

## **Workshop Title: Year Round Farmers' Market Success: Tips and Tricks**

**Speakers and their titles:** Paul and Sandy Arnold, Pleasant Valley Farm (NY)

**Executive Summary:** Paul and Sandy Arnold own and operate Pleasant Valley Farm in Argyle, New York. The farm is a mixed fruit and vegetable operation that provides local farmers' markets with fresh produce year round. Pleasant Valley Farm is 180 acres in total, with 7 acres in vegetable and fruit production. This session focuses on simple record keeping and marketing strategies that boost the profitability of small-scale farming operations.

### **Introduction**

**[Slide: What Profitability Means to Us]** For the Arnolds, profitability means that they are able to pay their bills, maintain their equipment, purchase health insurance, invest back into their farm, pay their children's wages, invest in IRAs (tax deductible Individual Retirement Accounts), and have time for family vacations.

**[Slide: Small Acreage]** When the Arnolds began farming, they started small and were determined to figure out how to make the most money on a small plot of land. Record keeping was key to their success.

**[Slide: Value of crops]** Record keeping for profitability begins with figuring out the value your crops. You can measure the value of your crops per acre, or per square foot. Once you have calculated your crop value, you can create a crop plan, which will allow you to estimate your yield and gross profit.

### **Record Keeping**

**[Slide: Record Keeping]** The Arnolds use simple spreadsheets and notebooks for all of their record keeping. All fields are named using a two-letter code. Field sections are represented by letters, A, B, C, etc. The crop plan does not always accurately reflect the actual seeding, so both projected and actual seeding numbers are recorded on the chart.

**[Slide: Seeding Totals - Lineal feet/year]** Knowing your seed spacing for a given crop makes it possible to calculate yield per bed, and per acre. For example, the Arnolds' initial bean seeding is 800 ft, followed by 400 ft every other week for a total of 3,600 lineal feet over a season. Using standard bed and path sizes allows the Arnolds to calculate yield per bed, per square foot and per acre. To continue with the bean example, 3,600 lineal ft of beans x 9 beds = just under

5,000 square feet of beans.

**[Slide: Harvest Records]** Once you have established your yield, the next step is to determine gross sales. The Arnolds create a harvest prep list which includes, the date the list was created, which market it was created for, and what the desired harvest is for each crop. Since the desired harvest and the actual harvest do not always match, the Arnolds also maintain an Actual Harvest Market Sheet. The Actual Harvest Market Sheet is used to record what was harvested, what went to market, and also what was not sold at the market. The unsold produce is accounted for while packing up at market, which takes some time, but is worthwhile because it creates a record of what you have available in storage for the next market. The Actual Harvest Market sheets are also invaluable to farmers because you can see what you sell out off year to year, what crops were good sellers at a given market or time of year, etc.

**[Slide: From the Market Spreadsheet]** Using market spreadsheets, the Arnolds calculate the dollar value of what they sold. They use this sheet to assess each crop to see if it fits their basic farm rule for crop viability: each crop should make at least \$10,000 per acre. It is very important to run your numbers in order to determine the profitability of your crops, especially if you are a new farmer. For example, the Arnolds found that they made less on shell peas than on snow peas, so they decreased the square footage allotted to shell peas, and increased snow pea production. The Arnolds always calculate out the value per acre, even if they aren't producing or selling an acre of a given crop.

**[Slide: Summary]** Record keeping need not be complicated. The Arnolds use simple notebooks and spreadsheets. They keep seeding and harvesting records, but don't bother with calculating expenses, or with production records. They recommend running lots of numbers to determine the value of your crops. On small acreages, high value crops are key to profitability. And finally, don't forget to review your records and implement changes accordingly!

## **Marketing**

**[Slide: Marketing]** The Arnolds do direct marketing exclusively. They attend three farmers markets and do a bit of restaurant sales. Two of their markets continue throughout the winter. Most restaurants pick up from market.

**[Slide: For making a living on a small farm . . . ]** Paul began farming in 1987 after being inspired by an experience he had as a customer at a farmers' market. He started small, with a 1-acre plot in his parents' backyard. Despite the naysayers around him, he remained positive, and believed in the countercultural idea of making money at small-scale farming. The Arnolds know that there is money to be made in farming, and that farmers have to be as good at marketing

as they are at growing to be successful.

Paul describes his gradual evolution from a 1-acre farm attending 6 markets a week, to a 7-acre farm attending 3 summer markets and 2 winter markets. Winter markets are nice because it removes the pressure of hustling to make a year's worth of income in the summer months alone.

**[Slide: Always work to be done]** Attention to detail is an essential part of marketing. Using levels to keep the table looking full, backfilling the table, misting produce, and presenting vegetables in colour combinations and packaging that shows them off to best advantage, are all key. And of course, it is important for farmers to enjoy their customers and to create a relationship with them.

Other things that work well include ensuring that low profit margin items are well balanced with higher grossing products, ensuring that you bring a diversity of colours, flavours and varieties, and educating customers about the food they are buying. For example, the Arnolds bring brussels sprouts on the stock, which acts as a conversation starter and customer education prop. They also bring recipes for vegetables that customers might not be familiar with.

**[Slide: Be creative!]** Always look for ways to turn lemons into lemonade. For example, if your basil is bolting, strip it into bags for pesto basil. If broccoli is not going to head on time, cut the greens and sell them by the bunch as a collard alternative. If a variety of kale does not sell well, try selling colourful mixed kale bunches to move the less favoured product.

The Arnolds also use an employee handbook to communicate business objectives and expectations to all market stand employees. It is important to consider the impression that staff make on customers. Pleasant Valley Farm tries to always have one farmer at each market, as this maintains a direct link between the customer and the farmer, and customers appreciate it.

Signage, packaging and presentation are important. The Arnolds use laminated signs because the tables are constantly getting wet. They use wooden bins to present the produce, and the wooden bins are designed to fit inside a buckhorn crate. It is important to do lots of back-stocking and to always bring extra produce so that the stand never looks sparse at the end of the market. Everyone who comes to the market should have a good selection of produce to choose from.

The Arnolds make it as easy as possible for their customers to pay. They accept cheques, cash, including 100 dollar bills, as well as food stamps and market specific dollars.

**[Slide Summary for marketing essentials]** Marketing essentials include:

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- Misting
- Quality control
- Pile high
- Colour coordinate
- Bring diversity
- Back stock
- Smile
- 110%
- Learn customers' names and preferences
- Take orders
- Clear signage
- Recipes and knowledge
- Build relationships with your customers and you will build loyalty!