



SUCCESSFUL FARMERS' MARKET FARMERS

IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

**BUSINESS MANAGEMENT LESSONS
FROM 15 CASE STUDIES**

Acknowledgements

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Cover: Ice Cap Organics

A woman with a braid, wearing an orange baseball cap and a grey hoodie, is sorting red cherry tomatoes into a white plastic crate. She is surrounded by numerous blue plastic crates, some of which have green labels. The background is slightly blurred, focusing on the woman and her work.

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Introduction

This guide was developed to support the next generation of farmers in British Columbia by showcasing successful farm operations and highlighting key best business practices that have contributed to their success. It is hoped that these examples of best business practices will help farms grow and access consumer markets. Additionally, by assisting farmers this guide supports BC farmers' markets to attract new, successful vendors to their markets.

The stories shared in this guide aim to provide valuable and scale-appropriate business management information for current and future farmers' market farmers. This guide will also help consumers to better understand the motivations, intentions, and challenges that farmers' market farmers face, and their unique paths to success. Such understanding will lead to stronger support for the local food system and the farmers' market sector.

What's in the Guide?

This guide is organized into 15 farm business case studies that highlight tried and true business management practices of farmers' market farmers. We refer to these as **best business practices**.

The farms and farmers featured in this guide are diverse in terms of their land tenure, scale of production, product diversity, and marketing strategies. They are located in regions across British Columbia where consumer markets vary in size, patronage, and opportunity. The farmers are at various stages in their careers—some are just starting out, some are in mid-career transition, and some are moving toward succession and reflecting on their experiences. The common thread is that all of these farms and farmers grow and sell wholesome, nutritious foods directly to consumers through a variety of marketing channels, including farmers' markets.

The farmers' market farmers featured here are thriving and contributing to vibrant local food communities in the province. They were identified by farmers' market managers and their peers for their dedication and success in various aspects of farm business management and direct marketing.

Best Business Practices: 4 Key Areas of Performance



1. Financial Management

Good financial management is key to the success of any business, and farm businesses are no exception. This involves skill building and utilizing the necessary methods and tools to efficiently and effectively manage financial activities, farm operations, and sales operations. Farmers' market farmers adapt tools and practices that are suited to their scale and production diversity. Good financial management allows farmers to accurately assess their farm business operation to make better, more-informed business decisions.

2. Human Resources

Labour, one of the most challenging resources to manage, involves developing unique strategies for recruiting employees, managing workers, and valuing the time invested in the business by the owner-operators. Farmers' market farmers rely on a variety of employment models that often shift with the changing needs of the farm throughout the season and from year to year.

What Are Best Business Practices?

Best business practices (BBPs) refer to practices or techniques that through experience and experimentation have proven to be instrumental in achieving success in direct-market farm business operations. These BBPs maximize available resources, leverage connections, and highlight innovation. The BBPs featured in this guide highlight four key considerations for success: financial management, human resources, marketing, and farm operations.



3. Marketing

Direct marketing to consumers, in all its dimensions, involves consideration of the market, branding, direct communications, and sales. Farmers' market farmers must choose which marketing channels to sell through, decide how to reach new customers and create loyalty, and learn how to promote their farm and its products. Building relationships with customers through direct marketing also contributes to building supportive communities and strong local economies.

4. Farm Operations

Farm operations refer to the day-to-day decisions made on the farm, including those about production, agro-ecosystem management, environmental stewardship, and capital investments. It also includes short- and long-term goal setting, strategic farm planning, and succession or transition planning. Farmers' market farmers operate diverse and dynamic businesses and carefully consider operational approaches that suit their management style, farm, and farming objectives.

Crophthorne Farm (Ladner)



Farmers: Lydia Ryall

Region: Greater Vancouver

Farm size: 17 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, eggs, cut flowers

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (70%), community supported agriculture (CSA) (15%), farm store (10%), restaurants (5%)

Farmers' markets: Main Street (Vancouver), West End (Vancouver), Kitsilano (Vancouver), Ladner

photos by Crophthorne Farm

Crophthorne Farm is located on Westham Island in the Fraser River delta, near the Salish Sea. Farming in this unique location offers good growing conditions for organic vegetables and easy access to major markets in Vancouver. Lydia Ryall farms alongside her parents and sister who each operate distinct farm enterprises on a shared 50-acre parcel. Lydia and her family make collective decisions about how to rotate crops and they share equipment.

Lydia grew up on the family farm and studied agriculture at university where she discovered a keen interest in direct-market farming. This model would allow

her to engage and connect with the people who would be eating the food she produced. Her family's background in farming also helped her understand that financial viability is an essential and achievable part of farming.

As Crophthorne Farm continues to grow and evolve, its production scale and diversity have become major areas of focus for Lydia and her farming team. Recently, Lydia and her husband welcomed their first daughter into the world and have recognized the importance of balancing business growth with personal life and relationships.

"We are growing vegetables here, but that is not the only thing the land is being used for—there is all this biodiversity and magic happening under the soil and that is important for us to maintain and promote."

—Lydia Ryall





"For us, it's about getting to a place where you can grow and change with ease, have positive relationships with your staff, and live your personal values."

—Lydia Ryall

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Use farmers' markets as the entry point to direct-market sales and a gateway to other direct marketing channels

Farmers' markets are a critical point for accessing the consumer market, especially for new farmers, and can open up a variety of other direct-to-consumer marketing channels.

When she first began farming, Lydia Ryall sold produce grown at **Cropthorpe Farm** predominantly at farmers' markets because they offered low-barrier entry into the direct-to-consumer market. This also provided exposure that allowed her to expand with a CSA program and then restaurant sales. "For new farmers, it's good to be able to get that top dollar for your products, and to take that money home at the end of the market day," explains Lydia. "Farmers' markets were the best and easiest way for us to do this when we started out."

Tyler McNaughton and Sacha Bentall of **Cutter Ranch** started out delivering directly from their Kootenay region farm to customers as far away as Vancouver. In a marketing shift, attending farmers' markets became a way for them to tap into a growing local food sector and gain exposure closer to home. "When we started selling at farmers' markets, that is when the floodgates really opened," says Tyler. "We now had a direct point of contact with customers and were able to get the exposure and confidence we needed to consider approaching other markets."

Shirlene Coté of **Earth Apple Farm** started small, distributing locally through a CSA program. Beginning to sell at farmers' markets in Vancouver was a next step for her business, helping to build a supportive customer base and the confidence to branch out with new marketing channels. "My regular appearance at the farmers' market has done wonders," says Shirlene. "There are people who come and buy from me every week and that has become the economic foundation of the business."

Zaklan Heritage Farm (Surrey)



Farmers: Doug Zaklan and Gemma McNeill

Region: Greater Vancouver

Farm size: 1.5 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, eggs, cut flowers

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (24%), CSA (21%), farm store (12%), restaurants (39%), other (4%)

Farmers' markets: New West (New Westminster)

photos by Zaklan Heritage Farm

Zaklan Heritage Farm is a relatively new enterprise operated by partners Doug Zaklan and Gemma McNeill. In 2012, after completing a farm practicum program, Doug began growing vegetables in Surrey on an eighth of an acre of family-owned land. Gemma, who had four years of farming experience at that same small-scale program, joined Doug at Zaklan Heritage Farm in 2013.

Together, they now cultivate a wide variety of vegetables, selling direct to consumers through local channels. Their approach to business growth has been a steady focus on building local markets and improving production efficiency. Strategic investments in a new barn, farm

office space, and a greenhouse have all contributed to these goals and to the growth of Zaklan Heritage Farm.

Gemma and Doug have been particularly focused on connecting to a supportive local customer base. Integrating effective use of social media has changed how they promote Zaklan Heritage Farm and how they interact with their customers. Through social media they connect directly with people who buy their food and share day-to-day farm happenings through an ongoing narrative.

Selling direct to local restaurants is a new endeavor that also requires creative self-promotion. Opportunities for cross promotion are available, and they mention and connect with restaurants supporting local farmers through Instagram and other social media channels. This has helped to raise the profile of their farm and connect them to the vibrant local food scene in Vancouver. On top of promoting their own farm, they are promoting other local food-sector businesses.

"In terms of our own capacity to build new markets, adding a new sales channel each year seemed like a smart way to grow."

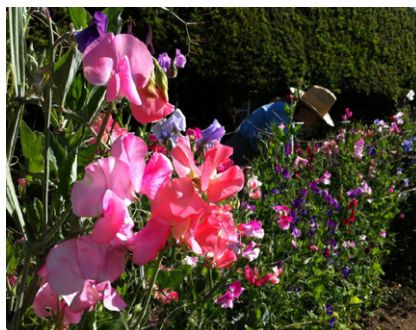
—Gemma McNeill

Gemma and Doug have built a successful business farming together but are realistic about the precariousness of farming on land that they do not own. Despite not knowing where their farming future might take them, they have invested in their local market, in on-farm infrastructure, and in developing their own skill and capacity as farmers.



"Developing our customer base has been a huge piece of work over the last four years. We are honing our crop planning skills so we are growing things that people actually want and figuring out how to market ourselves."

—Gemma McNeill



Best Business Practice: Marketing

Craft an engaging story about the farm

Marketing can be as much about telling a compelling story that customers can connect with as it is about the products being sold. This is a strategy that can help farmers to build understanding, appreciation, and customer loyalty.

Gemma McNeill and Doug Zaklan have been committed to building markets in their local community as they grow **Zaklan Heritage Farm** and have focused on telling their unique farming story. "We are young farmers, growing on family land, and doing something unique in the suburbs... So that's the story we tell," says Gemma.

Arzeena Hamir of **Amara Farm** recognizes the opportunity for marketing cooperative Merville Organics Growers' Cooperative to stand out in the region and capitalize on a unique story. "We always communicate about ourselves as a cooperative, which is something unique," explains Arzeena. "We want people to know that when they support us, they are supporting all these small farms that are working together."

Shirlene Coté of **Earth Apple Farm** expresses an image of herself and her farm that customers have really responded to. "I have people who have been shopping with me since the very beginning," Shirlene says. "They have seen the farm grow and the stand grow and they shop with me because they can see the care and effort I put into growing my produce and creating my market displays."

Taves Family Farm (Abbotsford)



Farmers: Loren Taves

Region: Fraser Valley

Farm size: 65 acres

Farm products: Apples, apple cider, pumpkins, greenhouse vegetables, berries, poultry

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (10%), wholesale (50%), farm store (40%)

Farmers' markets: Abbotsford, Trout Lake (Vancouver), Kitsilano (Vancouver), Riley Park (Vancouver), Mount Pleasant (Vancouver)

photos by Taves Family Farm

Loren Taves started farming when he was 17 years old and has been working in the sector in some capacity ever since. Today he is owner and manager of Taves Family Farm, working alongside his wife, Corrine, and a growing staff. Their business is made up of several enterprises with direct-market sales, wholesale, and agri-tourism components. Each of the Taves Family Farm enterprises requires an appropriate, tailored approach to production, human resources, marketing, and business management.

"Agri-tourism and direct-farm marketing is not an instant success. You need to build the experience and learn what your customers want, which takes time."

—Loren Taves

Loren and Corrine began to build their agri-tourism enterprise by doing extensive research and touring more-established farms on the east coast of the United States. They wanted to learn about the operations and apply what they learned to a new initiative on the West Coast. Because the agri-tourism sector is seasonal and unpredictable, they knew it would be necessary to plan and carefully execute this initiative while maintaining a balance with their other enterprises.

Increasing capacity for on-farm processing at Taves Family Farm has been a key strategy in adding value to their products. This has allowed the farm to extend their production and marketing season and create opportunities for year-round employment. Taves Family Farm integrates new visitor experiences every year and is now bottling apple cider for retail sales throughout the Lower Mainland as well as doing custom apple pressing for local breweries and distilleries.



"The poultry operation is consistent, year-round income. The greenhouse is more precarious, with more variables to consider. And the Apple Barn is mostly seasonal and requires a lot of management on my part. But, together the enterprises work."

—Loren Taves



Best Business Practice: Farm Operations

Increase value-added farm products and services to access unique growth and revenue generation opportunities

Adding value to farm products is a strategy used by direct-market farmers to access niche markets, capture more value from their farm's products, or diversify their operations.

The primary value-added enterprise at **Taves Family Farm** is the agri-tourism operation known as the Apple Barn. The Apple Barn is open from August to October and offers visitors an opportunity to experience agriculture in the Fraser Valley. Visitors can buy pumpkins, apples, apple cider, and other processed products through the farm store, participate in children's activities, and take hay wagon rides around the farm property.

As former supply-managed poultry producers, Lisa and Hans Dueck of **Sterling Springs Chicken** wanted more control over the processing, marketing, and selling of their products. Scaling down and investing in processing infrastructure on their farm opened up new opportunities in direct-to-consumer and restaurant sales. The ability to capture the economic value inherent in those value chain elements has changed their focus and boosted the business.

Earth Apple Farm (Abbotsford)



Farmers: Shirlene Coté

Region: Fraser Valley

Farm size: 6 acres

Farm products: Vegetables

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (43%), CSA (47%), restaurants (10%)

Farmers' markets: : Trout Lake (Vancouver), Nat Bailey (Vancouver)

photos by Earth Apple Farm

For nearly six seasons, Shirlene Coté has built Earth Apple Farm by farming on tenuous parcels of land throughout Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley. First farming on rented land, then as an incubator farmer, Shirlene has now found a more permanent home for Earth Apple Farm. She recently became a member of Glen Valley Organic Co-op in Abbotsford where she farms six acres on the cooperatively owned and managed agricultural land holding.

Not unlike her search for land, Shirlene's farming journey has been full of experimentation and learning, beginning when she started farming "off the side of her desk" while working full-time as

a university researcher. Having never farmed before, and with a background in ecology, education, and research, much of her time in the early years was spent learning about and developing her own capacity and skill as a farmer.

Shirlene remained motivated by the goal of developing a farming system at an appropriate scale and level of diversity that would be sustainable from both business and production perspectives. Today Shirlene credits her success to personal determination and the strategic decisions she made to seek out support through mentorship and work toward a balance in production diversity.

"My marketing strategy is really about being authentic and showing that I care. This happens through my displays at the market, and through the logo I created. People see that a lot of love goes into this food."

—Shirlene Coté





"Because of how I started, I sort of missed out on the internship opportunity, but I see how the opportunity to learn and take risks on someone else's land could have been really valuable."

—Shirlene Coté

Best Business Practice: Human Resources

Seek mentors and mentorship to gain knowledge and build skills in business management and production

Through formal mentorships, new farmers can connect with more experienced producers who have knowledge to share about critical business and production practices. Mentorship and mentoring can also be a way to strengthen the farming community and increase the viability of new farm businesses.

As sole proprietor of **Earth Apple Farm**, Shirlene Coté found it challenging, when starting out, to make connections in the farming community. Connecting with an experienced farm mentor through a formal mentorship facilitation program marked a significant turning point in her farming career. She was encouraged to be more focused in her farm planning and gained confidence as a producer by having a trusted peer to share ideas and farm plans with.

Gemma McNeill and Doug Zalkan of **Zaklan Heritage Farm** are young farmers who benefited from connecting with an experienced mentor through a formal mentorship program. They also maintain relationships with farmers they met while in a training program, creating an active network of experienced farmers in the region that they can call on for support.

Alisha Zayac of **Ice Cap Organics** maintained a relationship with the farmers that mentored her long after completing her apprenticeship. This ongoing relationship has proven to be a great support in the farm's startup years. "Seeing the success of more established farmers showed us how we could be successful," says Alisha's partner Delaney. "Having an example of good business practices and people who are 100% committed to sustainable production gave us inspiration to start our own business."

Ice Cap Organics (Pemberton)



Farmers: Alisha and Delaney Zayac

Region: Sea to Sky

Farm size: 5 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, eggs, chicken, cut flowers

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (80%), CSA (20%)

Farmers' markets: West End (Vancouver), Kitsilano (Vancouver), Nat Bailey (Vancouver)

photo by Ice Cap Organics

Alisha and Delaney Zayac's interest in farming was solidified after Alisha completed a farming apprenticeship on an established farm in Pemberton. With this experience as reference, they jumped in with both feet, borrowing capital to buy land and thereby securing the foundation to launch their own farm business. They invested in a five-acre farm property in

Pemberton and became certified organic in 2009.

As new farmers, Alisha and Delaney knew that they would have to focus on skill building and on carefully tracking their activities in order to be productive and profitable. They have tapped into various networks for production, marketing, and

Best Business Practice: Human Resources

Establish or connect with networks that reflect your business, production, and personal values

Farming can be an isolating pursuit but also one that benefits from the sharing of knowledge and experiences among producers. Networks for sharing production and business-related information exist within the farming community and can be a critical resource for supporting both new and experienced farmers.

Alisha and Delaney Zayac of **Ice Cap Organics** connected with the right networks by understanding what skills they needed to be successful. "Through our [organic] certifier we have the opportunity to engage with experts who have a lot of knowledge about organic production and this has been a great learning opportunity for us," explains Delaney.

Lydia Ryall of **Crothorne Farm** and others have found that farmers' markets offer a great venue to connect with other farmers working at a similar scale and experiencing similar challenges. "We talk about what common things we are dealing with ... new techniques for dealing with pests, for example," says Lydia. "We also just talk about our lives as farmers. We all have a lot in common."

personal support, which includes a strong farming community in Pemberton.

As their farm business grows, Alisha and Delaney continue to experiment with various labour models, including casual short-term volunteers, seasonal interns, and paid staff. This has been a significant area of learning and improvement for their business. As their confidence as farmers and business managers has grown, they have shifted to having paid staff, who return to the farm year after year. However, connecting to the local labour market where they compete with other farming operations and a major

tourism industry in the region remains a challenge.

With access to a reliable consumer base through the farmers' market network in Vancouver, and the security of owning their land, the couple is now focused on becoming better farmers and employers.

"Our focus is on growing in harmony with the ecosystem and trying to have a positive impact on our community, through our business."

—Delaney Zayac

Best Business Practice: Human Resources

Create employment opportunities that attract the right kind of employees

Finding qualified and reliable labour is a challenge for many farmers. Creating flexible and rewarding employment opportunities is important for finding and retaining employees who fit with the farming operation and share its values. Recruiting and training new staff each year is costly in time, money, and energy, making employee retention a key to business success.

Alisha and Delaney Zayac have created flexible part-time, paid positions at **Ice Cap Organics** for local people who may have other obligations but can come to the farm two to three days a week. "We want to have staff who are dedicated and who fit in well," says Delaney. "We also want to be able to pay people a good wage so we are finding strategies that allow us to do that."

WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) is a model for volunteer labour that gets mixed reviews. Arzeena Hamir of **Amara Farm** makes strategic use of the program by only accepting WWOOF volunteers in the shoulder season when securing local farming help can be more challenging. "This is a way for us to be sure that people coming to the farm have a genuine interest in farming and learning and aren't just interested in a vacation," explains Arzeena.

Now moving more toward having paid employees, Robert Hettler of **Pilgrims' Produce** empowers staff by encouraging them to innovate and contribute to the farm. "I have found that if I provide good training and am open to new ideas, people working here are empowered enough to put their own stamp on things, which improves the farm," says Robert.

Both **Croptorne Farm** and **Taves Family Farm** use the Canadian Temporary Foreign Workers program as a way of accessing skilled and reliable agricultural labour. They are required to provide housing and support for foreign workers and describe the experience as positive.

Sterling Springs Chicken (Falkland)



Farmers: Lisa and Hans Dueck

Region: Thompson Okanagan

Farm size: 140 acres

Farm products: Chicken (whole, cuts, and processed products including sausages, cold cuts, and pepperoni)

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (65%), restaurants (35%)

Farmers' markets: Kelowna, Vernon, Penticton

photos by Sterling Springs Chicken

Hans Dueck is a third-generation farmer with over twenty-six years of experience. He and his wife, Lisa, began farming together with a conventional 75,000-bird commodity broiler chicken operation. At this scale, Hans and Lisa felt disconnected from the whole of the value chain when selling exclusively through the poultry marketing board, which is a federal agency that sets mandatory production

targets and pricing structures for poultry commodities. This led them to look for alternative business opportunities so they could exercise greater autonomy over production, processing, and marketing of their products.

In 2011, the Dueck family sold their commodity operation and transitioned to a smaller enterprise, raising a few

Best Business Practice: Farm Operations

Make strategic and direct investments to take advantage of niche markets

With increasing competition in the marketing of local food, successful farmers identify and capitalize on gaps in local food supply through direct investments in production, processing, or marketing.

The loss of small-scale processing facilities in many regions has left a gap in the direct-to-consumer supply of locally grown and processed meat products. Seeing this as a business opportunity, Lisa and Hans Dueck of **Sterling Springs Chicken** invested in processing infrastructure that matched the scale of their new farm and filled a niche market for processed chicken products. "It's all about ... being able to respond to the market. We now have the control to adjust production and processing," explains Hans.

Early in the development of **Pilgrims' Produce**, Robert Hettler built greenhouse infrastructure for growing warm-season crops, which also allowed him to extend the spring season so he could bring crops to market early—capturing market and revenue. "We were coming to the farmers' market with carrots and beets before any other farmer in the Valley, says Robert. "People really like to see that, especially early in the spring, so this gives us a marketing edge."

hundred chickens at a time on their new farm. The couple had significant experience in commercial poultry production but faced a learning curve adjusting to a new business model that integrated hatching, raising, processing, and marketing.

For Lisa and Hans, an important part of starting a new business was adjusting how they thought about production scale and marketing. In addition to new production infrastructure, they invested significant capital in on-farm licensed slaughtering and processing facilities and a sausage kitchen. This scale of operation is unique and has given Sterling Springs Chicken a competitive edge in terms of being able to offer value-added products that are customized to meet the demands of their local market. By shifting their business model to have control over post-production processing and sales, they have become increasingly nimble in the market.

Lisa and Hans are actively building connections with producers, retailers,

and chefs in their region, and as a result the Sterling Springs Chicken brand is becoming well known. The couple recognized the growing opportunity and demand for local food in the Okanagan Valley and have strategically capitalized on the momentum of the movement.



“Before, we were a small cog in the wheel.... Now it’s about the health and welfare of the birds and the quality of the end product.”

—Lisa Dueck

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Capitalize on the momentum of the local food scene in the community or region

A growing interest in local, sustainably produced food is supporting farmers in communities across the province. Farmers’ markets, local food events, and interest from retailers and restaurants are all opportunities that can be capitalized on for marketing farm products. When consumers purchase foods directly from farmers, much more of their food dollars go to support farming in their communities.

In their new role as direct-to-market farmers, Hans and Lisa have built their **Sterling Springs Chicken** brand at farmers’ markets and by building relationships with chefs. The latter has been particularly rewarding. “We have some of the best chefs in the country in our backyard,” explains Lisa. “We are developing relationships and learning about the sector and in turn we are teaching them about the production side.”

By developing an agri-tourism experience on their farm, Clarke and Nancy Gourlay’s **Little Qualicum Cheeseworks** and associated enterprises benefit from a growing interest in local food and increasing tourism in the region. Clarke and Nancy have capitalized on these developments by enhancing the experiences of those visiting the farm—by integrating the cheese plant and retail store, a café, and a new winery.

Pilgrims' Produce (Armstrong)



Farmers: Robert Hettler

Region: Thompson Okanagan

Farm size: 13 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, tree fruit, berries, nuts

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (75%), wholesale (5-10%), CSA (5-10%), U-pick (5-10%)

Farmers' markets: Vernon, Armstrong

photos by Pilgrims' Produce

Robert has been farming in the Okanagan Valley for twenty-six seasons and has experienced the growth of the direct marketing sector in this region. Coming from a farming background in Alberta, Robert grew up to know that he wanted to pursue a farming model that allowed him to focus on ecological production, producing food rather than commodities, and selling directly to consumers.

Confined by housing developments and small acreages around the property, Robert's farm has not increased in size since he moved there with his family in 1991. He has focused on increasing crop

diversity as a strategy for expanding the business and at the same time mitigating risk.

Recognizing labour as a significant input and cost of production on his farm, Robert has made strategic investments in scale-appropriate equipment to limit labour costs and increase farm returns. Investing in mechanized bean and carrot harvesters have significantly increased efficiency by reducing the labour requirements for high-value crops. To Robert, making investments that dramatically reduce costs and increase the return on certain crops is a good decision.

"Right now, my farm is highly diversified. Vegetables, berries ... I have five or six varieties of fruit trees and about ten varieties of nut trees."

—Robert Hettler





"We are involved in many different aspects of community life here. By being at the farmers' market each week we get to know people and they get to know us. These relationships are very strong."

—Robert Hettler

Best Business Practice: Farm Operations

Make strategic investments to reduce production costs for increased enterprise profitability

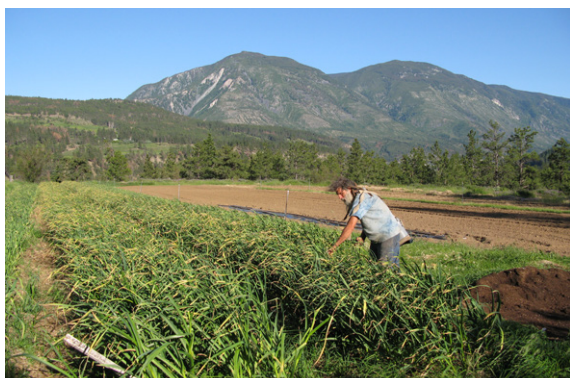
Greater crop production efficiency can be achieved by a variety of means, such as using specialized tools, improving systems, and introducing mechanization. Opportunities can usually be identified by pin-pointing which parts of a farm operation require high inputs of resources and money. Investment in appropriate technology or any production improvement strategy should always be based on accurate cost-benefit analysis.

Scale-appropriate mechanized bean and carrot harvesters have significantly increased production efficiency for **Pilgrims' Produce** by reducing labour costs for these high-value crops. "On a farm our size, you might have three people working for a day to harvest two thousand pounds of carrots. With a harvester, the same number of people can harvest five thousand or six thousand pounds in an hour," explains Robert.

Chris Kimber and Michael Stevens of **3 Crows Farm** significantly increased harvesting efficiency for their high-value lettuce crops by investing in a scale-appropriate harvesting tool, which attaches to a regular hand-held power drill. "This was a game changer for us. We have cut harvesting time by more than one third and now we are thinking about what other crops we could grow and harvest in this way," says Chris.

Gemma McNeill and Doug Zaklan of **Zaklan Heritage Farm** expanded on their existing barn to create a new processing area, which increased their post-production efficiency and matched the scale of their growing farm. "We did some cost-benefit analysis before building, but we have never been afraid to spend money on what we knew we needed to make things flow better or make our lives easier," says Gemma.

Stein Mountain Farm (Lytton)



Farmers: Erin and Ron Coghlan

Region: Thompson Okanagan

Farm size: 7 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, tree fruits

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (98%), wholesale (2%)

Farmers' markets: Trout Lake (Vancouver), Kitsilano (Vancouver), Burnaby, Ambleside (North Vancouver)

photos by Stein Mountain Farm

Stein Mountain Farm can be found after winding up a mountain road from the small interior town of Lytton. Erin and Ron Coghlan moved to this remote farmstead over thirty years ago with the intention of becoming homesteaders, living off the grid and producing food for their family. Today, the farm features terraced market gardens, greenhouses, and fruit trees, creating a unique farmscape

and production environment. The hot, arid climate in the region creates ideal growing conditions for certain crops, which the farm has become well known for at farmers' markets in the Vancouver region.

In their long farming careers, Erin and Ron have learned many lessons about farming, homesteading, and managing a

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Dedicate time and resources to educate consumers about new products and services

When experimenting with new products and selling directly to consumers, the onus falls on farmers to educate consumers. Dedicating time and resources to promote new products can open up new markets or draw in new consumers, which will pay off in the long run.

Because they bring unique and often unfamiliar produce varieties to the farmers' market, Erin and Ron Coghlan of **Stein Mountain Farm** are committed to offering samples at their farmers' market stand as a way to introduce customers to new things. "We have even been sampling roasted squash the last couple years because of all the unique and unfamiliar varieties we grow," explains Erin.

Early in their farming careers, Rob Borsato and Cathie Allen of **Mackin Creek Farm** took it upon themselves to educate local people about CSA programs and the benefits to producers and consumers. "We wrote an article for the local paper about what CSA was and used that as a starting place for educating the community about local, organic food, which was a new idea at that time," says Rob.

small farm business in a remote region. These lessons include the importance of strong relationships with customers and maintaining a clear and complementary vision of their farming and lifestyle goals.

In the last few years, Erin and Ron have focused on integrating their adult children into the farm operation. This has led to shifts in production and has also allowed them to participate in an additional

farmers' market. Erin and Ron have embraced this new dynamic—farming alongside their children—and continue to evaluate new opportunities for change and growth that align with their personal interests. With their well-established customer base and a diverse farming system, Stein Mountain Farm provides a place for the next generation to experiment.



"We grow mostly open-pollinated varieties, so we educate our customers about why we do that and try to encourage them to try things that they may have never seen before."

—Erin Coghlan

Best Business Practice: Human Resources

Communicate personal and business goals clearly and honestly with family or business partners

Many small- to mid-scale farming operations rely on family involvement, often with spouses, partners, and generations working alongside one another. Open and honest communication with partners and family members, and accommodating the goals and needs of all individuals involved in the operation, is key to farm business success.

Although Erin and Ron Coghlan didn't initially set out to be full-time, commercial farmers at **Stein Mountain Farm**, they have developed a business that aligns with their lifestyle and family goals. "The farm business really grew out of the two of us talking about what kind of lifestyle we wanted, and how we could make that happen," says Erin.

Lydia Ryall, of **Cropthorpe Farm**, with her family operates three independent farm businesses on fifty family-owned acres. They share equipment, collectively make decisions about crop rotation, and plan for farm succession. Communication has been helped by hiring a third-party facilitator when key decisions need to be made. "It's important for the success of our businesses and for our family relationships that we can have respectful and productive conversations about this stuff," says Lydia. "For us, hiring someone to facilitate a conversation is totally worth it."

Cutter Ranch (Fort Steele)



Farmers: Tyler McNaughton and Sacha Bentall

Region: Kootenay Rockies

Farm size: 160 acres

Farm products: Pasture-raised pork, lamb, poultry, beef

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (17%), direct-to-consumer delivery (78%), restaurants (5%)

Farmers' markets: Fernie, Cranbrook, Kimberley, Invermere

photos by Cutter Ranch

Tyler McNaughton and Sacha Bentall are young farmers growing and marketing high-quality, pasture-raised livestock in East Kootenay, and making a name for themselves across the province. In a

region with a strong ranching heritage and a growing awareness and interest in local food, Tyler and Sacha are committed to the Cutter Ranch slogan "Where Food Comes From" and have grown their

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Promote transparency and authenticity

Building a brand and a reputation as direct-to-consumer farmers' market farmers requires honest and open communication and a commitment to sharing your heartfelt values with your customers. Customers are interested and react positively to hearing about the everyday happenings of a farmer's life.

Tyler McNaughton and Sacha Bentall at **Cutter Ranch** use farmers' markets as a key point of contact with customers to educate and build relationships. "If direct sales are your direction, a big key to success is being consistently present at your farmers' market to connect with as many customers as possible and make those sales. Farmers' markets are an incredible platform for selling," says Tyler.

Pat Swan of **Stonefield Farm** integrates photos and information about how and why she farms into her farmers' market display—inviting questions and conversation with the public. "We are always happy to talk to people about what we do on the farm," says Pat. "People come to the farmers' market because they want to be able to ask those questions directly to the farmer, and that is part of the job that we really love."

Under the name **Little Qualicum Cheeseworks**, Clarke and Nancy Gourlay have created an agri-tourism experience that offers an intimate look at dairy farming and small-scale cheese making. "We don't charge people anything to come to the farm, and there are no barriers between visitors and what is happening on the farm," explains Clarke. "It is a really unique experience for a lot of people."

business significantly in recent years. Starting with thirty ewes on a pasture-raised production system, Tyler and Sacha began their farm business with a commitment to diversification and marketing. After eight years, they still feel like they are in the start-up phase and remain focused on honing their business skills and planning for the next phase of growth.

Knowledge of the land has been key to farming success for Tyler and Sacha, who say that working with the land and experimenting with different enterprises has been a key strategy for developing a sustainable farm. The learning curve has been steep but the couple is committed to responding to what their customers want, while taking into consideration what their land will environmentally and ecologically support. They continue to develop innovative approaches to

production and business management, with the hopes of modelling a unique approach to farming in their region.



"Observation is critical to what we do ... it is important that we spend enough time on the farm and ensure the greatest health of our animals and land, so we need to balance our time carefully."

—Sacha Bental

Best Business Practice: Financial Management

Evaluate management capacity and market readiness when considering new farm enterprises

The evaluation of potential farm enterprises should include an analysis of how they fit with farm management style and existing operations. Consider the capacity to manage different enterprises at the same time, the readiness of the market, and the relationship to long- and short-term business goals.

In addition to pasture-raised lamb and pork, Tyler McNaughton and Sacha Bental of **Cutter Ranch** also raise poultry. Although they have had good success with this enterprise, they continue to assess how well they can manage poultry production alongside raising pork and lamb. Beef, on the other hand, is well matched to the type of meat production and marketing channels they have in place and has already proven to be a good match for their farming style. "Beef is a logical fit with our primary red meat production system," says Tyler. "To meet customer demand, we have acquired a small cow herd and will be offering beef in mid-2018."

Gemma McNeill and Doug Zaklan of **Zaklan Heritage Farm** have a good following for their eggs, which they sell exclusively through their farm stand. However, they are considering the fit of this enterprise with their farm because of the time and energy it takes away from their vegetable enterprise. "We have a mobile chicken coop that needs to be moved regularly, and sometimes finding time to do that in an already busy day is a real challenge," says Gemma. "So, we will be deciding if this is something we want to keep doing."

3 Crows Farm (Cranbrook)



Farmers: Christian Kimber and Michael Stevens

Region: Kootenay Rockies

Farm size: .75 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, sprouts, microgreens, wheatgrass

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (70%), restaurants (30%)

Farmers' markets: Kimberley, Cranbrook, Fernie

photo by 3 Crows Farm

Chris Kimber started farming to find a more flexible form of income generation that could be adapted to the schedule of his busy young family. Starting in his own backyard, Chris eventually expanded to more plots in his Cranbrook neighbourhood. 3 Crows Farm has now

grown into a partnership between Chris and business partner Michael Stevens. In addition to producing a diverse range of vegetables using the SPIN farming model, the pair produce microgreens in Chris's garage, which is also their processing area and farm headquarters.

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Test new markets by starting small and focusing on delivering quality products and building new client relationships

Breaking into new markets can be a challenge, especially with uncertainty about volume, pricing, and consistency. When diversifying marketing channels, farmers often start small and adjust their approach by responding to the needs of the customer and fit with existing marketing channels.

By establishing relationships with new restaurant clients, **3 Crows Farm** has focused on a few crops they knew they could supply consistently. As their production skills improved and relationships with restaurant clients developed, they have been able to introduce new crops. "We were a little nervous to start selling to restaurants because we weren't sure if we could support the consistent demand of that market," says Michael. "So we started with microgreens and a few other things we know we could supply consistently and built from there."

Lisa and Hans Dueck recognized that **Sterling Springs Chicken** had a product that would be desirable to local chefs. They approached those who they thought would respond well, provided samples, and asked for feedback. "You have to go in and show your face," says Lisa. "We knew that establishing this sales channel would mean starting with a few key products, building a relationship with chefs, and educating them about our products and our operation."

Learning what they can grow and where they can grow it was a major learning curve. By tapping into a variety of resources available to small-scale growers, and through a lot of experimentation, Chris and Michael have learned many lessons about the practicality of growing and marketing in this region. For example, by growing in urban backyards they can take advantage of microclimates where crops are protected from wind and sun exposure is maximized. This, along with season-extension techniques such as cold frames and row covers, allows them to grow crops that might not otherwise thrive at high elevation.

3 Crows Farm is a small enterprise and both Chris and Michael acknowledge that being able to use their own land and land provided by neighbours has contributed

significantly to their success. Michael owns a five-acre property just outside of town where they are experimenting with different production models for 3 Crows Farm. Their business model is viable because they have extended the use of their own properties and have accessed additional plots through neighbourhood connections. They have built a successful farm business over the years recognizing that it is not about farming big, but farming smart.

“Growing conditions are extremely regional ... we compete with farmers from Creston or Fernie, but we can bring stuff to the farmers’ market that those farmers won’t have for another month.”

—Chris Kimber

Best Business Practice: Farm Operations

Diversify production to maximize market returns and minimize risk

Diversifying production is a strategy for reducing risk and for building customer loyalty. Successful farmers pay attention to consumer demands, competition, and financial returns to determine the best strategies for product diversification, and they balance diversification with management capacity, inclination, and fit within their overall operation.

For Chris Kimber and Michael Stevens, a big part of building **3 Crows Farm** as a business has involved getting to know their local and regional markets and creating an appropriate crop mix. This involves balancing high-value, high-turnover crops (e.g., salad greens) with lower-value crops that satisfy customer demands. “We need to be more diverse so people will spend more money per visit at our stall at the farmers’ market, and to do that we need to offer more than just lettuce,” explains Michael. “So we are experimenting with different crops, looking for what works in our market and in our farming systems.”

For Robert Hettler of **Pilgrims’ Produce**, building diversity over the years is now yielding benefits as he considers new marketing and operational directions for the farm. His U-pick operation has been more of a focus, offering customers a new experience and more affordable prices and also decreasing the need for harvesting labour. “We used to pick more, but we are getting older and can have trouble finding people to come pick for us.... We are encouraging our regular customers to come out and U-pick,” says Robert, “and as we add more crops it’s better for them too, it’s a win-win.”

Happy Pig Organic Farm (Smithers)



Farmers: Paul Murphy and Marlene Thimer

Region: Northern BC

Farm size: 320 acres

Farm products: Pork, beef, chicken, lamb

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (35%), direct-to-consumer delivery (65%)

Farmers' markets: Bulkley Valley (Smithers), Skeena Valley (Terrace)

photos by Happy Pig Organic Farm

Attracted to buying land in this region for many reasons, Paul Murphy and Marlene Thimer didn't originally intend to farm to earn income. They began raising meat only for themselves, family, and friends. After reaching a point where farming demands became more than a part-time endeavor, the couple decided to try full-

time farming, becoming certified organic in 2009.

Farming in Northern BC comes with limitations and opportunities. Farmers in this region have access to affordable land and the summer climate is good for growing crops, but they must travel

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Use a variety of marketing channels to increase exposure and gain market share

Taking advantage of a variety of marketing channels to access and gain market share is another way of managing risk and ensuring more stable income throughout the year.

Paul Murphy and Marlene Thimer have invested significantly in enterprise diversity at **Happy Pig Organic Farm**. One example is purchasing a vehicle that they converted to a mobile food truck, which they take to farmers' markets and music festivals all summer long. "Some people might say we aren't getting the return that we should, [but] it's a way to get our food out to people and to get exposure. And in the end make a bit of extra money, too," explains Paul.

Other farms, including **Ice Cap Organics** and **Zaklan Heritage Farm**, rely on the consistency of the CSA model in addition to farmers' market, restaurant, and farm gate sales. In the CSA model, consumers pay up front for produce delivered all season long. Early season capital can be invested into the farm to buy seed and build infrastructure, creating a solid production foundation for the farming season.

long distances to access consumer markets, incurring associated travel and time costs. To offset these costs, Happy Pig Organic Farm operates an organic produce delivery service. They distribute organic products, brought in from other areas of the province, alongside their

own pasture-raised meats. Investing in software that facilitates online ordering and creating delivery and distribution routes in surrounding communities has been key to the success of this innovative direct-market food system endeavor.



“Farming in this region, especially organic farming, is marginal. We only know one other farmer in our area who is farming full time, so we didn’t really know what kind of market opportunities were out there.”

—Paul Murphy

Best Business Practice: Marketing

Understand the unique needs of the consumer market where farm products will be sold

For many, farming is about pursuing what they love, but like any business venture, understanding the needs of the market is critical. Farmers should understand the size of the market and the type of products customers are looking for. With this knowledge, you can determine what to produce and how to sell it.

Paul Murphy and Marlene Thimer are still cautious when introducing new products through **Happy Pig Organic Farm**, and are aware of the needs and limitations of the consumer market they are selling into. “Sheep are great to raise,” says Paul. “Unfortunately, there is not that much demand for lamb up here. People want chicken and beef because they know how to prepare those things. If we wanted to sell more lamb that would mean also educating people about a new product.”

Tyler McNaughton and Sacha Bentall of **Cutter Ranch** sell their products in bulk, offering a box of mixed cuts that is affordable and could fit easily in the average freezer. With this strategy, Tyler and Sacha benefit by being able to sell more product per order, making the most of marketing and delivery resources. “We have an idea of what mix of cuts people are looking for and about how long it takes for our customers to go through one of our freezer boxes,” explains Tyler.

Mackin Creek Farm (Quesnel)



Farmers: Rob Borsato and Cathie Allen

Region: Cariboo Chilcotin Coast

Farm size: 5 acres

Farm products: Vegetables

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (80%), local retail (10%), restaurants (5%), other (5%)

Farmers' markets: Quesnel

photos by Mackin Creek Farm

Cathie Allen and Rob Borsato have been farming north of Williams Lake for 30 years. Once a small-scale logger, Rob describes a connection with the land as a main reason for settling there. Today, Mackin Creek Farm is a diverse vegetable operation that has contributed significantly to the small-scale organic agriculture movement in the region. The farm relies on draft horse power for field work.

"We've always been cautious about growth, maybe too cautious, but I have seen new farmers who are so overly ambitious they just implode. They take on too much too fast, when growing incrementally can be more sustainable."

—Rob Borsato

Getting a start in the 1980s, Cathie and Rob were limited by the marketing opportunities in their region at that time. Their success would depend on actively contributing to the growth in direct-to-consumer markets. They were part of a group of producers in their region who joined together to start the Quesnel Farmers' Market in 1988. Today, Rob describes the local food scene that surrounds them as vibrant, with more opportunities to reach customers and tap into new niche markets.

With a cautious nature, they started their business small, with a plan to break new ground every two years toward an ultimate goal of five cultivated acres of vegetables. They describe this as a "measured approach" used to match their increasing capacity as farmers and the slow growth of the local food market in the region.



"Selling direct to market, you benefit from being able to respond to demand by increasing prices to reflect that demand. If people want your product, producing more is not always right financially and might not work for the farm."

—Rob Borsato



Best Business Practice: Financial Management

Establish record keeping systems that align with business goals and personal values

Long- and short-term business goals that reflect your values, priorities, and objectives as a business owner should be kept in mind when establishing a system for record keeping. This will ensure that the right information is tracked, which will help to make sound business decisions.

Cathie Allen and Rob Borsato of **Mackin Creek Farm** have paid close attention to the land, noting soil health as a key measure of success that directly contributes to farming productivity and profitability. Carefully tracking crop yields by farm plot and year helps Cathie and Rob adjust crop planning as needed, and it provides valuable information about how their soil management strategies are working. "I love soil, I wish I could get a PhD in soil science," expresses Rob. "The health of our soil is something that we track closely on the farm."

Organic certification requires farmers to keep detailed records of their farm operations. This creates an opportunity and format for farmers like Alisha and Delaney Zayac at **Ice Cap Organics** to carefully track production and financial information, which helps to inform their farm operations and business planning.

Little Qualicum Cheeseworks (Parksville)



Farmers: Clarke and Nancy Gourlay

Region: Vancouver Island

Farm size: 88 acres

Farm products: Milk, cheese

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (20%), wholesale (50%), farm store (30%)

Farmers' markets: Trout Lake (Vancouver), West End (Vancouver), Kitsilano (Vancouver), Qualicum Beach, Moss Street (Victoria)

photo by Little Qualicum Cheeseworks

Little Qualicum Cheeseworks is a cheesemaking operation and agri-tourism destination located in the Oceanside area of Vancouver Island. Clarke and Nancy Gourlay started dairy farming

at a small scale in the late 1990s. Their dairy operation, Morningstar Farm, now milks 50 cows and sells milk directly to their cheesemaking enterprise, Little Qualicum Cheeseworks, for processing

Best Business Practice: Human Resources

Integrate family members into the business in ways that reflect their strengths and professional or personal goals

On family farms there are often expectations about what the roles and responsibilities of each family member will be. This can be especially true in multi-generational situations. Successfully sharing responsibilities among family members can be done by assigning roles and responsibilities based on the interest, capacity, and goals of individuals.

The multi-generational character of **Little Qualicum Cheeseworks** has always been an important personal and business focus. "How we relate to each one of our kids, and how they relate to the business, is dependent on them as individuals and is something that is constantly in flux," says Clarke Gourlay. "We are taking steps, in some cases baby steps, towards succession, but ultimately it will depend on what the kids want, and how they want to be involved in the business."

Over the last few years, Erin and Ron Coghlan from **Stein Mountain Farm** have started working more closely with their children. Integrating the next generation into the business has meant taking on two additional farmers' markets in the Vancouver region and exploring new crops on their farm. "Tomatoes have never really been a big crop for us, but our son is really interested in growing them so we are experimenting now with all these different varieties and he is really taking the lead there," says Erin.

and value adding. A winery on the farm, making fruit wine using locally sourced BC fruit, is their latest venture. This creates a marketing synergy that allows the Gourlays to take advantage of the complementary dynamics of cheese and wine as well as the appetite for local food-focused tourism in the region.

The Gourlays are committed to transparency and effective communication within their truly multi-generational business. This has become a defining characteristic of their business model. Clarke and Nancy's children, who grew up on the farm, are now young adults and becoming more involved in the operation of the business. Farm succession has also become a focus for Clarke and Nancy and involves working

closely with their children. Eldest son, Raymond, and his two brothers, John and Kevin, are involved in different aspects of the farm and business and are exploring new opportunities for what this will look like in the future. The Gourlay family remains committed to the integration of the next generation into the business, and a model of business ownership succession that acknowledges the skills and future plans of their children works best.

"Most multi-generational businesses die because of interpersonal issues, not business failure. So we keep communication a top priority."

—Clarke Gourlay

Best Business Practice: Financial Management

Determine the economic feasibility and contribution of new or existing enterprises through enterprise analysis or partial budgeting

Evaluating the economics of a new or existing enterprises is an important practice for overall success of farm business. This can provide insight into the costs and returns for individual farm products, and how they might or do contribute to overall farm profitability. Enterprise analysis also allows for year-to-year comparisons and an assessment of shifting costs and returns.

In addition to closely tracking their daily business finances for **Little Qualicum Cheeseworks** and its associated enterprises, Clarke Gourlay compares annual businesses records, looking closely at the bottom line and for any significant changes in costs of production and returns. "We built a new barn last year, so looking at the cash flow statement and comparing to previous years will show the impacts on staffing, feed use, or electricity," says Clarke.

Borrowing capital made it possible for Alisha and Delaney Zayac to buy land and build the infrastructure they needed to start **Ice Cap Organics**. With these loans, they knew that carefully tracking production, profits, and expenses would be essential. They created partial budgets for each crop that included inputs (e.g., seed, fertilizer), equipment, labour costs, yield, and returns. Balancing costs against yield and market returns helped their crop planning evolve so they could maximize productivity and profitability from their land. "We knew it would be important to track from the beginning. It was about learning what we could grow and about what people wanted to buy," says Delaney. "We were analyzing all the way along and honing our crop planning skills."

Stonefield Farm (Mill Bay)



Farmers: Pat and Brian Swan

Region: Vancouver Island

Farm size: 22 acres

Farm products: Chicken, pork, beef, turkey, eggs

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (20%), wholesale (35%), direct-to-consumer delivery (45%)

Farmers' markets: Downtown Nanaimo

photos by Stonefield Farm

Starting their farming operation in 1996, Pat and Brian Swan began by raising pigs. They now primarily produce chicken in addition to pork, beef, turkey, and eggs. Farming on southern Vancouver Island offers mild winters beneficial for raising livestock and close proximity to larger consumer markets in Victoria and Nanaimo. Over the years they have capitalized on this consumer market access and built a supportive and loyal customer base.

In addition to being naturally attracted to customer service, Pat and Brian both have agricultural backgrounds: Brian's is in dairy farming and Pat's is in agricultural

education (teaching vocational agriculture in the United States) and in conducting loan appraisals for agricultural businesses in the finance sector. Combined experience in production and farm business management has contributed significantly to the success of Stonefield Farm.

Over their years of farming, Pat and Brian have seen a decline in small-scale abattoirs and processing facilities, which they once relied on to process and package their meat products. Loss of the small-scale, local "mom and pop shops" forced Stonefield Farm to transfer their processing to a larger facility. To manage this shift, Pat and Brian carefully observed how their animals were handled in the slaughtering process so they could make recommendations on more appropriate techniques that would ensure they delivered consistent quality to their customers. Although they are not doing the post-production processing themselves, they aim to maintain as much control as possible from beginning to end in order to guarantee a high-quality product for their customers.

"You need to be outgoing. We are interacting with people all the time and this is something that my husband and I both enjoy."

—Pat Swan

For Pat and Brian, building a viable business over the past twenty years has been a process of experimentation and learning. Today, Pat ascribes the viability of their business model as reliant on maintaining a balance between wholesale and retail marketing channels and production diversity.

“We have always been sensitive to what our customers need—that is the paramount thing. When they know you have one good product they are looking forward to your next good product.”

—Pat Swan



Best Business Practice: Farm Operations

Maintain or gain control over processing activities to ensure product quality and respond to market demands

Quality and responsiveness to customer demand is essential. Maintaining or gaining control over processing of raw farm product into prepared or processed product is a good strategy for assuring that the highest-quality products are delivered to customers.

Pat and Brian Swan began using a larger commercial slaughtering facility to process **Stonefield Farm** meats. After noticing an increase in damaged birds, they aimed to address this issue as it could ultimately impact their marketing channels and bottom line. “We saw a lot of damaged birds coming off the line,” explains Pat. “I made a point to just observe the process and then made suggestions about how they could better handle our birds. We were growing bigger birds so it was a matter of giving them more space on the line and that change helped a lot.”

When conventional commodity producers Lisa and Hans Dueck of **Sterling Springs Chicken** were limited by not being able to control the processing, scaling down and investing in their own on-farm processing infrastructure opened up new opportunities in the direct-to-consumer and restaurant markets. “We now have more flexibility to respond to what the market needs in terms of volume or product type,” says Hans. “We can control this, and we retain more of the end value.”

Amara Farm (Comox Valley)



Farmers: Arzeena Hamir

Region: Vancouver Island

Farm size: 2.5 acres

Farm products: Vegetables, blueberries

Sales channels and % of total sales: Farmers' markets (30%), CSA (60%), restaurants (10%)

Farmers' markets: Comox Valley

photos provided by Amara Farm, William Jorgensen Photography

Arzeena Hamir and her family moved to Vancouver Island in 2012 to farm after purchasing land in the Comox Valley. They were looking for rural farmland and were drawn to the region by the availability of affordable land and a vibrant, local farmers' market.

The lively, small-scale farming sector in the region conferred the element of competition, especially from more established farms. When first starting out, Arzeena certainly faced a number of challenges in accessing suitable local markets for her farm-fresh produce. She also had to learn to farm in a new climate and build infrastructure for the new farm.

"We knew that if we wanted to farm on a small scale and sell direct to customers, having access to a well-established local market would be important."

—Arzeena Hamir

Breaking into the local direct-to-consumer market required Arzeena to strategically overcome certain barriers: she needed a more consistent supply of produce, a greater diversity of products, and more opportunities to gain exposure to customers. The ability to address these challenges came about when she joined forces with another farmer in the region to sell their farm products cooperatively through both the Comox Valley Farmers' Market and a CSA program.

The marketing cooperative that Amara Farm now works with is called Merville Organics Growers' Cooperative. A small percentage of each dollar of product sold through the cooperative is collected and invested back into the business to cover costs associated with packaging, travelling to farmers' markets, cold storage, and shared processing facilities. Although the fees for participating in the cooperative have increased since Arzeena joined, she believes that having access to so many supports and services—that Amara Farm would otherwise be responsible for providing on its own—is well worth the cost.

Connecting with other young farmers that were farming at similar scales, and selling through the Merville Organics Growers' Cooperative, has in numerous ways helped Arzeena, her family, and Amara Farm become more embedded in the community.

"I don't know if we would have grown as quickly if we didn't band together from the beginning. Our sales were very small and on top of that we were learning about farming in a new climate and figuring out what the community was looking for."

—Arzeena Hamir



Best Business Practice: Marketing

Work cooperatively to establish and access local markets and gain economies of scale

Balancing marketing and sales with production and other business demands can be challenging. Opportunities to work collaboratively can significantly contribute to the success of individual farms by opening up new channels, appealing to a wider demographic of consumers, and building demand in the local market. Additionally, farm members can share critical and often expensive resources and infrastructure that no single farm can fully afford.

In 2017 the Merville Organics Growers' Cooperative was established, comprising four participating farms, including **Amara Farm**. The cooperative agreement was officially drawn up and executed with help from the BC Co-operative Association. Merville Organics Growers' Cooperative members make decisions as a group about crop planning, marketing, and operations while maintaining their individual farm enterprises.

Cathie Allen and Rob Borsato of **Mackin Creek Farm**, along with several other producers, worked together in their early years of production to establish the Quesnel Farmers' Market in 1988. They recognized the need for more places to sell and access local food. "We have seen such a change since we started, and it's nice to be a part of that!" says Rob. "Back then there just weren't places to sell food."

Best Business Practices: Reference Chart

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Conclusion

In this guide we have shared the unique stories of 15 selected BC farmers' market farmers to convey the importance of a holistic approach to farm business management.

Growing interest in local food and ecologically sound agriculture in BC is supported by the efforts of visionary, dedicated, and skilled direct-market farmers across the province. By highlighting successful farm operations, this guide aims to reinforce the exemplary business practices of these farmers and to encourage and support the next generation.

Viable farm operations require consideration of traditional business management elements, including financial management, human resources, marketing, and farm operations. However, the farmers we interviewed also expressed their love of the land and dedication to their communities, a commitment to ecological sustainability, and a desire to support one another and help build more-connected local and regional food systems.

If we support farmers' market farmers, they will support us.

Project Partners

This project was a collaboration between the BC Association of Farmers' Markets (BCAFM) and the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

BCAFM is a non-profit organization that exists to support, develop, and promote farmers' markets in British Columbia. It provides capacity building, education, promotion, advocacy, and research to support BC's farmers' market sector. BCAFM currently represents over 145 member farmers' markets and 3,000 vendors, including 1,000 small-scale farmers that sell directly to consumers. Discover over 145 BC farmers' markets at bcfarmersmarket.org.



BC ASSOCIATION OF FARMERS' MARKETS

ISFS is an applied research and extension unit at Kwantlen Polytechnic University that investigates and supports environmentally sound agriculture and regional food systems as key elements of sustainable communities. Applied research focuses on the potential of regional food systems in terms of agriculture and food, economics, community health, policy, and environmental integrity. Extension programming provides information and support for farmers, communities, business, policy makers, and others. kpu.ca/isfs



Institute for Sustainable Food Systems



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