

Workshop Title: 10 things to think about when getting started in market farming

Speaker(s) & their titles: Chris Blanchard

Executive Summary :

Chris is owner and operator of Rock Spring Farm. Before he stopped farming full time, he grew twenty acres of vegetables, herbs, and greenhouse crops, marketed through a 200-member year-round CSA, food stores, and farmers markets. Prior to 1999, Chris managed student farms, worked as an intern, packing house manager, plant breeding assistant, and farm manager, and provided consulting for a major organic processor, in California, Wisconsin, Maine, and Washington state.

His 10 tips:

1. **Make goals!** Money – Quality – Time. Know what you want out of your farm/ how you will respond. Planning will help you alleviate stress, balance your priorities etc. Happiness is as much about being ok with what you are not getting done, as what you are.
 - Write down your goals on paper (e.g. check out Holistic Management)
2. **It takes more than you think:** If you get into farming you have to start thinking like you own a business, otherwise get a job. For example, if you want to make \$50 000, you need to sell \$125 000 of rutabaga! Crunch the numbers! Don't just follow someone else's model, and think it will work for you. You might need to figure out how to grow more on less land, or you might focus on larger scale and sell wholesale.
3. **Local Food Lies:** People think that local food should be cheaper than what is produced in California. Not true! They are super efficient, and can do things a lot cheaper than small scale people. It is not your obligation to sell cheap food.
4. **Capacity – how much can you take?** Manage your workload today, AND into the future. Think long term: you want to be able to keep farming for a long time, so don't overdo it at the beginning. Build resiliency through diversification.
5. **Invest in systems to drive the business:** Sometimes this means equipment, but mostly it means systems that make things more efficient.
 - **Simple and documented:** Anytime you can write down the instructions, incorporate this right into the work (e.g. on your harvest sheets have instructions for the food safety inspection).
 - **Clear Expectations:** Be clear about what work needs to be done for your employees etc.
 - **More Yes-No Decisions:** Break things down, take the decision out of everything e.g. Q: Are there 24 trays on the transplant cart? If the answer is yes, then the employee can proceed. A bad example is "I need you to pick good quality swiss chard" What if they don't know what good quality chard is? Chris trains his employees on a scale of 1-10 on what he means by good quality chard. Then he tells them "I need you to pick everything that is a #6 or higher" This simple clarification eliminates a lot of issues later on.

- **Safety:** Make sure that things are safe. Use signs, have first aid kits handy, make sure people know where they are located, train employees on how to operate equipment safely.

- 6. **Invest in People:** You can't expect that your employees will work like you, but you have to be the example. You can't make them do a good job, but you can lead and be an example. Hire slow, do thorough evaluations – get good people. If your farm is not performing, it is your fault – not your employees! Read the book “One Minute Manager” by Ken Blanchard.

- 7/8. **Plan for change:** If you are all invested in spinach, and there is an e-coli outbreak in spinach – you are toast! Make sure you have some insurance, whatever that is for you. A good example is a hoop house, it is **flexible**, and can be used for anything.

- 9. **Leveraging Biology:** Invest in biology – healthy soil is your most important investment.

- 10. **Keep perspective:** A complaint is just a project waiting.... Ask yourself what your end game is. Pay attention to where you want to be in the long run. All I can do is all I can do.

His advice for new farmers:

- Clean vegetables – nobody wants dirty veg
- Start with season extension from the beginning
- Upgrade the basics – e.g. grow sungold cherry tomatoes, this way you also get a premium price
- Go with your skills, play to your strengths (e.g. buy newer equipment if you are not a mechanic)