

**Clifford Scholz:** Hello everyone. This is the Farms for Tomorrow Podcast and I'm your host, Cliff Scholz. We're here today with Eric Kampe, an organic, no-till farmer in southeast Michigan. Eric founded the Ann Arbor Seed Company in 2012 and is now part-owner of the Green Things Farm Collective along with four other farmers. Welcome, Eric.

**Eric Kampe:** Hi, Cliff, thanks. It's good to be here.

**Clifford Scholz:** So, let's get right into it. You started your own seed company in 2012. Can you tell us a little about your background? And why seeds? Why was that the thing you were attracted to?

**Eric Kampe:** So I didn't come from a farming family. I was an engineer a lifetime ago. And I wasn't satisfied with sitting at a desk for so long. I wanted to work more with my hands, I wanted to work outside more. And I had a craving to have a more environmental career.

And I started volunteering on farms; I was living in Colorado at the time. And then I started working on farms. I just let it become a slippery slope. I found that I enjoyed the work and I started farming at Abbondanza Organic Seeds and Produce.

And I was there originally because they were an organic produce farm, which is something I was interested in. But they were also a seed-saving farm. And they were doing seeds on their own label, but they were also contracting with Seeds of Change.

So, anyway, that was my first exposure to seed-saving, and I just found it to be mesmerizing and beautiful. You get to see the full life cycle of the crop. You get to farm kind of at a slower pace, since the crops tend to be a full season. Some produce crops can be very quick: You're in and out and on to the next.

And it's pretty rare with seed crops. Usually, it's a longer game and that lets you get to see pieces of the life cycle of a crop that not every produce grower routinely sees. And I just found that to be really beautiful.

And so, when my wife and I moved back home to Michigan where we grew up, I thought it might be a time to see if I can start seed saving on my own here. That was the beginning of Ann Arbor Seed Company, which has carried me into the Green Things Farm Collective and today.

**Clifford Scholz:** I see. So, every farmer's first task is to find a piece of land to farm. And how did you manage that?

**Eric Kampe:** I had it easier than most. Land access can be real challenging for folks, especially if you don't have a lot of resources if you're not inheriting it from a family, if you're not rich. I got pretty lucky because I was almost immediately connected with a family that had a little extra land and were looking to host a farmer on that property almost immediately when returning to Ann Arbor. It was really a whirlwind for me.

So, we're moving back home, and we're looking for apartments, and a friend of mine takes me to this pop-up brunch that was called Selma Café. And it was hosted at a community member's house and it was a nonprofit. It was using the proceeds to kickstart other farming operations and it was the sexy thing of the moment.

Like, "Oh, you got to go to Selma Café. You're going to get a great meal, you'll see really great people — it's just fun." So, a friend took me to that, and I met Jeff McCabe there, who was one of the hosts. And he pointed me at Steve and Madeline Thiry, who were friends of theirs, who were my landlords for eight years, I believe, my farm landlords.

And so, it really felt wonderful to be so quickly embraced moving back to

a community and stumbling upon a small amount of land to farm almost immediately. And so, that was the land that I grew seeds on for Ann Arbor Seed Company for those years.

**Clifford Scholz:** You also grew vegetables for market on the property that you obtained that way?

**Eric Kampe:** Yes, absolutely. I started with 100% focus on seeds. And as I gained more experience working that land, I started doing more produce side by side. Because you really can, they benefit from each other, but also, it's just a lot to manage a farm. And so, I was trying to take it one step at a time if I could. But, yeah, we did grow produce there as well.

**Clifford Scholz:** It's an interesting part of the story that community was a theme right from before you even started, really. You met some people at a locally food-themed event, and then it grew from there.

**Eric Kampe:** Yeah, absolutely. Community is critical, it's central. You know, there's a lot of different ways to be a farmer. And the small farms that I know tend to be very community-centered because they're directly marketing. And so, you want to know your customer and you want to be a part of your community that you're serving. You want them to know you and know why it's worth cooperating with that farmer, supporting that farm.

If I was just selling to the corn mill as a commodity crop, knowing my neighbor, I think, would still be important, but I'm not trying to sell to them. For these small farms, these are CSA farms that are doing community-supported agriculture. They need to be integrated in their community, it's in the name. And these are the customers that you're selling to and these

are the people that are going to say, “Oh, have you talked to so-and-so chef?” Or, “Have you considered,” I don’t know, “such-and-such idea?”

**Clifford Scholz:** Local food has kind of a cachet it’s definitely developed over the last few years as a matter of public awareness. There’s local-food restaurants that specialize in serving things that have been grown locally. And there’s, in Ann Arbor, anyways, there’s also even local grocers who aggregate the produce from a lot of our area farms and make them available through their own storefronts. So, how does local seed fit into the whole local food picture?

**Eric Kampe:** You know, I think, in a lot of ways seed-saving, unfortunately, has become a niche. Or it’s uncommon these days. I think it’s actually really gaining in popularity in the last few years. But if you take a longer view, we’ve been losing the genetic diversity of the seed, of the produce seed that’s available to us, for generations.

As seed companies have done the “get big or go home” philosophy, the consolidation, and so it’s left us with just a small handful of mega-giants that are operating as a seed industry. And it used to be more commonplace for home gardeners and small farms to save some percentage of their seeds. And that’s become less and less common.

And that’s a part of why I wanted to do seed-saving. On one hand, it makes a lot of sense to consolidate seeds. Because they ship well, they’re lightweight. And so, if you want to plop one company down in the middle of the country and mail your seeds out to everyone and contract out the growing to only the regions in the country that are most suited, you can find the easiest, most profitable way to grow the crops. And then just be the only game in town and distribute it to everyone.

I mean, boy, that makes a lot of I guess, business sense. But when you start thinking about how important diversity is in our food, it doesn't make sense for us to just have a few big companies. And diversity is both in the perspective of the seed saver and the region that it was grown in and the biology of the seed.

Ooh, there's a little bit to unpack there. So, I would say every time you save seed, from the biggest operations to the smallest hand gardener, you're making a selection. You're choosing which biology you'd like to save and pass on to the next generation for that seed crop.

You're deciding, "Oh, this is the most vigorous plant, this is the most flavorful plant, this is the one that suits my farm, and it suits my culinary use. And so, I'm choosing this." And that selection is an influence on the genetics of that plant.

And over time, these varieties will adapt based on those selections. That's selective breeding. And so, if we have very few companies that are doing this, you have very few perspectives. We basically have a small number of large, profit-driven companies that are supplying large, profit-driven farms.

And not that "profit" is evil. But if that's the primary perspective, is to satisfy your shareholders, flavor's going to be lower on the priority list. But if this is someone in their own garden saving seed for their favorite tomato plant, flavor's going to be really at the top of the list; vigor and productivity is going to be at the top of the list. And just like their use: "Oh, this is the one I use for my famous pasta sauce recipe: That's my tomato."

And I think that's really a beautiful thing. And I think that's why seeds can be really complicated but they can also be really simple. Anyone can be a

seed-saver, and anyone can have that power to just say, “Okay, I’m joining this conversation between human growers and the plant species that we depend on to live.”

**Clifford Scholz:** That’s a big-picture consideration. And it also does inspire people, I think, or I hope it does, to connect with local seed producers like yourself. Because potentially, anyway, what you’re saying is that local seeds can be locally adapted to local conditions.

And you’re also, along the way, building relationships with the people that you’re buying seeds from, building community locally as you do. So, that’s a beautiful vision. And then you went forward and became a farmer. How did your practice grow over that time? What worked?

**Eric Kampe:** So, I started off small, like you ought to, I guess, the advice that no one takes. But the land that I rented in 2012 was three-quarters of an acre. And I wasn’t even attempting to farm the entire property in my first few seasons.

I quickly realized, well not as quickly as I’d like to in hindsight. I started to realize that water was my challenge on this property. And so, I had gotten my first real exposure to farming in Colorado, where it was pretty dry. And we were able to run irrigation, but it was a whole different game.

And here in Michigan where the water falls from the sky, the reality of the land that I ended up with was a heavy clay with a high water table, and not really an obvious drainage. And so, for the first time, I was seeing water as a problem of having too much of it. And so, I struggled with that for quite a number of years. I think that was the big issue of learning to farm once again in Michigan.

**Clifford Scholz:** So, how does that show up if a farmer’s having issues?

What did you see that's like, "Uh-oh: I've got to do something about this"? And is there something that you did that might help other farmers who are facing similar issues?

**Eric Kampe:** Yeah. It hits you over the head like a mallet when you have a big rainstorm, and your crops are literally under water. But it also gets you in subtler ways. If you have a part of your field that has frequent poor drainage events, or frequently has a high-water table, you end up with an anaerobic zone in your soil, or a shallower soil.

You could have soil that should be six inches or a foot deep, but that low six inches of it is always wet. And that can be exacerbated by compaction. And I think it affects the general soil biology of that. So, that ground can dry out after the storm is over, but it's still stunted, you know?

And I went through the process of getting a soil test and I made sure to get a soil test on the best parts of the farm, and then specifically a soil test on the worst parts of the farm. It was a small farm, so these "best" and "worst" parts are near each other.

And the soil test came back the same, leading me to guess that it really had to do with this water issue. The mineral component of the soil wasn't different. But the biological part was different because this low wet spot was just getting choked out through anaerobic conditions periodically.

**Clifford Scholz:** In our introduction, I described you as a "no-till organic farmer." How did no-till practices fit into your solution for the problems that you faced on that piece of land?

**Eric Kampe:** I started exploring with some of the techniques that are involved in no-till organic farming pretty early on, before I even really knew that's what I was doing. And so, I guess to be clear, I'm following a

no-till method that is often called “the deep compost mulch” method.

And you can see that described. There’s several books. I know Andrew Mefferd has a book, and Daniel Mays has a book. There’s a great podcast that Farmer Jesse does: The No-Till Market Gardener Podcast. Folks can learn more of those details.

But it uses several techniques. You’re smothering weeds, or controlling weeds, with occultation, or a dark tarp, or a silage tarp; and you’re using an applied compost as a deep mulch to be a barrier between your soil and the sunlight to protect it from the sun, the wind, and the rain, but also to block weeds, to keep weeds below them, and as a medium to transplant or to direct-sow your seed.

It encourages the use of a broad fork if anything is needed for loosening the soil, something that’s less disruptive than tillage. The idea is to not break up the soil structure, disturb the existing biology in your soil, and to not bring the weed seed bank back up to the surface — to keep your soil covered at all times.

I was using pieces of this no-till strategy before I even knew what it was. I didn’t have a scale that it made much sense for me to invest in a large tractor. And so, it was hard for me to do tillage anyway, and I was already looking for alternatives.

I had to hire it out, and the timings were awkward. Someone had to come in and that space was hard to get to. It was just mechanically difficult for me to till. And so, when I learned that you can transition from weeds or, better yet, a cover crop using a black plastic that’s temporarily applied to smother out the sunlight and kill those plants, that was really helpful to me.



You know, I can drag a tarp over an area. I can wait an amount of time, kinda depending on how warm we are, what part of the summer we're in. And then when I remove it, it will be clean of weed life. And when I first was hearing about that, I was worried that I was going to pull a tarp and see this baked, scorched-earth desert.

But what you really end up seeing is this beautiful, not overly wet, but moist, soil. There's earthworms right at the top. The cover crop or weeds that you smothered: They're dead, but they look like straw; they're not overly cooked. And so, that was encouraging. And so, I started moving more and more into these practices.

**Clifford Scholz:** In 2019, there was an enormous amount of rain in the early spring, and it was dubbed the "no-plant spring" for many farmers in the country. And farmers were tallying up their losses due to the fact that they couldn't get their seed in the ground because the ground was too wet. So, how did your soil respond to that situation?

**Eric Kampe:** Yeah, yeah: 2019, the spring of 2019 was gnarly. It was wet. I think we got something like 25 days of rain in May. And a lot of those were one inch, and some of those were three-inch: It was really wet. And so, at this point I had built my farm into permanent raised beds. And I had made an intentional lower pathway that sloped the water where it wouldn't be destructive.

So, that was helpful. But I still had heavy clay soil that didn't like being that wet. The winter preceding 2019, I was thinking, "I'm going to lean into this no-till idea that I've been reading about." And you get all the books, and you got all your field plans and all your intentions. And then, honestly, I was scared, because I still couldn't wrap my head around how to completely replace all the services that tillage does with these no-till

techniques.

And I was going to chicken out. I don't know what I was going to do, but I was ready to chicken out. And then we got rain, and then more rain, and then more rain, and then more rain. And it didn't matter how scared I was: Tillage was not an option. You know, the implement would have just sunk in the muck, and then stayed there.

So, I moved into the practice of applying mulch and planting into it. And so, the condition of my field in, let's rewind to March, early April it had been cover-cropped preceding a winter-kill cover crop.

But those winter-kill cover crop, what happens is the winter kills them. And then before your spring planting date, there's this perfect bed of winter-killed cover crop and nothing else, but at the wrong time: like in February.

And then by the time you're ready to do your spring planting, you've got those early spring weeds: like chickweed, other cold-hardy grasses and mints. And they're not hardy, they're not established yet, but they're there. And if you were to try and just plant among them, they'd just dominate.

That wasn't an option. I knew putting a tarp over it then wouldn't be very effective, because it's quite cold then. If you've ever tried to tarp cool weather crops too early in the season, you pull the tarp off and they're just blanched, but still alive.

So, I rolled out paper or cardboard, which was an option at my scale. And then I put about an inch of compost over top that. And I did the pathways in wood chips mostly just to help the wheelbarrow get in.

And then I was transplanting my spring greens through that layer of

compost with a paper or cardboard mulch under it. And it worked beautifully. That thin layer of paper or cardboard was enough that none of those early weeds were able to survive: They couldn't push up through it.

But coming from above, anything I transplanted, or even something I direct-sowed: It had the power to push down through it from above. And so, you know, we were either troweling through it or, if we had enough material, just letting the plant establish and then grow through it on its own.

And so, this was a year when all the big boys, the big, agronomic farms couldn't get their machines in, not a chance. And then my peers, other small farms: They also weren't able to meet their spring planting dates. But we could work rain or shine.

And lettuce, in particular, seemed to really appreciate basically growing in compost. And I admit that it's materials-heavy, and it was tiring. Because I didn't have the infrastructure in place at that time to move these materials. I was moving them with a wheelbarrow. But it really opened my eyes that getting bullied by the weather in the spring, it was nice to have a way around that.

**Clifford Scholz:** You're now cultivating with your farm partners, with the Green Things Farm Collective. You're working a bigger piece of land. I'm wondering about the scalability of no-till. And anything that you could share with beginning farmers or established farmers who are looking to incorporate this practice?

**Eric Kampe:** As a small-scale market grower, I've really appreciated the no-till techniques. And I think for the farms that are in the one-acre, two-acre range, I think it's almost a no-brainer. It really works well with these

human-scaled farms or farms that want to be very square-foot intensive. I think there's a lot of practical use for that.

But now, like you were saying, Cliff, I've joined with some other growers, and we're doing about three and a half acres of vegetable field production and we have some large hoop houses.

And we're looking to grow. We're looking to increase that size a little bit. I think it still is possible to move things around with wheelbarrows at that scale, but we're using machinery at that scale. And I don't think it changes the appeal to no-till at all.

We have a lot of pathway. Our pathway is 30-inch, and our bed spacing is 30-inch. So, that means that our farm is 50% pathway. And when I first saw that I was like, "Ooooph! That's a lot of pathway." And that's to get the big tractor tire down to fit the machine down the row.

But as I came to see it, I actually kind of appreciate it now. When you have full-grown crops in the swing of the season it gives them more breathing room, it gives them more space. Think of not just the seedling, when it's first planted, but the full-grown, cauliflower or trellised tomato. Having that extra path space isn't so bad.

Since we're doing a no-till method, we're not ruining these paths every year and remaking them every year. We're making them once, and we're maintaining them. And so, we're only adding fertility to the beds. And we're only really focusing on the beds. So, while it does feel like a big waste at first, I think it works out pretty well.

So, that lets us get machinery in. And so, we have a John Deere front-loader tractor that can use PTO implements. And we have a couple other tractors that can pull equipment through the field. One of the challenges

with no-till, at least at first, is material-handling.

And so, I mentioned those big pathways: Those are all wood-chipped. And they're all wood-chipped pretty deeply. And so, we had to move all those wood chips. Our growing space, we're mulching that with compost, and we're doing that quite regularly. And sometimes we're doing an inch but occasionally we're doing more than that. And sometimes we're on top of that compost, we're putting other mulches. We can source a leaf mulch or something else to just keep that soil as covered as possible.

But it all adds up to a lot of material handling. But with the equipment, you can find ways to make that farm more and more efficient. So, first we were shoveling material out of the bucket of the tractor. So, the tractor would drive in reverse down the beds, and you'd have about a yard of material in the bucket and two people would pull it out with shovels.

You can get a skillset about that, and you can do it pretty well. And we did a huge amount with that method. But it eventually became clear that we can optimize further. Quickly we learned that we can use a dump trailer with a baffle installed in the middle: So, it's just a board that was screwed in the middle.

And so, when the dump trailer did its normal dumping mechanism, that baffle blocked wood chips, so they would only fall off on the sides behind the wheels. And we were using that to help us apply wood chips in the pathway. And we liked that, but it's a little messier than we'd like. We found it's really important to keep the wood chips in the path, and the compost in the bed. And if you have a few inches where it's a fudgy gray area, it's sort of both; it's not ideal.

**Clifford Scholz:** This is a recent innovation that you developed with

other farmers at the Green Things Farm Collective, correct?

**Eric Kampe:** Absolutely. And it's the kind of innovations that I couldn't have done on my own. I'm mechanically minded enough to get myself into trouble. But we have some team members that are actually really skilled and that's the benefit of working with a team, is we all have our strengths and weaknesses. And having someone that, you know, a puzzle that I would scratch my head at over a year, and then make some expensive mistakes someone else can look at that and be like, "Oh, well, you just need this and that."

And I'm like, "Thank you very much! Let's do that, then." One of our farming neighbors was exploring using a manure-spreader.

And they were using it, actually, to apply their wood chips. But we started using a very small compost-spreader. And normally the way these work is they just fling manure out the back. And we built a wooden baffle over the back of it and so instead of flinging it every which way, it hit the baffle and then dropped right on our 30-inch bed.

And so now, instead of having three people: one person driving the tractor and two people working shovels, one person can pull this single implement and spread compost. And it does a nice job. Or, if we're really in a pinch, we can have two people: one person running compost back and forth with the loader, and another person driving a second tractor pulling this spreader.

And in that mechanism, we can add compost really quickly. As fast as I can get compost out to the field, we can spread it. So, when we're doing a no-till bed flip, we've got our previous crop harvested and our beds clean. And we're going to add our amendment, we're going to do our broad fork,

and we're going to add another inch of compost, and then we can plant that day.

**Clifford Scholz:** With this transition to a collective farm, you've upped your game in a lot of different ways. There's a whole story there that I think young farmers, and farmers who are looking to build a stronger business, might learn from. Can you give us a sense of how that started? Where the idea of farmers getting together and farming together under an LLC: Where did that come from? And how did you do it?

**Eric Kampe:** So, this really ties us back to community that you were talking about before. We are lucky enough to have a really generous community of small farms and farm advocates in the area here. And we've been getting together routinely and sharing solutions and commiserating and trying to figure it out in a very community-minded, cooperative sense. And I think that's a real treasure, I think that's really important.

And so, I think, thanks to that I think I can credit all of the people I ended up with. I know Hannah who was running the Land Loom, she had this thought that, "Hey, you know, maybe we should talk about going together and farming as a group."

And her and I had spoken previously about doing some kind half-measure, where we would both have our own farm, but we would market together. And it seemed like it was a good idea; it seemed like it had some traction. And then the growing season happened, and you just get swept away like you do.

And then it's like, "Oh, it's winter again: Whoops, we didn't do it." So, it was the fall of 2019, or maybe the late summer, Hannah started floating

this idea. And it made sense to me, and it made sense to our friends at Green Things. And that would be Jill, Nate, and Michelle.

And so, the five of us got together at Green Things Farm and started talking about what it would take to farm together, to farm collaboratively. It felt to me like the first stage of this process was more like therapy. And then the later stage was more like starting a business.

And what I mean by “therapy” is, first of all, this was in the middle of the growing season and we were all tired. And we were also all admitting to each other that the thing we were currently doing, which was running our own small farm business, was maybe not working, or was struggling, or wasn’t fulfilling in some way.

And that’s hard, you know? That’s hard to admit. You know, it’s something that you care really deeply about and it’s sort of scary, a little bit. These are friends, but they’re also, to admit to someone something that personal.

And so, it took a few meetings for us to just sort of talk that piece of it out. And think, “Well, well, you know, could it be better if we were one business?” And I think it became clear at that point that it was important not to do what I had called earlier a half-measure, something where, we’re all still our own farm.

I could have imagined a path where we all farmed on the same property but we kept our own businesses, and we negotiated a schedule for shared infrastructure. That could have gotten really messy. And so, we started a new business: We formed an LLC. I think the structure of the business could be whatever it needs to be. I know you can form an LLC that is singularly owned. But you can also form an LLC that’s collectively



owned.

And so, we formed an LLC that we each owned equally. You have to put in some money in an equal amount. And then you just form this new LLC. And then that new LLC that we all owned purchased our existing businesses, I guess from ourselves. I hope that's not confusing. But the reason we did it that way is because then we all, from the beginning, owned this thing equally.

**Clifford Scholz:** So, essentially, you formed an LLC which then you became owner of, and then you had to take this, perhaps somewhat scary, step, I'm guessing, of selling the businesses that you had created to this new entity that you had also collaborated with, with your new business partners. Does that summarize basically what happened there?

**Eric Kampe:** Yeah. And it is scary. We weren't professional lawyers. And so, we did this with the benefit of a lawyer that was actually a member of the community, the partner of a local farmer that we knew. And so, we had this amazing resource of someone who was able to work with us.

And much like my earlier example of something mechanical, the five of us were feeling very daunted by this. Like, "Oh, geez, how do we even do this?" And he's like, "Oh, it's easy. You just, here, I'll just draft up the thing. It's real standard."

And it was like, "What a relief!" And so, we still had to do the hard part, which is come up with an agreement on how we were going to run this business, how we were going to resolve conflicts, how were we going to actually farm together? Which is still a work in process, of course, and always will be.

But the paperwork side, having a lawyer that can do that, and someone who is hired to work on behalf of this new farm entity: So, he had the interest of this, he cared about our success. And so, I think that was really valuable.

It got us to our first season: How about that?

**Clifford Scholz:** So, were there any models that you worked from, as you looked at the options that you had collectively, that helped you decide on the LLC? What are some of the other things that factored into that decision?

**Eric Kampe:** I mean, there are, it's not super-common, but there are collaborative farm models. The one that comes to mind quickly, there's a farm in Quebec that's run by a group, it's a collaborative operation. I think it shares a lot of similarities to what we're doing.

And I had met Dan Brisebois because he's also a seed grower. I had met him at conferences, and we had heard through podcasts, heard of their seed-saving work, but also through their collaborative farming work. And he was kind enough to speak to us over the phone while we were preparing and giving us the benefit of his experience. So, I think that was very generous and helpful. So, there are models. It isn't super-common. Like we were talking about earlier, farmers are very independent.

**Clifford Scholz:** Suppose somebody's saying, "I've been at this for a while, and this sounds interesting." What's the one or two or three pieces of advice for someone who's even considering doing this that you would give to say, "Yeah, if you want to succeed, if you want to give it a try, do these things"?

**Eric Kampe:** Think of it like marrying these people. It's a serious

relationship; it's a serious commitment. And so, the strength that we had going into this is we all knew each other, and we all trusted each other's commitment to the same core values.

We spent time coming up with a mission statement. And so, I think it's enormously helpful to have this deep trust in the heart of everyone that you're working with. Because I'm not their boss and they're not my boss. We're co-equal owners of this thing.

And also, farming is very, very challenging as a career. But one of the bright sides of it is the people that are involved are deeply invested and passionate. And that's a real asset. Goodness, I get to meet some of the hardest-working, most caring... honestly, I think that's one of my favorite things about being a farmer, is the quality of people that I get to meet.

But, man, we all care so much about this farm that we can be real pains, because you know, "How dare you disagree with me on my very, very passionate project?"

I was talking with a friend of mine, and he's not a farmer. And he goes, "It sounds like y'all are in a rock band. Y'all care very much. And every now and then someone has a tantrum and loses their cool. And we wonder, 'Is the band going to stick it out? Are they going to make it?'" It's maybe not that dramatic. We've never trashed a hotel room. Yet.

**Clifford Scholz:** I'm seeing that you've done work that is innovative in your farming that's grown out of skillsets that are coming together, and different experiences, and so on. You've also referred to the collegiality of a more satisfying work environment rather than just "goin'-it-on-your-own." How's the finances working out? That's a piece of what makes farming sustainable. It's got to be financially sustainable. So, how's that

working out so far?

**Eric Kampe:** So, so far, so good. That's a hard question to answer simply. But we met our goals for 2020. And had enough money to pay ourselves what we were intending, and to pay our crew, and to reinvest back into the farm.

And to have that in our first year feels like a runaway success. So, I'm really thrilled and optimistic. 2020 was a unique year. And we benefited from the extreme interest that people had, both in locally grown produce and in seeds in that year.

I think, 2020 was a hard year for so many people. And it's awkward to speak of the "silver lining." But folks were keenly interested in their local farms. And we dearly appreciated that.

So, financially, I feel like it can be possible. Our goals for paying ourselves are very, very modest. And we still do need to slowly but surely increase the amount of money that we take home at the end of the day before we could call it "a living wage." We're not there yet. But it seems within reach.

I think the no-till practices are going to help with that. We're seeing greater reliability in the crops that we plant. So just the chance that something that you planted gets to be a successful harvest, or that the yield of that successful harvest is profitable: that it feels more consistent.

There's still a huge amount to learn and to work out. And we're interested in that. But I also see us being in a pretty good position to see what worked from our growing season, and to increase our profitable crops and to step away from those that really weren't working.

These things sound really basic. But anyone who's full-time farming knows that sometimes you get so swept up in the season, you get to the end of it and you're like, "So, what even happened?" And maybe that's part of the strength of having five of us, is there is more of a chance that someone's mind is able to learn a lesson during the busy season, or to keep the right record.

I know when I was farming on my own, I often felt so overwhelmed, I was dealing with just what was right in front of me: "What is today's problem?" And that's not a good sign. Now that we can divide some of that burden, I'm more able to think long-term. "What are we doing in the next weeks or months or years?"

**Clifford Scholz:** So, we can add planning and record-keeping, and some of these other administrative shared functions that not only distribute the workload of, the administrative challenges, of running the farm. But they also make sure that balls don't get dropped, and may keep the right kind of records, and notice the right kinds of things, to make sure that the farm doesn't start to wobble. Is that what you're saying?

**Eric Kampe:** Yeah, sometimes it's as simple as that: If you're able to think beyond just today's problem, that's a good sign of like, "Okay, we're doing okay right now." And having five of us helps divide that mental workload.

I think non-farmers, not even just non-farmers, someone who hasn't run a small business might be surprised at just how overwhelming and how many different fields you have to be an expert in: How much of farming is spreadsheets and planning and marketing and website and the whole thing; it's a business.

**Clifford Scholz:** Were there any big surprises along the way?

**Eric Kampe:** You know, I don't know if it was a huge, huge surprise, but, boy, oh, boy, it takes a lot of communication to have five equal owners managing something. And that's the advantage of a more simple, top-down, you know, "I'm the boss: You do what I say or get outta here!" Like, you know, at least that was a quick meeting.

When there's five of us, we are all coming with our own perspectives and our own ways of listening and our own ways of hearing and observing, and our own priorities. And frankly, sometimes one of us will be really tired or really overwhelmed by something. And if you think of a normal farm year, where you could be working long hours or you could just be physically tired, and then add all the stresses of a COVID year and a year with a lot of upsetting political news, it really does feel like being kind to each other and being good communicators is really at the core of running the business.

**Clifford Scholz:** Looking forward: Is there anything that you're considering doing different or changing for the upcoming season?

**Eric Kampe:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. In all of those fields, we're looking to continue to get better. And so, I could certainly grow as a communicator myself. And so, being better at listening and speaking with my team, for sure.

We're also improving as growers. These no-till practices, we're a couple of years in, and that makes us beginners. And so, there's a huge amount to learn as we go forward. And I think the practices will change. Those first years are establishment. And then the later years are more maintenance.

And so, what does that transition look like from a soil health and a soil maintenance point of view? I'm really excited to learn about that. And then marketing is maybe the most important part of any farm. And so, how is that going to change?

You know, COVID was the big upset of this last year. And what are the changes that we need to do to stay relevant, and to stay serving our community the best we can with the best food? So, I don't know... I could go on and on. There's so much we need to do; we'll never be bored.

**Clifford Scholz:** As you look at your community outreach, how's that shaping up? How are you building community around your farm and how does community support your farm?

We've got a sense now of community that's happening even within the farm, because of the structure you've created. How does your farm interface with other farms and farmers? And how do you also connect with your various customer constituencies?

**Eric Kampe:** Oooph! So, we're all looking forward to a day where we can hug our friends and have more on-farm events. Obviously, this last year was isolating in that way. I used to organize a once-a-month Farmer Beer Night. Where it was just a casual invite. It was located at a different place every month. It would be at some restaurant or bar in the community. And it was an opportunity for people to just get together.

There was no agenda: It was just, "Hey, let's just be a community." And that halted when it wasn't safe to do it anymore. And I'm very much looking forward to getting back to that. We would love to have on-farm events at the property. Like these would be dinners and CSA events. That's community engagement.

**Clifford Scholz:** Going back to your Farmer Beer Nights, how did you organize that? What were some of the benefits that you saw from being an organizer of a social event like that?

**Eric Kampe:** First of all, I kept them real simple. I was busy and didn't have time to make a big hullabaloo. It was an email list that I invited anyone who was in our community, close enough that they'd want to drive down here, and who considered themselves to be a farmer.

And I let that term be as broad as anyone wanted it to be. I really feel like there's a lot of ways to be a farmer, and it's not my job to decide who's "authentic" or not. All I would do is pick a place once a month and send an email out.

And folks would show up and socialize. Like I said, there was no agenda. You could hang out in the corner with a friend, or you could mingle and meet as many new people as you wanted. You could use it as a place to complain about the weather, or to ask how other folks were doing.

And I liked that piece of it, leaving it kind of unscripted. I didn't have time for a lot of management, and I don't think there was need for it, either. And in a way, it sort of self-selected. The people in our community who felt that the community was worth sharing with were the ones that showed up. If you personally wanted to be grumpy and not neighborly to your other farmers, well, you still got the email and you were welcome just the same. But we didn't end up seeing you as much, that... that's okay, too.

That's always been my philosophy, is that, if I'm at the Farmers Market and I look across the aisle and there's another farmer, and they've got the same products, the same produce, I really don't like falling into the trap of seeing them as my competition. Because the real competition is to



broaden the community awareness of the good food that we can grow.

So, the way I figure it is, if I have a farm that really grows lettuce, for example, well, and we find it profitable and rewarding, and if I grew more lettuce than I can sell, then my job changes from growing lettuce to selling lettuce. Like, that's seems pretty obvious. And so, I'm looking for more markets or more restaurants or more people that want a salad. Well, if I grow lettuce and you grow lettuce, and we together are growing more lettuce than we are able to sell, then our job is to get together and work on how to sell lettuce. And at least that's how I see it.

**Clifford Scholz:** Does the informal socialization turn into more formal business relationships? Or do the informal friendships that you're developing lead to specific ideas that you can implement on your farm?

**Eric Kampe:** Absolutely. I think the lame way to put it is "It's not what you know, it's who you know." But I think a better way is one of the farmers in our community, Richard Andres of Tantre, he describes it as "social capital."

I think it's so valuable to have a good network of your peers and your friends and other farmers and people in the food industry. But I also think that extends to your customers at the Farmers Market and your CSA members and just the person that lives down the street.

Because you really don't know where that connection's going to come from. And if you have a community of people that are rooting for you, and that you're rooting for them when they come across a new chef that's looking for lettuce, they're going to point them your way.

And when you realize like, "Oh, you know, my farm's really not the right fit for this opportunity, but I can think of two or three others that you should

call right away.” And if we all have that mindset, because, like I said, it is really a small percentage of the food economy is going to local sources.

So, the competition isn't each other. It's really this awareness of how good this food can be. But also, the willingness to go that extra mile. A lot of chefs are excited about local food. But they have this really easy global supply chain that is available to them.

And so, it really does take someone that wants to do that extra effort and so making those connections. And I think the next frontier for small farming is finding ways to enter that middle space between a small market operation and this mega international supply chain, globalization. And there's a lot of space between those two scales. But if we want to sell food you know, to small institutions, or to have basic processing. There's a lot of work to be done.

**Clifford Scholz:** And we haven't even talked about online, does the online thing make much of a difference? How does it fit in your organization?

**Eric Kampe:** This is a piece of it that I don't have a strong, natural strength in. But the web is absolutely important. It's a piece of marketing. You know, we have a website that describes our farm and lets people learn about us and connect with us.

We're also selling direct-to-consumer online. I've been doing my seed pack sales that way for a number of years. But when we first organized as the Green Things Farm Collective, when we joined forces one of the goals right off the bat was to explore an online market platform for our produce.

And we chose Barn2Door, as a third-party software package. It allows us

to make a market space, basically, online. And then COVID hit. And it was obvious that this is the perfect response to a terrible crisis, was, “Oh, we really need to step back from our face-to-face interaction, even though that’s so lovely to get to meet people. And how can we provide people with good food in the safest way possible?”

And so, the routine, for that, became our crop manager would see what’s in the field and they would update our online listing. Customers could shop online and then we would package it up for them. It was twice a week and they could pick it up from our farm stand. Or we’d take it to the Farmers Market, if we were attending.

And that way, especially with the farm stand, they’d have a contact-free way of getting this produce. The only people who’s handled it is us. There’s no distribution, there’s none of that. You know, obviously COVID was a challenging year. But we’re already used to food safety and handling.

So, everyone’s got to wash their hands. We’re like, “Yeah, we’ve been washing our hands. So, sure, we can still wash our hands with a mask on.” That made a lot of sense to us. And I think folks really appreciated it.

But it also works well for the bottom line for the farm. Attending a farmers market is actually quite costly because it takes a lot of labor hours. And doing this contact-free, like I said, it’s not as intimate, you don’t get to see people face to face. But it does sort of make sense from a business standpoint.

For example, our friends that are in the restaurant world, they had such a rough year for a huge number of reasons, but one of them would be, “Oh, sure, you can reopen. But you know, instead of having 100 tables, you’ve

got 25.” Well, that throws their whole business model out the window. That’s like, the very basics of how many people they can serve in a day. And it just doesn’t add up in the same way.

**Clifford Scholz:** So, looking at your, you mentioned you had a farm stand. And then you used this Barn, I think you called it “Barn2Door”?

**Eric Kampe:** That’s right.

**Clifford Scholz:** Barn2Door is a sales platform online to get people. That still meant, though, that community was onsite. I mean, you had people who were coming to you, which should generate some benefits just in the fact that you’re not having to carry everything offsite to go sell it somewhere. Are there other benefits to having community members show up onsite and on the farm?

**Eric Kampe:** We have a very good location. We’re located very convenient for our customers here in Ann Arbor. And so, it is very easy for folks to just come to the farm. The plan would be to have on-farm events. And, if you have someone visiting your farm, it is a perfect opportunity to build a real relationship with them. We’ve got a small herd of beef cattle, and you can go check them out, go see them. Or you could go for a short walk and just enjoy the beauty that is the farm.

And, you know, this obviously was a challenging year to do those things, so those were all put on hold. But having routine farm dinners and having events, community events: The merit of the farm is not just the relationship with our community members; the merit of the farm is the produce that we’re making. But it’s both.

And I think everyone benefits when you can meet the person that’s involved in the food that you’re eating. I want to attribute this sentiment to

Eliot Coleman, but I could be way off right now.

Maybe it's Joel Salatin. It's someone great.

It seems really obvious, but if you have a gigantic and broken food system, where the grower never has a possibility of meeting the eater, and the eater could never look up who the grower is, suddenly, you know, whatever, what's the difference? And that's really sad.

**Clifford Scholz:** I understand that, given the uncertainties it's hard to make plans, especially social ones. But is there anything that you could share about your upcoming vision of the future for a community engagement, whether on-farm or off?

**Eric Kampe:** Actually, I don't know. I might have to punt on that one. I think we're still figuring out the mechanics of this season that's coming. And we're not sure, like many folks what this years' going to be like from a COVID safety point of view, which is the big piece of this. Is everything going to go back to normal magically? Probably not. So, we're going to have to wait and see.

**Clifford Scholz:** Yeah, and at the same time I've never seen as much interest in small farms and farming as we're seeing today. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us, Eric. It's been a pleasure.

**Eric Kampe:** Thanks a lot Cliff.