



**Heart Beets Farm
Berkley, MA**

Stephen and Sarah Murray
2017 Technical Assistance &
Loan

Farm and Loan History

Steve Murray started working on organic farms in 2007 when he was barely out of college — stepping into his first role as a farm manager while finishing his final semester. In 2014, he and his wife Sarah started their own operation, Heart Beets Farm, on five certified organic acres rented from the owners of the farm Steve had managed. Steve grew crops, using deep organic practices to maximize soil and plant health, on two acres, while Sarah did the marketing for Heart Beets’s 100 CSA members. They doubled their production in 2015, cropping four acres. They now manage 36 acres, which allows them to rotate crops optimally, and for the 2020 season they’ll grow on about 10 acres, in anticipation of increased CSA membership.

Steve and Sarah recognized in 2014 that residents of Bristol County were spending less than \$25 per person per year on local food.

They saw this as both a challenge and an opportunity: there was plenty of room to get their community on board with eating more local vegetables, an effort which has gone slowly but steadily.

Steve and Sarah have had a significant marketing advantage from the beginning. They inherited their organic certification from the owners of the land they rented, which makes them one of a very small number of farms in the county offering certified organic produce.

In 2017, Heart Beets Farm received technical assistance from The Carrot Project to review their business plan and put together a loan application as part of a match for a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources. They used the loan to purchase equipment needed to increase soil fertility and production efficiency.

Farm Snapshot

Steve and Sarah grow diverse certified organic vegetables on 10 acres for CSA with spring, summer, fall, and petite shares, a farmstand, two summer and two winter farmers’ markets, and occasional wholesaling.

Innovation

Steve manages a total of 36 acres, cultivating 10 acres and cover cropping an additional two acres to increase soil fertility and the nutrition of the produce. They use deep organic techniques, which, in Eliot Coleman’s words, mimic the elegant patterns of the natural world’s “soil-plant economy.”

With a variety of CSA share sizes and options, Heart Beets Farm lowers the barrier to entry to CSA so that more people can eat local, fresh vegetables.

Maximizing Efficiency and Nutrition

“Consistency plays such a large part in management,” says Steve, as he gives the example of introducing a fertilizer spreader on his farm. Before, when they were hand-spreading fertilizer, the application was uneven and plants grew haphazardly, Steve says. With the spreader, a purchase he made with his Carrot Project loan, fertilizer was spread evenly and plant growth became uniform. Cultivating and harvesting plants that are the same size and in the same growth stage is much easier and faster than working with plants of all different sizes and stages. Evenly applying fertilizer streamlines the whole production process.

Consistency is important throughout Steve’s systems: an ongoing challenge of CSA farming is the inherent inefficiency of producing 40 to 50 crops per season. This is where the equipment purchased through The Carrot Project loan made a difference. When using a properly sized tractor and appropriate implements, Steve was able to set up beds properly, transplant more efficiently, manage weeds more effectively, and harvest faster, all leading to increased health and nutrition of the soil, plants, and vegetables at Heart Beets Farm.

Regarding soil health and nutrition, Steve had his “aha” moment while working with Derek Christianson at Brix Bounty Farm in Dartmouth, MA, for two seasons, before starting Heart Beets Farm. Derek is a vocal soil health advocate and practitioner of deep organic techniques, and Steve saw the results: stronger, healthier plants and far less disease and pest pressure. He returned to Berkley to start Heart Beets with a commitment to increasing fertility, and has been able to increase his yields and produce a heartier product. **Acquiring the right tools and knowledge over time has amplified the effectiveness of these principles.**

On the marketing front, Heart Beets has made its mark with some creative flourishes on the traditional CSA share, with the goal of lowering the barrier to entry, “helping more people to eat more vegetables,” and making the share more robust so that people would consider a season-long commitment. In 2016, Sarah started a private members-only Facebook group, where she posts live “unboxing” videos, sharing information on how to store and use the produce, as well as recipes. Members of the public can also purchase membership to the [Facebook group](#). In 2019, Sarah created the popular and less expensive “petite share” in which members pick up vegetables every other week and have more time to eat them.

On the Horizon: Recruiting more mouths and more hands

Steve and Sarah have had the goal of enrolling 200 CSA members for several years, but membership numbers have hovered around 135. The 2020 season looks promising for a leap in membership: Steve and Sarah’s focus on improving retention has paid off, and as a result of participating in more marketing events and channels to attract new members, the rate of new sign-ups is healthy. From year to year, Steve is continuously honing the contents of the

share, striving to find the right balance in terms of quantity and variety of crops, so that members can consume their shares and not feel guilty about unused produce — one of the biggest reasons, in general, for people quitting their CSA share.

Labor is another ongoing challenge. Even though the farm is highly mechanized and Steve is a natural tinkerer — he quips that “at Heart Beets Farm, we play with things”— Steve still puts in a lot of sweat equity. With just one full-time and one part-time seasonal employee in 2019, Steve does the lion’s share of field work, including harvesting for his two CSA pickup days. Describing how he fills the boxes for more than 75 people on Monday and 75 more on Friday with harvests from a range of 12-15 different crops, he replies “I just try to go really, really fast.”

After many seasons of difficulty finding enough qualified and interested applicants, Steve has taken a different tack, now building his budget to allocate more money to purchasing and maintaining equipment and technology than to wages. However, there are many tasks on the farm that simply have to be done by hand, but because the farm is not located near any traditional sources of labor like high schools or colleges, Steve may need to dig deeper to find qualified people who are excited to work in vegetable production.

Steve is heading into the 2020 season feeling confident that each season will be a little more efficient than the previous one. **“I’m always looking for ways to make this very hard thing — organic farming — a little less hard.** If carrying a smart phone or using equipment to make production more efficient will give me a little time at the end of the day to spend with my family and friends, then I’m all for it. I want to grow great food, I want to be able to do it for a long, long time, and I also want to live a healthy lifestyle.”