

THE carrot PROJECT



CLIENT UPDATE

FULL WELL FARM

FARM DETAILS

Full Well Farm North Adams, MA

Megan Bantle and Laura Tupper-Palches, Business Advising
2020-2021

FARM SNAPSHOT

Full Well Farm produces 120 vegetable and flower CSA shares and sells through one farmers' market and 17 wholesale accounts, including North Adams' public schools and an online platform.

INNOVATION

"Access to food is a right, not a privilege:" Full Well works with community partners to expand access to their produce. 46% of their CSA shares were sold through community programs at low- or no-cost in 2022.

FARM HISTORY

Despite both their families' farm backgrounds, neither Megan Bantle nor Laura Tupper-Palches imagined they'd end up farming. But a shared love of land, sense of place, and appreciation for local food brought Megan and Laura together to found Full Well Farm in 2019.

Meg, raised on their grandparents' dairy farm, grew up with a fairly grim view of farming: "The story of the dairy industry in the Northeast for the last fifty years is one of a dying industry: not very uplifting," they say. In college, Meg and Laura (who was raised on her family's cranberry farm) both got into contact with young farmers committed to growing local food. "I did not consider farming to be a sustainable industry—until I saw other young people doing it," Meg says.

By the time Laura and Megan met at Kitchen Garden Farm in Sunderland, MA, they were both considering that farming might be a real, sustainable option. In 2018, Meg's family offered an opportunity to use a portion of their family's farmland—most of which was then in hay—to start growing vegetables, and Full Well Farm was born.

Meg responded by writing a business plan, selecting a site, strategizing about the infrastructure needed for vegetable production, and researching loans and grants to make it all possible. The following spring, Meg and Laura started preparing a quarter-acre for vegetable production, and weeded it by hand with friends.

Laura remembers that "the farm looked so small then, compared to now," but weeding the hayfield was no small task. Raising vegetables that year was daunting: without an irrigation system, they hauled a 300-gallon maple tank up a hill to a stream and back down to their plot, with the use of an ATV owned by Megan's family.

Taking another farmer's advice, Megan and Laura limited their first season's production to a small crop selection. They sold to locals buying their weekly groceries at the North Adams Farmers' Market, and to a handful of local chefs. In 2018, they put up a 16' x 100' high tunnel with donated hoops and ran drip irrigation into the tunnel. They also received a grant from NRCS to install a well.

OVERVIEW OF OUTCOMES

Two years into production, Laura and Meg were facing major decisions about growing their operation. In 2020, they added flowers and tomatoes to their previously limited crop plan, and decided they were ready to grow for CSA production. Their first CSA offered 30 pre-packed boxes and contactless pick up on the farm and at various locations in North Adams.

Realizing they needed to hone their business planning skills, they participated in The Carrot Project's Making it Happen Workshop (MIH), and followed up with one-on-one business assistance in the winter of 2020. They worked with a Carrot business advisor, Brian Zweig, to determine the viability of putting up a 30' x 96' greenhouse, which would help them to substantially extend their growing season.

Laura and Meg worked with Brian to get their financial statements into shape to show to lenders. As a result, they were able to access loans and grants that made it possible to complete the building of their greenhouse by June of 2022. By winter of 2022-2023, the greenhouse was full of salad greens, spinach, kale, and herbs, which will transition to tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers for summer.

Laura, initially hesitant to take business risks, found that “working with someone else and having them give feedback and help us learn how to decide if an idea is good” was extremely helpful. “I’m pretty risk averse, and taking on loans and big projects feels like a big deal.”

Meg agrees: “We were at a phase in the business where we were looking for advice on being financially viable, figuring out how to support employees and work towards the livable wages that we both want, what to invest in, and how to make a longer-term plan.”

In previous seasons, Full Well rented space at other farms. Now, having their new greenhouse not only makes their workflow more efficient, but also sets them up for four-season growing. Expanding production through the winter months will also give them another tool to mitigate severe weather related to climate change.

From the beginning, Full Well Farm has been committed to making their food accessible throughout their community, offering a sliding scale through which CSA members who can pay more subsidize members who can't afford the full price. “It balances out really well,” says Meg. Full Well partners with the Department of Transitional Assistance, as well as with multiple non-profit organizations prioritizing local food. In 2022, 38 out of 82 of their CSA shares were sold through a community program or at a subsidized rate.

ON THE HORIZON

Meg and Laura look forward to growing the CSA and expanding production and distribution into a longer season, in hopes of eventually supporting year-round employees. The farmers are also excited to increase flower production to boost their wholesale, retail, and CSA sales, as high demand for both their vegetables and flowers continues. “We’ve had a waiting list every year!” says Meg. The farmers plan to boost sales through additional channels, expanding to online and mail delivery in the coming season.

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Making our vegetables accessible is deeply important to us.

To avoid burnout and exhaustion, and for the sake of sustaining long-term farming careers, both Laura and Meg want to prioritize a reasonable work schedule, meaning a five-day work week with planned vacation time throughout the year. Because they're getting into year-round production, they'll no longer be able to count on downtime in the winter to recuperate. Meg and Laura also share a long-term goal of welcoming CSA members onto the farm more. They're building a new shed as a first step to launching a robust farmstand with retail and community space. In future seasons, they'll explore adding tours, volunteer days, and other ways to make the farm more accessible to more people.

Their top priority remains staying connected to their hyper-local community, and building a farm store feels most in line with their desire to create access—not only to food but to the beauty of Full Well Farm.