

Beginning Farmers Part 2

From John

So last week I was talking about the many beginning farmers that come through the farm each year. The best advice we have is to invest in good boots and a good mattress. OK maybe that's not the best advice we can offer but we do say that quite seriously, you will almost always be in one or the other. While we have a lot of opinions on CSA and how a beginning farm should approach it, we also have rather strong views on another topic which I was planning on talking about anyway. That would be organic certification. I have really done a 180 on this since we started farming for ourselves. If you had asked me three or four years ago about organic certification I would have said that it wasn't all that important. I think that was in part because I was a manager at [Roxbury Farm](#), one of the best CSA farms in the country which despite not being certified, truly did often go above and beyond the requirements for organic certification. Paying particular attention to what the certification requirements were. However I would say this farm was exceptional; anything but the rule. I also would have to admit that I bought into some of the myths about certification which I will discuss in just a bit.

When we got started here, maintaining organic certification was a lease requirement to ensure that when the time comes for us to move along to our own land, the farm would remain certifiable. What we found was that it is very advantageous from a marketing perspective to be certified organic. Running our own certified organic farm has also really made us understand the frustration that other certified organic farmers felt when competing with so called 'un-certified organic' farms. When farming on the East Coast the CSA model has been very well established for quite some time with many members being part of a farm for 15-20 years in many cases. Many of these CSA's predate the NOP (National Organic Program) which enforces USDA organic certification law. These long-standing relationships have allowed a level of trust where many CSA members don't feel that certification is required. If the farm isn't competing in the retail or wholesale markets than many simply deem certification unnecessary. Out

ON DECK

Garlic will return (cured for storage) and shallots or cipollini onions will make an entrance. It's August so you can expect more beans, peppers, eggplant, tomatoes, corn, some kind of melon and greens. We may harvest some beets just to add something new as we lost our early beet plantings, we'll have to wait and see on that.

here in the Midwest consumers are much more likely to want have their produce to be certified. Another factor is that there are many produce vendors at the farmers markets in the Twin Cities. Being certified is the best (maybe only) way to get into the best markets. When you get around some of the myths about organic certification we have also found it makes us better farmers.

Myth#1: Organic certification costs 1000's of dollars which the small farmer can ill-afford. This is perhaps the most common reason you hear for not getting certified. When you hear this claim, it is at best misinformed and at worst blatant dishonesty. The bottom line is that it will cost no more than 2% of gross sales. That figure doesn't account for the fact that the USDA also has a cost-share program to help offset the expenses of certification. The cost-share will reimburse 75% of certification dropping that 2% number to about .5%. When you consider that organic certification can increase sales by 20-30% or more, 1/2 of 1% seems more than miniscule. Last season, certification cost us all of about \$250. Three tanks of gas in the delivery van cost us more money.

Myth #2: There are mountains of paperwork that a busy farmer doesn't have time for. There is some truth to this myth. Certification does require an immense amount of paperwork which at times certainly seems onerous. But the reality is that all this paperwork is something that we should be doing anyway. Certified or not, every farmer needs to keep very detailed production, harvest, sales and purchase records. There are other regulatory things like trying to buy certified organic seed, having a plan for crop rotation and getting approval for all off-farm inputs. Because of certification, we are much more disciplined about keeping really good records. In the long term this will greatly improve our chances of future and standing success. It is also worth noting that in the digital age there are great tools out there to help. We use one called [Cog-Pro](#) which makes

records quick and easy to enter, we can even do it in real time as we work in the fields on our cell phones. Yup, organic certification; there's an app for that, what an age we live in.

Myth #3: 'Organic' is just as good as 'certified organic.' It may be true that there are some non-certified farms that are better than others with certification, this is generally not true. Organic certification standards are much more stringent than you might think until you have gone through the audit. We are required to have soil tests that show a need for any fertilizers we may want to use. We are required to use cover crops and crop rotations. We need to try and find organic seeds (we search 7 sources though only 3 are required) and absolutely no GMO's or human waste can be used. We can only use an approved pesticide after exhausting all reasonable measures at prevention first. Food safety is also a part of certification. We need to have our water tested annually to make sure that our wash water is free of bacteria. We are not allowed to use raw manure within 4 months of harvest (this includes compost which hasn't gone through and approved composting process). Without certification none of the above mentioned things are required.

Myth #4: I don't want to government interfering with my business. I can certainly understand the aversion to having a Federal agent watching over my shoulder and micromanaging what we do here. But the bottom line is that doesn't happen. Certification is certainly not a perfect process. There is a lot of room for improvement in the program and hopefully the standard become stricter rather than loosening. There has to be some kind of verification process if you are going to make claims about the superiority of your products. It's like this; I am a really good farm mechanic, but I am not a real mechanic. I occasionally moonlight for people because I can do the work at a cut rate because I lack the formal ASE certification and people know that. Knowing that, would you pay me the full price that a professionally trained mechanic would charge? The reason we are able to get a premium for our products is that we have taken all of these extra steps and many others so that we don't just say that we are organic, we prove it.

News and Notes

- Chicken will be for sale in about 8 weeks. This means we will only have a couple of weeks at the end to distribute them. We will hold the price at \$4.00/pound. Please fill out and return an [order form](#) to reserve your birds
- We will be gathering for a Potluck at the farm on Sunday September 9th at 1-4PM. We will keep reminding you for the next several weeks. We will need to rent tables and chairs so please RSVP by September 1st so we have an accurate guest count.

Featured Item

This week we are featuring fennel. We featured this last year but know it will be new to many people. It is traditionally considered more of a winter crop, though it seems well suited to growing in the spring, summer and fall at our latitude. You may recognize its licorice (anise) like smell at first though when roasted the flavor become soft and sweet. Don't be afraid of it if you hate the flavor of black licorice you may well still love fennel. It is also delicious raw, in a salad with arugula, cucumber, squash, zucchini, and/or oranges. For another great recipe see last year's [Busy Bee](#). Fresh fennel will stay fresh for 7-10 in a plastic bag in your



Box of Birds From the Post Office

Recipe of the Week

Fresh Green Beans, Fennel, and Feta Cheese Ingredients

1 pound fresh green beans, trimmed
1 fennel bulb, cut into thin slices
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil leaves
salt and pepper to taste
1/4 cup crumbled feta cheese

Directions

Fill a saucepan half with water and bring to a boil. Add the green beans and fennel slices; cook until just beginning to become tender, about 4 minutes. Pour into a colander to drain and run under cold water to stop the cooking process.

Return the empty pan to the stove and set heat to medium. Pour in the olive oil and let it heat for a minute. Return the green beans and fennel to the pan. Season with basil, salt, and pepper; cook and stir until coated and warm. Transfer to a serving dish and toss with feta cheese.