

Versatile Farmer Brown

Lisa Brown mixes ideals with business savvy to keep her New Brunswick operation thriving

BY JANET WALLACE

Lisa Brown packing beets for CSA members.

“If we’re not making a profit, a decent profit, we can’t continue doing it,” says Lisa Brown, businesswoman, farmer and active community volunteer.

Fifteen years ago, she opened a nursery outside Moncton, New Brunswick, to sell bedding plants to municipalities, stores and parks. Every year she invested much of her profit back into the business, Farmer Brown’s Greenhouse. As the number of greenhouses grew, so did her clientele and work force.

Fred Brown, Lisa’s husband, described by his wife as an air traffic controller but a farmer at heart, also works on the farm, as does her eldest daughter, Jessie (23).

The thriving business in bedding plants enables Lisa to fulfill her personal goals — creating jobs, providing food to many families and stimulating the local food economy through her volunteer work.

For years, Farmer Brown’s Greenhouses grew mostly ornamental bedding plants. Contract and wholesale accounts covered 80 per cent of sales. Now, plant sales are divided equally between contract and retail sales. Additional farm income is generated through vegetables sales at farmers’ markets, CSA (community supported agriculture) subscriptions and sales of beef, pork, eggs and poultry. The Browns have 70 acres of land, three of which are used to grow vegetables.

Bedding plants, generating more than \$50,000 per year, continue to produce most of the farm income. The season is short and intense. Most of the planting happens in March and April. Sales between mid-April and late June total about 8000 flats (each with a dozen four-packs), 15,000 pots and 1000 hanging baskets.

For cell packs and flats, Lisa starts almost all of the plants by seed. With the pots, three-quarters are planted with purchased plugs or liners (rooted cuttings).

The Browns’ five greenhouses, four of which have double-poly glazing and oil furnaces, while one is single-poly and unheated, provide 10,000 square feet under cover.

During the spring when the seedlings are young, two greenhouses are maintained at 65F at night. Later in the spring, when the plants are mature, the temperature is kept at just above freezing.

Two greenhouses are allocated for retail sales, three for contracts. In each one, the bench space is used three times between March and the end of June. “The more times you use the bench, the more profit you can make,” says Lisa.

Capitalizing on contract sales

In addition to the City of Moncton and Fundy National Park, she also sells plants to a hardware store, grocery stores and landscaping companies.

And while growing her business, she’s upped her business savvy. She now has a five-year contract with one of her large customers — much easier than dealing with annual contracts — and that client submits orders in December, giving her ample time to organize her own orders for seed and plant stock.

She used to feel obliged to offer lower prices for large contracts but over time she realized large contracts can gobble up large chunks of time, more time than retail and small wholesale orders. When she increased her prices for large contracts to account for this, sales were not affected. But the bottom line improved.

One price does not fit all; when orders become complicated, she charges more. Rather than getting frustrated by complicated orders, she makes more money from them.

Her business practices are evolving in other ways.

“Every year we have unsold plants,” she says. “I used to think it was a bad idea to throw out product, but I heard a speaker at a conference say that if he didn’t throw out a significant percentage of plants, he wasn’t doing a good job. That meant he was telling customers that something was out of stock and they would have to go elsewhere to find that product.”


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From late April until mid-July, seven days a week, customers can wander through the two retail greenhouses and pick up cell-packs of seedlings, potted plants or hanging baskets \$12-\$21.




Vegetable seedlings are outnumbered by ornamentals at Farmer Brown's Greenhouse.



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Selling directly to customers

From late April until mid-July, seven days a week, customers can wander through the two retail greenhouses and pick up cell-packs of four seedlings (\$1.45), flats of a dozen cell-packs (\$14-\$16), potted plants (\$2.50-3.95) or hanging baskets (\$12-\$21).

The checkout is in a shop containing a display of hanging baskets made of wire and moss or coir, ideal for impulse buys. When customers come to the till carrying plastic baskets, they pass beside the much more attractive ones. Staff will offer to repot the plants into the upscale baskets, which start at \$20.

Another service helps sell baskets and encourage repeat sales. Customers drop off their baskets in early spring and pick them up filled with plants four to six weeks later.

Vegetable seedlings represent only a tiny proportion of sales but some customers spend hundreds on flowers. "People pay more for a plant they can look at," Lisa says, "than for a plant they can eat. I have to go where the money is." Still, she plans to create display vegetable gardens "to show a mix of

vegetables and flowers looks nice and to encourage people to grow their own food."

Along with the bedding plants, she wants to sell the experience of coming to the farm. "Often, when retail customers come to pick up bedding plants, we end up taking whole families to visit the chicks and the horses."

Time invested has paid off. People who come to buy ornamentals end up joining the CSA. And, says Lisa, "people who garden are more likely to pay more for homegrown food — they understand the work involved."

From flowers to food

A CSA program Lisa started in 2012 now has fifty members. She also sells \$2000-3000 worth of vegetables and transplants at the nearby farmers' market.

The Browns raise laying hens year-round and two batches of Meat Kings (Cornish Cross chickens), followed by turkeys. The turkeys are a nice fit for later in the season. They can tolerate cooler temperatures better than the chickens can.



She likes providing healthy food for her community, but she won't let her food politics affect her decision to focus on bedding plants to generate the bulk of the farm income.

Lisa Brown walking through one of the greenhouses filled with plants for contract sales.

For the second year, they're raising Berkshire pigs on pasture and have started to raise Belted Galloways, a heritage breed of cattle. All the pork and beef was pre sold before the animals arrived on the farm. They brought in their pigs in July this year so they could supplement their organic feed with cull vegetables.

Lisa's goal is for annual vegetable sales of \$25,000. She likes providing healthy food for her community, but she won't let her food politics affect her decision to focus on bedding plants to generate the bulk of the farm income. She tracks costs and revenue to ensure the vegetables and livestock are profitable.

The vegetables do create a longer season for the staff — four to six full-time seasonal workers, as well as several students for occasional transplanting or harvesting. "Given the changes to EI (employment insurance), I want to give my staff an extended work season so they will stay," she says. "I have to keep my good people."

Communal lunches help create a positive work environment. Employer and employees take turns making lunch for the crew using locally grown ingredients. Over lunch, they talk and laugh, and plan their volunteer activities.

Lisa is the president of Foods of the Fundy Valley (FFV), a non-profit organization which links consumers with local food producers and teaches children how to grow and cook vegetables. Two board members work for her. Their workday sometimes includes helping with FFV activities, such as the school garden club.

Elementary students start vegetable seedlings in the greenhouses and they're later planted outside at the farm. In the fall, the students harvest and cook the vegetables and serve a meal to the entire student body and staff.

"It's great working with the students to create a school garden," Lisa says, "That's where the future lies. But we really need to focus on creating and supporting more local businesses."

Under Lisa's leadership, Foods of the Fundy Valley has created a buy local campaign including a brand, a map of local food producers and a 20-page newsletter promoting consumption of local food products. When not volunteering with Foods of the Fundy Valley or working on the farm, she coaches a girls' basketball team.

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