

Notes from “**Low barrier methods to achieve your farm dream**” panel talks with Jean Snow, Graeme Bancroft and Dan Brisebois. 1pm, Thursday, Saint John Room.

Three talks, one right after the other with questions at end. Order was: Jean, Graeme, Dan.

Jean Snow

- represents SPIN: small plot intensive farming.

-One of her initial main points was to emphasize that farmers need to get paid. Farmers can't survive without payment. Many people want farmers to speak at events, volunteer for things, etc. but they still need to get paid.

- She is interested in urban farming and SPIN farming. Her farm, Lake City Farmers, is just like every other farm. They are trying to diversify their clientele, the crops they produce, trying to grow more of their own food, etc. Needs and desires are the same as other farms, they're just in a city as opposed to a rural area.

- Motivation to farm came from a desire to help cities grow their own food. Wanted to help support the urban farming movement. She started with her own backyard, which is small, but managed to grow a surprisingly large amount of food. One of the first challenges they faced once they got their plants growing was finding some way to keep the crops cool so they didn't spoil. It's common in farming literature to read about the need for a good, efficient cooling system.

-She told the story of their farm's three year history. In addition to their farming venture, Jean and her husband work full time outside of their farming, and still manage to run a CSA (very impressive!).

Year one: Bought a second hand refrigerator (normal household size) to keep products cool. Kept on their deck. Was too small for the produce they grew in their own small yard (wow!). Looked to buy used fridge from restaurants, etc. Too expensive. Solution: Her husband built walk-in cooler right in their backyard, looks like an ordinary shed. Lower cost to run, buy, etc.

- The premise of the farm is that they grow food in their own backyard as well as in other people's backyards. They expanded beyond their own yard in year two.

Year two: They found that growing food in other people's backyards was very popular, got lots of publicity (media attention, etc.), got lots of people interested.

- They have two types of customers: those who have land, and those without (landless). Those without land get a box of food. Customers pick up their own food from cooler in Jean's backyard (on the honour system), lots of trust in customers.

- They are not at the farmers market regularly, but sometimes. Can be problematic when sporadic, can't always meet up with landless customers.

- She grows a lot of specialty greens (e.g. radicchio). Advantageous because many people don't know about them, so they are curious. Also, can charge more for specialty greens because they are rare and harder to come by. Specialty foods also mean she's not competing with other bigger farms. Customers like full flavour- - the spicier the better - of the specialty greens.

- Restaurants can be complicated for small farms to do business with. Jean does source to restaurants sometimes, especially with specialty greens. Problems can form when cultivating relationships with chefs, who then leave for other jobs, and then Jean has to start again with new chef. Wants to work towards community relationships - manure to farm, greens to restaurant, closed cycle-type relationship.

Year three: Now she has a variety of markets for her produce: CSA, restaurants, selling at the farmer's market, Farm Gate (I didn't know what this was). She is a pioneer in urban farming, so a challenge for her is that the local gov't doesn't know how to regulate small urban farms. She wants to better communication with customers online through facebook or another online presence. A concern for her is she might do something wrong that will get farm shut down by the city, but the city doesn't know how to regulate urban farms.

Future direction: She wants to expand to gardening on restaurant land for the restaurant. She will do gardening, maintenance, etc. Wants to expand into school gardening too. Would take portion of the food to sell in CSA. They harvest food and leave at owner's back door. Not organic.

Take home message of talk: Anyone with land can do what they do with SPIN, you only need small patch of land with 4-5 hrs of sunshine/day.

Graeme Bancroft

"Buy your food like a hillbilly"

-How do you sell a little bit of food when there's too much for you, but not enough for stores (wholesale distribution)?

Solution: Graeme sells his produce at a roadside stand. Works for him very well. He is a carpenter, which is his main means of making money. For him, farming is more a process of experimentation... trying out ideas. He is learning from a friend Becky, he knew nothing until 2009. He encourages new farmers to experiment, use imagination as much as possible in both growing and selling their produce.

- Agriculture is not a practice you can learn from a book. Rather you use your imagination and instincts to produce and grow food. You've also got to figure out how to make a little bit of money.

- He experimented with miniature greenhouses. People loved buying a box of seedlings, but he's not sure how successfully they grew in people's gardens, didn't do the follow up. But customers loved to buy the seedlings.

-*Showed pic of his roadside stand* He is very into design, the aesthetics of the experience. Designed stand to promote a feeling, cultivate an experience for the customers. Nice, wooded stand, looks quaint. "Let the display do the work". The sign does the work for him.

-Advice for new farmers: If you want to create an experience for customer, you need to think about design. Graeme lives in very rural setting, doesn't have the bureaucratic headaches Jean does in the city. His stand has a ocean view, which is a nice attraction for customers. Keep in mind people are coming by vehicle. They need a spot along the road for them to turn off.

-More advice, this time about signage: if you don't actually work the stand, then you don't know how much your customers know about the food. e.g. what a kohlrabi or spinach in a bag is. Everything must be laid out very clearly.

- You must tell people to wash their food. Must be clearly indicated at an unmanned stand. He's had people complain before about insect in food. Need to spell everything out for customers.

- The location of the stand is also strategic. He's across the road from community mailboxes. His stand is transportable. If you make a permanent building, you will have to deal with building permits, power, etc. Changes cost issues, makes things more difficult. Going to have to justify to someone, sometime, the purpose of the building. Can "fly by night" with mobile stand.

-His customer base is the cottage market. Coming to the area, wanting a certain experience in the summer, he wants his stand to be part of the positive part of their experience. His stand has an open-air feel to simulate an open-air market. Doesn't see anyone on rainy days (cottagers stay indoors), so it's ok for his stand to be open to air.

-He is willing to discuss particulars with anyone interested. Things to consider: You must keep produce cold. He first used Styrofoam coolers, got 5-6 hours at a time. Was a real pain. Couldn't sell as much as he wanted too. Also appropriate drainage a problem. Also doesn't want to handle product twice. Not sure what he's doing now, he didn't get into it. Packaging is also something to consider. Paper bag system worked reasonably well for most things. He wants to know if you can provide waxed paper bags. Jean said the superstore does. He avoids plastic when possible. Need to make packaging process straightforward for people.

-Money.

Cash box is suspended underneath the bench with folder of envelopes on the counter. Customers write what and how much they're buying. Money is placed in

envelope and dropped into the cashbox. People seem to enjoy this, and like the feeling that you're taking their money seriously. A note tells him what was popular with customers, and extra effort seems to resonate with customers. He's gotten some really interesting notes from people. 17cents owed once by a customer who left him an I.O.U. note, and the person came back to pay it later.

- If the cash box out of sight, it's out of mind. If people can see a jar full of cash, they are less likely to be generous with cash. They will buy more if cash out of sight. He doesn't provide change, and advocates that checking the cash box everyday.

Daniel Brisebois

- Founding member of Tourne-Sol cooperative farm, in Les Cèdres, Quebec.

- suggests growing herbal teas, dry seeds themselves, to sell at market.

- suggests having some livestock at market.

-also suggests growing seed. At Tourne-Sol, they harvest and clean their seeds by hand, pack up and go to seed events, and have developed a seed catalogue. 40% of their produce goes through farmers market. It's important to have lots of produce out on display – good aesthetic – indicates abundance which will sell more produce. They also have a CSA, with 260 families involved - very impressive! Tourne-Sol has a market style CSA - people come, are given a list and make their own baskets. Half of their customers pick up at the farm, half at a church in town.

-Break-down of their farm operation: Five farmers work and run the farm together. The "five" met at university, where they all majored in agriculture. All were friends and roommates, and now they farm together. Their operation was kick-started by renting land from a bigger company with extra land. The "five" are two couples and half of a couple. By being cooperative, they need only one set of equipment and can get more from the farm, rather than each person needing own land and supplying it themselves. They don't have the same labour issues as other farms often do when running cooperatively, and they don't have to worry about finding new people every year. They are able to improve, rather than maintain, their skill labour level.

- Money: Their philosophy is that all tasks have equal weight, are valued equally and paid same hourly wage. Apprentices don't make the same as the first five, but it's possible for them to work up to same wage (hasn't come up yet, apprentices all eventually move on). Money turned out to be the easy part of managing the farm, working out how much time spent working on each task is not so easy. At first they tried just recording their own hours, but not everyone does that. While all work is equally valued, not all is done as efficiently by everyone, and it seems better to divide tasks.

-Solution: Came up with a very organized schedule that everyone follows. *showed us their typical summer schedule for a week* Everyone starts at 7am, works to 5pm everyday (Sundays off). He finds they are able to break up each major task nicely. Everyone also has +2 floating hours per week so the schedule has flexibility to it. Everyone works the same schedule, share profits 1/5. Their summer schedule runs April to November. During this time, they are all outside and they all work together. Work ~ 2000 hrs/farmer in the summer season. In winter, it's different: 325 hrs /person from Nov. to April. They organize their financials so that they can pay themselves weekly wage all year even though they work more in the summer than in the winter.

Note: Dan seems extremely organized and efficient, their banking seems really well worked out.

-Communication: They have to communicate well on the cooperative. They use two main tools for this: nonviolent communication and holistic management.

They took a workshop on nonviolent communication. He finds these tools allow them better inter-personal dialogue.

-None of them were from farming families (I was surprised by this), but had worked on farms before starting theirs. All had different perspectives and different farming goals. Holistic management training has helped them manage their goals, understand each other better, work together smoothly.

-They also use lots of blackboards on their farm to keep tasks organized and to communicate with each other. *look very busy and organized*.

-They also divide up office responsibilities in 5 ways: accounting, certification, CSA member management, website and human resources. Each person takes on one task more than the other four, which prevents micromanagement (can be inefficient). Somewhat different than the farming tasks, these "office" like duties are handled more by one person than as a collective.

-How they handle field responsibilities: At first they divided them up evenly between everyone, but then found over time that some people had preferences for one thing over another, some were more efficient at certain tasks, etc. so they refined the list. Learned by trial and error. Now, for instance, Dan handles much of the seed production, because he really enjoys it.

-They take time to communicate directly with each other each and every day. The main five meet every morning for a chat, then get together with their apprentices to have a "standing meeting" (stand in circle, 15-20 minutes, say what they did yesterday and what they will do today). The main five also meet once a month for a board meeting on to farm management and to stay on top of administration. In the fall, the main five take 6 weeks after harvest to meet and "take business apart". Then in the spring they meet for 4-5 weeks, once a week to discuss "larger vision" things. e.g. overall tractor use on farm, why use a tractor at all and for what tasks, etc. They find that by spring, everyone is very

excited about the growing season, there are no grievances etc. left over from in fall, and it's easier to communicate on bigger picture items.

Dan has a blog: www.goingtoseed.wordpress.com