

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits

Growing a sustainable farm business



CAITLIN HALL
REROOT ORGANIC CSA

A young farmer with a non-farming background, Caitlin Hall is using her experience as a CRAFT intern to run a successful new organic CSA.

The Series

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits is a series of seven case studies featuring innovative farmers with non-traditional backgrounds. The series shares practical production tips, innovative marketing approaches and creative ways to successfully negotiate the myriad challenges that new farmers face in their start-up years and beyond.

Participants in the series include:

Elisabeth Bzikot - Best Baa Farm and Ewenity Dairy Co-op

Linda Crago - Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm

Caitlin Hall - Reroot Organic CSA

Shin Kang - Skyland Farms

Linda Laepple - Laepple Organic Farm

Achim Mohssen-Beyk - Reachview Farm and Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op

Ute Zell - Smiling Goat Farm

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“I’ve been interested in farming for a while. I took Environmental Studies at school and during the five years that I was at school I developed an interest in organic agriculture. But I grew up in the suburbs; I had never even had a garden before.”

“I just finished my third CSA pickup. They’ve all been quite successful. People are happy with what they’re getting and there’s an abundant amount in the fields. I think I’ve made a few believers out of people who initially, because it’s my first year and because I’m young and maybe because I’m a woman – I don’t know – but who were a little hesitant at first to join. I think they’re pretty happy.”

The farm

Caitlin Hall runs an organic CSA (Community Shared Agriculture) on land belonging to Mapleton’s Organic Dairy, an organic farm in Wellington County. Still in its first season, her 2.5-acre operation provides vegetables to 20 families. Caitlin also sells her produce to Mapleton’s on-farm café, and at the nearby Elora farmers’ market, farm café, and at the nearby Elora farmers’ market.

Starting out

“I’d been looking for my own land and sort of had that as a vision of how to do things. But now that I’ve started here, I’ve realized how not feasible it would have been to go off and get a piece of land and do it on my own. There’s just so much

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that you don’t really realize before you start.”

As a young farmer with a non-farming background, Caitlin has worked hard to create her own agricultural opportunities. Her partnership with Mapleton’s came out of a CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training) program, run by 14 organic farms in Southern Ontario, including Mapleton’s Organic Dairy. Caitlin, a former CRAFT intern, struck a deal with Martin de Groot, the farmer at Mapleton’s, to use the land free of charge until 2010. In exchange, she lends a hand with the dairy’s operations.

“I help out making ice cream and yogurt and fill in sometimes doing the chores with the calves. And he helps me out, too. I have a little tractor, but he’s got bigger equipment, so he’s done some cultivating for me.”

““I think we’ve both been pleasantly surprised by how well it works – how well the two operations complement each other. I use his wastewater from the ice cream plant to irrigate and feed his pigs my compost. The café uses my vegetables and my members pick up their vegetables here and they buy his eggs, meat and dairy and vice-versa.”

Growing at Mapleton’s has also meant access to the dairy’s loyal customers, some of whom had already expressed interest in joining a CSA.

“I didn’t do much marketing because I only wanted 20 shares

this year. I just put pamphlets in the store here. Mapleton’s has been around for years, they have really dedicated customers and are well known in the community. So it definitely helped to have my name attached to theirs. And actually, there had already been some interest in this area to have a CSA. So there were a few people who were already keen.”

Financials

In addition to her agreement with Mapleton’s, Caitlin has also received help from a former strawberry farmer, who lent her a small tractor and strawberry transplanter for the season. These arrangements have kept start-up costs to a minimum, enabling Caitlin to launch her operation without having to take on debt.

The CSA model has proved an ideal way for Caitlin to get into farming. CSA members buy their shares at the beginning of the season, thereby providing revenue when it’s most needed. By selling her CSA shares in the spring, Caitlin was able to generate enough income to cover her initial input and equipment costs.

As a result of her hard work, her strategic business plan, and the support she’s received from established farmers, Caitlin expects to break even this year.

Crop planning; record keeping

As a new grower, running a new operation on a new piece of land, Caitlin needs to be vigilant about planning her market garden, keeping track of production details,

and maintaining a record of sales and expenses.

“I made a pretty elaborate crop plan in terms of what I wanted to plant, how much, when and where. Not everything has gone according to plan, but I’ve been trying to keep track of things. When you’re growing however many crops and however many different varieties, there’s just no way you can remember which broccoli did well, or which tomatoes didn’t do well. So I’ve tried to keep track of that for decision-making for next year.”

Caitlin insists that her record keeping strategy isn’t especially innovative; many of the tools she uses have been adapted from other farms. But in combining techniques, she’s created a system that works perfectly for her. One of the most useful items in her toolkit is a set of crop planning spreadsheets, designed for CSA farmers just like herself.

“There’s a guy in the ‘States, at Brookfield farms. His name is Dan Kaplan, and he created these spreadsheets that he sells for about \$30. They’re formatted so that you can enter the number of shareholders you have and it does all the calculations for you. It even includes the spacing for each product, so if you have 30 shares and you want each of them to get 2lb of tomatoes per week for four weeks, you know how many tomato plants you need, and therefore how many row feet you need.

When you work all day, updating your records at night is the last thing you want to do...

"It took me a really long time to get it all set up, especially the equations and stuff. But in the long run, I think it will be really time-saving. All I need to do next year is address anything that wasn't right this year, change the number of shareholders and it figures it all out."

Caitlin uses Microsoft Excel to keep track of production details, regularly adding her notes to a spreadsheet. She also uses Excel to maintain records of her sales and expenses. She might not update the spreadsheets every day, but she enters information at regular intervals, before it gets out of hand.

"When you work all day, and then you come home, it's the last thing you want to do. But I'm getting better. I'm realizing that it's worse to have to sit down to a backlog of stuff and go searching for a receipt for something you bought two weeks ago, than it is to sit down every couple of days and do it."

One thing that Caitlin hasn't been tracking, however, is the hours she puts into the CSA. She points out that this is a common oversight among new farmers, who tend to undervalue their time.

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A commitment to value

Behind Caitlin's record keeping strategy is a commitment to keeping her garden productive, her business efficient, and her customers happy with their membership in the CSA. At the end



Caitlin uses an innovative spreadsheet system to plan her 2.5-acre, 20-member Community Supported Agriculture operation.

of the season, she plans to calculate the amount of produce that each of her members received and figure out how much these vegetables would have cost if they were sold at farmers market prices.

Caitlin expects to see significant savings for her CSA members. She hopes to use these figures to remind her customers of the excellent value they receive from their \$600 shares and perhaps to attract new customers, should she decide to expand.

Lessons

Reroot organic CSA is an exciting example for anyone who would like to start a small farm business with minimal start-up costs. Reflecting on the success of her new CSA, Caitlin highlights the importance of

getting to know more established farmers.

"That has been the best part of being a part of CRAFT. I was having problems with my tomatoes earlier in the season, and sent an email out to the CRAFT farmers. They're all really committed to nurturing new farmers and they're very experienced. So finding a way to network with other farmers is really important. Actually, there's been a few times this season when I've thought, 'Wow, what would I do if I couldn't email Ken Laing and ask about this or that'."

Caitlin has made full use of apprenticeship opportunities in Ontario and credits both her healthy social network and her agricultural know-how to the summers she

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spent as an agricultural intern. However, she recognizes that long-term apprenticeships might not be an affordable option for everybody. New farmers who don’t choose to apprentice may want to search out alternative means of developing connections with other farmers. For Caitlin, these have included attending the annual Guelph Organic Conference and getting involved with the NFU.

Caitlin also urges new farmers to polish up their business skills before launching a new venture. She took two 3-hour workshops at the Guelph-Wellington Business Enterprise Centre, which helped her to develop some basic accounting skills, and to put together a business plan.

“I’m not naturally a business person, but I’m realizing that all farmers have to have some business skills, or you’re just not going to be successful. You have to know how to stay on top of your things, and make sure what you’re doing makes at least some sense, financially.”



Caitlin’s greenhouse was her largest capital investment in the farm. The greenhouse allows Caitlin to produce vegetables from April to October.

Finally, Caitlin’s experience reminds us of the benefits of farming on a smaller scale.

“You know, I’m having a potluck up here in a few weeks, and I like the idea that I’ve got 20 families,

and I know them all, and they can all come up here at once, and we can all sit in here and have a potluck. I don’t really want to get too big.”

What is FarmStart?

The objective of FarmStart is to **support and encourage a new generation of farmers** to develop locally based, ecologically sound and economically viable agricultural enterprises.

There are many challenges in agriculture today but there are also **many exciting opportunities**. By thinking about agriculture in new and innovative ways we can meet the challenges head on with a variety of solutions that promote a **a sustainable, healthy and regional food supply**.

Successful farms make important contributions to the health and vibrancy of both rural and urban communities. FarmStart encourages new farmers to engage in **entrepreneurial strategies that creatively turn challenges into opportunities**.

To learn more please visit www.farmstart.ca or call 519.836.7046



The Ignatius Incubator Farm - Guelph, ON