

Growing vegetables during a pandemic

For many vegetable producers, the COVID-19 pandemic has turned business as usual on its head. In a rapidly changing environment, farmers have moved quickly, harnessing their creativity and adapting their business models while prioritizing health and safety. These case studies highlight a few of the major changes, challenges, and successes two farmers have experienced with regards to their employees, health and safety, and sales and marketing. Additionally, these farmers reflect on their roles as food producers during this uncertain time and their thoughts on how this new environment may impact their operations over the long term.

CASE STUDY

Lovefood Farm

David Bachhuber

Interviewed on May 28, 2020 by Sarah Janes Ugoretz, Doctoral Candidate at UW-Madison (sjanes@wisc.edu)

FARM BASICS

Year farm established: 2015

Number of seasons of vegetable production: 6

Location: Stoughton, Wisconsin

Acres in production: 8 acres in vegetable production

Growing practices: certified organic

Primary sales channels pre-pandemic: grocery, farmers markets, CSA, restaurants, value added

CSA membership in 2019: 110

CSA membership in 2020: 360

Hired employees in 2019: 8 (all part-time)

Hired employees in 2020: 7, with a goal of 12

EMPLOYEES

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- A larger crew size accommodates more labor-intensive tasks and mitigates risk of illness.
- Employees are instructed to minimize exposure while not at work.
- Experiential learning and pairing longer-tenured employees with newer employees has assisted with the extensive training required during this time.
- There is no written COVID plan at this point, but various policies and practices are in place.

CREW GUIDANCE. When the pandemic hit, the safety of his crew was a major priority for David. In general, he makes it a point to stay out of his employees' personal lives, but with the stakes being so high, David no longer saw this as an option. His approach has since been to have very frank conversations with crew members about what role he sees the farm playing during this uncertain time. "Our goal is to feed people to either get them well again or help them maintain their health. We cannot screw up." Being able to achieve this goal is directly connected

to the health of the crew. When they're not at work, David has asked employees to quarantine at home to the best of their ability. "We can't control what their roommates or partners do, which is nerve-racking, but we're just asking people to be really conscious about their exposure." Appealing to his employees in this way has resonated, and as the state has begun to reopen, crew members have initiated conversations with David about what sort of activities might be safe for them to engage in. "That's a huge relief," David says, "since it's prompted by them."

ADDED LABOR. David estimates that the new health and safety policies in place on the farm amounts to an extra 10 hours of paid work over the course of the week, with 4 crew members putting in an additional 30 minutes each day. Due to this added labor, plus the uncertainty of whether or not crew members may become sick with the virus, David has hired more employees than he normally would. He's up to 7 but anticipates increasing that number to 12 by mid-season. "We need to make sure we have too many." Though the payroll is challenging, David sees this as a necessary precaution for the farm to take. Moreover, he points out that this is a crucial time for the farm as an employer within the community. And while Paycheck Protection Program funds are offsetting some of the additional costs right now, having extra labor in the years to come may be a change that David keeps in place.

TRAINING. Attracting applicants hasn't been difficult per se, but finding experienced employees remains a long-standing challenge. This translates to the need for more extensive training, especially considering the new policies and practices in place and the larger crew size. "At a certain point, people glaze over if I try to present everything up front." During employee interviews, David makes a point to ask candidates what kind of learner they are. Many of them have the same answer—they most easily pick things up by watching and doing. As a result, training largely takes place through experiential learning. "I just make sure that the people who are less experienced are working with someone who is more experienced." He also tells his employees to expect regular feedback and to not take his input as a criticism. "Our goal on the farm is this spirit of constant improvement, so when I come back, no matter what, there are going to be things that I point out. It's a way for all of us to improve." This work, David says, is meant to ensure everyone has a shared understanding of expectations. "Once July rolls around, I don't want to have a conversation about how big a bunch of beets needs to be. If we get ourselves on the same page now, we can be better later."

COVID PLAN. At this point, David doesn't have an official COVID plan for his farm but recognizes that having a written resource would be valuable for both him and his employees—especially as new crew members come on. "Every spring, you just try to keep your head above water, so I feel like we've got the things in place that I want to have in place." At the same time, one of his worst fears is having an employee get sick. "I don't know how to resolve that stress point," he says. "I don't think there's a way to do it. I think my job is just to live with that and mitigate it." One farm employee did recently come into contact with someone who tested positive for the virus. In response, David instructed this employee to go home, get tested as soon as possible, and remain at home until the test results—which were ultimately negative—came back.

Right now, the farm's policy is:

- Employees exposed to the virus but who test negatively can return to work 14 days after the exposure.
- Employees with no known exposure to the virus who test positively can return to work 14 days after their symptoms clear.
- Employees with no known exposure to the virus but who experience COVID-related symptoms may return to work 24 hours after these symptoms clear as long as their test results were negative.

While farmers are legally required to compensate employees who test positively, David is conflicted over whether to do so for an employee who is awaiting test results and ultimately tests negative. The employee who left work to get tested did receive compensation for the remainder of that day, but David wonders, “What if someone on the farm exposes the entire crew and everyone has to stop working for 2 weeks? It’s a really hard thing to figure out, and I don’t have a good answer other than to keep my fingers crossed 100% of the time.”

HEALTH AND SAFETY / SANITATION PRACTICES AND POLICIES

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Employees must wear masks when within 10 to 15 feet of one another.
- Broad but rigorous sanitation practices are in place, with employees trained on each task.
- Packing and delivery practices have been adjusted, and plastic liner bags have replaced wax boxes.

MASKS AND DISTANCING. David requires all of his employees to wear masks when they’re within 10 to 15 feet of one another. Knowing that doing so will become increasingly uncomfortable as the temperature rises, he spent time trialing different designs. Once he found what he thought would be the most comfortable mask for this type of work, he purchased them for his crew members. Spreading out in the field or starting at opposite ends of the beds while weeding or harvesting gives employees some space to work without a mask. But if they’re even “questionably close,” David has instructed crew members to put their masks back on. Though he has to remind them periodically, for the most part, everyone has been excellent in adhering to this policy. Hand cleanliness remains an ongoing concern, however. “The thing I really worry about is people touching their masks. So I basically want them to put it on or leave it off, and then leave it alone.” Employees are instructed to sanitize hands between touching their masks.

SANITATION. The farm’s sanitation adjustments have been fairly broad, and a checklist ensures that specific items are cleaned daily. “Basically, we’re sanitizing everything. Anything people touched during the day is washed with soap and water and then spray sanitized with Sanidate.” Employees receive training to ensure that they are able to properly clean each item on the list. David reflects that a number of practices—like sanitizing tables and washing hands before packing—were already built into the farm’s systems before the pandemic hit. One positive adjustment he did make, however, was building and installing new handwashing stations in the greenhouse and the packshed.

DELIVERY POLICIES. Employees wear their masks when making home deliveries or dropping off wholesale orders. Though there is not heightened concern right now over transmitting the virus through produce itself, David has taken precautions when it comes to boxes. For the CSA and orders that come in through the webstore, the crew packs into a plastic liner bag on a sanitized table. While boxes are used to transport the bags to their destination, employees only hand over the plastic liner bag. When it comes to wholesale deliveries, produce is delivered in boxes just as it was before. Once these boxes are picked up from wholesale accounts, however, the farm’s policy is to set them aside for 2 weeks. For customers who pick up on the farm, they are instructed to remain in their vehicle and honk their horn to announce their arrival. After checking in to collect their name, an employee then brings the order out and either puts it in the back seat through the car window or places it in the customer’s trunk. This process eliminates any face-to-face contact.

SALES CHANNELS / MARKETING

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Tremendous growth in the CSA has required major adjustments to the field plan, work flow, schedule, and delivery options.
- Customers—including non-CSA members—can shop via a newly created webstore and may chose a home delivery option.
- Investments in new equipment helped accommodate the expansion of the CSA program.

CSA. In a typical March, Lovefood Farm could expect to bring in about \$3,000 in CSA subscriptions. This year, that number skyrocketed to \$20,000 as a 110-member CSA grew to 360. Not only did this growth require David to redo his field plan 3 times, but it also prompted a number of additional adjustments. In the past, CSA members would head to the farmers market where they would pack their own shares. Now, the crew is assembling all orders on the farm for the first time, and they’re doing so twice a week to accommodate several new delivery options. In addition to picking up at the farmers market on Tuesdays and Saturdays, CSA members can elect on-farm pickup on Thursdays, or home delivery on Tuesdays or Fridays. David was cautious about making such a major change so quickly. “We talked to other farmers to get a sense of where things go horribly wrong and where we need to be careful.” The harvest and packing schedule had to shift in significant ways to accommodate these changes, and the crew works ahead as much as possible. Though David sees the new on-farm preparation as being much less efficient, packing twice a week does serve to spread the load and the risk at this early stage. “We have our cooler thoroughly dialed in, so we have not seen quality issues with storing from Thursday to Saturday before distributing.” David emphasizes that this has made navigating these major changes much more manageable.

WEBSTORE. As part of his effort to increase people’s access to fresh and healthy produce, David worked with Barn2Door to set up an online store for the first time. Anyone can place an order, regardless of whether they are a CSA member or not. While online sales tied to the farm’s spring plant sale were strong, the role and the impact of the store remains to be seen. “To be honest, I can’t quite tell how I want it to do. The logistics of it are so challenging, so I can’t tell if I’m hurting myself by getting 40 deliveries on top of 60 CSA deliveries.” David’s response has

been to take things slowly, limiting orders and suggesting purchasing minimums while he sees how demand unfolds. Right now, he is encouraging customers to spend at least \$15 each time they shop. Spending \$20 or more makes them eligible to receive 10 percent off their order if they elect to use a provided promo code.

HOME DELIVERY. David sees adding a home delivery option as being directly tied to his commitment to get food to the people who most need it right now. With this opportunity, however, he sees great responsibility. By delivering to people who are sick or may be in high-risk situations, “we have to be so careful that we’re not transmitting from one to another.” This is where the extra health and safety precautions come in. And while David is confident in their system, he recognizes the importance of remaining vigilant.

With grocery and restaurant orders already going out every Tuesday and Friday, it was feasible to fold CSA and online orders into the mix. Purchasing a new van with two and a half times the capacity of their old van facilitated this adjustment. David uses zip codes to organize deliveries, assigning them to Tuesday or Friday accordingly. Meanwhile, he uses a routing software called OptimoRoute to organize each day’s deliveries. Two farm employees share the delivery driver role. On the day of, David sends the route to the delivery driver’s phone. Customers receive an email letting them know when they can expect their delivery, while the built-in tracking function also allows them to follow the truck.

Right now, David charges \$5 per home delivery. “We wanted to keep it on the lower side because we knew we’d have density to our deliveries.” CSA members are not locked into one specific type of delivery, however, and David worries about that density diminishing if people decide they want to switch to a different option, especially now as some people are starting to feel more comfortable with being out in the community. “To switch over to pickup and then back to home delivery—it gets logistically complicated very quickly.” As mentioned above, one mitigation tactic David has employed is incorporating suggested minimums for online orders.

FARMERS’ ROLES AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Farmers can safely and consistently provide community members with healthy food.
- Collaboration with community partners remains critical.
- The farm’s success during a time when many businesses are struggling provides perspective and underscores the necessity of food production.

We are living in an environment when uncertainty is high and people are fearful. As customers have shared notes of their gratitude, David is mindful of what he sees as his farm’s role. “The choice is fairly simple, right? There are people in need of healthy food, and I have the thing they need.” This perspective, he says, goes a long way. While David remains anxious about making sure the farm can continue to fulfill that need, it hasn’t stopped him from working with other community partners like a food pantry and two online stores that are aggregating locally produced goods and distributing them to community members.

For David, the pandemic has further highlighted how creative and impactful farmers can be—especially if they work together. In the early stages of the pandemic, a few schools reached out to David to see about sourcing vegetables from him. At the time, he was too worried about being able to meet his own CSA members’ needs to sign on. Instead, he contacted a peer who had developed a strong relationship with several Madison-area chefs. In the past, this fellow farmer would work with a small network of growers to assemble weekly product lists for chefs to order from. With the bones of this system already in place, David talked with this farmer and proposed that the process be modified to meet schools’ needs for fresh, local produce. To David, this is a powerful example of how “by working together like this, we can do so much more.”

FARMER MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Establishing a sustainable work-life balance is especially difficult right now.
- Childcare is a major challenge.

When they began farming, David and his partner were intentional about protecting family time. “Home by 5:00 and Sundays are off except for watering the greenhouse.” But, as he immediately points out, “part of the rules is the exception to the rule” and there are days when it’s difficult to make this happen. During this time of pandemic, that is definitely the case. “It’s incredibly overwhelming 130 percent of the time. You really have to have some systems in place or it’s going to hit the fan. So we’ve got those, but stuff is hitting the fan outside of our systems and all of that has to go somewhere.” This has translated to late evening work, limited sleep, and very early mornings.

Despite this grueling schedule, David says his days still feel relatively normal in that every morning, he gets up and leaves for work. His wife, however, has endured a major shift in her schedule as she works remotely while taking care of their daughter. “It’s just one of those real pieces to throw in. There are a lot of things we rely on schools for, and one of them is taking care of our kids.” As schools moved to remote learning and summer activities were cancelled, David emphasizes that, “The only reason any of this is working right now is because of my partner. I’m less affected simply because she is *more* affected.”

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- There is a high degree of uncertainty about CSA member retention.
- It is difficult to know whether the farm is making or losing money this year.
- A number of new practices will carry over into next year, including a larger crew size and increase sanitation practices.

With so much change this year, David feels a lot of uncertainty about what the future holds. “I see almost no chance that we’ll have the same volume next year,” he says, adding that he expects a significant drop in CSA number. While he believes there is great potential to retain people who

had been interested in trying the CSA model before the pandemic hit, he is less sure about those who sought him out mainly as a means of ensuring their access to food. “That’s the challenge of deciding to shift like this when we know it’s probably temporary.” David sees the farm at its most resilient and adaptable when there is a fairly even balance between grocery, wholesale, and direct-to-consumer sales. Right now, the CSA has tipped these scales out of proportion, but David expects this to contract and eventually balance out again on its own.

“When the pandemic started, I couldn’t tell if I was overreacting or underreacting. I had no clue at all, and I actually feel like I’m not going to know for a couple of years.” David says that perhaps the most difficult thing right now is “figuring out if we’re making or losing money when it comes down to the extra labor it takes to sanitize everything and to do home delivery. We’re charging for it, but is it enough? We’ve done the math, but is it right?”

When it comes to newly instituted policies and practices, David sees several changes being incorporated into the farm’s operations over the long term. He likes the idea of hiring more labor than in the past and plans to continue the additional sanitation practices they’ve implemented. Even home delivery is something he can see keeping in the mix, as long as the demand is strong enough. Dropping one farmers market this year has also been a mostly positive decision, since it has allowed David to spend more time on the farm training and working alongside his crew.