

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits

Growing a sustainable farm business



SHIN KANG

SKYLAND FARMS

Originally from South Korea, Shin Kang has farmed in Ontario for over thirty years. At Skyland Farms, Shin grows vegetables for direct sale to Toronto's Korean community.

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

Missing a profile? Please visit www.farmstart.ca for the complete series.

“I came to Canada in 1971. I was raised a farmer, I lived on a farm. My background is all farm life and my brain too. I graduated high school, and I came to Canada with \$15 in my pocket. How could I start farming? It was impossible. So one week later, I went to work at CN, on the railroad. I worked six years there, so that we could buy land.

“Even after I started farming at the Holland Marsh, I always worked an evening shift with CN. I was an inspector for the freight trains. I worked from 4pm to 12am and in the morning I wake up 9am, and from then until 3pm, I've got to work farming, because I love farming. So tired, eh? I did like this, two jobs, for three or four years.

Until one day, I had to make a decision. Which one I took for the future: CN or farming? At that time, I quit CN, and I farmed. At CN, I had a regular, secure income. Farming is not secure – no guaranteed income. But I changed my job to farming. To start farming took me almost ten years.”

The farm

Skyland farm is a 110-acre operation in Campbellville, ON, southwest of Milton. Shin Kang has grown Korean vegetables here since 1990. He cultivates about 25 acres of vegetables: cabbage, peppers, radishes, cucumbers, zucchini, melon, eggplant, and onions. He also grows vegetable seedlings. Shin rents some of his land to a cash cropper, who is raising wheat. He used to sell to

“I was kicked out from the big supermarket... Everybody bought from me, but suddenly they stopped buying...”

wholesalers, but he now sells all of his products direct to Toronto’s Korean-Canadian community. Shin wants readers to know that he doesn’t consider himself a *successful* farmer – he loves what he does, but he has not become wealthy by growing vegetables.

Starting out

Shin Kang was born in a rural community in South Korea. He came to Canada as a young man, at the invitation of his elder brother, who had been working in Toronto for several years. Shin found work with CN (Canadian National Railway), and was soon able to invite his fiancée to join him in Canada. By 1976, the couple had saved enough money to purchase a 50% share in a farm. With Shin’s brother as a silent partner, they bought 35 acres of land in the Holland Marsh.

“There was a house and a barn, but it was very old. When it rained, I had water coming in. There was no central heating system; I had an old oil furnace, you know? Poor, poor! I had to buy a tractor; I had to buy all kinds of stuff. But it was my dream: I want to farm. So I stayed there with my wife, very tough life. Ten years, we worked there, and finally I got the operation financially just standing.”

After ten years in the Holland Marsh, about half of those spent working both at the farm and at CN, Shin was approached by his elder brother, who wanted to buy Shin’s share of the farm. Having worked so hard to make the business viable, Shin did not want to sell, but he but did not want to

cause trouble in his family, either.

So in the winter of 1986, Shin sold his share in the farm and bought land close to Milton. His wife, who has an urban background, was happy to live close to a city again. But they were under pressure to buy quickly, and bought the land while it was still under snow. With the spring thaw came deep disappointment for the Kangs. The land turned out to be heavy clay – useless for agriculture. For two years, they tried to work with the land, adding manure from local pork and dairy operations in the hope that the soil would improve, but it was like trying to grow in concrete. Shin was forced to take work in a factory again.

After a couple of years in Milton, the Kangs were able to sell their land for development. They purchased Skyland Farms in 1990. This property had also been earmarked for housing, but the contractor had since gone bankrupt, so the price was good. Later, they bought a second piece of land from a local farmer who was retiring. The growing conditions are better on this land and Shin now grows most of his vegetable crops there.

Competition and crisis

As one of Ontario’s first Korean farmers, Shin originally enjoyed an excellent wholesale market for his vegetables. He sold to several Korean markets in Toronto. By 1980, however, Shin began to face fierce competition from a new Korean farmer, a man with a lot of financial capital and a lot of ambition, but very few scruples.

Because the growing season in Ontario is short, Korean-Canadian grocers turn to U.S. farmers to supply them with vegetables throughout the winter. Shin’s new rival had enough capital to respond to this situation by purchasing farms in Florida. His farm business soon started to produce an enormous amount of napa cabbage – more than enough to satisfy the Toronto Korean community’s demand.

The farmer used this excess cabbage to flood the Korean vegetable market in Toronto, deliberately undercutting small farmers like Shin. With his competition more or less leveled, he was able to close exclusive deals with each of the city’s Korean supermarkets. Shin, along with the other small Korean farmers like him, was entirely shut out.

“I was kicked out from the big supermarket, the wholesaler. Everybody bought from me, but suddenly they stopped buying from me. They said, ‘Oh, we can’t buy from you, Shin, because the other big farmers, they can guarantee me a supply throughout the whole year, and a better price.’ Because big farmers have Florida farms, so they have year-round production. But for me, I’m only a local farmer, so I only produce in the summertime. About ten stores all pushed me out.”

Selling direct

Shin had a ten-acre cabbage crop ready to harvest, but suddenly he and his wife were without a market for their vegetables. They were

Twenty years have passed since Shin first started selling his vegetables direct, and he hasn't looked back.

faced with the prospect of all that cabbage rotting in the field.

"We had to make a decision: quit farming, go to factory, or continue. But I was stubborn: 'Let's find another way to sell it.' From that time on, no more store."

"I went to some big apartment buildings, you know? I made a flyer and put it on all the apartment's bulletin boards. At such and such a time, I will come. Farmer selling directly from the truck. When it started, ten people came. And the next week, you know what? A hundred people came! Rumours all over the apartment block! I could easily sell all the ten acres of vegetables on the farm. I sell cheaper, half the price in the store. But still, what the heck, you know? Better than giving up!"

Twenty years have passed since Shin first started selling his vegetables direct, and he hasn't looked back. He still takes his farm truck to the city several times a week, and sells at several different apartment blocks, and at a large Korean church.

"Now I have a relationship with the people, a very good, warm relationship. Some people say, 'Oh, I don't have money today.' 'Okay, take these, pay me next time.' It's a different style of business, right in the parking lot. People come out with their slippers, you know? With their kids. It's fun."

"In the store, they always weigh, weigh, and; 'Okay, \$1.89'. Always charge cents. But we don't. Just \$2, \$3. Simple. People like the old-



Shin bought his Campbellville-area farm in the early 1990s. Some of the land is too dry for vegetable production; Shin rents these fields to a local cash cropper

fashioned style. They are happy, so they stay."

Shin has used his old-fashioned business style to build a loyal base of 200 regular customers. However, his innovative marketing has not gone unchallenged by local stores or local authorities.

"The stores, they felt like I was an enemy of them, because I was selling private. The stores couldn't sell as much as before, because Shin's selling from the parking lot, you know? So people were happy, but the store people, they hate me.

One day I was selling on the parking lot, and the store owner, he came to me and blocked my truck with his car. He tried to fight with me: 'You come in this community

and sell all the vegetables. How can I survive?' He's crying now. I said, 'Well, I don't know. You've got a thousand items at your store. I'm only selling produce.' But the guy, he phoned the police, and they came to me, and bothered me. 'Can I see your vendor's permit?'"

Farmers don't need a vendor's permit to sell their own produce from a farm vehicle in Toronto, and Shin eventually dealt with the police by acquiring a copy of this bylaw. He still keeps the document in his truck, in case the authorities ever harass him. The bylaw doesn't protect him from building superintendents, who sometimes forbid him from selling in their parking lots. But when this happens, Shin just parks on the street

“Anybody who learns how to farm, they have to love land and nature, not only business. Like a kind of philosophy.”

Lessons

Given the hardship he’s weathered over the years, Shin knows how difficult it is for new farmers to start viable farm businesses in Ontario. He attributes his success to hard work and perseverance, but also to a spiritual connection to the land, and a faith that things will improve.

“Farming life is simply this: my life and nature, we have to marry together. Anybody who learns to farm, they have to love land and nature, not only business. Like a kind of philosophy. They have to have it. Otherwise, people will always go – if there’s better money elsewhere, go. That’s not a good thing. Farmers, even if we’re poor today, we have dreams of better money for tomorrow.”

Shin has very warm memories of the years he spent raising his young family on a farm. Even though he has had to work so hard, he has always loved the lifestyle that farming provides. However, Shin advises young couples who want to get into farming to make sure that both partners have realistic expectations.



Shin and Su Kang at Skyland Farms. Ingenuity and determination have enabled the Kangs to weather the tough patches in their 35-year farming career.

“Some youngsters, they marry. They love each other. Okay. They start farming, and they start with a hope, with a dream, with ambition. But so many hardships come. It’s hard work. They start to complain, ‘Oh, farming is dirty; farming is no fun. I have to work morning to night.’ This kind of thing.

“Don’t just think about selling and collecting money. You’ve got to put in so many hours on the land. You’ve got to fight with the weather, this kind of thing – farming life. We need to teach new farmers that this is a hard life.”

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



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