

## Growing New Farmers

Thursday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012  
Georgian Room, (9:00am – 7:00pm)

### Workshop: Running a Successful CSA

#### Speaker: JEN CAMPBELL

Jen grew up on a large conventional potato farm and decided to pursue a career in organic agriculture after a 9 month internship at Ignatius Farm CSA in Guelph. She owns and operates a 75 member CSA with her husband Derek and twin boys Ben & Jake. Jen & Derek recently sold their 200 acre farm and purchased another property closer to Derek's job and both their families. They now rent land from Jen's families farm which has proven to be a successful transition.

#### Executive Summary

From finding a consumer base and setting up a crop plan and planting schedule to packaging produce and communicating with shareholders, there is much to consider! Join Island farmer Jen Campbell, as she explains the challenges, triumphs and 'how-tos' of maintaining an ever-growing small-scale CSA model at Jen and Derek's Farm, and seek inspiration in the development of your own!

#### Detailed Notes

**Slide 3** displays a photo of the farm that Jen grew up on. Both sets of her grandparents were farmers there, however currently there are only potatoes growing in this location.

Jen went to Sir Sandford Fleming's Sustainable Agriculture Program, prior to participating in a nine month internship through the CRAFT program (**Slide 5**). The farm she interned with was a CSA. Jen loved this program, especially working with a female farmer. This was particularly important to her having grown up in a farming community predominantly made up of only male farmers. The internship was oriented towards high production and helping her to form her structure and vision of what she wanted to do when she began her own farm.

Jen describes **Slide 7** as "perfect property".

**Slide 8** displays a photo of Jen's farm.

Jen and her husband Derek had created a business plan where Derek and her would work together on the farm full time, but they found they couldn't achieve this because the farm was not making enough money to support them both. Because of this Derek continues to work his off-farm job (**Slide 9**). They talked to the neighbors' of Jen's parents and offered to buy their land, which was closer to Derek's job. Luckily, they agreed. They moved in May and started to farm immediately.

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Shortly after, they had kids- which was not a part of the plan! Jen thought it would be impossible to farm with kids, but found that it is in fact possible. While Jen was off with the kids, Derek took over the farm duties. This was difficult balance with the CSA, the market and the rest, so they decided to just focus on the CSA.

They currently run an 18 week CSA. They sell two sizes of “shares”; a small and standard. The small share is time consuming and difficult to manage. Despite this, they have never decided to drop it entirely because they are unsure that the customers who buy the small shares would stay with them if only the large were offered **(Slide 13)**.

What the customers want is staples and only some “unusual” veggies. Jen’s solution to this is to pack everyone’s box herself so that everyone has the same staple veggies **(Slide 13)**. Then she sets out “grab boxes” of less common veggies where people add to their box what they want. This ensures that all her customers get the staples that they want while still encouraging folks to try something new **(Slide 14)**. She says you need to educate the consumers, while letting them customize their own boxes.

An example of what goes in the grab boxes are celeriac and fresh herbs. Jen says people just don’t know what to do with them. The grab box system is not really monitored, but Jen has not seen any problems with people much.

She tracks the value of each share based on the model described in Daniel Brisebois and Frédéric Thériault’s book “Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers”. To help with this she uses the voice recorder function on her smart phone, then inputs the data into a spreadsheet **(Slide 15)**. She also keeps a spreadsheet in her greenhouse with specific columns for everything (transplanting, harvesting etc).

Within her CSA all members sign a contract at the beginning **(Slide 16)**. Some policies that are included in the contract are:

- No one is allowed to take breaks for holidays
- After two weeks either party can cancel the contract at no fault
- the risks are clearly stated that could impact the quantity or quality of the produce (storms, pests, drought etc.)

Jen finds it harder to get new members than to keep the ones she already has, so she focuses a lot of energy on customer satisfaction and retention **(Slide 17)**. The most important tool she uses for this is her blog.

Through her blog she sends emails of what to expect in each basket. She goes to both of her pick-up locations herself, because she feels it helps for her clients to see her regularly **(Slide 18)**.

Also on her blog is an easy survey of 10 questions, that her clients can anonymously fill out asking about what they liked and didn’t like. She finds good suggestions and unique ideas come from this survey.

They are expanding, but slowly. Right now Jen works full time on the farm. Derek tracks the farm data and financial information, and does a lot of looking after the kids. They have one staff at 20 hours per week.

Aside from the blog, they use a facebook page to promote their farm which she finds helpful **(Slide 19)**.

Their members are able to volunteer on the farm if they wish, but it is not a requirement for them as it is with some other CSA farms.

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In their 18 week CSA, the early baskets are mostly filled with salad greens, which can be risky **(Slide 22)**.

Jen loves using heavy equipment, which was an issue at first because of the learning curve and her concerns for fossil fuel usage **(Slide 23)**. But now finds that she has no time for hand tools. The time she saves by using tractors is time that she can spend with her kids.

The spacing used on the farm is transplants set out at 12”to 24” apart. On her first farm they were farming in 100 ft rows. Now they have moved to 300 ft rows, 4 ½ m wide.

They have converted their tractor to use electric power. Switching out the motor and converting it took much less time than expected – only 25 minutes! **(Slide 29,30)**

The battery for the tractor is stored in a covered box in the back. They have also added a basket weeder which doesn't throw dirt from side-to-side so it can be used for small, young crops such as carrots. They don't do any hand weeding or hoeing.

They use this tiller for fine bed prep. They cannot do raised beds because they rely on this tiller **(Slide 32,33,34)**.

They do have some sales that are not through the CSA. They sell carrots and turnips to another farmer who sells to restaurants, which are crops they have specialized in. The money generated from this they use to pay their employee.

Tips for raising your own greenhouse. When they say make sure it is a really calm wind day, take them seriously! Be extremely careful with the plastic because the any amount of wind will make this process very difficult.

They don't use their greenhouse for winter production. Rather they grow tomatoes, peppers and basil in there, because their CSA members really want them.

To support the tomatoes they originally wanted to have lower braces to tie them off too, but instead opted to stakes and find that this works just fine **(Slide 45)**.

Before Jen had kids she admits to having been “obsessed” with weeding. She was always cranky about it. But now realizes that it is not so serious and doesn't worry about it.

Jen follows a tight schedule to get all the chores done on time and to keep everything running smoothly **(Slide 47,48)**.

Jen now feels proud to have people come out to her farm and look around!