



Profiles: A Look at 8 Successful Microfarms



Les Jardins de la Valette

Sylvain Couderc

FRANCE

Sylvain Couderc was born in 1983 and grew up in Aveyron, France, in a family that has agricultural roots (his grandparents were farmers). He always wanted to work the land and grow plants, with a job that would bring in a decent salary while allowing him to develop practices that better protect the environment and biodiversity. When he was younger, Sylvain would spend hours in the family garden, drawing inspiration from permaculture. But he went in another direction with his studies, instead choosing to get a French BTS, or technical diploma, in electrotechnology. His return to the land began when he enrolled in a vocational program leading to a nurseryman diploma, and was later cemented when he spent a year learning the trade on agroecological farms in Australia and New Zealand. “I wanted to explore the most cutting-edge systems in these countries, but I couldn’t find a viable model for permaculture. And 12-acre organic farms running on tractors didn’t satisfy me either. But that’s where I first came across people using Eliot Coleman’s methods. So I decided to continue my agricultural training with a BTS in horticulture,” he explains.

As a part of his studies, in 2010, he completed a one-month internship with Jean-Martin Fortier and Maude-Hélène Desroches. “When I walked around Les Jardins de la Grelinette, it was a revelation. Here, in real life, I was seeing everything I had read about in Coleman’s work. The system appealed to me right away: the layout, the size of the farm, the quality of the vegetables...an organized garden, square, aesthetic, not too big. I wanted to get home as quick as possible, to do the same thing in France.” He cut his BTS studies short, and with the help of the Aveyron Chamber of Agriculture, Sylvain set up a diversified market garden on his family’s land (1 acre of farmed land, over 3.7 acres). “I was lucky to have access to land, which was a key factor that made the start-up easier. This wasn’t an ideal spot for market gardening, with clay and limestone soil, cold weather in the spring, and very limited water resources. But I didn’t have to rent land or housing. I don’t know if I would have managed to get established without that boost. I was able to start with a €20,000 (US\$21,500) grant for young farmers and a €40,000 (US\$43,500) loan.

FARM STATS: LES JARDINS DE LA VALETTE

SIZE OF THE FARM

7.5-acre farm
1.2 acres usable farm area
0.3 acres high tunnels
Divided into 120 beds, each 160 ft²

SALES

2022: €75,000 (US\$81,000), taxes incl.
2021: €62,000 (US\$67,000), taxes incl.
2020: €55,000 (US\$60,000), taxes incl.

YEARS OF OPERATION

Since 2012

MARKETING & DISTRIBUTION

Direct sales at 2 markets (90% of revenue)
On-farm sales (10% of revenue)

VARIETAL DIVERSITY

45 vegetable species and 105 varieties

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES & HOURS WORKED

2 FTE (full-time equivalents) spread over 1 year:
• 1 employee at 32 hours per week, March to September
• 1 employee at 16 hours per week, October to January
• 1 intern at 32 hours per week, March to September

INVESTMENTS (EXCL. LAND & REAL ESTATE)

Total invested since the beginning: €120,000 (US\$130,500)
€60,000 (US\$65,000) at the start
€40,000 (US\$43,500) after 5 years (move to new farm)
€10,000 (US\$11,000) after 7 years (new greenhouse)
Investments made over the past 2 years:
€10,000 (US\$11,000) to drill a well
€10,000 (US\$11,000) for equipment (new irrigation,
new cold room, tools)



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That allowed me to pay for tools, irrigation, a greenhouse, a tiller, a flail mower, a harrow, a delivery truck, and a cold room. This was in 2012, when Jean-Martin's method was still relatively unknown, and he had not yet published a book. I kind of 'free-styled' the start-up, but I felt quite confident."

In the first few months, Sylvain relied on invaluable help from his father and his partner, Nancy, who was still a student at the time. "That support was crucial because getting started alone is hard. I religiously applied what I had seen and learned with Maude-Hélène and Jean-Martin. In the fourth year, I hired someone for a few hours a week, from March to December, and increased those hours every year. In 2017, I hit my €40,000 (US\$43,500) sales target, which meant I could also earn a minimum wage. I just divided the surface area and number of workers by two: at La Grelinette, 3 full-time employees work on 2 acres of land, and my operation, at Les Jardins de la Valette, is half of that."

Moving the farm

In 2017, Sylvain and Nancy, who had become a teacher, began to consider acquiring new land and, especially, a place to live. "We each had a salary and could take out a loan. We were looking for a farm within a 30-mile radius of our current location, so we could stay close to our existing distribution channels. I got my first loan, €40,000 (US\$43,500) over seven years, for the market garden (greenhouses, irrigation, retention pond). The second loan I took on with Nancy, to purchase land and buildings (€230,000 [US\$250,000]). This new iteration of the farm showed me that the Fortier system is easy to replicate; it took me only three months to set up beds and build greenhouses. As a result, I was able to maintain a continuous farm output, and by 2018, I was harvesting my first vegetables. On the second farm, you don't make the same mistakes you made on the first one—you do it all over again, but better. This might not be the best soil for market gardening, but it's still a great Aveyron soil, sitting 1,500 feet above

sea level. It's an acidic sandy loam that's easy to cultivate. More importantly, we now have water autonomy, thanks to a spring-fed well and a 100-foot well that we had dug to fill the pond." Sylvain even managed to increase his soil organic matter content, from 1.5% to 4.3% between 2017 and 2021, after he consistently added green waste compost to his beds. This organic matter mineralized the soil and made it easier to cultivate, which in turn improved weed management and increased yields. With better soil quality and more water, Sylvain's sales shot up from €44,000 (US\$48,000) in 2018 to roughly €75,000 (US\$81,000) in 2022.

A marketing approach that relies on two weekly markets

Les Jardins de la Valette is divided into 7 plots that are in a 7-year rotation, with each plot containing 12 beds. The 6 greenhouses are in a 6-year rotation, each containing 7 beds. "Here, we don't heat the greenhouses, our climate is more forgiving in that respect, and we start going to market one month earlier, in April. We plan everything so that our last vegetables will be sold at the end of December. Then, we empty our greenhouses in January, clean them, and immediately fill them with plants ordered from organic nurseries: mâche (corn salad), lettuce, cabbage, spinach, beets, arugula, turnips, radishes, Swiss chard, fennel, parsley, pac choi cabbage, kohlrabi. After a one-month break in February, I start again in early March with seeding and planting."

With the 20 or so crops that reach maturity at the end of March, Sylvain can stock a beautiful farm stall in early April. He brings this produce to his flagship market in Limognes-Quercy, in Lot, and to a "very promising" market that he just recently joined in Villefranche, in Aveyron. "Until recently, I had been selling CSA boxes, but I decided to give that up because it takes a lot of effort for mixed results, especially with a rural clientele. I prefer to focus on this second market, because I like the atmosphere around the stalls and the relationships I build with customers and colleagues."



KEY DATES

2010

One-month internship
at La Grelinette

2008

Trip to Australia and
New Zealand, discovering
Eliot Coleman's methods

2012

Starting up on 1 acre
of family land in Aveyron

2017

First time Sylvain
earns minimum wage
Setting up in a second
location, after purchasing
farmland and a home

2022

Joining a second market,
€75,000 (US\$81,000)
in sales





THE BIOINTENSIVE SYSTEM, ACCORDING TO SYLVAIN

This model changed my life. It is a mindset based on organization and planning, and this approach to overall farm management makes it super efficient. The ultra-rigid and structured model speaks to me, it works for me. It allows me to maintain my family life, earn a decent salary for 40 hours of work per week, and enjoy

two months of vacation per year, one month in February and four weeks spread throughout the year. All this without a major cash contribution and few loans. If I hadn't gone to Maude-Hélène and Jean-Martin's farm, I probably would not have become a market gardener. I was familiar with permaculture and grew

crops according to those principles, but I didn't see how I could earn a living doing that. With the biointensive system, I realized that it was actually possible. In future, I want to be more efficient every year, stay the same size, and continue doing what I enjoy.

SYLVAIN'S ADVICE

For many people, it can be hard to stick to a model because everyone wants to create their own farm in their own way, even though it would be better to follow certain principles. It took me a decade to accept this and to apply the model a little more every year. There's always this temptation to run around, left and right; it's a mental game, you have to stay focused. Don't they say that "the greatest liberty is born of the greatest rigor"?

It's helpful to have multiple sales outlets from the start, even when your output is still quite small. By doing this, you'll be able to fine-tune your distribution channels and focus on the ones that are most efficient, most profitable, and easiest to organize. The diversified market gardening model really is best suited to direct sales. Things are more complicated with stores that push down prices to improve their margins.

Every season, I make a crop plan using open-source software. With this plan, I know what needs to be planted and where, every week, without having to second-guess myself. It tells me the crop successions I have to plant, which saves me time and ensures that I'll always have enough produce for my customers.











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