

WORKING THE LAND: THE STORY OF CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

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Growing for and Selling to Your Neighbors

The community connection is what makes organic farming viable

Interview with Paul Bucciaglia
Proprietor, Fort Hill Farm, Milford

Most students at agricultural schools end up with jobs off the farm. That was the case with Paul Bucciaglia, who became a plant scientist after graduation from Penn State.

After spending years in the laboratory, Bucciaglia saw how community-oriented organic farms around the country were becoming more popular -- and profitable.

So, deciding to try his own hand as an entrepreneurial organic farmer, Bucciaglia quit his job in order to learn the business as an apprentice on organic farms. He then got a job in farm management, and finally started his own farm, on leased land from the Nature Conservancy. It's been a tough financial row to hoe, but today Bucciaglia runs one of the state's most successful CSA farms.

A farmer revives his passion with help from friends of the farm

I grew up in a mill town, Naugatuck, Connecticut. When I was a kid, I really wanted to farm, probably, since I was four or five years old. I think that was when I had my first gardens.

I went to agriculture school at Penn State in the middle of the dairy crisis. Farms were going bankrupt left and right, and people said you can't farm – forget about it. So I looked for other ways to be involved in agriculture that maybe wouldn't be production farming. I was a plant scientist for a long time, and worked in laboratories on plant molecular biology. In the late '90s, I became aware of these small-scale organic farms that were doing the kind of work I liked and were making a go of it economically.

Crop diversity is one of the most important principles of organic farming. We grow 40 different crops from about half a dozen plant families – brascas crops like broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, all kinds of cucurbits like summer squash and winter squash, solinacious crops like tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, eggplant. We keep them together and then we move them around and we confuse the pests that way.

Economically viable models for organic farming generally involve using organic methods and then directly selling your harvest to people in the community. When I saw that, I saw a way I could farm. I just, cold turkey, quit what I was doing and went back as an apprentice. I worked for a buddy of mine for a couple of years on a farm he was getting going, then worked for another farmer, learning his system. I managed farms for a nonprofit organization then started my own business about three and a half years ago.

The reception we've had is phenomenal. I've never advertised, and every year I've sold out the community-supported agriculture program we do. They love the fresh vegetables. They love the fact that we're organic. They love bringing their kids and going out and picking flowers, herbs and strawberries.

We're happy to have them come here because they're making a commitment to the farm for the whole season. That commitment to the farm allows us to grow the wide range of crops we do for a whole season, rather than concentrating on sweet corn or tomatoes.

There aren't too many people getting into agriculture and making a living at it full-time. I think this model works in that way. We could have dozens of farms like this in the state because we've got an interested population. There's a lot of demand for local produce in general, organic in particular, and if we save the land, we could be doing a lot of these farms. I find that really exciting.

These are the things the farmer needs

They say a farmer needs to be an electrician, a plumber, a carpenter, a mechanic. Those things are all true, but I think at the core, a good farmer needs to really understand the biology of the soil and the crops he's growing, and needs to understand the market and the financial situation involved in growing these crops. All those skills – the plumbing, the mechanics, the carpentry – I'm lousy at and I admit it. But I have a good understanding of soil, I have a good understanding of my crops, and I have a good understanding of my market.

And I can cover my weaknesses. When I have to wire something, I know who to call. If the power steering goes on the tractor, I know who to call. Those are costs I'm prepared for rather than skills I'm trying to master.

I think what young and beginning farmers need in this state is a secure source of agriculturally valued land. And that's something we're sorely lacking. Land values in this state have skyrocketed, and it has nothing to do with the land's ability to produce food or any other agricultural product. We need to stop that trend immediately.

Agricultural land has incredible value to our state, in terms of its scenic beauty, in terms of wildlife habitat, water quality, and the fact that we're a small state with lots of people and should be thinking about our food-security here. You go to the store now, things are from Peru, Guatemala, wherever. That is not a sustainable system unless we come up with some really interesting answers to our energy situation. The Connecticut River valley has some of the best farmland in the world and we have a decent growing climate. We've got a long winter but we've got six, seven solid months when we could be growing some real world-class crops.

The second thing any new farmer would need is several years of training. The best place to get training for production agriculture is on a farm. I'm convinced of that. I've been to agriculture school and that was a great theoretical framework, but the nuts and bolts – a lot of the biology you learn by seeing and doing – needs to happen on a farm. We need to support the farms that are offering apprenticeship opportunities for people.

The third thing a new farmer would need is access to capital, some source of secure credit. Organic farmers generally work as apprentices, which doesn't allow them to accumulate a lot of capital to put into a business. I started this farm on my life savings, and I blew it all in three months. Then I started maxing out credit cards, and then I asked my father for some money, and that's how I financed the farm. You need tens of thousands of dollars to start a farm on an economically viable scale full-time. That's a place where state agencies could really help out a lot, with capital – loans or grants to get farms going.

My business is on firmer ground, but I wouldn't call it solid. I'm still working to get back on my feet financially from the investments I've had to make. I've been surprised at how much I've had to put into the business every year. You get more shares, you need a bigger truck, you need more tractors to cover more ground, you need to hire more people. Things just kind of add up,

The future of agriculture, the future of Connecticut

I'm optimistic for some forms of agriculture in this state, for sure. I think it's just a matter of changing from a commodity-based agriculture to a direct-marketing approach. The more producers that make that

switch, the better off Connecticut agriculture will be because we have a lot of people here who want to support their local agriculture, who want local food. If we can tap into those people and give them good products and good produce from our farms, then we're going to do okay as farmers. So, I'm optimistic in that sense.

But I'm afraid of what we're doing to land in this state. I'm crushed by it. If you go down Route 7 and you look – there was a farm field that was growing sweet corn three years ago, now there's a sign that says "Premium topsoil for sale." They've scraped the topsoil off. They're going to build a big building there.

It's greed, and it's shortsightedness, and it really has to stop or we're going to find ourselves in a situation where we're living in a place that we don't like anymore.

There's more than just money at stake here, it's what quality of life do we want to choose for ourselves? The sad part is we're choosing that for our children and their children. So we really ought to think with a little longer vision about where we want to see the landscape go, and our food production and the agricultural heritage we have in this state. Do we protect that or do we want to see it go away?

I think that's a big decision we have to make soon. It shouldn't be a tough sell.

Who owns the land?

It's been hard for me to say I might not ever own a farm. I have a lease on 20 acres, and I'm very happy about that. I have a good relationship with Sunny Valley Preserve and the Nature Conservancy, the land owners, so I'm able to farm and it's worked out okay. But there is something about owning land that it's hard to deny. It's an important thing. So what I'll do down the road, I don't know.

The big problem with leasing is knowing where the land's going down the road. I have an ideal situation because the Nature Conservancy and Sunny Valley Preserve want to see this land in agricultural production. Other producers on rented land are not so fortunate. That is a big problem in agricultural production systems because investments you need to make in land – in time and machinery and compost and fertilizers and all these things, especially in organic systems – are often two, three years before you do a crop. If you only have a one- or two-year lease, you're forced into a short-sighted economic take on the land.

Although I'm happy with my lease, I'm sort of boxed in to this piece of land. I don't really see any additional land that I can go to, so I've been trying to look inward and try to be more intensive on the land that I manage. Still, I don't have access to any more land so I can't grow the business further, which is too bad because we sold 225 shares this year, we have a waiting list of 100 people. And we haven't advertised.

As I said before, the future of farming in Connecticut is going to hinge on our ability to convert from a commodity-based, anonymous agricultural system to a local, relationship-oriented take on farming. There are all kinds of ways to do that – farmers' markets, community-supported-agriculture farms, natural food stores that identify Connecticut grown products so consumers can say, "That's the local one. I want that." Then they know that they're supporting farmers and their efforts to stay on the land in Connecticut.

We just need to connect those people, get the farmers on the land, get the word out there, and I think it'll take off.