

NEW FARMERS

Big Bucks from Small Spaces

Half Pint Farm Models High-Value Possibilities

By Erica Frenay

Mara and Spencer Welton packed the room at this year's PASA conference with their provocatively titled talk, "We Made \$50,000 on One Acre." When they spoke at the previous year's PASA conference, heading into their 4th farming season, they had shared their \$50,000 goal with the crowd. The response was mostly pessimistic.

But in fact, Mara and Spencer beat their goal, with gross sales of \$63,000 this year from their one-acre farm in Burlington, Vermont. Not bad for a couple of city kids who don't own any land and started with no capital. Their story is an inspiration for beginning farmers about the power of planning and dreaming.

Mara and Spencer grew up in inner-city Denver, and attended the University of Colorado at Boulder. Spencer got a degree in Classics, while Mara studied Anthropology. Their interest in an agricultural livelihood took root during a post-graduation stint in the Peace Corps, where they were stationed in the Solomon Islands. Mara taught small business management and Spencer taught agriculture.



Photo by Spencer Welton



Mara and Spencer Welton grossed \$63,000 on one acre in their fourth farming season. Not bad for a couple of city kids who don't own any land and started with no capital.

Photo by Mara Welton



Photo by Phillip Sandoval

After the Peace Corps they moved to Pennsylvania, where Spencer got a Master's of Science in Sustainable Systems and some more agricultural experience managing an on-campus market garden. After graduating, he and Mara moved to Vermont to start Half Pint Farm on an acre of leased land in urban Burlington.

They leased the land from the non-profit Intervale Center, which manages 354 acres of farmland, nursery, trails, and wildlife corridors along the Winooski River within the Burlington city limits. The Center serves as a "farmer incubator" by providing land

access and shared equipment. Eleven farms in addition to Half Pint lease land there too, ranging in size from 2 to 40 acres.

SPECIALIZED PRODUCTION

Early on the Weltons realized the need to specialize, to distinguish their farm from others. Now they are known by farmer's market customers as the 'baby vegetable' people. They are also known for their unusual colors and varieties, high quality, and gorgeous farmer's market display.

Though they were tempted to lease more land and expand into livestock enterprises, they decided it was more important to keep getting better at what they already do. They started focusing on fewer varieties in order to grow better produce, and set an annual goal to be better growers. Last season, they followed tips gleaned from organic gardening publications, and took the time to do the mulching, spot fertilization, and trellising that many gardeners do. Mara says, "In 2006, we farmed like gardeners. Everything was beautiful!"



The Weltons specialize in unusual colors and varieties of vegetables, like these heirloom tomatoes and root crops.

Photos by Mara Welton



One-sixth of their total revenue came from microgreens, a multi-colored mix of about a dozen varieties of greens grown under shelter and harvested at the first true leaf stage. These retail for \$24/lb and wholesale for \$17/lb. The remainder of Half Pint's bestseller list for 2006 was filled out by tomatoes, potted plants, carrots, head lettuce, salad, squash blossoms, beans, potatoes, and radishes.

Which brings us to a personal rule to which Mara and Spencer adhere strictly: Don't be afraid to axe a crop if it's not earning enough money! They dropped winter squash, melons, most herbs, broccoli raab, peas, cabbage, most flowers, and okra for this reason.

SAVVY MARKETING

Three markets receive most of the fruits of

Mara and Spencer's labor. They sell to high end chefs in Burlington, a weekly farmer's market, and a natural foods store. They have put a lot of effort into developing these markets. Spencer figures that they only spend about 20% of their time actually growing the crops; 80% of the time they're harvesting for market or actually selling their produce.

The Weltons have carefully cultivated their chef contacts, and continue nurturing these relationships every year. In the spring the farmers send out a letter with a list of produce they plan to grow, and ask the chefs if they have any requests. Twice a week Mara calls each chef to check in and get orders. Several times a season she and Spencer patronize the fancy restaurants where they sell their products. Mara says that although they end up spending a lot on dinner, they usually make it up in increased orders from the appreciative chef over the coming weeks.

The Weltons' personable natures are their own value-added. They will do absolutely anything for their customers. One elderly woman brought them Hungarian pepper seeds from his home country, and asked the farmers to plant them. They did, and then brought the fruits of those plants to market to sell. In doing so, they earned a customer for life.



Customers are drawn to Half-Pint Farm's gorgeous farmer's market displays.

Photo by Nancy Johnson



Photo by Mara Welton

CLEAR GOALS AND THOROUGH PLANNING

The Weltons are such fastidious planners that they could have had successful careers as accountants. Lucky for their customers, they decided to grow good food instead. They credit their goal-setting, tracking, and follow-through for their success.

Twice a year, they hold "Half Pint Farm Conferences," formal full-day events to which Mara and Spencer are the sole attendees. They draw up structured schedules and agendas and distribute reading packets to each other in advance. At their winter conference, they establish a financial goal for the season, which has grown substantially each year. Spencer then uses a cash flow sheet to enter income estimates for each week of the season, tweaking it until the numbers add up to their goal.

This goal literally drives the farmers' day-to-day activity throughout the growing season: they create field maps, seeding orders, a planting plan, and a marketing strategy that are all keyed into this magic number. From these, they derive precise seeding schedules and task sheets that divide up the week's chores, making each day less stressful because the Weltons know exactly what they need to accomplish. At the farmer's market each week, they know precisely how much they need to sell in order to reach their target, and they do a little celebration dance when they hit it. They are so organized, it's no wonder they've exceeded their financial goal every year so far.



Tomatoes and peppers thrive in an unheated plastic hoop house.

Photo by Mara Welton

TIGHT RECORDKEEPING

To hear the Weltons describe their operation, it seems they have a spreadsheet for everything: weather, hours worked, cash flow, and crop yields, especially for those lucrative microgreens. They love to track everything, though they admit that it's a challenge to actually do all this paperwork under the duress of the growing season. To make it as easy as possible, most of the spreadsheets live in a field binder that is always nearby and is also used to track daily things of note.

All the planning in the world can't protect you from the vagaries of farming, but it can help prepare you for whatever disasters may strike. Like all farmers, Spencer and Mara have weathered a few disasters, including dysfunctional irrigation systems (during the hottest part of the season), and this spring, flooding that submerged their fields under 3 feet of water. "Having the field map totally figured out before we planted our first seeds was absolutely critical to our success this year," Mara said. "When the fields flooded, we could take our plan and modify it, rather than having to start from scratch."

CREATIVE FINANCING

The Weltons began their business with \$0 of their own money and the goal of making enough farm profit to put a down payment on a house in Burlington. Five years later they've bought that house, with a down payment they earned by farming. How did they do it?

They got started by cashing one of those promotional checks that credit card companies periodically send out. This provided them with a \$3,500 loan that was interest-free for the first year. This method of farm financing is not generally recommended—credit card debt can quickly swallow the unwary consumer—but the Weltons knew as long as they could pay it back within the year, they were in good shape. They did this easily and just kept on growing from there.

While Mara and Spencer's model wouldn't work for everyone, it's an inspiring example of how hard work and a whole lot of planning can be more important than having land or money to make a farm dream come true.

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