

MAKING A LIVING

FROM A 1.5-ACRE MARKET GARDEN

By Ann Slater

The fields around my farm in southwestern Ontario have rows and rows, and acres and acres, of corn and soybeans.

This is a prime agricultural area where land sells for \$7,000 to \$8,000 per acre but there is little history of vegetable growing. Among these large cash crop fields, there are a few remaining dairy farms with hayfields and cows on pasture. My brother has one of these “islands” of hay, pasture, small grains, silage corn and organic dairy cows. My one and a half acre certified organic market garden farm is hidden away in the corner of his farm; we have two farm operations on one farm. I have been market gardening for over 20 years. I started by expanding the family garden and selling the extra produce on the street corner in St. Marys. I slowly acquired growing and marketing skills and gradually built income from the farm. From the beginning, I knew that if I wanted to make a living as a farmer I needed to find a way to get a retail price for my produce, and therefore, needed to rely on direct marketing.

Small-scale market gardens can help meet the demand for fresh local produce at producer-only farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, local health food stores, on-farm markets and restaurants. Along with providing fresh produce, they can provide opportunities for young and new farmers to make a start in farming. My op-

eration is on my family’s farm, but I know of other organic cash crop and livestock farmers who would be willing to provide a few acres of land to market gardeners.

Income

Can a small-scale market garden provide a reasonable second or only income to the farmer or farm family? In 2004, my gross farm income was \$28,000

and in addition there was fresh, stored and preserved produce for myself and six other family members. I sell almost all of my produce within ten kilometers of my farm, in the town of St. Marys. Of the \$28,000, \$13,500 came from selling at farmers’ markets and \$11,700 came from my 37-member CSA program.



Ann Slater with her display at the St. Mary’s Farmers’ Market.

Expenses

My regular expenses came to about \$8,000. These expenses include \$2,200 for seeds, \$2,100 for farm-related pick-up truck expenses like gas, insurance and maintenance, \$300 for plastic bags, \$300 for market fees, \$300 for potting mix, \$200 for certification, \$200 for land rent, \$200 for farm and liability insurance, \$200 for row cover, and miscellaneous smaller expenses like organic mulch, telephone,



Lettuce and other salad greens brought in more revenue than any other crop.

magazine subscriptions and rototiller maintenance. Most years there are also major purchases of new equipment or buildings to help keep the farm running smoothly and efficiently.

Seeds

Although I grow all of my own transplants and save my own seed potatoes, I do not feel I can make the time to save my own vegetable seeds. My seeds are purchased from several seed companies in Ontario, PEI, BC and the US. I like to support small, independent Ontario and Canadian seed businesses but I rely on Johnny's Seeds and Vesey's Seeds for most of my seed purchases because over the years they have reliably provided good quality seeds in market garden quantities. Whenever possible I purchase organic seeds to meet certification standards and to support the growth of organic farming.

Vegetable variety

For my direct marketing success, I rely on having a wide variety of vegetables for as long a season as possible. I grow around 30 different types of vegetables and in some cases, like tomatoes, I grow up to 30 different varieties. The St. Marys Farmers' Market is open Saturday mornings from mid-May until the end of October and I have produce there every

week. My CSA program runs weekly from the beginning of May until the end of November.

Why grow so many types of vegetables?

- To have a wide selection for customers at the farmers' market. This can bring customers to my stall and can encourage one-stop shopping for produce;
- To not put all my eggs in one basket – when one crop fails another will do well;
- To spread the workload and cash flow over a longer season;
- To give CSA members the opportunity to try new vegetables;
- To provide biodiversity in the garden;
- To build a complex crop rotation system;
- To keep challenging myself.

Challenges to growing so many types of vegetables:

- Too much selection for customers at the market – if customers find it too difficult to decide what to buy, they might not buy anything;
- Getting everything displayed at market so that customers can find what they are looking for;
- Learning how to grow, harvest and market each type of vegetable;
- Juggling too many balls at one time – remembering to plant, weed and harvest each type of vegetable at the appropriate time;
- Designing a crop rotation: crop rotations become more complicated with more types of crops;

Where did the \$28,000 come from in 2004?

Top Ten Vegetables and Others

Lettuce and mixed salad greens	~\$4800
Tomatoes	~ \$4000
Potatoes	~ \$2300
Spinach	~ \$2000
Beans	~ \$2000
Peas (sugar snap, snow and shell)	~ \$1500
Carrots	~ \$1400
Summer squash (green, yellow, pattypan)	~ \$1400
Beets	~ \$1300
Winter squash	~ \$1100
Others	~ \$6200

- Identifying and keeping track of which vegetables bring in money;
- Adapting to different growth habits that make mechanized cultivation and planting difficult.

Double cropping

With limited market garden space, I rely on double cropping to increase my planting area and extend my season. Lettuce, spinach, salad greens, bok choy and radishes are all easily double- or triple-cropped. Carrots, summer squash, cucumbers and late cole crops can be planted following early leaf or pea crops. After early potatoes are harvested, late leaf crops can be planted. Likewise, beans and beets can follow early lettuce.

Double and triple cropping can increase the production and income from a small-scale market garden but it requires careful thought and planning. Some points to consider are:

- Fertility levels – ensuring that there are enough nutrients for a second or third crop;

Each Friday I need to harvest, wash, trim and pre-pack enough produce to fill my pockets with cash on Saturday morning.

- Crop rotation – making sure second and third crops are not related to the first crop;
- Moisture levels and weed pressure after the first crop – ensuring that the following crops won't suffer from moisture stress or extreme weed pressure;



Beets can follow early lettuce in a double-cropping plan and give great value for the space used.

- Length of the growing season – deciding if you want to garden as long as possible or would rather have a shorter garden season;
- Plant residues from the first crop – planning so that the crop residue doesn't interfere with the seedbed for the next crop;
- Time – finding time in the middle of harvest season to plant and weed new crops.

Return for garden space

If making money is one of the reasons you are market gardening, you need to consider how much financial return you get from the garden space a crop occupies. For example, sweet corn takes a lot of space for little return per square meter—it is not a logical crop for a small-scale market garden. It also does not allow for double cropping as it needs to be planted before an early crop can be harvested and usually is not harvested until later in the summer.

Peas, especially shell peas, do not bring a high return for the area they use but can be worked into a double cropping situation. The main reason I continue to grow shell peas is to provide a treat, and a thank you, to my customers early in the season.

I am going to stop growing most cole crops because they take more space than is appropriate for the income they return. However, I will continue growing Brussels sprouts and kale because they bring in cash late in the season.

The crops that give me the best return for the area they use in the garden are lettuce, salad greens, beets, beans and spinach. If you want to grow crops that take a lot of space, you can raise prices to get a better return for the space used.

Return for time

To do well at a farmers' market or to keep CSA members, I need to

be able to get fresh, top-quality produce to people's kitchens. I do this by picking almost everything the day before, or the day of delivery. Each Friday I need to harvest, wash, trim and pre-pack enough produce to fill my pockets with cash on Saturday morning. The amount of money I bring home is directly related to the freshness and quality of my produce, the right product mix, having the types of vegetables people want to buy, having fair prices, and being able to get enough produce ready for market.

I find it useful to think about the return I will get for, say a bushel of beans at market, compared to the time I put in picking and preparing those beans to take to market. A good starting point is to expect \$30 to \$40 for each hour you put into harvesting and getting produce ready for market.

If it took you an hour to pick a bushel of beans, you should get \$30 or \$40 for those beans at market. If you are not getting this minimum return, you can raise the price or sell in smaller quantities (you can usually get more by selling in quart boxes than in bushel baskets). Or you can streamline your harvest and preparation operation, or use the garden space for something more economically viable. As you gain experience, you should be able to pick and pre-

pare produce for market more efficiently and should be able to bring in more than \$30 to \$40 per hour of harvest and preparation.

Making a living

My crop decisions, marketing decisions and planting decisions are based on what will give me the best return, and I ask for a fair-to-me price for the top-quality, fresh produce I supply to my customers. While I take my responsibility to grow food for my local community seriously, I also take my need to make a living seriously.

Ann Slater has been operating a 1.5-acre market garden in Oxford County in southwestern Ontario for over 20 years.

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