

# **THE MARKET GARDENER: A SUCCESSFUL GROWER'S HANDBOOK FOR SMALL- SCALE ORGANIC FARMING**

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*April 12, 2021*

My barn has a split personality. On one side, you may not be surprised to learn, dusty in the gloom, carefully organized and stacked, are defensive implements of war, slumbering until the day of judgment. On the other side are implements of agriculture, for I also aspire, in the now, to be a peaceful gentleman farmer. That is, not a profit-making farmer, or even a farmer who sells anything, but someone who enjoys being outdoors and learning how to grow plants and husband animals (and bees). As I expand from simple garden plots to acre-plus growing, I turned to this book to expand my knowledge. I got what I was looking for, and I also was inspired to think about two closely-related topics: modern farming practices and fat people.

Of course, in agriculture even more than in most areas of applied arts, book learning is no substitute for experience. Not only are the variables nearly infinite, so that no book can hope to cover all situations, but any book with specifics is going to focus on one geographic area—in this case, southern Quebec, whose conditions are considerably different from my own Midwestern climate. Nonetheless, a well-written book such as this frames thought processes and offers data that makes the gentleman farmer's task easier. Or the market gardener's task, at whom this book is actually directed—someone who aims to make a living from selling quality produce to those who will pay a premium for it.

The core concept of market gardening is that some consumers will pay extra, and give up the convenience of buying any item at any time, in exchange for receiving the freshest, best produce (or other products, such as meat, though the author, Jean-Martin Fortier, produces only vegetables), often from a farm with which they are personally familiar and to which they have long-term ties. Fortier, a leading exponent of market gardening, sells his farm's produce at local markets, and also sells "shares" to locals as part of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, in which consumers at the start of each season purchase a share of the crop, and receive regular weekly bundles of produce throughout the

growing season. This is a subscription box model, really, though one developed long before the internet made the model ubiquitous.

Fortier explicitly aims to encourage young people to consider market gardening as a permanent, full-time occupation. That's what he and his wife chose to do, in their twenties (he is now 43), and by his account it has worked out well for them. What does "well" mean? He gives figures for revenue and expenses, and it appears that his family clears around \$70,000 (Canadian) each year, or did in 2013, when this book was published. But he also gets three months off in the winter, he's his own boss, and he gets to listen to the birds when he works. Certainly, this is a far more healthy lifestyle, physically and spiritually, than the vast majority of jobs young people take now.

Market gardening isn't a spiritual quest, however. It's entrepreneurship, and should be viewed as such. In today's culture, entrepreneurship is thought of mostly as a way to get rich, and that's certainly how I thought of it when I was running a business. I've offered detailed thoughts on entrepreneurship before, through my own lens, but we should remember that it's perfectly reasonable to bear the costs and risks of being an entrepreneur not because you want to get rich, but because you want to do something you enjoy and which helps accomplish other ends important to you. Certainly, that's why Fortier went into this line of work. But never forget, there are plenty of costs. The work can be quite hard, and entrepreneurship, of any kind, most definitely isn't for everyone. It's a good idea for far fewer people than the number who think it's a good idea, most of whom see splashy profiles of successful entrepreneurs and fail to count the costs, including that most entrepreneurs fail. The same is no doubt true of farming as a business.

How practical is being a market gardener for a young person in America? We'll talk later about how broad a consumer reach market gardening has, but sadly, being an entrepreneur, especially as a young person in America, is not easy, and harder than it used to be. For one, let's be honest, the Canadians do a better job in letting young people start their working lives without debilitating financial liabilities. To take the two major areas, college costs are far lower (Fortier went to McGill); you can't start a business when you must start paying back massive loans. And in America, you have to get health insurance, especially if you have a family, and individual policies are crushingly expensive. But

agriculture has many other disincentives to American entrepreneurs, even aside from that most people think “entrepreneur” means “tech entrepreneur,” so there is little cultural support for getting one’s hands dirty for a living. Prime among these is regulation, eagerly desired by large concerns in order to create barriers to entry. Stories are legion of “health” regulators shutting down small farm operations for ticky-tack violations (that may be a problem in Canada, too, but Fortier doesn’t mention it). Worse, though, for an agricultural entrepreneur, is that by driving down labor costs through importing illegal and legal immigrants, as well as “legitimate” methods such as economies of scale, big agriculture sets an expectation of low prices among consumers. Thus, I’m far less optimistic than Fortier about the practicality of market gardening as a career path for young entrepreneurs, even though I’m in total agreement with him about the upsides of it.

I wish it were practical. A substantial amount, probably the substantial majority, of jobs in America today have no value whatsoever; it is simply legions of “email workers,” in the words of Gord Magill, who churn paper while looking down their noses at those who work with their hands. Of course, people take those jobs because they allow the lifestyles desired today—Fortier says manual labor is pleasant, and I agree with him, but most people don’t, sadly. Far better to earn \$150K as someone working half days on Zoom at something completely ephemeral; that’s what the people want, or think they want. But if the alternatives were less risky, maybe they’d get more traction.

Anyway, the book itself consists of Fortier going through all aspects of his operation, from site selection and preparation through winter storage after harvest. *The Market Gardener* is, as I say, for those who want to make a living, a profit, from market gardening; Fortier focuses on crops that can be sold for high profit margins, which means primarily good-looking vegetables that can be identified by the consumer as fresh. That excludes quite a few crops someone with an extensive home garden might want to plant, such as potatoes. His highest revenue (and profit) crop is greenhouse-grown tomatoes, but he grows a wide range of other vegetables, from turnips to radicchio. Each of these is covered in some detail.

Almost all of his farm is set up in raised beds of standardized length (a hundred feet). This is only one example of how his operation is designed

for efficiency, something any entrepreneur needs to be aware of, but one sometimes ignored, especially because an operation (in any industry) takes on a life of its own, having to be immediately responsive to the many unexpected demands placed on a business. It's easy to get lost in the weeds and end up with a Frankenstein's monster of a business, and as the proverb goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so planning ahead is key.

His farm is an acre and a half of intensively cultivated land. This includes a heated greenhouse and two unheated hoopouses. Fortier uses no tractor or other large-scale mechanized implements; rather, he uses a walk-behind tractor that, with different attachments, cultivates thirty-inch raised beds, and a variety of hand tools for weeding, along with insect netting and similar aids made possible by modern technology. This is physically demanding, and in many ways complicated, involving complex schedules for planting and harvesting, as well as crop rotation, and for cultivation, cover crop planting, and similar necessary activities.

Although, as the subtitle notes, this is a book about organic farming, Fortier is not a purist. He doesn't use artificial pesticides, to be sure, but he uses petroleum, both in his small-scale machinery and in products such as insect netting. He uses manure from factory-farmed chickens. He rejects no-till (leaving plant debris on the surface rather than turning it under, and planting through it), and he gently sneers at those who claim that "proper balance" will eliminate weeds and insects.

So this is a great book if you want to learn; Fortier writes well, the graphics and illustrations are excellent, and the book is even an uplifting pleasure to read. I highly recommend it even if you're not considering any type of farming; it's interesting in its own right. But let's turn to what this book can tell us about America's approach to food.

First, is market gardening a concept that has broad appeal to consumers, as Fortier thinks? I am skeptical. We associate CSA and farm-to-table with Brooklyn hipsters because that type of person is the primary market; as with so many things, from buying made-in-the-USA products to exercising, the average person pays lip service to the concept, but won't inconvenience himself to do something that requires the least cost, in cash but even more in effort. (When our Peloton was delivered, before the Wuhan Plague, the setup man said that the vast majority of bikes are never used.) Fortier notes that "enthusiastic consumers ready to pay

a premium for fresh, organic produce are usually found in large urban areas,” which I’m sure is true, but even in urban areas such people are a small minority. Smaller towns also have some such consumers, but fewer, and Fortier admits that in rural areas, people tend to grow their own, and thus the market is extremely limited—not to mention that the distances in rural areas make selling harder.

This is just a subset of the broader modern fundamental food problem: that most people claim that they want fresh, healthy food, good wages for producers, and “food security,” yet they won’t pay anything for those things. The market gardener must locate that small set of people who will. This challenge is similar to that faced by airlines. Now, I have no love for airlines, and less love for the farce that is “service” on airlines, but it is true that most airline passengers won’t pay anything for service, even as they wail about it, instead gravitating to the very cheapest fares. However, with the magic of big data, airlines have successfully algorithmically sorted and separated those who are willing to pay, who self-sort out of a vast pool of consumers. That’s not possible, at least to the same degree, for the market gardener, necessarily limited in his geographic area. As a result, I suspect market gardening is not a viable career path in most areas—and in edge cases, there’s little way to find out except by trying, which can easily lead to entrepreneurial failure. I can’t think of a good solution for this, given the current culture.

Second, does market gardening provide broader social value? Fortier strongly believes it does, mentioning especially food security—that market gardens are not subject to the same supply chain failures that can affect industrial agriculture. I don’t dispute that such failures are possible, perhaps even likely. But I doubt if market gardening is the answer. Fortier’s products are extras—the amount of calories from his farm would only feed a handful of people, given that he produces no calorie-dense products. Food security only comes from growing grains, and it’s extremely hard to feed a modern town, much less a city, with small-scale agriculture of grains. And I’m all in favor of localism; among other benefits, as Fortier notes, it adds “resiliency” to a community, and I would add that it increases social trust, something in short supply nowadays. But again, it strikes me as quite clear that most Americans won’t actually take any actions that cost them anything to advance these social benefits.

This is especially true with respect to food because the unfortunate reality is that most people today are gluttons. They want to stuff their faces, six days a week and twice on Sunday, which is why most Americans are fat. Most people, instead of fresh tomatoes, want a BK Double Stacker King with a giant fries, and for no more than two dollars. This is terrible, and one of the strongest indicators of the spiritual decay of America. I'm not as hung up on the physical debilities produced by food as those on the Right like Bronze Age Pervert, but a diet of high fructose corn syrup, vegetable oils, and processed foods is certain to be damaging, doubly so when consumed in quantities grossly in excess of the body's needs, triply so when coupled with no exercise. It's therefore no surprise that eighty percent of those hospitalized during the Wuhan Plague were obese or overweight, probably a large part of why the Plague has been less damaging in Africa, where few people have the luxury of being fat.

Americans simply won't exercise basic discipline, even when the benefits are in no dispute. Much of the reason is that the social disapproval that used to apply to the obese has disappeared in most of America (less so among the rich, but even there it is mostly eroded), along with all the other beneficial social stigmas that used to exist. I, certainly, assume that any truly fat person I meet has a problem with discipline more broadly. Although there are certainly exceptions to this, several of whom are friends of mine, lack of discipline in one area of life correlates strongly with lack of discipline in other areas of life. We should bring all the social stigmas back, including those tied to obesity, and that'd help market gardening too!

And while the masses lack virtue in this respect, let's not forget that a lifestyle of solipsistic gluttony is also something desired by our globalist overlords, for us. They want us passive; they want us all to literally eat the bugs, live in the pod, take the drugs, and watch the porn, sedated and compliant, while they, of course, lead totally different, glittering lifestyles. Thus, they want food to be ever cheaper (which it is—the average American spends far less on food as a percentage of income than in the past). I don't know what Fortier's politics are; probably Left, but likely of the type of Left with which I largely agree. (I doubt if he thinks much of Justin Trudeau; he says market gardening "allows us to participate in society without being completely embedded in the

globalized economy,” and Trudeau is the ultimate empty-suit globalist.) Therefore, I can certainly get on board with widespread adoption of the program Fortier advocates; it’ll both improve virtue and undercut the oligarchy. As with so many things, however, I don’t see that being possible until there is a reset of social beliefs.

Third, turning away from consumer behavior, should we use the power of the state to reduce factory farming in favor of smaller-scale farming such as Fortier’s? I am violently opposed to factory farming of animals, which is an abomination. I don’t think animals have rights, but we do have duties with respect to animals, and treating animals cruelly so Americans can eat large amounts of cheap meat is terrible. Meat should be vastly more expensive than it is, and under Foundationalism it will be, because factory farming of animals will be outlawed. But what of industrial-scale crop agriculture, in part the fruit of Norman Borlaug’s Green Revolution, the triumph of Wizards over Prophets, of technology overcoming natural limitations?

I think we should distinguish between aspects of industrial agriculture. For example, simply because modern agriculture is done on a large scale, with expensive equipment, and has therefore eliminated the family farm as an option for most (though obviously Fortier is in a sense trying to bring it back), is not inherently bad. An increasing population (or, rather, increasing for the moment) almost certainly does need the efficiencies of scale that come from mechanized farming. True, smallholders have been the backbone of most successful societies, but that doesn’t mean we can artificially create smallholders. On the other hand, the massive use of herbicides and pesticides, monoculture crops, and genetically-modified crops must necessarily have costs as well as benefits, and our warning antennae should perk up when we are told there are only benefits. Not to mention there are some activities that have only costs, but those costs are invisible because delayed, such as the destruction of aquifers by irrigation, or invisible because we are lied to, such as the diversion of cropland to produce the fraud of ethanol. Big agriculture, desirous of cheap labor, is also, as I say, a massive proponent of illegal immigration to the United States, something that has been hugely destructive of the American working class (and something I intend to cover in more detail in a future discussion). Thus even in crop farming, the giant corporations who dominate industrial agriculture,

both as producers and as the direct consumers of farm products, are the enemies of a decent society, something that has become increasingly evident in recent years.

I would, and hopefully will, destroy these corporations and take several other actions, addressing the concerns above, that will necessarily raise the price of food, but are required to rebalance our society's relationship with food. Market gardening may not become the dominant paradigm, but we'd all be a lot better off if it became a major paradigm, and for that to happen, the state will have to reset the balance of costs and benefits of today's agricultural system.