garden for a couple of years and planted some asparagus and that kind of thing.

(00:04:45):

And then we were approaching having a family, and Janet had been working for about five years or so at a daycare center, and she was ready to have a family. We both were, and she knew she didn't want to be at a daycare. So here we were, I was leaving the law firm because I knew I wanted to do something different. And I guess at that time, we had sort of decided that we wanted to try farming. We had absolutely no education in that direction at all. We had support from especially my folks and interest, and we had tolerance from your folks who didn't just think... I think they thought we were totally crazy, but on the other hand, they were very supportive people in general. Now, we didn't have to worry about survival. We had some backing from my folks and her folks so that we were not going to starve, nor did we ever really work out.

(00:05:56):

As it turns out, there was a VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America, who came around one day and said, "Hey, if you grow something, I can sell it to restaurants for you." And I don't know if Jake ever mentioned that to you, but he was part of that too for a year or so. And so we had set up a card table where we first started growing and selling some vegetables right out there on Little Crossroad, which was back then it was known as the Dump Road because there was one of those old type dumps that so many towns have had. And we were encouraged from our sales, and we were encouraged from the fact that we could grow some produce and have it get marketed without us having to do too much effort. So we did that for a year or so, right?

Janet Taylor (00:06:55):

And built our first greenhouse that year.

Tim Taylor (00:06:58):

And built our first greenhouse and had our first child all in the same year. Then it just gradually grew and we made lots and lots of mistakes along the way. I think the most significant thing that really happened was the fact that we started to go to the Veg Growers meetings, and in that same time, met Jake and Liz Guest, met Dave Chapman from Long Wind Farm, who also lived in Thetford at the time. He was a longtime friend. I think he was a friend even before maybe starting to farm. I can't quite remember that. We got to know Dave Pearson, who lives up in Bradford. We got to know Pooh and Anne Sprague, and we all sort of formed this little network trying to educate ourselves because of course, this was all pre-internet.

(00:08:04):

And Extension did reach out to us, but they reached out in a way that we weren't entirely comfortable with. I think one of the first things that I really remember about Extension was going to a strawberry conference, more of a twilight meeting, I'd say. And they were laying plastic out over the field where the strawberries were to go, and they were pumping methyl bromide in underneath to essentially kill everything. This was around 1980, '81, and that didn't sit too well with us. Though we have never been nor certified organic, but our practices were always directed in that general direction. So one of the things we started to do was put together our own conferences, Dave Chapman especially, we would get together and plan conferences and then invite people and learn from these people who had alternative organic methods.

(00:09:21):

There was two other really important things that sort of happened at that time. Dave was actually working for Jake at the time, so we would invite Dave over quite frequently to have dinner, and then we would ask him everything he'd done that day and try to learn from him what Jake, who became a very

strong mentor of ours. The other thing that was occurring as the years slowly went by was that Elliot Coleman was up at the Mountain school in Vershire. And so he took an interest in us and dropped down here and watch us and kind of give us advice, and this is sort of the start of his more public career, I guess, that some of his hoes were first tried on our farm and whatnot. So that was very important.

(00:10:18):

I think what I would stress was that... Oh, and then I started to take a very active interest myself in the Growers Association and became chairman of the programs' committee so that I could direct as much as possible what interested me for speakers and that kind of thing. I mean, I think today Vern largely takes care of it himself. That wasn't always true. Back in the day, it was very much a part of a committee, and specifically for a few years, me, who would put a lot of programs together that we really wanted to learn about. We once brought Allen Hand of Hand Melon, which is a very famous grower over in Greenwich, New York of melons to come. In fact, we had that conference up at Randolph, that was really very successful. So very quickly too, we realized we couldn't make a living here out in Post Mills in Thetford doing just simply selling at a little stand. So we very quickly started to direct market to restaurants.

Janet Taylor (00:11:41):

And the farmer's market.

Tim Taylor (00:11:42):

And the farmer's market. Whoops, forgot that.

Janet Taylor (00:11:44):

Now, that's a pretty big piece at the very beginning.

Tim Taylor (00:11:46):

Yeah, it certainly is.

Janet Taylor (00:11:47):

It was two days a week unlike now, which is one day a week, and there were no stands down in Norwich. So that's where our market was, and it's a much more densely populated by Vermont standards. So two days a week, we would go down there and sell what we had. That was year two for us. I think it was year three maybe for the market. It hadn't been around for too long, and that was another group of people that we would exchange ideas with. And so the whole point being that at the beginning there was a lot of exchange amongst the growers that was really critical to our learning. So yeah.

Tim Taylor (00:12:33):

Yeah, Emily Grube was there with a bunch of little toe heads running around, and some of those have become very important to the extension and in New England.

Janet Taylor (00:12:46):

So you're going to talk about the wholesale.

Tim Taylor (00:12:50):

Yeah. So yeah, we started direct marketing, wholesaling, and it's interesting when you talk about this food table, farm to table, we kind of had a laugh when that came around because we'd been doing it since the early '80s. And what I would do would be just to take... we were largely lettuce growers. We even tried iceberg for a while, and mostly back then you grew romaine and green leaf. There wasn't even red leaf at first. I can remember taking red leaf to a restaurant once, and they had a salad bar and they had those lights that were kind of orange-y, kind of yellowy, and they thought the red leaf look rotten, what was on the salad bar. And when I think where we've come today with salad greens.

Andy Chamberlin (00:13:44):

They're not just green.

Tim Taylor (00:13:46):

They're not just green, but that apropos of that, there is a freckled romaine, and I never could grow that one because of that experience. I just figured people would think that was a leaf that had gone by. So I would take, especially parsley, fresh curly parsley. A lot of the restaurants used that as a garnish back then as well as kale. Nobody ate it particularly, it was a garnish. But it would be delivered to them by the wholesaler with a rubber band around it, and it would generally be dead practically. And so we would bring these loose, curly parsley bags and weigh them by the pound, half pound, and sell them. And they love that because it was all washed. They just pull it out, wouldn't have to do anything with it, put it on the plate.

(00:14:43):

In fact, I mean, the one French restaurant in Hanover, that was the first thing they'd asked for in the spring. Now, almost all these restaurants are gone now, but there was always right from day one, this kind of collaboration with the chefs. Now, chefs moved around a lot, and so sometimes you could lose an account when a chef left, but generally speaking, it was a great way for us to learn. Because in the course of growing lettuce throughout the summer, which is something we were always able to do and can still pretty much do, but sometimes it's with climate change, it's getting a little warm at times. But what generally happens is your spring lettuce, if it's been hit by frost, sometimes if you haven't row covered the first crop might be a little small, but then eventually you start to have in plantings, two, three, four, five, these humongous heads of lettuce.

(00:15:45):

And then as the summer comes on, you get into the July, late July, August, the heads tend to drop off. But the restaurants were wonderful in that as long as we brought them what was still the amount of yield, we might bring them 12 heads of lettuce early on and then eventually bring them 24 heads of lettuce for the same price. But they yield, as long as the yield was still good, they were happy with that. So that was a great way for us to start to learn how to grow a quality product that was consistent, but might be blemished in some way. Perhaps it was the tomato that was blemished, it could have been a number of things, but restaurants were more forgiving than a retail customer was. Now we still had the stand and the farmer's market. So what happened was as the years went by, we were able to glean off because our wholesale business, direct marketing to summer camps, children's summer camps on Lake Fairlee.

(00:16:55):

Eventually we did break into some, the co-op and start to market directly more to consumers. But that was quite a bit later, at least 10 years down the road, we did these restaurants and our wholesale was two-thirds of what we did, and our stand was maybe one-third. So we could glean off the best of the

best to sell at our stand, which helped raise the quality of our product. And every year our gross sales for all during the '80s would double every year, and we kept adding greenhouses. Arthur Wells was a very key figure for us from Extension over in New Hampshire. He spent time in Israel, I believe, and he introduced plastics to us. And so we learned how to, for instance, grow our peppers. It was new to grow peppers on black plastic, and then row covers came along, and that was new, spun-bonded polyester plastic with holes in it.

(00:18:09):

I never really liked plastic with holes in it. Jake, I know loves it, but I always felt like you could fry your plants very easily in it. So I liked spun-bonded polyester. I felt still warmed the soil in the crop a lot, but was very forgiving temperature wise. And then it became natural to consider our first greenhouses were mostly to get plants started, but all of a sudden became, "Well, why don't we grow crops there too?" I mean, it was the natural extension from going from the field if we're enhancing our growth in this cold climate, because we should mention that when we got started in the '80s, we almost always had a June frost here in Post Mills. The air just naturally settles down from Vershire Heights into this valley here, and it could be really cold at night.

(00:19:03):

So we chose crops that were... we grew still frost-sensitive crops, but far fewer than we might otherwise have. We grew lots of greens, lots of crucifers, lot of broccoli, cabbage, that kind of thing, things that could stand up to that kind of cold weather. But it sort of dawned on us and started to dawn on everyone else, that if we're going to continue doing this with tunnels, why don't we do it with a larger tunnel i.e. a greenhouse? So greenhouses started to spring up and we're learning from everyone else about it. And at first some of them weren't heated, but we learned very quickly. We named one Frosty because we hadn't heated it, and we had a frost, and it killed the plants in there. So every house started to have at least a minimal amount of heat in it to keep it from freezing.

(00:20:05):

And again, that became a big part of our growing, because now we could get a jump on the season. One of the things I find interesting when you look at soils is you'll see statewide soils and then prime agricultural soils, they'll make this distinction. And something like a Windsor soil is considered statewide, and Agawam is considered a prime. I mean, they're both protected soils, but because the winds are sandier and it has less organic matter in it and less clay, they tend to measure it through the amount of... in kind of an old-fashioned way, at least for a vegetable farmer, they measure it in terms of how much hay comes off of it or how much corn comes off of it. Not sweet corn, but cattle corn and whatnot. And I think it's wrong to do that from a vegetable point of view, because what we have here is light Windsor soils that we can jump on and get growing very early when you might not be able to get on the wetter Agawam soil.

(00:21:21):

And you can, when you just walk around the farm, you can feel it. You pick up the organic matter level of the Windsor soil is usually somewhere between, well, maybe if it's low, it's two and a half to three and a half. Whereas you go out here in the field across the way from the house here, and that Agawam soil is more like in the three and a half to five and a half range, and it's just naturally more fertile. So I think both those soils when it comes to preservation of soils for agricultural purposes is equally important. I've kind of jumped around, off subject here, but I'm getting to details of things I've started to learn.

Janet Taylor (00:22:08):

Well, one thing I was remembering while you're talking is that as... First of all, our connection to other farmers was key at the beginning, and the fact that we had more than one way that we marketed was key for us. The fact that we had crops that were focused on the kind of environment that we had, going from colder to warmer things, and then back to colder, we know in timing of that, and which we played with the timing a lot at the beginning. And that was important to us to learn.

(00:22:42):

And then the third thing was that we also had diversity in that we started growing flowers after the first year. We went to the market with a few petunia baskets that we grew in sort of the hanging part of the greenhouse, and discovered that they went really fast at the market. And we said, "Okay, so every spring we're going to grow some flowers because that brings in early income." So we started focusing on that a bit, but all those things continued, the cooperation with the other growers, learning the kinds of things you were talking about, Tim, and constant education, and then also staying diverse. So all those things were really important to us from day one.

Tim Taylor (00:23:34):

Yeah, one couple I forgot to mention, and then that would be silly to forget, is the Grays, Four Corners Farm. We knew them from way back in skiing days when they were over at the, I think it was the Green Stallion Inn where they were running before they were really actively farming. Or maybe they were even farming at that time, but they were doing a cross-country ski trail system over there in Randolph. And we came up and met them and skied on that property. And then when they were down in Heartland, we got to know them at the farmer's market, and they were always someone to aspire to because they grew just amazing crops. And so we've been longtime friends of theirs as they grew and then moved up to Newberry. Learned an awful lot. I mean, he was eventually president of the association, and I was his vice president. And then eventually I was president, and Dave Pearson was my vice president, and Jake, I think was his vice president. So it sort of went up and down the valley for a while. Pooh couldn't get involved because he was from New Hampshire.

Andy Chamberlin (00:24:48):

Oh, right. Yeah, he's just across.

Tim Taylor (00:24:49):

Yeah. But we all took a turn doing that. But Janet's really important point about the flowers is really key because that became a very... that was early money and it extended our season dramatically beyond just vegetables. We've seen an incredible extension in seasons now with growers growing all season long. I think they're crazy, but they do it. I really like to let a green house freeze and I think it asks for a lot of disease problems, potentially. And I think we've seen that. One of the things I've always marveled at organic growers is that they seem to be able to, I don't know if it's just part of their DNA, but they seem to be able to solve problems and then immediately have another problem that they then tackle.

(00:25:46):

And I've found it fascinating because they're very, very creative, and so you always want to pay attention to them, even if you're not doing exactly what they want. So the flowers became very important because we could start selling them end of April, May, and bring in a quick amount of income, that became really good. Janet, you want to pipe in with something new that was really good, what you had to say. You kind of put it all together. You're always good at that. So where do we want to go from-

Janet Taylor (00:26:19):

Are you doing history now or are you-

Tim Taylor (00:26:20):

Well, I mean, history is sort of there.

Janet Taylor (00:26:22):

That's the early part of our history, just I think people need to remember how different it was back then. If I wanted to learn something, I couldn't go on Google and figure it out. If there was a library, good, but there wasn't an agricultural library around here. And so that's, I think, really a different way that we learned was just by visiting other farms or farmers or talking to them. And the Extension started to provide [inaudible 00:26:49]

Tim Taylor (00:26:49):

Yeah, twilight beans were very important, weren't they?

Janet Taylor (00:26:52):

Yeah. And oftentimes if you visit another farm, you're going to maybe learn about how they're choosing to do their tomatoes, but you walk past a farm implement that you've never seen before. So that was key. And it's always hard to find time when you're sort of getting started. I think the first five years we barely took any time off at all. And eventually it didn't feel quite so impossible to go visit another farm after work because, or instead of work is really what it was because there was no after work. You're always 24/7 thinking about things. And I'd say, yeah, to have five years of learning, big learning curve was pretty much, I would say people should expect that.

Tim Taylor (00:27:40):

Yeah. No listserv to ask. I won't characterize all the questions because I think it's really good service we have. I mean, there were books. We bought a lot of books and had quite a library. I remember Dick Raymond was working with Troy-Bilt, and that was our first rototiller. Before we had a tractor, we had a rototiller, we got a neighbor to plow the first fields, eventually bought an used manure spreader and got a used Kubota tractor. It was really the only small tractor that was diesel that was available at the time. But I had to shovel off all the manure out of a truck before I got the manure spreader. I did that for a year or two until that got old, and also we were expanding. So some of those kinds of things happened.

Janet Taylor (00:28:47):

The other thing that happened to us that's probably worth mentioning, I don't know if this is the right time, but about how our farm grew in acreage. And the first piece we had was 15 acres, and part of that was a greenhouse or two and-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:29:04]

Janet Taylor (00:29:00):

And part of that was a greenhouse or two. And most of that land was very workable. There's a piece it was a little wet, but you rolled with it. And then we acquired a second piece.

Tim Taylor (00:29:16):

Yeah, that was key. So, in 1982, only two years into it, a developer from Bradford came, owned land next to us and across the street, he had a trailer park across the street. And the land next to us was 20 acres of this Windsor soil, some Agawam on it. And he wanted to put 10 two-acre lots in it, similar to the houses that were across the street, that he sold the houses, they were sort of these double-wide type houses that would come in, and they kind of glue them together. And so Act 250 kicked in, and there were hearings as well as our Town Development Review board, which was I guess the ZBA at the Time Planning Commission. Anyhow, Rd Boughton, who was extensionated at the time, had taken an active interest in us. And he came and testified before the Act 250 commission that this would pretty much kill us to have these 10 two-acre lots developed right next to it, this small farm that was just getting going, just for all the reasons you can imagine.

(00:30:27):

And also, to the fact that the part of the 9B part of Act 250 talks about, did he have other soils that he could be growing on? Did he really need to do this? Had any attempt to cluster it? In any event, the ACT 250 said, "No, you can't do this." And he turned around and offered to sell us the land. And we said, "Yeah, well, it's pretty expensive, but we did it." And I think we had some help from our folks. And that became crucial to us. It became early soils, like I discussed earlier, became our pond site. And I'd never go into this business without having irrigation again. When we started off, we tried to have some irrigation directly out of our deep well, which was a good well. It produces like 30 gallons a minute if you have the pump to do it. But having a pond is a whole different thing.

(00:31:27):

So yeah, you're right. That was early on. But critical, because while I think you can be successful on a small scale, much of those 15 acres we had was an integrated soil that has clay at about a couple of feet down, and it's about six to eight inches of clay. And it keeps a very high water table, and makes that soil potentially, unless you have a drought a year, very difficult to grow on. So, this was key to us.

(00:32:02):

And then I think what maybe around 1995, or it was a little earlier, a magic thing happened; Vern Grubinger arrived. And I'll never forget that because one of the first things he asked us was, "What can I do for you?" And that was a little different approach, because we were always sort of being told what we should want to know. And now we're being asked, "What do you want to know?" And we said, "Knowledge, about all different kinds of ways to grow things."

Andy Chamberlin (00:32:48):

And you'd been in it like 10 years at this point already.

Tim Taylor (00:32:51):

Yeah, I guess you'd have to check with Vern exactly when he came. I know I've asked him.

Andy Chamberlin (00:32:57):

But my point was, you had your feet underneath you. You had a running farm business rolling.

Tim Taylor (00:33:02):

Yeah, we did. And we were profitable. But it was just so exciting to have that approach be taken where all of a sudden, and along with the internet coming along...

Janet Taylor (00:33:16):

It coincided with that.

Tim Taylor (00:33:17):

Yeah. And one of the things he started to do was just similar to what we're doing here, except it was out on a tractor, the videos. So, all of a sudden we're all becoming stars of I guess VHS was it for... No, it was... Was it VHS first?

Janet Taylor (00:33:17):

Yeah.

Tim Taylor (00:33:36):

Yeah, it was VHS first. And you can still. And then eventually those cultivations, which by the way, when we got started, I guess I'm doing a lot of history here, but I remember going up to Black Mountain in Haverhill, New Hampshire, looking for cultivation equipment at the time in the early 80s. And they said, "Well, they kind of looked at me like funny," and said, "Well, I guess from what you're describing you might want some horse-drawn equipment." And it's out back, and I kind of looked around and it was all this rusty stuff. And there was plenty of cultivation equipment out there, and mostly in Europe, actually. And that was the kind of thing that took us quite a long time to learn.

(00:34:22):

But when Vern came, all of a sudden the pieces started really falling together. And the level of knowledge increased logarithmically, I think, for many of us. Even though we were already doing it and being somewhat successful, I think we became that much more successful as a result of his arrival.

(00:34:41):

The same time prior to that, Elliot Coleman and Dave Chapman had gone to Europe and learned from the Dutch, learned a lot about how to grow organic tomatoes. And brought that knowledge back to us. And went on a tour teaching us all about that. And so we learned a lot from that. That was another huge way, because tomatoes became everyone's. Besides sweet corn, tomatoes were the most important thing to have available to your customers, and it has always been a big part of Crossroad Farm.

Janet Taylor (00:35:18):

And you're talking specifically about greenhouse tomatoes?

Tim Taylor (00:35:22):

Well, I mean, we discovered that if you want to keep disease off of them, you grow them in the ground in tunnel houses with heat, but able to roll the sides up. I mean, we've always grown a variety called Big Beef, which was a 1995 All-American winner. So, I guess we had already been in the business 15 years growing all kinds of other ones, many of which would split and have all kinds of problems. But we always liked to grow outdoor varieties and stay away from the Dutch varieties as much as we could. Although Buffalo became a favorite of a lot of people, it's a Dutch variety, and then eventually Geronimo. And some of those are still grown today, and we grow them. But we've always really, and still to this day, grow the majority of our tomatoes are outdoor varieties.

Janet Taylor (00:36:14):

And it's because of the flavor?

Tim Taylor (00:36:16):

Absolutely. There's no comparison.

Janet Taylor (00:36:18):

If the flavor's kind of boring, then there's no point growing it.

Tim Taylor (00:36:25):

And I guess I've been criticized before from friends when I stress Big Beef because it does have problems with calcium uptake during heat, and we'll get a yellow shoulder and that kind of thing. I've always viewed growing tomatoes with Big Beef as you grow maybe five or six clusters, and then move on, you do succession growing. So we for years and years would grow approximately, anywhere from five to six crops of tomatoes, starting the first one in February and planting it around the first day of spring in the greenhouse. And then putting the last one sometime in mid-June after... And the last ones went into greenhouses that had already, we had prepared with manure and compost the fall before. Had brought in benches, grew a whole crop of bedding plants that we sold during May and early June, pulled the benches out, and then grew tomatoes for the late summer fall.

(00:37:42):

And so that's how we would do successive crops, whereas many of our farmer friends would grow and drop the tomatoes down and run them along the ground. And so in the course of the summer, their tomatoes might've grown 20 feet or so. But we never liked those turbocharged Dutch varieties that well. Even Buffalo, which was I knew a favorite of some growers. And eventually Geronimo became one that I actually had something to do with, as Buffalo was leaving, I shared that with some growers. And it's a pretty good variety, but I still don't... And we grow some of it here, and I think it's an acceptable variety for late fall when you have a lot of disease pressure. But generally, you get an excellent crop of big beef off for five or six trusses, and then after that, that's pretty profitable when you do that. That's always been a big crop for us as tomatoes. I think today still we're growing somewhere between 25 and 30,000 pounds.

(00:38:57):

Corn's been an interesting one. In the old days, corn might last before starching up on us. Certain varieties might last three or four days. I used to pick corn. We would close the stand at six, and from five to six I just spent all my time running back in with corn.

Janet Taylor (00:39:19):

Because people knew you got to get it right before you wanted to eat it.

Andy Chamberlin (00:39:24):

The freshest of the fresh.

Tim Taylor (00:39:25):

Yeah, and I did that and you didn't want to ever have any leftovers, so you're trying to run out at the same time you were doing that.

Janet Taylor (00:39:32):

Or give it to the pigs.

Tim Taylor (00:39:33):

Yeah, or give it to the pigs. But it never would hold like it does today that change in development with that synergistic variety. So, first we had the sugary enhanced varieties, and then eventually the synergistic. And so it is quite different today. They last much longer in the field. I can remember one of the things we made, I think we made kind of our reputation on, was picking very early corn that didn't taste like cow corn. And it had that crunchiness to it. It made it difficult to do, because you had to go through the field three or four times. Whereas today, I think that sugars with the synergistics actually get enhanced as they develop.

(00:40:29):

And while you still may have that crunchiness, if you pick early, it may not have quite the sweetness that'll get as it grows on and develops further. But in the old days, if it developed further, I can't remember some of those names right now, but you couldn't pick it, you just had to till it under. It was terrible. And it could happen fast, especially if you got hot weather. So, that was an anecdote, a learning lesson. So, in some ways that's easier to grow today.

(00:41:06):

We've also watched in the course of growing our season extend for sure, we've watched new insects and diseases come along. One of the things we can't do very well anymore is grow fall cucumbers, downy mildew. We used to grow five crops of cucumbers. I think now, Phil, by the way, we've sold the farm. We're two years out of selling the farm. This is 2024, and this is our first full year not being on a tractor in 40 some odd years. But that being said, we know a lot of what's going on. It is very frustrating not to have fall cucumbers. Even trying to do it out of the greenhouses with certain varieties hasn't worked. The attempts at using organic fungicides haven't been very successful.

(00:42:06):

The different downy mildews just seem to change so quickly that even the synthetic fungicides don't seem to particularly work, from talking to my more friends who will tend to use those. We don't do that here. So you get about three crops now. And used to be four, and now it's down to about three. I think Phil pulled off a little bit of fall cucumber in some of the greenhouses, but they really need to work on those varieties.

(00:42:46):

Another one that has been bothering was... Well, I guess we created that problem, was the hornworm. But for a lot of years we never saw the hornworm. And I don't know if it was a combination of changing weather, or just the fact that there were so many tomato greenhouses that let hornworm go by. But all of a sudden, that became a fairly significant problem. Easily controlled, with BT, but it was a problem.

(00:43:22):

Cultivation's always been a big deal for us. We've never been certified organic, but we've never grown our corn with anything but cultivation. And still to the day that's the way it's done. I think upwards to 10 acres of corn now, it's a fairly significant part of the farm, maybe even more, but it's still all cultivated various techniques. A lot of tying, weeding at the start. And then a little bit of hilling with kind of a little small hillers that we got back in the early 80s after going to a NOFA conference that was up in Montpelier. And we still use those to this day. And then eventually, you put on regular discs and hill the corn. We're still pretty primitive in that we do it all. We do the Lely obviously two rows at a time, but when we actually cultivate, we're only doing a single row at a time. So there's a lot of time taken there. If it gets wet, it can get difficult.

(00:44:35):

We're not the ones to talk about weed control, because we're not very good at that. We have always had excellent access to cow manure. And in fact, what we've been using for the last 20 years or so is kind of a heifer replacement cow type manure. It combines a horse farms over in Stratford with all those shavings and bedding with cow manure, and it's just wonderful stuff. We've managed to use that and not increase our phosphate levels off the charts. We're right there with phosphate, the last soil tests I saw, but we're not in excess. So, that's actually worked out very well. I think occasionally Vern's been somewhat mystified by that fact, but it is true.

Andy Chamberlin (00:45:34):

You were saying how there seems to be quite a bit of pests and disease pressure in the recent years. Do you think it's more difficult to grow now than it was when you started? Or no, the challenges have just changed? Because like you said, the learning, just the practices were the challenge at the start.

Tim Taylor (00:45:57):

Yeah, that's a really interesting question, because there was so much ignorance at the start, and so much of a learning curve that much of that was difficult, and now I think it's gotten, because our weather reflects more what you would face in our earlier years further south, it's become more challenging from that point of view. On the other hand, I think one of the great things that organic farming has brought to the US, especially, is an emphasis on a new generation of chemicals, of pesticides that are much safer and organically oriented.

(00:46:43):

And so the tools in the tool shedder much greater in that sense. I guess I should say my philosophy in not getting certified was that I didn't really like one person... Philosophically, I never really liked to follow one particular dogma. I felt like there was enough evidence, enough educational information out there that I could make our own decision about what we'd apply and when we would apply it. And so I wanted to have access to what I still think is a useful part of agriculture. And yet at the same time, try to stay as close to organic techniques as possible.

Janet Taylor (00:47:45):

But to answer the question too about, which I think absolutely the challenges keep changing. The beginning was just ignorance, and then it became, how do we just improve? And then the weather, as we know, the climate has changed. So there's a longer season, which is good, but more pressure from disease and insects, which is tough. I think one of the things that's different now too is the whole labor situation. Vermont is a very aging population, so where we had teenagers working on our farm a lot, and was basically high school and college age, people were the crux of who we hired. Nowadays, there's a lot of retired people working part-time. And so that whole labor thing is definitely changing. Immigrants have been part of it... Not immigrants, sorry. People from who have H-2A... Is that...?

Tim Taylor (00:47:46):

H-2A.

Janet Taylor (00:47:46):

H-2A.

Tim Taylor (00:48:53):

Specifically Jamaicans.

Janet Taylor (00:48:56):

Are part of what a lot of growers are using now for their labor pool. So things do change, and I think those are some of the big ones.

Tim Taylor (00:49:07):

Yeah, definitely. That question's interesting, because if you ask me, would I want to be going forward with farming? I don't think I could honestly say yes in some respects. But that may just reflect my age at this point.

Janet Taylor (00:49:07):

I know it's part of my aging.

Tim Taylor (00:49:29):

Yeah, I just turned 73. I never had that innate love for growing that I feel like Jake Guest has, and still has, and always has had. Watching him over the years contemplate and try different things has always been fascinating to me. I guess if I was known for anything in the group of farmers was my organization, and preparation for the next year. I always tried to have, when computers came along, I was right there with spreadsheets and all these different fields are different lengths and sizes. So we created lots of formulas and embedded them in the spreadsheets so that if we changed rows, all we had to do was punch in a number and it would generate how much we needed to grow, and did that all through the late 90s. And what I wanted to be ready to do, I wanted to only act in the spring. From about March 1st, I didn't want to have to think. I wanted to look in my book...

Andy Chamberlin (00:50:49):

Just execute the plan.

Tim Taylor (00:50:51):

And execute the plan, exactly. And I think that was what, if you asked some of the other farmers what my strength was, it was that. I knew how much we were going to grow, where we were going to grow it. Did it always work out? No, of course it didn't always work out. If you had a really rainy spring, you might have to jump around and stay on your lighter soils for little longer than you intended. But some of that's even changed, whether are doing a better job with our deep tillage to keep from compaction. That's one of the things that I find is an irony with doing all the cultivation we do. We're running equipment to grow a crop of corn, you probably run a tractor through that for or five times. And even though they're light tractors generally, you're still compacting.

(00:51:45):

And so for years and years, we would subsoil every year. And one of the things we often noticed was that the ends of the rows might not be... a head of lettuce might be a lot smaller or whatnot. And once we started subsoiling, that went away. Crops didn't do that. I think today there's a little less subsoil, a little more chisel plowing going on, but that was always a big issue for us, to make sure that if we were going to cultivate that we still had good compaction. That we didn't have compaction.

Andy Chamberlin (00:52:30):

What did you envision your farm would look like when you got started? Did you have a plan and a goal in mind? It sounded like you jumped in full-time farming pretty quickly.

Janet Taylor (00:52:41):

I would say that we did everything sort of as it came, and did not write up a business plan. And we did not say, "In five years I'm going to be here." We just started, and it grew, kind of organically.

Tim Taylor (00:53:03):

Yeah, no, it was by the seat of our pants. I think part of the Greening of America, there's a book entitled that, we weren't Hippies by any means, we didn't live on a commune like a few other farmers that you've talked to. Obviously, I had this graduate degree in law, so I was a lawyer. Interestingly, I flunked the bar in Vermont twice by a couple of points. I took the bar in New Hampshire and passed it actually. So I was admitted to practice law in New Hampshire, ironically. Kept that license as an insurance policy for a long time.

(00:53:49):

But no, it was seat of the pants. But it had a little bit to do with our generation wanting to flee the suburbs and go live in the country. And while it wasn't a commune, I can remember one time in the early 80s going to a party and coming late, being the first people to arrive with four or five other couples. We were the first ones that actually had electricity right from the pole. Everyone else had generators, it was before solar, really, entirely. So, it was by the seat of our pants, by and large, yeah. I didn't even know what a business plan was. When did they come about?

Andy Chamberlin (00:54:31):

Yeah, no, it's always interesting to hear how people come into it, and what their dreams were from the start. Did you...

Janet Taylor (00:54:37):

I think we just enjoyed it and kept going with it. Here's a funny one. When we first started, people thought we were nuts, especially my parents, I think. Even though they were okay with it. And then people would come and say, "Why are you doing this?" And then they'd start to say, " Oh, this is coming out pretty good. It looks really good." And then we had a fire in one of our stands, and the current one and followed it, and it's a big post and beam structure. And one of our customers said, "I love this because I know you're going to stay." And whereas before, everyone was questioning whether we should even be doing it. And it became a community resource for people. And I think eventually that had a different look to it.

Tim Taylor (00:55:34):

Yeah, the strange thing, we went from being totally nuts to being rock stars, kind of, in the course of the 40 years, in a way, because you tell people what you did. And especially if they were similar age and they'd done their professional lives, sometimes they would look at it and go, "Boy, you were really lucky that you did what you did." So yeah, we did. We really loved it. We did.

Andy Chamberlin (00:56:02):

What fulfilled you in this career? What kept you going for 40 years?

Tim Taylor (00:56:08):

I think in getting to know one piece of land so well was kind of one of the things I've marveled at over the years. I could tell you in this acreage where what would grow best, and where it might not grow as well. And part of it had to do with just the innate experience over the period of time that would come from learning and growing. And also, of course, from soil tests and the results of those. But I guess that I've reflected back on how hard we worked. It was a great way to raise the kids. We could have them around, we could bring in, when they were real little, we'd bring in neighbors kids to sort of take care of them while we took care of them.

Janet Taylor (00:57:05):

I sort of didn't think about the soil so much, although obviously that's a key. But I love the diversity of the work. Just about the time I'm sick of picking a strawberry or whatever it is, the season's done. Or you have a nice variety of people that you work with and sometimes it changes, and sometimes you're really sad to see someone go, but sometimes it's the right time. And so there's diversity in the labor, there's diversity in the work. We have the greenhouse business early on, which I always loved. The planning part was fun. The book work, not so much. But the diversity for me...

Tim Taylor (00:57:53):

Yeah. Thank you for bringing that up. The seasons change, and the work changes with the seasons. Spring's a wonderful time...

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:58:04]

Tim Taylor (00:58:02):

Spring's a wonderful time no matter who you are and what you're doing, and it can be difficult for a farmer for sure because of late frost and cold weather and all that, but it's an exciting time. You're going full bore. You're filled with energy. I can remember times when I wouldn't leave the farm for two weeks and then might go shopping somewhere or whatever and be astonished to see how the foliage had changed elsewhere. But then as, just as Janet says, just as you're kind of really getting tired of seeding something, it's done and you're moving on to going from full bore planting, seeding, growing, protecting, to just harvesting mostly, and then gradually turning the fields back in and putting cover crops in. And then suddenly, in our case, we had it dialed so that by November 1st we might have all the greenhouses change, we'd be completely closed up. And in the later years starting in, well, even when the kids were little, we would throw them in one of the delivery vans and start traveling around the country.

(00:59:22):

We did well enough that we didn't have to work a winter job and so we'd travel and that continued as our children grew and went off to college. Our son was down in Georgia, so we'd meet him down there and then eventually he was in Florida and we might come go to Christmas in Florida by way of the Grand Canyon. We had a truck camper. So it was a great lifestyle in that sense. Unlike the dairy farmer who tends to be stuck there forever, we could see it all changing and then we'd have winters off and we'd be planning and this incredible, after the 1st of January would strike us, and this incredible energy would come back and excitement to look through the catalogs and order the new seed and get ready for the next year.

Janet Taylor (01:00:13):

Although I have to say, whenever we've had tough times growing, which definitely has happened, we're always thinking about how to make it better for next year, how to improve it. Sometimes we'd have a tough time and you just always were thinking about improving and growing.

Tim Taylor (01:00:35):

In the late eighties, we responded to a recession that occurred by actually expanding and just picking up more customers, and that was when I like to say we went west. We headed out of the immediate upper valley, the Lebanon, Hanover area, and went over into Woodstock and Quechee. That's when Simon Pierce approached us to start selling to them, and then we picked up the Woodstock Farmer's Market, which is a store over in West Woodstock area, the western side of Woodstock. And just actually we would respond to down times by getting more aggressive and going for more things. I guess we just had tremendous energy back then.

(01:01:22):

The fall though was, for me, became a time of not growing, but call it soccer season. We did not have spring would be our greenhouse season then strawberry season then corn season. Fall was not really pumpkin season for us. We never did too much with that. It was soccer season and I coached a lot of the kids in soccer and we'd go to a lot of soccer games

Janet Taylor (01:01:48):

And the flexibility of the farm allowed for that.

Tim Taylor (01:01:51):

Yeah, right. Yeah. Although it did fall on Janet quite a bit.

Andy Chamberlin (01:01:56):

Let's see. You kind of mentioned it already, just as far as who's been an inspiration or a mentor or influence for you. I think you really touched on a lot of your friends along the way that-

Tim Taylor (01:02:05):

Oh, this network we had, which eventually what it became for us was annually in March, it became sort of centered at our farm, but it did occur at a couple of farms. But we started to have an annual get-together, usually in March before things really got cranking, when we would invite farmers to come and we'd have a potluck and it'd be all the Upper Valley farmers and extended all the way down to Jack Mannix and Karen Walker farm, they would come up from there. We might even have farmers like Pete came down from Pete's Greens at one time, and we'd have farmers from all over would come, but generally the nucleus was the Upper Valley farmers. And it was just a wonderful time approaching a very busy season to get together and exchange ideas, and that initially was a lot of ideas being exchanged, and sometimes we'd even have a subject to talk about, but over the years, eventually as we got more comfortable with just what we were doing, it just became a time to actually just party and have fun.

Andy Chamberlin (01:03:20):

So it was just a break.

Tim Taylor (01:03:21):

Just a break or the start of the new season kind of. But yes, from Jake and Poo and Dave Pearson and Bob Gray and Kim, all those people, they were a tremendous help. There was a professor of mine at college who helped us start the farm who passed away in 1999, but he did a lot of... Helped us. He was always a good sounding board for me to bounce things off of so it wouldn't drive Janet entirely crazy, but having a sounding board like he was during that period of time was good. While we did, I'd say there was just such a tremendous learning curve even for the, until, I would say from 1980 to 2000, that 20 year period, that sounds like a long time, but there was so much learning that went on there and getting to be better and better at what we did the last 20 years was kind of pretty much a breeze really, wouldn't you say?

Janet Taylor (01:04:33):

I don't know about a breeze, but.

Tim Taylor (01:04:33):

Yeah, still tons of work, but.

Andy Chamberlin (01:04:35):

The flywheels spinning you had-

Janet Taylor (01:04:37):

Absolutely.

Andy Chamberlin (01:04:38):

You had the infrastructure and the equipment in place.

Janet Taylor (01:04:42):

Yeah, because the first 20 years we built a greenhouse almost every year, so it was that kind of thing.

Tim Taylor (01:04:51):

Well, one other quick comment which I've observed that's different for us was ironically, even though we were very socially oriented, we ended up doing a job that was right, you couldn't have entered a job that was more in the free enterprise capitalist system. Nobody cared whether this small little farm were successful. No one cared whether we stayed in business. It was all on our shoulders, and I came to really like that. The fact that I made a buck was whether we got up in the morning and got out and did our work or not. I really did like that, ironically. In many countries or in the dairy industry, you're part of these cooperatives, the prices almost set. You can't mess with your price.

(01:05:48):

Now, yes, we had to be conscious of our price. We were competing against wholesalers like Upper Valley Produce and Black River and whatnot, and we did sell directly to them some eventually, but generally speaking, we could still make our own price. And if we weren't comfortable with and there was too much dickering, we might just walk away from that customer. But it was on us, and I really liked that. As the years went by, we never got anything from the government. I think one time we applied for a little rye cover in one of the programs, and that was too much of a hassle to even bother. It wasn't until, you'd have to tell me when this was probably, that they started to recognize cost sharing on

greenhouses, and out of our 20 greenhouses are out there, I think one, maybe two in all that time got cost share.

Andy Chamberlin (01:06:56):

Oh, wow.

Tim Taylor (01:06:56):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (01:06:57):

So you really footed the bills for those then?

Tim Taylor (01:06:57):

Yeah.

Janet Taylor (01:07:00):

Oh yeah.

Tim Taylor (01:07:01):

Yeah. And then to see now the grant to build this packing shed is just a mind-boggling thing for me, and I assume for you, too, Janet, to see how much interest and help there is out there now. Conserving the farm was very productive from that standpoint in terms of getting a-

Janet Taylor (01:07:24):

What year did we do that?

Tim Taylor (01:07:26):

That started in 2012 and spilled over into 2013, or was it '13 to '14? Right in there. Maybe I'll shift to our transition then if you have other questions. So I think we first met Mike Gia a good 10 to 12 years before we finally sold the farm, and I think I was around 60 at the time, and we were starting to think about where we were headed with the farm. So if that was 1960, if we were 60, that would've been... we were born in '51, so call it 50. So that would've been like when would, it was 13 years ago, so 2012, I guess, '11.

Andy Chamberlin (01:08:19):

Right around there.

Tim Taylor (01:08:19):

Yeah, around then, around 2011. And that was first starting to occur to us, and I think for me, the thing that struck me immediately was, "Wow, how am I ever going to give this up?" This is what was our baby. We created this from literally nothing. These fields had been abused and they might've been hayed once a year. I don't think any fertilizer really put back on them. One of them I think was used a little bit for grazing, so something might've happened there, but generally speaking, they were in pretty poor shape

when we took them over. And we built them up over the years so that the organic matter levels were much higher, and that was so exciting.

(01:09:08):

So we started to work with him a little bit, and I think the first really big thing that happened was a few years after that, we decided that it was time to conserve the farm, and we worked with Vermont Land Trust, and one reason we chose them rather than the Upper Valley Land Trust, which is our local land trust, was that we could sell them an option to purchase at agricultural value, which meant that the future of the farm was secure unlike... And that it would remain a working farm. It could skip a generation potentially, but it would always be there for that. Whereas many of the farms that had gotten, or the land that had gotten conserved was conserved folks from down country that had the money to buy it, put a horse or two out there maybe, maybe a beef or two or whatever, but maybe nothing really, and just they never had any intention to subdivide the land. That was always one of the ideas, we wanted to protect the land from being subdivided.

(01:10:11):

So while that was good, that wasn't going to assure a working farm. So we worked with them and conserved the farm and got a nice chunk of change to go towards retirement. So that was sort of one of the first big really steps towards our retirement, I think.

Janet Taylor (01:10:31):

It's funny, I was just thinking how he said we didn't have a business plan when we got started, but we had an exit strategy.

Tim Taylor (01:10:39):

Well, it slowly developed.

Janet Taylor (01:10:39):

I know. Yeah, it developed.

Tim Taylor (01:10:43):

Yeah, it slowly developed. So that was a big issue. And then in 2017, Jake and Liz, who are a little older than we are, had decided to sell their stand in Norwich, and Phil brought that to our attention, and this is Phil Mason who had been working with us since he was 14 years old, and that was 2000 when he started working. So now we're in 2017, 17 years later, and we were at the point where we were thinking about wondering what was going to happen with our relationship there because we were ready to maybe dial back the farm and start to drop wholesale accounts and have a nice little retirement business with the stand, we had built that new stand in 2008 and possibly do that. At the same time though, there were starting to be pressure from Janet to get out of the farmhouse and out of the center of the farm.

Janet Taylor (01:11:52):

Well, if it were to stay a farm for somebody else.

Tim Taylor (01:11:54):

Or even for us, frankly. The opportunity to buy Jake and Liz's stand came along and we said to Phil at that time, well, he thought we should do it. I said, "Well, if you're going to do that, then you're going to

become partners with us." So he needed to obviously buy into the farm. So we made that, I think pretty affordable for him with the expectation that that would be his baby. He would basically manage that vis-a-vis he'd be hiring a manager. He wouldn't be there on a daily basis, but that was his to really make work. And so that's what happened there, and that was really good because it was a completely change in our business model and plan because now we were almost 90% retail, and so the amount of crops we grew, what we had to grow changed quite dramatically.

(01:12:56):

We had to drop a lot of wholesale crops, for instance, we didn't eat as much lettuce. We were always greens growers. We didn't eat as much as that. We needed more corn. So actually Jake grew the corn for quite a few years. A couple of years we needed more tomatoes, so we had to drop some of the wholesale tomatoes we'd been growing. So a lot of things changed, but it was kind of exciting. Then of course, COVID hit and that was even, it turned out we were almost geniuses without realizing it because all our restaurants would've essentially dried up, but now they were only amounting to about five to 10% of our gross sales, and everyone wanted to buy locally and support local, and no one wanted to go into big supermarkets. So both this stand and Norwich just, and to this day when you look at sales figures, they're kind of distorted by COVID numbers.

(01:13:59):

I've since not really looked at them, but I had a few post-COVID years to see, and we kept up with those figures, but just barely because they were amazing figures in terms of jump in sales, I think. Some cases was 30 to 40%, which really unheard of with a mature business like we had. So Janet was getting ready, she was ready to go, so she gave me her shares. We were one third, one third and sold Phil his shares. And Phil, we became 50/50, and that's sort of in around 2020-2021. And we had a great year in 2021, but I started thinking about selling the rest of the business to Phil. I always thought I'd stay on and work quite a bit more into that, but it became evident that in order to qualify for low interest loans from the Feds, he really needed to own the whole thing, and it was kind of awkward. I wasn't willing to do that with the lack of assurance that it was all going to happen and whatnot.

(01:15:24):

Another thing had happened with Janet leaving the farm. Now, we had an LLC with Phil and myself, and yet Janet and I owned all the property, pretty much the greenhouses, the LLC owned all the equipment, all the equipment in the greenhouses. It was kind of strange. So we were starting to, LLC was starting pay rent to Janet and Tim for use of the fields and the equipment and the greenhouses and the stand. And that was quite substantial, and I never liked it because I'm just paying, I'm caught in between a partner paying and then another partner receiving it. I found that kind of awkward. I'm not sure what the tax consequences were entirely of that. But I was able, so we started to check the value of the farm and work with a lawyer and think about tax consequences, and finally interest rates started to go up like crazy in 2022.

(01:16:38):

This was post I think, I don't know if you Ukraine had broken out now or not, but this was post-COVID, and finally we agreed that to approach Phil and that we would actually hold the mortgage ourselves and that we would give him a pretty favorable interest rate and that we would hold the mortgage for 20 years, not just 10 like many do. And that we would actually do a graduated payment so that each year it steps up for the first five years and then it settles out for the rest of the 15 years. And we did it. We pulled it off on our own and there was a few little things that were part of that we get to glean and go on the farm. I get to track, do my trails for cross-country skiing that we enjoy inviting the public to partake in.

(01:17:44):

And it's worked out really well because we built our house, our retirement house next to the farm on a separate lot that we had. And it just is taken right off with so many great ideas like this new package that's being built and increasing strawberries, he's done a beautiful job with that. Kind of moving away from the matted row system to going all to fall planted plugs on plastic, and so far that's worked really well. You couldn't have asked for a harder year than 2023. Now we don't have the flooding that the inner vale has, and other farmers have had because we're upland of all that.

(01:18:40):

But that frost that occurred on the night of around the 16th, 17th of May last year, that dipped to about 20 degrees. That was a catastrophic occurrence that he managed perfectly. There was really no consequence. In all the years that I've had a frost control, I never started much before 11 at night or maybe 10, he had the water going by eight. He had put double row covers over the berries, and of course now with all the monitoring you can do digital with the internet and whatnot, he kept them at 40 degrees in that. And as you know, one of the consequences of that cold night was that the oaks in the beach lost their first leaves.

Andy Chamberlin (01:19:30):

Yep, they did. And the apple crop was completely taken out that year, too.

Tim Taylor (01:19:34):

And it was a month before that second cohort, I guess they're called, of leaves, came out. And it was one of the strangest things I've ever seen to have spring have all this brown all of a sudden.

Andy Chamberlin (01:19:46):

Yeah, that was weird.

Tim Taylor (01:19:48):

But he pulled that off and that's when I knew that he would be successful if he could pull that off, I don't think I would've been able to do that in the same way. That was really amazing. And then this year's been a wonderful growing year except for those who got flooded. Here it's been an excellent growing year. So the last final piece of that transition was in 2023. I still really was working with him very closely, planning, working, drawing a salary, and then this year we switched to where I did some hourly work, but I pulled back and really had my first spring in 40 years off. We did a lot of traveling and a lot of biking and that kind of thing, and he's really taken off. And pretty much when we go by, we see things and we try to be as positive as we can, and sometimes we don't tell them things that we think he might want to actually know because we don't want to be the people that come with all-

Andy Chamberlin (01:20:57):

Nagging on him.

Tim Taylor (01:20:58):

We don't want to be nagging on him.

Andy Chamberlin (01:20:59):

But you want to see him succeed and drop some hints.

Tim Taylor (01:21:03):

Yeah. Yeah, and it's interesting because he's, in some ways, he's challenged the way we grew things here, but he's done it in a way by drawing on all kinds of other farmers, which is a great thing. That's what we did in order to get where we were, and I never felt like I had the sole way of doing it.

Andy Chamberlin (01:21:27):

Yeah, running and starting a farm in the 2020s I think is quite a bit different than it was in the eighties.

Tim Taylor (01:21:33):

Oh, yeah.

Janet Taylor (01:21:34):

Absolutely.

Andy Chamberlin (01:21:34):

It's just different now.

Tim Taylor (01:21:36):

Yeah, absolutely. I don't know, does that cover the transition pretty well?

Andy Chamberlin (01:21:46):

Your transition period kind of happened over really a 10-year period from the time you thought about conserving it to finding, working out the details with Phil.

Tim Taylor (01:21:57):

Yeah, I think that's one last thing. I think for me, that 10-year period was a real emotional period to deal with the fact that... And one of the reasons that the mortgage really worked out well was it just seemed almost emotionally impossible to walk out on that land and realize it was no longer ours. I know we're just stewards for short periods of time, but it meant so much to me that there was a moment where we were thinking of retiring elsewhere and building elsewhere. But that was sheer nonsense, and that was again, a piece of really the retirement we had invested, that money we received when we conserved and did quite well buying a piece of land, and now we came back and built this house and you can't ask for a better place to retire and enjoy. We walk the fields every day and-

Andy Chamberlin (01:22:53):

Right, you're still really on site. You're not in the middle of things like you were, but you're still here, you know the owner very well, and you hold the mortgage. So in a way it is still yours.

Tim Taylor (01:23:07):

In a manner of speaking.

Andy Chamberlin (01:23:11):

Slowly-

Tim Taylor (01:23:11):

I call it my welfare check that we get every month. It's a very important part of our retirement for sure.

Andy Chamberlin (01:23:21):

Is there anything that you could share about that, maybe the mindset shift of that transition that might help other peers that are in a similar situation that need to transition a bit?

Tim Taylor (01:23:40):

Well, I remember the last night we spent in our farmhouse looking up at the ceiling and thinking, "How am I ever going to move out of this 1840 Cape over to this 2020 modern structure?" And then I remember after maybe a year of being here or less wondering why the hell we hadn't done it sooner. So I don't know. I guess some folks are more adaptable than others even if they don't think they are. I guess that-

Janet Taylor (01:24:18):

Well, if you think about it, when you're dealing with farming, you're always dealing with change. There's always something happening that it's different than you think it's going to be. And so I guess in a way that sort of follows what you just said. Or What you just said follows.

Tim Taylor (01:24:41):

I've been warned about having enough activities and hearing horror stories of folks going downhill really quickly afterwards, but I have activities in the town that I like to do, and other things that I'm interested in. I'm not a big golfer or anything or whatever, but I think it hasn't been difficult probably because it was slowly prepared for for all this time, and we enjoy our mornings getting up and not having to worry about help coming in and getting this harvested or getting this growing.

Janet Taylor (01:25:31):

Yeah, I think we were old enough when we did it that our energy level had decreased, and so it was a relief not to see... Last year when it rained all the time was a hard year to be farming, and I was glad I wasn't part of it. And I do miss the people. I do miss the work, but I don't miss having to be connected as tightly as we had been.

Tim Taylor (01:26:03):

Yeah. It's kind of funny because, like trying to get you down here, it was like committing to a date, meeting someone here. As it turned, I told you I wanted to meet on a crappy day.

Andy Chamberlin (01:26:15):

I know. I'm sorry. It's blue sky. There's not a cloud in sight.

Tim Taylor (01:26:21):

Beautiful out there. But it's hard to always be spontaneous that way. People need to make plans. And then I was talking to someone else who was saying what happens when you get old is you have all these other appointments to go to the doctors. Well, fortunately that hasn't happened yet. But I like not

having a whole lot of commitments and just sort of enjoying the way our mornings unwind and what we do. It's great not having too many commitments and being able to be a little more spontaneous about what we decide to do. Yesterday we went off hi-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:27:04]

Tim Taylor (01:27:00):

Like yesterday, we went off hiking, which we liked to do. And we spun around in circles, over coffee and breakfast, about where we were going to go, from going off to the White Mountains and climbing Mount Willard up by the Presidentials to eventually doing a local hike that we'd never done before in Stratford, just 10 minutes away really. It was great. And we had a view of Mount Washington, a little tiny one. But yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (01:27:32):

Yeah. You mentioned that when we first reached out that you wanted to meet on a crappy day, but the fall's been too nice. I was waiting for the thirties and rain and-

Janet Taylor (01:27:43):

Yeah. We've been fortunate.

Andy Chamberlin (01:27:44):

It's been forty-fives and clear, so.

Tim Taylor (01:27:46):

Well, it was 15 here this morning, but then the sun came right out and it's been beautiful. But I guess if... I think Janet's right, we were old enough. I mean, we were, Janet in her case, late sixties, and I was in my early seventies. So for a lot of people that's fairly late for retirement. And I mean, we're still game to help out if we're asked, a little bit. I don't know how much commitment we want to make, but it was really fun this spring, being able to... We've really gotten into this e-bike thing and being able to go places in the spring that never been, including... We've been in Thetford since the seventies, and there are places where I still haven't really gone and experienced, and it's exciting. It's fun.

Janet Taylor (01:28:40):

Well, sometimes when we're in the woods and we see all the ephemerals before the trees really get going, and usually I'm in the greenhouse, so it's like, ah-

Andy Chamberlin (01:28:53):

You're just too busy during the nice months to see that.

Janet Taylor (01:28:56):

Yeah. So that was pretty fun to be able to do that.

Tim Taylor (01:28:59):

Well, hunting season's coming, so we're not going to make it up that, but we want to get up that hillside sometime and try to look back. So hopefully, we'll maybe go up there in snowshoes or something after

hunting season's over. I want to go up there when it sticks season, in order to be able to look back this way and actually see something.

Andy Chamberlin (01:29:21):

What did you do during your farming career? I mean, you just kind of touched on that, that you were really too busy to even see the neighborhood during the warm months. What did you do to take a break? Or was that really the winter months?

Janet Taylor (01:29:37):

Well, the first year that we started farming, we didn't take a day off. And we had this little baby. And the second year, I said, oh, I can't do this farming thing unless I have time to spend with my children. That's really, really important to me. And being around the farm with them is great, but there's other things we want to explore. And so I started taking Wednesdays off and the next year Tim said to me, I think I need to start taking Wednesdays off too.

Tim Taylor (01:30:11):

I bet you thought... That wasn't until the mid-eighties though. I mean, so Mariah was born in 80 and Patrick in 82, so I'm not sure there was any time off quite that soon.

Andy Chamberlin (01:30:11):

So a few years.

Janet Taylor (01:30:21):

Anyway, but then we started having Wednesdays off as a family, and we did a lot of hiking, which continued after our children left and went off on their own. So Wednesday was the day, and we had a rule when we were hiking that on the way up, you couldn't talk about the farm. You could talk on the way back down.

Andy Chamberlin (01:30:44):

You had to break the brain there.

Janet Taylor (01:30:47):

Yeah. Just to ave a mental vacation, as well as a physical break.

Tim Taylor (01:30:53):

So Wednesdays, we had it really dialed. Unlike once Norwich was purchased in 2017, but that's really late in our career. Things changed and it became a business that was in some ways almost too big for us. Until then, we had it dialed. So we wholesale delivered on Tuesdays and Fridays. So Monday was harvest for wholesale on Tuesday. Thursday was harvest for wholesale on Friday, and also Friday was preparation for farmer's market on Saturday. And of course, on a daily basis, the stand had to be harvested, but Wednesday was the slow day, and so that became very important. And we loved hiking. So even though we'd been working hard on the farm, we'd go climb a mountain unless it was incredibly hot. In which case, we'd probably go to the beach or something and go swimming or whatever, depending upon the age of the kids at the time. Then there was a few times where we started to take a

night or two away from the farm. We had Gina's brother worked here for quite a few years, and he could manage while we were gone.

Janet Taylor (01:32:10):

That's much later.

Tim Taylor (01:32:11):

But that was much later. Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (01:32:13):

So was the farm closed on Wednesdays or did you have other help to keep it open?

Tim Taylor (01:32:17):

No. No. Yeah, we had either family, relatives or someone and we could do that.

Janet Taylor (01:32:18):

Staff.

Tim Taylor (01:32:23):

Staff. We had it staffed, but we didn't have a wholesale responsibility or delivery responsibility. It was just the stand and the stand was a great thing, but it was somewhat modest compared to something like Norwich. Remember back then too, for most years, we were just selling veg, our own stuff. We didn't have all these other things that these stands all have now, bread from Red Hen and all these cheeses. I mean, all those cheese makers, I don't know. I guess, a lot of them have been around a long time, but a lot of them, it's just been amazing what's happened in the last 20 years or so with them. But yeah. No, Wednesday became crucial.

Andy Chamberlin (01:33:16):

What advice would you give to your beginning farmer self or a beginning farmer now?

Janet Taylor (01:33:23):

The one I used to always say is, when you build a greenhouse, build it bigger than you think you want to and be prepared thinking about where the next one's going to go. That was one of the ones that I used to recognize as being a really important thing. But I'll have to think about it some more for the more philosophical stuff.

Tim Taylor (01:33:48):

Well, I guess all the standard stuff now. The business plan seems to be... I guess, we wandered into something that while it was competitive from a larger wholesale point of view, we were one of the first stands in the Upper Valley really. There was Farmer Hodges, which had been around for years, and there'd be an occasional picnic table that neighbor pops up when they have too much zucchini or too many tomatoes, or might even do some sweet corn. But we came into a pretty open marketplace, and that was one of the keys that happened back then. While we were all competitors, you know Kildare Farm and Edgewater and Four Corners-

Janet Taylor (01:34:37):

Cedar Circle.

Tim Taylor (01:34:38):

Pearson And Cedar Circle and us. We all had our niches, so we didn't really knock heads too much. And then you could see as the years went by, more knocking heads, not so much with us, but younger people coming in and trying to find their way. And I think that's been one of the reasons that the agency of Ag is focused so much on the successory on the farm business, is trying to open up in a less regulatory way, options for farmers to do other things and bring other kinds of income in. And so I guess my real advice would be to really think about what your markets will be, because there's a lot of folks out there doing it. I think join the Growers Association because it's a very supportive organization at a very modest cost. I mean, the listserv alone has educated a whole new generation of farmers for sure.

Janet Taylor (01:35:42):

Another thing that comes to mind is having quality control and you grow all this stuff and you can do whatever you want with it, but if you want your customers to come back to your stand, you want to make sure you have the quality that's going to bring people back, and there's plenty of places to... You can find plenty of places to move your produce that isn't maybe top quality, but when you're doing the retail part, that's really important.

Tim Taylor (01:36:14):

Yeah. Yeah. That's a good point. Really good point. I think for us, farm tours, getting out and seeing other farms, was just an incredible way to learn. It might have been a particular thing that we were going there to learn about, but there was always some little tiny thing you would pick up, almost insignificant to actually talk about, whether it was a way someone was dealing with covering their greenhouse or-

Andy Chamberlin (01:36:47):

Just a little tip or a trick.

Tim Taylor (01:36:50):

Just a little tip, just maybe a little implement, a certain knife they were using for some kind of harvest. All those little tiny things that you could do. And then I would also say not only become members of the association, but get on the board of directors, because while they don't meet that often, at least in the past, I learned so much at those meetings that went beyond just our bureaucratic stuff we needed to deal with. Just the conversation was terrific. Of course, go to all the meetings, the annual meeting and the New England meeting.

(01:37:27):

I just think that kind of... While the Internet's there and we can hop on now and do all these zooms, the interaction of being able to immediately react at an open meeting is... The New England's can get to be too big, and we all knew that. That's why we kept trying to do the grower on grower kind of thing to keep it smaller, but that always was really important to us, for years and years. And then I guess some growers want to go all year long and spread out their workload. We always didn't really, in our minds, have a choice. We had to do it all in that concentrated period and then take time off. That worked for us, but it doesn't always work for everybody,

Janet Taylor (01:38:25):

But I think it's a good model.

Tim Taylor (01:38:27):

I think for the emotional part of it is, you've got to have a partner. In our case, the two of us, while we found our own little niches to keep ourselves from killing each other, the story we always tell, you-

Janet Taylor (01:38:45):

Don't take your spouse to the farmer's market and set up in a very short period of time.

Tim Taylor (01:38:50):

Yeah. We figured that out. We'd also have different ways of doing that. And then as the bedding plant business grew and became very significant, that was, without trying to be too sexist, that was a natural way for Janet to sort of go, that and the stand. And field was sort of the natural way for me to go, it seemed like. There are farms that do it differently though, and I applaud that.

Andy Chamberlin (01:39:18):

But you've found your strengths and leaned into those.

Tim Taylor (01:39:21):

Yeah. But having a partner, having someone that you could sound off because there's a lot of decisions that you make that you've got to live with that may not be the best decisions, and so bouncing that off. And especially in the spring when you're trying to decide whether should you put these melons that have sudden wilt. Should you put them in? Is it going to be too cold, too cloudy, for instance. And then you put them in and you discover that doesn't really happen because you're using row covers and you learn from that so you don't worry about it quite so much. But just little details like that, being able to bounce it off someone is so important.

Andy Chamberlin (01:40:07):

Bounce it off, and yet not get in a bickering argument about that.

Tim Taylor (01:40:11):

Yeah. Yeah. We did pretty well with that, I think.

Andy Chamberlin (01:40:14):

I think you should pull off the cover. It's too hot.

Tim Taylor (01:40:18):

No, that's true.

Andy Chamberlin (01:40:20):

One of my questions is what does sustainable farming mean to you and how are you achieving it? Well, we didn't answer that directly, but I think you've touched on that, having key partners, starting your business was diversified really from the start in numerous ways, whether that be greenhouses and field

crops, that was both retail and wholesale. I think all of those is what contribute to sustainability. Is there anything around that that resonates?

Tim Taylor (01:40:47):

Well, I think-

Janet Taylor (01:40:47):

Soil health.

Tim Taylor (01:40:48):

Yeah. Diversity was always a big key for us. If one crop didn't do so well for one environmental reason or another, another would, whether it was cold or wet or whatnot.

Janet Taylor (01:41:05):

Yeah, I think soil health is.

Tim Taylor (01:41:07):

Soil health was always-

Janet Taylor (01:41:08):

When your talking about sustainability.

Tim Taylor (01:41:09):

Yeah. Always a key. For me, I always hoped that there would be this sustainability would come together and you might not have this gap between this organic certification. I understand from a marketing point of view, especially for the consumer, because us quote "conventional farmers," because we don't follow... We follow accepted agricultural practices, of course, but we don't... There can be this huge gray area with how we approach pesticides, for instance. So I understand why certification's important, but I always hoped there would be kind of this sustainability that would come together.

(01:41:57):

I taught one semester at UVM. Buddy Tigner had left, and I took his spot. And I used Vern's book as the textbook, and I challenged the kids to write papers on GMOs. I challenged them to think about sustainability versus certification and what was more important. I challenged them to think about sustainability, to go beyond just soil health, but the health of us as humans, paying your laborer a good viable wage, which being able to market something at an affordable price to people. By the way, one big part of our whole plan has been to work with Willing Hands, which I was on the board of for four or five years. And that is an organization that comes to the farm weekly and harvests for folks who are in need of-

Janet Taylor (01:43:09):

Gleaning too.

Tim Taylor (01:43:10):

Yeah. They come and glean, and that food gets distributed throughout the Upper Valley to various organizations for, what's that called? I always forget it, that are challenged. You never talk about people starving, but apparently they're challenged. Food challenged. Yeah. That's always been a big part of that. I felt like if our prices might generally be slightly higher, that it was important to, on the other side, try to give away as much as we could too, even though you can till it back in. But sustainability, to me, was kind of a whole network of things that went beyond just how we grew our crops to how we lived our life, how we work with our employees. One of the things we did for years, I mean 25, 30 years, was every employee came in and had free lunch. We gave them lunch. They came into our kitchen and made sandwiches, and we spent thousands of dollars on meats and cheeses.

(01:44:21):

I mean, they could bring in fresh veg too. And we had hundreds of high school kids work on the farm, who often was their first job. Some of them would extend way into college, and we'd have them for eight, nine seasons. That all was part of building a sustainable community that was really important to us. So I saw that, as the years went by, in a very holistic way. And that's another reason why necessarily organic certification, which is expensive and buying organic fertilizers is more expensive, that might not be the way that was as sustainable for us in that sense. If I can still grow a really healthy crop, but grow for a little less money, I might keep a little of that, but I might give my worker that too. And I think we did. I guess that's how I looked at that.

Andy Chamberlin (01:45:24):

Last question. Knowing everything you know now about farming, your history, your career, the current status of the industry, if you were restarting now, what would you do differently?

Janet Taylor (01:45:41):

What am I starting? Am I starting with one acre or starting with the farm as it is now, with over 40 acres?

Andy Chamberlin (01:45:49):

That's a great question.

Janet Taylor (01:45:51):

Because that's two different things. It's just like if I was starting with one acre, I probably would be doing something pretty similar, but starting with the farm that we have now, it's very different.

Tim Taylor (01:46:05):

I've often pondered this next generation coming in and watching them because there's a whole series of farms that I've alluded to that are transitioning, and especially one of them. They do a wonderful job, and I could name them, but I don't think that there's any real reason to. But it is so big now that I think it's often been daunting to me to think of how I would take over that farm and for that generation to take it over that way. So I'm not sure I would do much of anything differently than what we did do over those years. I always liked growing slowly. I had many friends who took on businesses at a similar time. I have one friend who was an electrician, and he created a dynasty in the Upper valley while we created this small little place. And so we always took our growth slowly and gradually, and so I think Janet's right. I would be overwhelmed with our business today, at least at my age. I suppose if I... And I can't

imagine even starting. That's why I think Phil, he's an amazing person in so many ways because he's just an amazing athlete, for instance. No, seriously.

Janet Taylor (01:47:42):

Don't go into that.

Tim Taylor (01:47:43):

Well, no, I can. I think anecdotally, it's important for history. He's a biker and he bikes from home, which is over in Norwich. It's a number of miles away, and if there's a race up, Mount Mansfield, he wins that race. He's won it a couple of times. The race that goes up Mount Washington, he's come in third or fourth I think. So that kind of energy, that kind of commitment, that kind of, and he's smart too.

Andy Chamberlin (01:47:43):

Physical health.

Tim Taylor (01:48:12):

Yeah, physical health. Well, that's a really important thing. I think, to compete in this world today, in some ways with the farms, it takes that. Yeah. I mean, there's not a lot of structure there already. There's a reputation Ccrossroad Farm in the Upper Valley really means something. And I think we had a lot to do with building it, but he did too. So jeepers that... It's just so hard, at our age, to be able to answer that.

Andy Chamberlin (01:48:46):

Fathom starting now.

Tim Taylor (01:48:47):

Yes, exactly. It's that winding down, and when you get older, you can kind of feel that. It doesn't mean I don't want to go biking this afternoon, after I get rid of you. You know, have our sandwich or whatever, or if you want to walk the farm. But there's so much detail involved in a diversified vegetable farm. That's why you throw in all those other things. You add cows to it or chickens or anything else. It's pretty daunting.

Janet Taylor (01:49:23):

Then you need another partner.

Tim Taylor (01:49:24):

Yeah. It's wonderful, but it's daunting.

Andy Chamberlin (01:49:27):

Awesome. Well, thanks so much for sitting down, chatting with me and coming onto the show.

Tim Taylor (01:49:33):

Well, I hope it's helpful to some people or interesting, if nothing else.

Andy Chamberlin (01:49:43):

And that was the Farmer's Share. I hope you enjoyed this episode as we got to know some of the history of Tim and Janet's journey to Building Crossroad 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.

(01:50:25):

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 THEFARMERSHARE.COM/support.

(01:50:40):

We also receive funding from the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. The VVBGA is a nonprofit 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, 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.

(01:51:58):

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.

(01:52:28):

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PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:53:24]