

Preface

Backstory

My entire life I wanted to be a rock 'n roll musician; even from the time I was 16 years old, I was playing in bands with other young men in my town. We would go on weekend tours to nearby cities like Vancouver and Seattle. Playing music was the only thing I actually enjoyed doing, and it was all that I wanted to do. After finishing music school in 2002, I formed a group called People for Audio, and we moved to Guelph, Ontario, to spend a year writing music, recording, and gigging in and around southern Ontario. During this period, and for nine years after, I would travel back to BC for two to three months in the spring to early summer and work as a treeplanter. It was something besides music that I was fairly good at, and it allowed me to make enough money, that I could afford to work only part-time, or sometimes not at all, during the winters so I could focus more on playing music. Perhaps a seed was planted in me at this time: I discovered that I loved working outside and being engaged in nature. In 2003, I and the other main members of People for Audio moved to Montreal together, and that's

where I stayed for another six years. The band did a lot of recording and touring in that time, and for most of those years, playing in a band was all I thought I was meant to do.

Growing up as a bit of a “rebel without a cause,” I got into punk rock music at a pretty young age, and through that I discovered thinkers such as Noam Chomsky, which led me to follow geopolitical issues with great interest and despair. Back in my punk rock days, I heard the old cliché, “If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem,” and it has stuck with me ever since. It was around late 2007 when I really started to be personally bothered by a lot of what was happening in the Western world and abroad: endless wars, environmental degradation and an economic system that benefited only a small number of elites. I sometimes went to bed very restless because of all the injustice I saw in the world. My music career at this time was starting to slow down; the band was in the process of breaking up, and this forced me to reevaluate my life in a way that I had never done before. Everything up to that point had led

me to believe that my one true calling was to be a musician, but it was obviously not working very well for me.

The winter of that year, I was working at a screen printing shop during the day and spending a lot of my nights cruising the Internet, learning about living off the land, natural building and organic agriculture. I became obsessed with looking for alternative ways to live on this planet in a sustainable way. I felt like I had to take control of my life so that I could simply live by my values. So many things that I saw in the world disgusted me. The way in which we who live in affluent countries travel, eat and make money all made me sick. It was like everything I saw myself do in my day-to-day life was detrimental to the environment in some way, and this caused me to fall into a depression unlike any I had ever experienced. I guess you could say it was a combination of realizing that music might not have been the right thing for me to do in life as well as realizing that I was, in no way, contributing to solutions. I felt like more part of the problem than ever. Cruising around the web one night, I discovered a program called WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms),¹ and from there I felt like there was an answer for me. This led me further down a path to organic farming, living off the grid and alternative energy. At this point, I started to realize that I needed to get out of Montreal and begin working toward something. I didn't know exactly what that was yet, but I

started to put one foot in front of the other, and I drafted up a plan for where I wanted to be in five years. I decided that I needed to live off the land in some way, and so I planned to work the next five years in BC as a treeplanter, working really long seasons, where I could save up a lot of money each year, with the goal that in the end I'd have enough money to purchase a piece of land and begin my off-grid homestead. The plan also included doing a WWOOFing trip for the first part so that I could learn some basic farming skills. I planned to do a trip by motorcycle through BC and the southern west coast of North America, where I would visit farms and homesteads.

In late March of 2008, I left Montreal and headed back to BC, with the plan of treeplanting for the spring and summer, then embarking on this motorcycle trip along the west coast. When I arrived in BC, I began working with a new company and immediately made friends with a fellow named Jason who had a lot of the same ambitions as I had. We became pretty close quickly, and we would often spend the drive to work talking about living off the land and how we both had plans to do so eventually. He told me about a trip that he had taken a year earlier, when he rode his bicycle across the USA. The stories were unbelievable, and I was so inspired by them, that I decided to change my plans of motorcycling down the coast, and ride a bicycle instead. The rest of that planting season, I spent my nights off planning this trip. I was going to

ride from Kelowna all the way down the coast!

On August 18, 2008, I left on a trip that would change my life forever. I met incredible people who were generous and kind, and it seemed like there was just one serendipitous experience after the next every place I went. I visited many farms, off-grid homesteads, ecovillages and people just living by their values. What I learned on this trip wasn't so much about how to live off the land, but more about myself: If you wear your values on your sleeve (which is what I was doing in a way), people will approach you all the time. Especially the kind of people you want to be approached by. So, not only was I inspired by all the amazing individuals I met on the trip, but they were also very inspired by me. These interchanges totally reshaped my perception of the world, because I realized that I could have a profound effect simply living by my values and demonstrating them in some way. By the time I got to San Diego, I already felt like I could do anything, though my original plan had been to go a lot further. Riding a bike a hundred miles a day every day not only gets you to an amazing physical state but also a mental one. By traveling alone in such a way, I was forced to reach out to people, and I learned that showing a bit of vulnerability can open you up to people in a way I had never experienced. I guess I lived my life before with such a hard sense of pride and arrogance that it often turned people away from me.

But this experience taught me it was better to be welcoming and open.

Why I Wanted to Farm

After returning from my bike tour in November of 2008, I spent that winter reading more books on farming and did a lot of research on how I could do this. I knew then that I wanted to farm somehow, but I still wasn't totally sure how that was going to look. The biggest problem I kept coming back to was that land in BC was so expensive. This was going on year two of my original five-year plan, and I was on my way to making things happen. I had less money saved than I'd hoped, but I had done a lot of research on farming and felt like I knew a thing or two. I had read all of Eliot Coleman's books as well as John Jeavons'. So by now, I knew some kind of small-scale intensive farming was the thing for me. But still the problem of land access kept coming up. I had a friend visit me that winter; we talked about farming, and I explained to him about how buying land was such a challenge. He told me he had heard about a thing called SPIN farming, but he didn't really know that much about it. He mentioned that a farmer using these methods could make \$100,000 on an acre of land. When he told me that, my arrogant side immediately dismissed it. From what I read of Eliot Coleman's work, \$20,000 per acre was a very high standard for intensive farming. I thought my friend was crazy. Later that spring, I went back to the forests of coastal

and interior BC to do another season of treeplanting.

This time around, I began to get a lot more burnt out with this work. At this point it had been my ninth year of planting, and my body was starting to tell me that it was enough. Having come back from that bike trip feeling so energized, I felt myself sinking back into a depressive spiral as I started to feel discouraged that I might not be able to save enough money in time for my five-year goal: to buy land. Also, I knew I had to quit planting, and the dream of buying land to homestead was fading away. About three quarters of the way through that season, on one of my days off I went to visit a friend who was also treeplanting in a nearby town. We got into how discouraged I was about not being able to afford land to farm on, and how I couldn't see myself making it through another planting season. He also mentioned, as my other friend had earlier, SPIN farming. At this point, since two of my good friends mentioned it, I decided that I might as well look into it further.

That planting season wrapped up in June, and when I got back to Kelowna I began reading about this SPIN farming thing. I couldn't believe what they were claiming, so I searched around for anyone that was actually doing this in BC. I found a guy my age named Paul, who was running a SPIN farm using his bike in Nelson, BC (which is a pretty incredible feat, in that Nelson is a town that is as hilly as San Francisco). I contacted Paul, and he was so generous with

his time. He allowed me to interview him for a couple hours, and I made tons of notes about his experiences. From that point, I knew that I wanted to do in Kelowna what he had done in Nelson, and I wanted to do it pedal powered just like him as well. I was totally inspired, and I knew that this is exactly what I wanted to do.

My Barriers Were My Solutions

Having spent the later part of that summer reading more about SPIN farming, as well as going online and searching for more examples of people doing urban farming, I was certain that this is what I was going to do. I started telling all my friends and family about it, and it didn't take long until I had secured one piece of land. It was an urban lot in the downtown of Kelowna that belonged to the family of a longtime friend of mine. It was a double lot, altogether nearly ½ acre with a 2,000-square-foot heritage home on the one lot with a front and backyard, each 2,400 square feet. Next to it there had been a home that had burned down a few years before. Those property owners had torn the home down and completely removed it from the land. So, all that was remaining there was a big hole where the foundation once was. The family was very kind to offer me the property; in exchange I would look after the entire property and provide them with a basket of veggies each week once I got into production. A group of people was renting the house at the time, and the owners were spending a fair

amount of money each month to keep up the landscaping, which had fallen into disarray. It seemed like I showed up at the right place at the right time. The owners needed someone to manage the property, and I needed a place to farm: it was win-win on both counts. In August 2009 I started to develop the property. We started by building a fence around the perimeter, as it was on a corner and very open, so fencing it was a must. We also had to bring in all new soil on the side lot, as the existing soil was basically just builders' rubble. The landowners were very generous in that they paid me and a friend to build the fence, and they covered the cost to bring in the new soil. All in all, it cost around \$8,000 to build the fence and bring in the new soil. By early October that year everything was set for the next season. Once we had the grass stripped off, I formed out beds and planted the area with a fall rye cover crop. Not much else happened on the property until next spring.

Later that summer, I wanted to do something with farming, to get as much hands-on experience as I could before the winter, but there wasn't much planting I could do that late in the season. I had heard of a group in Victoria, BC, called Pedal to Petal, which ran a pedal-powered compost pickup service; I was inspired by what they were doing, so I figured I'd spend the fall and winter doing something similar so that I could at least learn a thing or two about compost. I went to a ice cream parlor in town and asked if I could take all their scrap

buckets; they were pleased to give them to me, as they would otherwise have been garbage. I gave one bucket to each of my friends and said, "Save me your vegetable scraps, and I'll pick them up once a week with my bike." It didn't take long until this little composting program took off. I was spending around 20 hours a week picking up, turning piles and finding dry brown material for the piles. Also, a restaurant that a friend worked at was interested in having me take their scraps as well. It was sort of a foot in the door for getting to know a chef, and it led to many more of those kind of relationships.

Spending time each week for the fall and winter with the compost program kept me pretty busy, along with reading books about farming and gardening. It didn't take long for people in the neighborhood to see that something was going on at this site, and before I knew it I had lots of people coming around to ask questions. Then it was local newspapers and radio stations. By October of that year, still not even technically farming, I was being asked by garden clubs and schools to come and speak about what I was doing. I felt kind of weird about it, because I still didn't really know anything on the practical side, but I guess I did in theory and I was a constant state of learning. So I became reasonably articulate about urban farming and what I was doing, mainly because I had to explain the same thing so many times over. By about late winter that year, I started to prepare

my long season crops such as tomatoes, peppers, onions and such. Because of all the press I had done over the course of six months, a lot of people in town had come to know me as the urban farmer guy, or the compost kid.

By this point, I remember experiencing phases of anxiety because I actually didn't know what I was doing at all. I remember waking up some nights in a cold sweat thinking, "Holy shit, am I actually going to do this? All these people in town think I'm this great urban farmer, but I've actually never fully grown a vegetable in my life. What if I fail? How embarrassing would that be?" I basically learned to ignore these negative thoughts and constantly kept a positive mind set. I really followed the saying "Fake it til you make it;" that became my mantra. I was, however, working very hard to consistently learn new things, and I spent a lot of time seeking out mentors in the community for advice. If it weren't for some of the elder organic farmers and gardeners in my area, things may have gone differently for me. I found so much value in speaking with growers who did things completely differently in a production sense, than I did but whose knowledge of plants, pest cycles, soil fertility and even life were so paramount to my success early on. I continually tried to listen, learn and not be afraid to show vulnerability and ask questions that I thought were stupid. I always asked questions, and I never pretended to know that I had all the answers. I still hold

those values to this day. These were things that I learned on that bike tour down the west coast that have been invaluable to my success in farming and in life.

Lessons from My First Four Years

In my first season of farming, I learned a valuable lesson within the first three months, and I want to instill it into you, the reader. Don't take on too much right away! Start with $\frac{1}{4}$ acre or less! I started with $\frac{1}{2}$ acre. I actually started earlier that year having just one plot of 6,000 square feet, and I should have kept it at that. One of the challenges for an urban farmer is the fact that so many people love the idea that, once they see you in motion, the land offers flood in. That's exactly what happened to me. Between November and March of 2010, there were so many articles in the local papers about what I was doing that I literally got one phone call a day with land offers. It was absolutely ridiculous, and it was so hard to not be so excited about it that I ended up taking on way too much. During that season, I was farming on seven plots of land totalling $\frac{1}{2}$ acre. My main problem in that year was that I didn't discriminate on location as much as I should have, and because the farm at this point was totally pedal powered, I wasted a lot of my time biking from plot to plot. I also grew far too many types of crops, and most of them barely made much profit. For the most part, this season was still successful, looking back. I grossed \$22,000 from being in

production from May 15 through October 31. I had one helper working nearly full time for that season as well. This was definitely my hardest year, and I worked nearly 100 hours every week for the entire year, even after the main season was done.

For the next two years my total land mass stayed around the same (at ½ acre), and I had a full-time helper as well. The gross profits of the farm grew without growing the land mass. In 2011, I did \$55,000 gross on ½ acre, and in 2012 I did \$78,000 on less than ½ acre. From this point I started to learn that it wasn't so much about how much land I was farming but the crops that I grew and the markets I pursued. As a trend over those first three years, I initially sold mostly to farmers markets, but less and less as the years went on. I found that spreading over a few market streams—such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmers markets and restaurants—allowed me to move a lot more product, because what didn't sell through one market stream I could sell through another. The main market stream that took off in my third year was restaurants. Having been introduced to one particular chef named Bernard Casavant, my business almost doubled over the course of a month. Bernard was a high-profile chef in BC, and when he started to buy my stuff, more and more restaurants followed suit. It was an exciting time as his restaurant alone would sometimes have orders nearing \$1,000 a week.

During 2013, I took on a partnership

with a friend and merged our farms. He had been farming for one year. Together we farmed 2.5 acres and grew around 90 types of vegetables. We had one site (that was previously his) at 2 acres, and the other ½ acre consisted of all my urban plots, with one peri-urban plot across the street from his two-acre site. This was definitely the biggest year as far as sales went. We grossed around \$130,000, but our expenses grew so high that it was hard to make a profit in the end. At the height of the season, we had around eight people working nearly full time, and the farm became very top heavy: too much management, too many crops and too much land. Our partnership ended after that season, and we went our separate ways. In the end, it worked out better for both of us. I reiterate the lesson I should have really learned after my first year: Don't take on too much! Start small, and grow slowly!

Green City Acres:

A Commercial Farm Grossing \$75K on 15,000 Square Feet

In 2014, I drastically reduced the size of the farm down to one third of an acre on five different plots that were mostly centralized within one third of a square mile. We focused on growing around 15 different crops, which I have discovered over the years are the most lucrative, based on price and days to maturity. We serviced seven restaurants, two wholesale delivery services and one weekly farmers market.

On average I worked 40 hours a week and enjoyed the most laid-back lifestyle I had ever experienced in my five years of farming. In the summer, when production was steady and we were past the set-up phase for the season, we actually worked less. Monday through Thursday, we were usually done by 2 PM and got to spend the rest of the day at the beach relaxing. I had only one part-time employee, who worked 16 hours a week, and I had a few neighbors who helped around the farm. This help was all offered in trade for vegetables: a simple and mutually beneficial trade which made everyone happy.

The main thing that changed from 2013 to 2014 was the dropping most of the crops and land. During the winter of 2013, I tried to figure out why we had made so little profit compared with previous years. I dumped all the profits we made from each crop into a spreadsheet and sorted it ac-

ording to their total sales. What I discovered was that about ten crops made almost 80% of the income of the total farm, and all of those crops were the ones grown on the small lots in the downtown core. I also discovered that our CSA program, which was the largest I had done in years, had a fairly low return, based on the labor and time it took to maintain it. Going forward into 2014, I decided to cut the CSA and cut about 80% of my crop production; I decided to specialize in 15 crops, focus on my restaurant clients and keep my weekly farmers market. It was a pretty huge shift, but 2014 turned out to be my best season ever. I made a much higher gross and worked far fewer hours.

This is what I want to demonstrate to you in this book: a better way to farm, where you can achieve a lifestyle that is personally sustainable and economically profitable.



PART 1

A FARM IN THE CITY



Why Urban Farming?

You've probably heard the term the *end of suburbia* before. In fact, a very well-known film was actually made about the whole concept. The basic premise is that as fuel prices increase, living in the suburbs will become less economically feasible for average North Americans; the cost and time it takes to drive into the city for work will outweigh the benefits of living in the suburbs, and this will cause their imminent collapse. Hence the term, the *end of suburbia*. You can look at that in two ways:

1. The decline of real estate values and mass exodus from the suburbs will turn them into ghost towns.
2. There is a huge opportunity to repurpose these places into modern day, self-reliant farming communities

This book will show you how option #2 is possible.

Let's look at some facts. Right now in the US, there are 40 million acres of lawn.

Between 30% to 60% of the fresh water in cities is used to water those lawns, and 580 million gallons of gasoline are used to mow them.¹ When we factor in all the costs it takes to maintain a lawn—such as watering, mowing, weeding and manicuring—it's easy to come to the conclusion that a lawn is nothing but a cost center, one that a lot of North Americans simply cannot afford.

But, what if we changed our thinking about lawns? We can tackle two huge problems

1. Lawns are unsustainable in many ways
2. Access to land is a major barrier for most young people who want to enter the agricultural sector

and create one great solution. Lawns, particularly in suburbs, offer great opportunity for new farmers because:

1. Land is abundant. The average home in the US has an average of .2 acres of land. That's around 8,000 square feet.²

2. Using land without owning it removes the idea that one must own land in order to be a farmer.
3. All of that land sitting in lawns now becomes a great place to farm.

What if we could repurpose the suburbs to be the new frontier of localization? What if all of these suburban streets turned into areas for transition, reeducation and abundance? I believe this is not only a possibility but an inevitability.

There are a number of reasons why farming in the city is not only more profitable, but there are also a variety of reasons that make it very advantageous: access to markets, low start-up and overhead costs, better growing conditions with warmer climates and easy access to water.

Advantages of Being Urban:

Market Access

Market access has to be the single greatest advantage that benefits urban farmers. When you live and work in the city, you live and work in the market that you're supplying. You don't have to travel very far to sell your product, and for the most part, your product will sell itself. When I deliver to restaurants in the downtown core, I am a five-minute bike ride away from them. Not only is that a talking point that those chefs will boast about to their customers, but it is also a huge advantage to me as far as saving time and energy in transport.

Delivering product that was harvested just blocks from where it is consumed has huge marketing appeal. Our farmers market is a five-minute drive or ten-minute bike ride from our base of operations. One advantage to this, besides bragging rights, is that, if I sell out of one particular item during the market day, I can buzz home quickly on my bike and get more. I call this topping up, and I've done it many times. From my proximity to the market, in 30 minutes, I can ride home, harvest some greens, bring them back to the market and bag them up there. What other farmer has the ability to do that?

Low Start-Up and Overhead

Farming in city greatly reduces the barriers to entry because you no longer need to think about buying land: it's available everywhere. If you can make enough income on small lots, you don't need the heavy machinery and infrastructure that is required for farming in the traditional sense. Infrastructure is simple, small and cheap.

Better Growing Conditions

A city is always a few degrees warmer than the countryside. This is called the *heat island effect*. With concrete and buildings everywhere, the city will absorb heat during the day into all that thermal mass, and the heat will release during the evening. This is very noticeable during the summer: if

you're riding a bike or driving your car past an open field, you'll immediately notice a drop in temperature. It's because you're leaving the thermal mass of the city that you feel that heat drop. In the downtown of my city, I'm in climate zone 6b, and people just a mile and a quarter out are around a climate zone 5. That's huge difference in frost-free days. In fact, I have at least 30 more frost-free days downtown than farms everywhere else in my area.

The other growing advantage is *microclimates*. When farm plots are surrounded by buildings, walls and fences, these can protect your crops from severe wind. Also, each plot will have its own set of unique characteristics, making some plots better for certain crops than others. This urban climate offers a nice diversity of growing conditions for your farm.

Pests and Weeds

Pest problems do exist in the city, but when you're farming on multiple plots, they can easily be avoided by simply running away. If flea beetle becomes a problem at one site, you can stop planting that crop there, and start it somewhere else. The pest can't follow the crop around in the city because of its many obstructions and barriers. And weed problems just don't exist in the way they do on rural farms. With barriers and obstructions, there are far fewer weed seeds blowing in from all angles. In the past, I farmed on two peri-urban plots where the

neighboring properties were just open fields. The weed problems on these plots were day and night compared to the urban plots.

Access to Water

Accessible water offers a huge advantage when you compare rural to urban farms. So many farms in the countryside have to wait for water from a river during the spring, and that can delay crop production. Also, well water can become contaminated by neighboring farms or industries. Accessing water on urban lots is in most cases as simple as connecting to the faucet on a house. The water is clean and has ample pressure.

The Social Connection

Over the years, I have met a large number of my customers, simply because they walked by my farm plots. Every neighborhood where I have a plot, I have a different set of neighbors, just as if I were living on that street. By working in these garden plots over the years, I eventually get to know most of the people on that particular street. This is a very nice thing, as I end up making a bunch more friends.

I can't tell you how many times on a weekly basis I'm visited at my market booth by neighbors from my farm plots. Not only do they become shoppers, but they end up bringing their friends too, who also become customers. There's an old saying "A satisfied customer is your best salesperson." For the

urban farmer, it's more like "Your neighbors are your best salespeople." One of the best advantages to having multiple locations is that you just have more potential to build social capital in more neighborhoods.

Social capital describes the relationships you build with people over time as a form of capital. Having good relationships with people can turn into many opportunities

like favors, connections and influence. These rewards are like money you can save in a bank, except you don't lose any economic value to income tax, sales tax or inflation. No government official can steal social capital from you. It's what you build with people by just making friends, sharing information and feeding the community!