

Farmers Share Their Start-up Stories: PASA Pre-conference Inspires Beginning Farmers

Item Type	Article
Authors	Charney, Madeleine
Download date	2025-08-03 09:26:48
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/32239

NEW FARMERS

Farmers Share Their Start-Up Stories

PASA Pre-Conference Inspires Beginning Farmers

By Madeleine Charney

Participants interested in what it takes to “get started” as a farmer, climbed aboard Track One of PASA’s (Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture) pre-conference during the 14th annual Farming for the Future conference in State College, Pennsylvania. On February 3rd, one hundred new and aspiring farmers (with 50 more on a waiting list!) were treated to five lively case studies presented by farmers who have succeeded in making farming their livelihood. The blend of presenters’ unique stories and ingenuity created fertile ground into which the audience could sow their own ideas.

BLUEGRASS BEEF

Sarah Rider grew up in suburban Philadelphia as a self-proclaimed “horse girl.” By the age of 22, with a degree in agroecosystems from Penn State under her belt, she began to ease her way into sole proprietorship of BlueGrass Beef. “Like all good ideas, it started with reading some good books,” Sarah mused.

Three years ago, when she began renting a farmhouse, the landowner approached her about the potential for raising beef on his land. It was after sharing with him what she learned from these good books (e.g. Joel Salatin’s *You Can Farm*) that Sarah “fell into farming.” Soon after their conversation, five steer were grazing just beyond her doorstep.

Based on that experience, she arranged four other rental agreements in her neighborhood. She notes that flexibility, collaboration, and ongoing dialogues with the landowners have been the keys to success with this “patchwork” system. In one

instance, she sold the breeding stock of her herd to the landowner while retaining the beef cattle and bull calves for quicker finishing and cash flow.

Having worked for three years at a local CSA (community supported agriculture) provided Sarah with a built-in customer base, support, and a market for her products. Staying in close communication with her customers has also proved to be of immeasurable value. Although she has investigated how to market her products at food shows and gourmet shops, she finds that it is her local customers who know and trust her and are willing to buy nearly anything she sells. Besides being enamored of her grass-fed beef, her poultry and eggs turn around quickly as well.

GREEN HAVEN FARM

Brian and Holley Moyer know how to spin straw into gold. A prime example was the exceedingly muddy day when the chicken pens needed rotating on their 27-acre, steeply sloped property. With no mechanical equipment and an injured back to boot, Brian proceeded to cut the wire off the front of the pens. Allowing the 250 chickens to roam within the boundaries of electric netting, Green Haven Farm’s “day range system” was born. Labor was further reduced as the pens now only need to be moved every other day (instead of daily).

Starting small with 50 chickens and borrowed equipment, nine years later their operation has expanded to include sheep products. “You’ve got to use all of the animal,” implores Brian. Chicken feet are sold to ethnic shops, the satiny feel of sheep skins allure customers at their market stand, and even sheep heads are in demand as a Muslim delicacy.

Like all the pre-conference speakers, the Moyers recognize that customers deeply value meeting the farmers that stand behind these products. Of equal importance is setting goals and maintaining careful records. QuickBooks is their tool of choice and trying to stay honest with themselves their main challenge around this task.

Joining organizations such as PASA and American Pastured Poultry Association expanded their network and knowledge of a job they clearly love. Brian describes the work as varied, with “no doldrums about it.” He wrapped up their presentation with a personal motto: “There is no finish line; it’s all one big journey.”

HALF PINT FARM

A background in classical languages and anthropology is not what you’d expect to fuel an agricultural business venture. But these are the respective degrees first earned by Mara and Spencer Welton of Half Pint Farm. Handy with a checkbook and being a former owner of a massage business helped Mara hone her business management skills. As Peace Corps volunteer she taught small business courses while Spencer taught beekeeping based on books he had read.

One unified lesson they both learned was the importance of observation. Later, as a graduate student of Sustainable Systems at Slippery Rock College, Spencer ran the small market garden and tracked the buying habits of their customers. Soon afterward, the couple became employed at a farm in Vermont where they scoured the produce lists posted on the cooler doors of their customers’ restaurants when making deliveries for the farm. They noticed trends and prices, building the knowledge and experience that led them to the Incubator

Farmer Program at the Intervale in Burlington.

The Intervale provides the machinery, greenhouse space, land, and storage. The Weltons supply the labor and marketing savvy. No-interest credit card deals were the source of the \$3,000 they needed for startup. Their crops of choice – baby and specialty vegetables. “If it’s not baby, it’s got to have color. If it doesn’t have color, it’s got to be a funky variety that no one else is selling,” explains Mara.

Like the Moyers, the Weltons credit their careful record keeping with their ability to guide their business to higher places. Both couples hold regular business meetings, the Weltons giving theirs the whimsical name “The Half Pint Farm Conference.” Twice a year, over dinner and a written agenda, they process all aspects of their completed records. “It makes decision making that much easier,” Mara adds.

Both couples also agree that the majority of their time is spent marketing, delivering, and selling. Wednesday is the only day the Weltons are actually on the farm all day. But this formula seems to be working. By setting and achieving their monthly goals, their farm income doubled after the first

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Resource Spotlight Magazines for Beginning Farmers

New and aspiring farmers, take note! The refrain of the more seasoned farmers who presented at the PASA pre-conference was that successful farming takes ingenuity. The following four publications contain articles highlighting this aspect of the trade.

Successful Farming: For Families that Make Farming and Ranching Their Business

Published monthly / www.meredith.com
Annual U.S. subscription \$15.95 / 800-374-3276
Each issue is split into sections for Business, Production, Family, Personal, and Features. Articles devoted to new farmers appear under “Up By Their Bootstraps.” Recent topics include “How to Keep Your Family Farm Partnership a Happy Dream,” “Start-up Farm Survives and Grows with Tight Cost Control,” and “Five Steps to Help You Survive Switching to a New Computer.” A regular column called “Machinery Pete” offers advice on maintaining and restoring farm equipment.

Countryside & Small Stock Journal

Published bi-monthly / www.countrysidemag.com
Annual U.S. subscription \$18.00 / 715-785-7959
An informal publication whose mission statement includes “a desire for maximum personal self-reliance and creative leisure,” and “a taste for the plain and functional.” Serving mainly homesteaders, feature articles fall under headings such as the woodlot, the smithy, the cow barn, and the beehive. Recent articles include “Dressing Well on a Budget,” “The Far Out Farms’ Off-Grid Brooder,” “Build a Wood-burning Cookstove from a Steel Barrel,” and “Extra Income on an Acre.” Extensive classifieds include opportunities for bartering, building alternative energy, and purchasing handicrafts and health items.

AgVentures: Today's Ideas on How to Profit from Your Land

Published bi-monthly / www.agventures.com
Annual U.S. subscription \$21.00 / 888-474-6397
Articles are divided into five main sections: livestock, aquaculture, niche market, niche crop, and state aid. Each issue profiles farmers and their innovative operations such as starting a kangaroo farm, harvesting and mar-

keting seaweed from your pond. The state aid section focuses on one state per issue and provides valuable information about programs for grants and loans. Back issues may be ordered from the detailed list at the end of each issue.

Farm Show

Published bi-monthly / www.farmshow.com
Annual U.S. subscription \$19.95 / 800-834-9665
This maverick exchange of ideas for improving and creating farm equipment and production is open to any unique contribution. Inventors, marketers, distributors, and manufacturers are invited to participate in this marketplace. Focusing on new products and product evaluations, no advertising is accepted. Recent articles include “Making Money Selling Corn Silk,” “Made-It-Myself Snowmobile,” “He Runs His Pickup on Veggie Oil,” and “Do-It-Yourself Chicken Plucker.” Letters from readers offer additional tips for time- and money-saving approaches. An annual addendum called “The Best of Farm Show” highlights that year’s “crème de la crème.”

Madeleine Charney, New England Small Farm Institute.