

Beginning Farmers Part 1

From John

Our unique relationship with [Gardens of Eagan](#) and the [Organic Field School](#) brings us a bit more attention than many beginning farmers generally expect. Quite a few groups come through the farm each season from beginning organic inspectors in training using the farm as a lab for mock inspections, beginning farmers from the [Veteran Farmer Coalition](#) (one of my favorite sustainable ag organizations to come along the past few years) and everyone in between. We just had one group come through in the past few weeks, here for a marketing workshop for beginning farmers. We weren't officially on the tour or part of the workshop but on their farm tour they grabbed me for 15 or 20 minutes of Q&A between bringing the garlic in and crawling through the brassicas and pulling weeds. Since we eat, sleep and breathe farming it's a pretty comfortable topic for us to talk about. I dare say it's just about all we know how to talk about. We are pretty opinionated people in all things agriculture so we like talking to beginning farmers in particular hoping to make a good argument for our views on getting started in farming. CSA is front and center.

We hope to dissuade start-up farmers from starting a CSA. Please don't panic and think we are throwing in the towel or anything, we love the CSA model and plan to take it to new levels down the road. But we have some pretty big concerns about CSA's in the Midwest and in other regions as well I suppose. One is the CSA box, it's not the greatest offense but we just don't like them and find them very inspiring. A second and much more significant (I hope not to make any enemies here, we love all farmers) are some larger wholesale farms that sell their best produce to the wholesaler and pad their margins by selling the second rate stuff to their CSA members at a retail price. We find this practice completely repugnant and contrary to the spirit of CSA. I will certainly admit that some of these mature farms have in place better system and more experience than we do,

ON DECK

We are starting to feel a bit guilty about the pepper and tomato tease we have been stringing you along with, but we swear they are coming and when they come in you will be swimming in them. Sweet corn should make a return as well. Otherwise the share will be quite similar next week.

and sometimes their number 2's are as good or better than our numbers 1's. But we assure you, you get the absolute best we can do each week, not pawing off what the wholesaler wouldn't buy and charging you more for the privilege. OK, that wasn't my real point but we find that particular CSA model disturbing.

What concerns us more, is bad advice that encourages beginning farmers to start CSA's as a way the generate income and capitalize their farm start-up. This is a recipe for disaster, for both the farmer and the CSA member. The amount of planning alone is far more than an inexperienced farmer can take on, let alone the execution. In full disclosure, Lidia and I didn't really follow our own advice here. But on the same token we weren't exactly beginners either. We started with more than 10 years combined farming experience, myself with five in farm management and (4 at a 1100+ member CSA) we had our hand in the production and distribution at the wholesale scale and over 150,000 weekly CSA shares. We spent a whole year doing our business and production planning before starting. Also as the incubator farm at Gardens of Eagan we are really spoiled with our access to equipment, supplies and support. With that said, we felt comfortable with 20-25 CSA members our first year. We have seen what happens when someone with only a year or two farming jumps in with 50 or 60 members right out of the gate. Some pull it off, but generally it ends badly. We encourage beginners to get more experience on someone else's farm if possible. I advise a bigger farm. Many people have a negative image of the larger organic farms, but they have production systems and efficiencies that will help a farm of any size to be more successful. Time spent as a manager or assistant manager is even better. Many of the people we talk to want to know how we

lucked into such a sweet deal as the incubator farm here. The truth is, we didn't luck into it all. We worked our butts off on other farms, did every job we could and gained as much experience as possible. After that it was a prerequisite that A; Lidia and I came as a team and B; there would be an opportunity to start our own enterprise of some kind. We were able to make these demands only because our experience and references said that we would be worth it. If that's not an option, then it's starting small. Go to some farmers markets, learn about production, improve your systems and gain your customers trust. A few years after that, you will be in a good position to start signing up CSA members. Showing up to a farmers market without much produce can be a little embarrassing and not make a lot of money. But showing up to a CSA distribution without produce that has already been paid for will put you out of business, at least if you make a habit of it. In CSA we here the term 'shared risk' which is an acknowledgment that sometime things won't go well and there will be lean times. Many things beyond the farmers control can happen in the fields. CSA members understand this and are quite forgiving; however 'shared risk' is not an excuse for poor farm management or a lack of experience.

As I write this I hope it doesn't come across as pessimistic or cynical. Actually I am very optimistic about the future of farming, and I think that CSA will be right at the center of it. It is incredibly exciting to witness a rural renaissance that is spreading into the suburbs and cities. It is a truly wonderful thing that so many people want to take part in this, whatever their reasons. We just want everyone to be successful. The organic farming community is a small and really close knit world. One of the things we all firmly believe that far any of us have success, we all need to find success. This is really the kind of conversation that farmers have amongst ourselves, so we hope you appreciate the peak into our world!

News and Notes

- We apologize for the lack of sweet corn this week. If you remember earlier writing about the cutworm, you will recall we lost some plantings to them and this is the expected gap.
- We are going back to college! No not to find another career, but to be better business managers. This fall we will start a 20 credit Farm Business Management Program through the University of Minnesota. Likely a future Busy Bee article.

Featured Item

Haricots vert are a traditional French green bean; actually it literally translates into green bean in French. In the freezer section you may see 'French' or 'Frenched' green beans which are just regular beans cut in half. Not a true substitute in our opinion. French green beans are varieties bred to pack a lot of flavor into a very tender small bean. Beans will stay fresh in your fridge for about a week but you can expect them to spot just a bit. For longer term storage they are very easy to blanch and freeze but Lidia and I love pickling them most of all.



Beautiful; and no I don't mean the Cilantro xD

Recipe of the Week

French Green Beans with Almond and Garlic

Ingredients:

- 1 lb Haricots Vert green bean, rinsed trimmed and steamed for 5 minutes or until tender
- 2 -4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 cup sliced almonds
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/8-1/4 cup water or 1/8-1/4 cup chicken broth
- Coarse sea salt and season pepper

Directions:

- 1 In a large pan over medium high heat, heat oil adding almonds and toss for about 1 minute
- Add garlic and cook until lightly brown
- Add beans and water or broth and cover for 5 minutes on low heat
- Season with salt and pepper to taste