



THE  
carrot  
PROJECT



## CLIENT UPDATE

### FARM DETAILS

**Hungry Reaper Farm**  
Morris, CT

Will O'Meara & Jill Verzino  
Training & 1:1 Advising  
Participants, 2021

### FARM SNAPSHOT

Jill Verzino and Will O'Meara grow vegetables at Hungry Reaper Farm, on four acres in Morris, CT, a town in Litchfield County. They have a 50-member CSA and sell at one farmers' market and to selected wholesale outlets. As they enter their third season, they are beginning an expansion to a 104-acre property near their current rented fields.

### INNOVATION

Jill and Will endeavor to manage their farm using methods that mimic natural systems. They use compost teas, crop rotation, and cover cropping to maintain their soil health and grow a broad range of crops, including flowers that attract beneficial insects, to ensure biodiversity on the farm.

## FARM HISTORY

Jill grew up in nearby Waterbury, CT, and after graduating from college with a degree in Visual Art and Environmental Policy, she returned to her hometown to teach painting to high school students at her alma mater. She worked in her college's gardens, put in six seasons at Evergreen Berry Farm in Watertown, CT, and worked one season at Simply Smiles Community Center in La Plante, South Dakota in 2016.

Will spent his high school years in nearby Litchfield, CT, and it was in this period that the pair first met through friends. Will went on to study environmental science in college in

California, but he left that program to return to Connecticut to work as an assistant farm manager at Waldingfield Farm and complete a degree in Sustainable Food and Farming at UMass Amherst.

Jill and Will spent summer breaks through high school and college working on farms together. In 2019, with several solid years of farming under their collective belts, they were presented with an opportunity to rent some farmland, and they decided to go for it. Will and Jill built a 30' x 94' greenhouse and a walk-in cooler, they grew on one and a half acres for their first season in 2020, and they have incrementally increased to their

current cultivation of four acres.

In the winter of 2020-2021, Will participated in The Carrot Project's "Making It Happen" workshop. He said that working through real-world strategies and scenarios for farmers pivoting in a rapidly changing sales landscape was a particularly valuable experience in the backdrop of the pandemic. As a result of the course, he and Jill: "made significant changes to how we were recordkeeping and planning for 2021."

Then, when the opportunity arose to acquire a long-term lease on 104-acres, Jill and Will reached out to The Carrot Project for technical assistance.

## OVERVIEW OF OUTCOMES

### Navigating the unknown to forge a viable farming future.

When they were matched with a TCP business advisor, Jill and Will went to work immediately to prepare a capital budget for expansion, along with new cash flow plans and projections to reflect business growth. They also hammered out a plan to eventually purchase their new land in a way that their business and personal finances could sustain. Will says: “it’s been so great to have someone help us distill all of our ideas into actionable plans.”

With a plan in place, Jill and Will worked through their need for a new employee with their business advisor. Jill reflects: “It had just been the two of us on our two acres – we knew that this [growth] wouldn’t be sustainable, even with part time help.” They knew they needed more help on the farm, but they didn’t know exactly what role that person should play. So, together with their advisor, they carved out a job description and concluded that they needed a farm manager, not just another laborer. “This work helped us navigate through something we hadn’t done before and helped us come up with a solution that works for every party involved,” Will says.

They have now hired their manager —“an old friend with tons of experience who has been instrumental already in the first months to get things up and running on the new land,” says Will, and he laughs: “It feels like we’re actually on top of things, for once!” He and Jill add that with the manager on the farm, they could add a plant sale to their marketing plan, something they’d been interested in doing previously but hadn’t had the capacity for. In addition, they’ve been able to take on a significant new wholesale account, and they’ve extended their season earlier into the spring now that they have the extra capacity to harvest and deliver while getting the rest of the season organized.

This season, as they make a full transition to the larger property, they will divide their growing between their current leased fields and the new farm. To allow capacity to execute the transition smoothly, they will increase production only moderately in 2022, increasing their CSA by 10% and remaining in their one farmers’ market, but they’ll bump up their wholesale channels more significantly to include deliveries to new grocers and three food hubs in Connecticut.

“We really like the wholesale part of our business because it allows us to spend more time focusing on growing and less time being offsite for farmers’ markets and small deliveries,” says Jill. “Plus, we reach more people this way.” Will adds that: “with a lean crew, wholesale is a good match, and we can get more food out into the world.”

## ON THE HORIZON

Within a few seasons, Jill and Will plan to grow on the full 15 tillable acres on their new 104-acre property. They will bring the rest of the acreage into production gradually – and they want to provide opportunities to other farmers by leasing portions of the land out for livestock production, agro-forestry, silvo-pasturing, and alley cropping. They are working with Dirt Capital, who owns the land, to put a conservation easement on the property that would make it feasible for the duo to buy it out right.

Jill says excitedly, “We have this dream of converting the barn into a vibrant farm store—stocked with our produce and carrying products from other farmers in our area.” Will notes that the location of their property is close to some major state roads, making it a great spot to aggregate products from other farms for food hubs to pick up. “We are looking beyond our own farm and seeing how we can support other farmers in our area.”

In that community-minded spirit, Jill and Will have their sights on training the next generation of farmers—Will says: “As we scale up, I’m really looking forward to bringing some younger folks into the fold. We both had really strong mentors, and playing that role now is really important to us.

Ultimately, Jill and Will look forward to transitioning the farm into someone else’s stewardship. Jill says “It would be great to help build this community of farmers in Connecticut and create pathways for the next generation to take over the farm. We don’t necessarily want to die on the tractor.”