

# Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits

Growing a sustainable farm business



LINDA CRAGO

TREE AND TWIG HEIRLOOM VEGETABLE FARM

A second-career farmer with a passion for unusual heirloom vegetables, Linda Crago runs a successful small farm enterprise on just 2.5 acres.

## 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 always loved to farm. I always loved the land. I was a social worker for quite a few years, and I just knew that wasn’t what I wanted to do. So when we moved out here, the gardens just kept getting bigger and bigger... It just sort of evolved out of wanting to do something different. And I always thought I wanted to do something related to growing.”

“When I started... I had never heard of CSAs before. I just had this idea that it would be good if I could get a group of people who would agree to buy my vegetables for the season. And that’s exactly what I did. And then I started doing a newsletter, too, without realizing that that’s just

what you did! So then I was doing this, and I heard about this thing called a CSA, so then I realized, that was what I was.”

### **The farm**

Linda Crago runs an organic CSA (Community Shared Agriculture) and heirloom transplant business in Wellandport, located in the Niagara region. The CSA, now in its tenth year, provides 20 families with seasonal vegetables, all grown by Linda in her 2.5-acre garden.

Linda is passionate about heirloom varieties: her transplant business offers 255 varieties of heirloom tomato plants, 39 varieties of pepper plants, and 33 different types of eggplant, as

## By choosing to produce organic vegetables in her own back yard, Linda entered farming with minimal financial risk.

well as ground cherries and tomatillos. Linda also grows heirloom tomatoes for sale to restaurants.

### Production challenges

By choosing to produce organic vegetables in her own back yard, Linda has been able to get into farming with minimal financial risk. Her facilities are modest: just two 80 ft. hoop houses, a cooler and a vegetable stand. While she now owns a small tractor, she relied for her first ten years as a farmer on rototillers and hand tools to work the soil.

But farming at home has meant coping with difficult growing conditions.

“When we moved here, there was nothing here. There were no gardens – not even flower gardens. There was nothing anywhere. It was all just scrub... And when I started gardening, the soil was – it’s *really* clayey soil. We’re in the Haldimand clay belt.”

At first, Linda dealt with the clay soil by building raised beds. But as her production expanded, she changed her strategy, working to increase the soil’s fertility with green manure crops, compost from a local dairy farm, and mineral treatments – which, along with seeds, represent one of Linda’s major production costs.

However, the heavy soil does have its benefits. It holds nutrients well, and with some mulching, stays moist even

during the hot Niagara summer. “Even though I could complain about my clay soil, I think it makes the tomatoes taste better.”

### Marketing strategy

Tree and Twig began as a CSA, and Linda initially devoted most of her energy to growing for her shareholders. At its largest, her operation supplied vegetables to 35 families – quite a feat for just one farmer. Linda appreciated the security that her CSA provided during those early years.

“I think a CSA’s a great way to go if you’re starting out, because if you can promote yourself, then things are sold. It’s not like going to the farmers market, where you can conceivably come back with a portion of what you went with. If you’re fully subscribed, then you just have to keep up with it, and everything’s sold. I think it’s a great thing.”

Linda also values the close relationships that she has developed with her customers, and enjoys helping people become more connected with the source of their food. Although she takes her vegetables to central pick-up spots in St. Catharines and Fonthill, she likes the fact that customers also visit the farm. But for all its benefits, maintaining a CSA is hard and sometimes stressful work.

“It’s anxiety producing if the weather’s bad, and even though you say to people, you know, ‘this is the hand that nature

dealt’, you still want to do your very best. And I always like to make sure people are getting their value.”

The last five years have seen Linda broaden her marketing strategy and reduce the size of her CSA. In 2003, she and a friend started a farmers market in nearby Fonthill, where she now sells her produce every Thursday.

“At first it was a slow process to get people to come out and to be involved. But it’s a really successful little market right now. People are enthusiastic, and you get to know a lot of people. It’s fun. They’ve added a band shell, and they make the market coincide with music night. So they have jazz and blues at the market... It’s great!”

Becoming a regular face at the market has brought unexpected benefits for Linda. In 2005, she received a call from a local ‘forager’, a person who sources produce for high-end restaurants.

“They had been in Fonthill, and they had seen my tomato transplants. And then she called me and said, ‘Do you sell the fruit too?’ And that’s sort of how that happened. I said, ‘Yes, I do.’ And I started selling to them.”

The foragers pick up Linda’s tomatoes from the farm, an arrangement that works well for her. The experience she’s gained by dealing with them has also allowed her to pursue new, more lucrative opportunities. This year,

**“It’s not like I do a lot of self-promotion to sell things... The unique things are able to really capture people’s interest and promote themselves...”**

she has a new contract with a Toronto-area produce dealer, whose clients are willing to pay big-city prices for Linda’s heirloom tomato crop.

### **Finding a niche**

Linda credits much of the success of Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm to the unusual products that she grows.

“It’s not like I do a lot of self-promotion to sell things. And I think that speaks to the uniqueness of some of the things I grow. The unique things are able to really capture people’s interest and promote themselves in some way.”

During the winter months, Linda spends much of her time researching and sourcing heirloom seeds. She works closely with seed-saving groups in Canada, the U.S. and Europe to promote seed saving and to broaden her own collection. When she first branched into the heirloom transplant business in 2001, Linda was acting on a hunch that other home gardeners might be interested in growing heritage varieties as well. At first, she offered 20 different varieties of tomato plants. Her selection has since increased more than tenfold, and so have her sales.

Linda sells most of her transplants direct to the consumer, at the Fonthill farmers market and from her farm store. She has also experimented with mail order, setting up a website and creating special packaging for the delicate seedlings. But postage costs have



Linda’s experimental seed beds. In 2007, she grew and marketed 255 varieties of tomato plants, 39 varieties of peppers, and 33 types of eggplants.

deterred her from expanding in this area.

However, the website has not gone to waste. Having a presence on the web has allowed Linda to promote her business to customers outside the Niagara region. Thanks in part to the website, Linda draws clients from as far away as Toronto, London and Stratford to her annual ‘Tomato Days’ plant sale. Transplant sales at this event, held at her farm over the Victoria Day weekend, now account for a significant portion of Linda’s annual revenue.

“I have a lot of people coming from all over. It absolutely amazes me.”

Linda’s knowledge of heirloom varieties and her passion for seed saving have also brought her new customers. She regularly speaks to horticultural societies and other gardening groups. Although her intention is to educate people, and not necessarily to promote her business, these speaking engagements have helped Linda to tap into a wide network of avid home gardeners, many of whom end up purchasing her plants.

### **Lessons**

Linda would council any new farmer to follow their interests and grow what they love.

“Find your niche. Find what you’re interested in, and what can be uniquely yours, and focus on that.”

“People know me now, and they’ve had good luck with the plants... It’s sticking with it, and letting people get to know you and what you sell.”

But she also thinks that it’s important to stay in touch with consumer demand, and to follow lucrative trends. She finds that US growers are always a step ahead when it comes to market trends, so she pours over US seed catalogues and American publications like *Growing for Market* and *The Mother Earth News*, always scanning for hot new varieties that haven’t made it to Canada yet. She also likes to keep up with what people eat.

“I buy food magazines, so that I can see what the trends are. You know, I buy *Gourmet* magazine, and *Food and Wine*, and I sort of see where things are going, and what people are interested in.”

With a bit of ingenuity and a lot of perseverance, a small-scale farmer like Linda can develop a strong local customer base – people who come back year after year. Reflecting on the key to her success, Linda emphasizes her continuing dedication to her customers.



Linda uses a straw mulch to suppress weeds and conserve water during the Niagara region’s long, hot summers.

“People know me now, and they’ve had good luck with the plants. I’m proud to sell the plants: they’re good plants, they’re healthy. That’s been a good thing. And it’s just sort of sticking with it, you know?”

It’s sticking with it, and letting people get to know you and what you sell.”

## 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](http://www.farmstart.ca) or call 519.836.7046



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