Daniel Gagnon

Broadfork Farm - Moseley, VA

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is October 8th, 2024. I'm here in Moseley, Virginia. If—do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Daniel Gagnon: Sure. I'm Daniel Gagnon.

Sarah Rodriguez: Great. When and where were you born?

Daniel Gagnon: I was born in Methuen, Massachusetts, October 14th, 1975.

Sarah Rodriguez: Tell me a little bit about your growing up. Who did you grow up with in your house? What was that like?

Daniel Gagnon: I grew up in, I would say, suburban Massachusetts, just right outside of the Boston metro area. My parents were city folks that had moved to suburbia. I grew up with three brothers and—

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Sarah Rodriguez: Where were you in the lineup?

Daniel Gagnon: Oh, I'm number two.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where are they now? Are they still up in Massachusetts?

Daniel Gagnon: Nobody's in Massachusetts. I'm the closest here in Virginia. Two brothers in Southern California, and one lives in Bangkok, Thailand.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit about—because we're a foodways organization, a bit what food was like growing up in your house?

Daniel Gagnon: Yeah. I think what was interesting and has been a big part of my food journey is that my parents were city folks. And my mom, who was the primary cook in the family, with Irish-American…so it was a lot of boiled vegetables, a lot of pot roasts, things like that.

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We didn't grow up with a lot of really fresh food, although there was some. But it was the '80s, so it was a lot of way—processed food was coming on the scene. There was a lot of that as well. Fairly bland, I would say, not fresh. [laughs] But I'm afraid my mom might listen to this, or hear this, or see the transcript, or what have you.

Sarah Rodriguez: What ended up bringing you—what was your story of coming down here to Virginia?

Daniel Gagnon: My wife and I met when we were doing an AmeriCorps program in the Pacific Northwest. We had both went there after undergrad, and we were doing an environmental program out there, mainly centered on environmental restoration.

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The Pacific Northwest salmon had just been put on the endangered species list, and so there was federal money going into salmon habitat restoration, which was not exclusively the projects that we were working on, but primarily. We did that for two years, each of us, in various capacities. And it was really interesting. We connected, fell in love during that time. We both came together with this desire to do good work, to be outdoors, and to be thinking about certainly an environmental ethic of, the world needs help, it needs improvement. What can we do with our bodies and our brains to make it better? That was the first time we got exposed to small-scale organic farming.

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Whereas before, I think if you had asked us what farming was in America, it was extremely large acreages. It was land that had been in generations for several generations. It was corn, soy, wheat, or food lots, or something like that. So, it never even occurred to us that farming was a career option until we saw some small farms in action, and we're like, oh wow, this is really, really interesting. It took a while for that idea and that possibility to incubate. That was in our early to mid-20s. And it just stayed there and was in discussions, and we would percolate, and we did some farming and gardening for about 10 years until we were able to make this place happen.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Prior to going to the Pacific Northwest, had you done any farming or gardening? Did your family have any gardens?

Daniel Gagnon: A little bit growing up, but only for a few years early on. From the family side, my wife's side was very much homesteading, so she got a lot more exposure to a big garden and goats and goat cheese and stuff like that. So, yeah, maybe she had a little bit more. I was like—it was the first place I had on my own after I graduated college, I had an opportunity to just grow a garden.

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I'm not even sure why I did it. It just seemed like a cool thing to do with my time. I just fell in love with the idea of just taking a seed and multiplying it into more food. I had studied botany and environmental sciences and biology in college. That was already starting to pique my interest and this idea. I just was fascinated with ecology and biological things, and getting

outdoorsy, going on hikes and backpacking, and doing adventure outdoor stuff. It was like farming was this thing where it took this interest that I had intellectually in biology and ecology, environmental science, botany, and then this developing love for the outdoors, and it came together into this gardening, farming, homestead brew.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Initially, early on, did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Daniel Gagnon: Oh, no, I had no clue.

Sarah Rodriguez: No clue?

Daniel Gagnon: Yeah. It was like, I was identifying values, not career. It took us, my wife and I, just that time to figure out like, we kind of know what we want to do in some general sense, and that was the dismissing of farming for a long time because it didn't seem financially viable, it didn't even seem like an option. But then, when we started to really investigate and look at, is there anybody actually doing it? Are they doing it in the way that we could potentially do it, which is to get small acreage and actually pull it off?

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Then, once we started finding some small examples of that, then we said, you know what? This is what we really want to try to do for an occupation. But it was this long time of a dream to some fuzzy potential to reality that took a while.

Sarah Rodriguez: Just to ask, where did you go to college?

Daniel Gagnon: I went to Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania.

Sarah Rodriguez: And then, you were in the Pacific Northwest throughout your mid-20s?

Daniel Gagnon: Just early, from about—I moved out there in ‘99, and we maybe stayed there for around four years or something like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Did you come immediately to Virginia?

Daniel Gagnon: No, then we went to New Hampshire. I was participating and working in an outdoor school up in Vermont. Janet was working on a nonprofit farm in New Hampshire.

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This was southeast Vermont and southwest New Hampshire, right where the Connecticut River divides the two, just north of Massachusetts, that three corners community there where all three states come together. We were there for a few years. Got married there. That was, again, we were seeing more small farms and honing in on our vision. Janet was doing the nonprofit stuff. The initial dream started, since we didn’t think we could ever do it as a for-profit, starting to think about maybe we could do something in that nonprofit world for a while.

Sarah Rodriguez: How long were you in New Hampshire?

Daniel Gagnon: Janet went to grad school, so we went to Massachusetts. We came down here 18 years ago, which is, what? [laughs]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Does it feel that long?

Daniel Gagnon: Our daughter is 17, and we moved here the year before. That’s how I always know how long we’ve been here, but then I need to do the math to figure out what year was that. That’s how long we’ve been in here. Then, we started the farm. This is year—is it year ‘16 now

or ‘15? It’s long enough now where I’m starting to lose track of the number of seasons that we’ve been in business.

Sarah Rodriguez: Had you bought this land right when you moved to Virginia, or had you lived somewhere else?

Daniel Gagnon: No, we didn’t. Janet’s family lives next door, and this place was for rent, so we rented it to be next to her family. Her dad was experiencing a medical condition. We wanted to be nearby. We were like, let’s just move down to Virginia. There’s not a lot of small-scale organic farms down there.

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Maybe that’s something that we can get into on the ground level and start—I mean, there were some, but the farmer’s market scene hadn’t really started yet. So, we saw it as an opportunity with like, oh, the growing season’s a little bit better, not as cold. Maybe there are some ways to make that happen. So, this property, we didn’t think we could actually farm here, but it was for rent, and it was going to give us time to get a job, get established, and then figure out what we wanted to do. Then, we just said, you know what? Let’s just make this place happen. So, we ended up purchasing it and going from there.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me about those early days of starting things up here?

Daniel Gagnon: Yeah. We really started from scratch. It’s just almost like a modern pioneer-type experience.

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It was an old farm, but it had overgrown with trees. So, we started with zero out buildings. Where we're actually growing a lot of our crops were some sort of either, I wouldn't call it a forest because it was pine trees that had grown up and where the farming had been maybe 100 years ago. We took those trees down, and then some really young, scrubby forest that we ended up, but that was probably half an acre or less. So, we started with really very little. We saved up money. We both worked full-time. We're saving up money. We had to save up money for a down payment to make that happen, and then the money to even get the business rolling.

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So, those first few years were part-time. Janet still worked full-time. I worked part-time. Then, I went to full-time farming, and then she went to half-time work. I think it was by year five where we were both full-time on the farm, five or six.

Sarah Rodriguez: What were you growing in those early days? How did you change this land to something that was more viable?

Daniel Gagnon: I think one of the things that makes the South unique to grow in is that the soil is, for the most part, relatively poor. The ice age glaciers never—so that's, I would say, the good and the bad. Having lived up in Massachusetts where there was glaciation at the last ice age, the benefit there was there was a lot of mineral deposits that made the soil better, more fertile for sure.

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I think that got us South is Long Island. So, Virginia didn't have that. And then, we've had a relatively wet climate. With a wet climate, you have nutrient leaching slowly over time, and thus the acidic soils that you tend to find. When we started, yeah, the soils, it was very, very hard to

grow anything, one, because we were inexperienced, but two, the soil itself was just naturally not very fertile. Part of that could have been also the history of the land. Folks have been here farming in Virginia not too long after the Jamestown Settlement, so early 1700s for sure. Whether that was happening on this part of the county, we don't quite know, but it was in the 1700s for sure.

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That type of early farming practices were degrading the soil even more with whatever natural fertility was here. And I don't think that's an uncommon experience for a lot of folks, especially new farmers to try to make something happen on a small piece of land because we don't have any money, and that piece of land being challenging to start with. That's what the early years were like. So, it took a while to build the soil. Those early years were about building the soil and learning what we needed to do to build the soil quickly here to make a living off of it.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you learn that?

Daniel Gagnon: Like books, books, books, books, books.

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It was really before the YouTube explosion of information happened, which is what's going on now. Lots of going to conferences. Anytime a local farmer was having a farm tour, we tried to get out and to see what people were doing, how they were doing it, what tools they were using, and stuff like that. And then, a lot of trial and error. Leaning on our scientific background that said, okay, we should be soil testing and thinking about biology, so looking at soil chemistry, looking at soil biology, trying to understand it from that perspective, drainage, aeration, all these things that we could influence and control, so being pragmatic about that.

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And then, just learning our little piece of the world, our microclimate, our soil here, the topography of it, how does it drain, where does the water go? I mean, those are all the things that everybody has to learn. Regardless of you're in the same climate or the same USDA zone, you still have to figure out your own little piece of land. So, yeah, it was scary. Certainly those first five years, we never knew whether we would even make it to the end of each season. Cash is coming in, cash is going out. Is it going out faster than it's coming in? Feels really close. [laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: How many seasons did it take before you were able to start making a profit on what you were growing?

Daniel Gagnon: Profit is tricky because we were reinvesting so much of what we earned back into the business to build infrastructure.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Did you start doing farmers markets?

Daniel Gagnon: Yeah, right away.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right away?

Daniel Gagnon: Yeah, because that's the easiest way to just get out there and without a lot of commitment, which is, I think, a great incubator for all small businesses, especially all types of food businesses. 'Cause farmers markets are amazing like that. You don't need to invest in a brick and mortar. You're not doing any sort of subscription. You need to show up and start selling without a lot of scary overhead. That's what we did right away. I think it was in year four where we started doing a CSA, Community Supported Agriculture-style subscription after we

felt much more comfortable having something that we could reliably produce. It was still very, very small at that point, less than 20 members or something like that.

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Sarah Rodriguez: What were you producing starting off?

Daniel Gagnon: A lot of greens, roots, and then of the vegetable fruits, tomatoes, summer squash, cucumbers, peppers, eggplants, stuff like that. A lot of that has stayed the same. We have continued to experiment with different types of crops, but for a small-scale market garden, market farm, which is what we are, there are certain limitations of crops that work well in this system. We don't do things like corn. We don't do large viny [sp] crops like winter squash, things that take a lot of space and a lot of time, no sweet potatoes because they're in the ground for a long time, but they're also really viny, so they take up a lot of space, whereas white potatoes can work, things like that.

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So, yeah, the winter squash, sweet potatoes, and corn. The one viny one that we really try to keep in the rotation and is challenging is watermelons just because it's so great and so delicious, and we want it too.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Could you tell me a bit about the growth that happened over time? I know you started getting into Ellwood Thompson's at some point. Could you tell me how things started growing once you were starting to get into the farmers markets and how it expanded from there?

Daniel Gagnon: We always had a long-term vision.

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I think the ethic that we brought to the land, which is, it's going to be slow. I remember us saying early on, we are tortoises, not hares. This is slow and steady wins the race. That was our mantra. Just keep on keeping on because there's so many failures that it can feel overwhelming psychologically. I mean, it's hard physical work, there's a lot of intellectual work to figure things out, but psychologically, it's just like failure, failure, failure. How long can I take this and still be psychologically well? That was broken down both in the farm side and then in the business, say, like sales side. And it was this interesting back and forth between figuring each one out. There would be this year where, oh my gosh, we can't produce enough to meet the demand, and then, we'd figure a bunch of stuff out on the farm, and then it'll be like, oh no, we can't sell it all.

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Each year required us to hone a different skill in a different area. But the primary ethic, which was on the farm soil side and then on the business customer side, was that slow and steady was building relationships, making connections. Each person that came to the booth or came to a self-serve farm stand, and the booth meaning at the farmer's market, was the potential to be a customer for the next 20 years. Whether we never saw them again or not, it was like, the potential is there. So, you might come back. We may see you again for a really long time. That's what we try to do, continue to do to this day, and then work backwards from there.

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If we wanted you to be a customer for 20 years, what do we need to do to have you as a customer? We need to be consistently good at what we do. Consistently good means really fresh, really flavorful, consistently available as much as we can in our climate and under our

constraints, really communicative, kind people that you want to see or be a part of. That's important because a lot of local farms especially were inconvenient. There's so much convenience in terms of, I mean, gosh, even now that didn't exist in terms of DoorDash and other stuff that brings food straight to your home, delivery from grocery stores.

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There's so much in the way of food convenience. Going to a Saturday farmer's market or going out to the farm to—come to the farm stand is a unique relationship, a unique opportunity. So, to earn that person's inconvenience in their life to make it worthwhile to be inconvenient, we have to be really good. Those are the kind of things that we have always kept in mind that we can try to do the best that we can juggling the farm and the diseases and weather and all that sort of stuff while trying to raise a family at the same time while trying to be financially sustainable. Those are all of the moving parts that I think almost every farm is negotiating.

Sarah Rodriguez: Tell me what the term regenerative agriculture means to you, where you came across it, how that term applies to the work that you do here, if it does at all.

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Daniel Gagnon: Yes. I think it was a slow trickle. We started where the predominant importance amongst certainly customers and farmers alike was organic. Organic was an input into the farm that either had to be animal-based, plant-based, mineral-based, and there were a set of standards that were followed. Now we're certified naturally grown, which is a different entity of certification that communicates to the customers that we're growing good, clean, healthy food, and follows the standard set by the USDA. It's just a different certifying process that's nonprofit-based.

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That communicates what the food is not. It's not contaminated with a chemical, pesticide, fungicide. There's no herbicide residue because it's not permitted for your weed management, and then there's obviously no chemical fertilization as well. Those are the things that organic—now, early organic had the ethic of soil building and land caretaking, but I think as it slowly became more mainstream, and it was a good and bad, we started to see organic products become way more popular into the grocery store, the idea of the farming processes behind it still started to then take a more industrial approach again. So, you could still be organic, but it really wasn't as soil-focused as it originally, I think, intended to be.

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So then, this idea of regenerative agriculture started to come along. I don't remember exactly when we started to deeply embody what regenerative meant and then how we started to incorporate it. That's partly because as we started to learn regenerative concepts, they just slowly started to make common sense for us that they just naturally got absorbed into the farm system and processes. I can certainly talk about some of the examples of that. But we knew we wanted to make the soil better over time. It would be like, how do we measure that, and how do we know that? And we started to know that qualitatively and quantitatively, which is, I think, interesting.

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So, I don't feel like at this point I'm super versed in like, oh, these are all the standards of regenerative agriculture because it's not something that I necessarily—like those sort of lists or whatever standards that some entity is creating that defines regenerative agriculture, but I know

that what we do is regenerative agriculture because both quantitative and qualitatively, our soil is getting better over time. It's substantially better than the way we found it. The crops are growing better. We're getting more yield. We're getting better flavor. All these things are happening slowly, sometimes not fast enough, over time. That's how I know we're doing it. And then I can go back and then look at the various checklists and be like, oh, yeah, that's what we're doing to make that happen.

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Some of those, we can certainly talk about that I do know and am aware of. So, yeah, we can talk about that too if you'd like.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, yeah. What are some of the things you've incorporated, whether because you knew that it was part of that or just because, like you said, it already made sense for what y'all were trying to achieve?

Daniel Gagnon: Starting with land that was severely degraded, to get it to grow anything, we knew we needed to build the soil back up. What did that mean? It certainly meant using the tools of soil-building, which is getting cover crops in there to just inject photosynthetic sugars back into the system to make minerals that may be locked up in the soil chemistry more available, which is one of the things that cover crops do.

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Also, if a cover crop is present and photosynthesizing, a good portion of those photosynthetic sugars are being put into the soil to feed biology because the plant knows itself that that biology is going to make the minerals available to itself. So, we know by doing cover cropping, we're going to be addressing the biological aspects of the soil as well. That was the beginnings of

recovery was using cover crops for that. But our cash crops can do the same thing. They're still photosynthesizing. They're still putting photosynthetic sugars into the soil. Then, it was a matter of, okay, the ball is rolling. How do we—and I should say part of the ball rolling, and like I said earlier, was addressing the biological and the chemical, and I use the word chemical in the chemistry very broad sense of the word.

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So, what does that mean? That meant, okay, we were looking at a soil test, and because of years of leaching and soil degradation in the past, we're really low on calcium, we are really low on magnesium, we are extremely low on potassium and phosphorus. Oh, it turns out we're really low on everything, micronutrients, macronutrients, trace minerals. So, we needed to address the mineral because even the cover crops struggle when there's no minerals there. We were even noticing that as well. Those were the two-pronged early approaches. And then getting compost and organic matter into the system early and often in absurd quantities, again, to make the fertility level high enough to start growing the plants that we needed to make a living.

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So then, there was this really intense building phase, organic matter, minerals, and plants that were photosynthesizing. Then, it's like, well, how do we maintain that and continue to build that over time? Those are some of the principles where we're protecting the soil. Soil, it's either going to be covered with some type of material. It could be plastic, it can be an organic mulch like straw or hay, or it can be a living plant. So, we're keeping the soil protected. So, all the work that we did doesn't get undone.

And then, tillage practices. We had to use tillage because the soil was so compacted and had some sort of residual hard pan. Some of that could have predated us, but some of it probably was caused by us when we had to clear land and had some heavy equipment on.

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So, we had to use some equipment to break up any compaction in the soil, and then to mix in all these minerals that were missing. They needed to be in that soil profile. They couldn't just be dumped on top. Some of the minerals do percolate through the soil profile, and some don't. We needed to mix those in. Then, after that, it's been a pretty minimal to no-till operation, so very little heavy equipment. I mean, tractors are used primarily to put compost on beds. Everything else is done with either very light walk-behind tractors or hand tools, so we're not doing a whole lot of soil disturbance. Then, we see how that has changed over time. Again, there's the quantitative and qualitative aspects of seeing that in action over a long period of time.

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Slowly, we start to see mushrooms popping up around. So, we know that we're not disturbing the fungal hyphae that are starting to grow, and we know their role is being able to increase root surface area. They're in a symbiotic, mutualistic relationship with the plants. This is mycorrhizal type fungi are the most famous for increasing the surface area of the root system. They can grab more water and more nutrients, but they're very fragile. So, if you're doing a lot of tillage, you can lose it, those cultures, so you have to rebuild them constantly over a year. But as we did less tillage, we knew that they were there because the mushrooms were starting to pop up in various places of the farm. Then, I would do little experiments where I would maybe do a little bit of

tillage following biological principles being like, okay, how deep are those fungal hyphae? How deep would I need to till to be safe?

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I would maybe just take a machine over the soil and just lightly till that first 1 to 2 inches and see what happened and be like, okay, sure enough. A month later, the mushrooms were popping up where I did that. So, I'm like, okay, that's a safe use of some tools, some mechanical cultivation. That was okay. That seemed to work. So, we knew regeneration was happening as we saw that. Other things that we saw that were really interesting, when we started farming and we were having to use tractors more to get the land ready, it was like any time there was a heavy rain, it was just mucky and muddy, and you couldn't walk in the field, or you would lose a shoe into mud. It was ugly and rough, and you could tell that we were being really hard on the soil.

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Since we've gone to no-till, we've seen this, like even after heavy rains, there's no puddles anymore. The water percolates in naturally. There's no doubt we are absorbing way more water with these practices than we would have otherwise. So, we see the land being able to tolerate periods of drought better, longer, so we're using less irrigation or even the energy required to use to fuel the pumps to send water out. All that kind of stuff is less demanding. Plant roots are getting deeper. Thus, the plant is more resilient. Even in times of drought or stress, they're doing better.

And I think I mentioned before, as the soil has gotten better, we see plant quality be better, yield be better.

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Plant quality, I would break that down into noticeably more flavorful. Some of the early plantings, they were really bitter and not very tasty. So, yeah, flavor has increased, I think, over time, just from my own experience, our family's experience noticing it, and then certainly paying attention to customer feedback and the ways in which we get that on a weekly basis that lets us know and reminds us that, okay, we think we're doing a pretty good job. All that, I think, also then relates to bigger picture stuff like climate change and extreme weather events and how these practices, I think, are helping us, pardon the pun, but weather the storm a little bit better when it comes to extreme weather events and things like that.

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So, not great. I mean, we just had a whole bunch of rain, very little sun, the farm is struggling, but we're still okay.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, that's good to hear. Could you talk a bit about maybe what have been some of the learning lessons that you—I mean, I'm sure there's so many. You mentioned that it's about being able to weather failures to be successful in this type of work. Can you describe any stories that stand out in your mind of challenges you've had to overcome in doing this type of work? I mean, I know that's 17 years of that, but anything that stands out?

Daniel Gagnon: Yeah, there's lots. [laughs] And almost trying to, like the challenges, bringing it down into a manageable chunks.

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So, COVID is obviously a really prominent and big example, which I'm happy to go into the ways in which we manage that. But I think what is like—and if I ramble, and you need me to get

back on track with an answer, just pull me in. Sometimes I'll go off on a tangent and forget that I'm not answering the question.

Sarah Rodriguez: You're good.

Daniel Gagnon: To be a diversified market farm, we grow lots of different crops. I mean, it's like, not even including varieties, but it's 40 or 50 different things.

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Each one has its own niche, different minerals that it prefers, also nutrient requirements, different growth habits, different diseases, pests. Early on, it was just like, oh my god, how can I learn all this stuff? Gardening, you just don't think about it in the same way because it's a good enough for who it's for mentality like, "I've got a few tomatoes, yay," or, "I got a couple of heads of broccoli. That was fun." But market farming was like, I need as much of this as consistently as possible for as long as I can grow it through the season, so as long as possible. I had grown all those crops successfully at some point as I was gardening, but then looking at them through this brand new lens was like, oh my god, this is so overwhelming.

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And when you grow enough of them long enough, the pests and diseases start to become a totally different story because we're helping to proliferate these pests and diseases, oftentimes by just giving them habitat over and over and over again. I just remember being so overwhelmed. There's this curve, I'm sure it has a name, and I've seen it in educational pedagogy, but if you're not challenged enough, you get bored. And you're over-challenged, then you're freaking out and can't learn. So, either, on one extreme, you're too bored, you're not interested, you're not

learning, or it's just too much information, or it's too hard, or whatever, and you're just too anxious and not able to concentrate and learn.

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That nice, sweet spot in between is when you've got an appropriate challenge, but enough of that anxiety where it's more on the exciting side and not the overwhelming side. I think early on, we were at that edge where it certainly wasn't boring. We were on the, oh, my god, this is too much. Realizing that we were there, and then the, so what do we do? Okay, what are the crops that we really need to get good at because they're the most popular market? All right, what's that list? Okay, of that list, which of those should we just—this is going to be the year of the tomato, cucumber, and carrot?

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We're trying to grow 40 or 50 of them, but let's just make this the year that we become masters of these few crops. So, it was just a matter of learning to troubleshoot, break the problem down, and not get overwhelmed by all the things we didn't know, but just to focus on—so it was taking that big picture that was very overwhelming, making it smaller so that I almost could curate the zone for myself by just picking those few crops and feeling like, oh, I'm excited to learn about them, excited to get success from them, and by doing that, I wasn't going to get overwhelmed by all the other failures that were happening.

So, I would, in the wintertime, be like, we'd identify what those crops were for the year, and then I would just do all the research. I still have all those files on the computer, the onion file, the beet file, the tomato file, and just full of all the information that I could learn all winter long, then put a plan together for how I was going to achieve some level of improved success for that year.

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So, what was the fertility that I needed to make sure that I got for these plants? What were the varieties that I really needed to choose to have success in this climate, in this place, on this soil type? What kind of irrigation setup did I need? What was the weed management plan that I had? A lot of that was coming from learning from the failures to be like, okay, that weed management plan was terrible. What are we going to do this year that would make that better? What are the pests and diseases that I need to learn and identify and be ready for when they happen so that I wasn't scrambling in June or July? I knew what to prepare for. That was early on a really successful way, at least that I was hacking myself and the problem to move forward.

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And then, a lot of it was just starting to retrain my brain to just be okay with failure and learning to just focus. That was a hard skill that had to be learned. That wasn't easy. That wasn't a skill that I was gifted. It was like, okay, it's been weeks panicking or freaking out. This is not productive. I've got to focus and figure out ways to just not get mired in the failure. That was a big one. And then, yeah, we can talk a little bit more about that. We can talk about on the business side of things or the market side or the COVID side or things like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. I'm curious when you started bringing on help, because it was you and Janet at first. When did you start to get to a point where, okay, one, we need more help, and, two, it's getting to a size where we can accommodate more work?

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Daniel Gagnon: That started pretty early. I can't remember if it was year two even, where we, again, just started to bring somebody on part-time. It was one employee part-time. The next year,

it was two employees part-time. Then, it was an apprenticeship where we started to bring on folks to come and stay and just learn what we were doing. We did that for a number of years. That was always tricky because you're trying to plan for the amount of produce and sales that you want to do, but you don't always know how many people you need to make that dream or that plan materialize.

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So, that was tricky on the learning the employee side of things, and then how to manage employees is also a soft skill that can be really challenging. But yeah, we started needing help pretty early to make it happen.

Sarah Rodriguez: About how many employees do you have now?

Daniel Gagnon: We have five full-time and two part-time equivalents at least. It's not always constant, things change, not even for the season sometimes. That's not including Janet and I actually. That's about what we feel is the amount of help that we need to do what we need to do.

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I think maybe it was the 10 years it took us to get to the place where we stopped trying to grow more, get more soil into production, and it's been the past 5-ish years where we've been flatlining and just maintaining. We're not trying to do more. We're just trying to do what we do better. That's easier because we know now, okay, this is the number of people that we need and just continuing to refine the system so that we do stuff better.

Sarah Rodriguez: You mentioned already the importance of connecting with people at the farmers market, even connecting with people through the sales side of things. I'm curious, what

is the role of community in the work that you do, whether through those channels or through connecting with other farmers? What do you see as that role?

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Daniel Gagnon: So, just looking at it from the business and working with customers, we definitely had felt that…well, there's a couple, I think, different ways to talk about it. Let me preface it by saying, I got into farming by just being really interested in the growing part of things. That's what excited me. And I thought that the sales part was just going to be the—I just hadn't put much thought into what happens when you actually build those long-term relationships with customers. [laughs]

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I just wanted like, I was really into growing food and all of the romanticism about it, and the sustainability parts, and the biology, and all that kind of stuff. Then we started the farm and we actually started selling to people and building relationships. For me, from the farm, it's like how a farm can be one avenue in a community that helps build relationships and brings people together. There are other ways a community can do that. We happen to feel like churches and religion can do that, maybe outdoor activities and recreation can do that, volunteer-type things, but really feel a strong ethic that farms should be there too at the center. And maybe that is pie in the sky, I don't know.

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We've got these customers coming to us. Are our customers building community together? Sure, that happens. It's hard to know the degree in which a farm does that part of things, actually connecting customers with each other, but what we know or what we experience is that when

people are interacting with the actual producer of the food, interesting stuff seems to just happen that is good for both the customer and the grower. I just had no idea how much people would appreciate that relationship and what a beautiful thing that was going to be and what an important part of my life that was going to be. I didn't realize the number of people that were on a healing journey and that were going to seek us out. So, that was very humbling and really felt like, I've got an important job to do here.

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That took me out of that, I'm just growing food, I just want to put seeds in the soil mentality. And a lot of customers, which is really cool—so we're direct to consumer. So, 90%, if not more, of what we sell is going straight to the consumer. Of that small, say, 10% that isn't, it's going to places like Good Foods Grocery and Ellwood Thompson's. Even of that 10%, those are people that maybe still bought from us from the farmers market but couldn't make it there that week, so they still went and said, oh, yeah, okay, they got Broadfork stuff this week. I'm going to get this out. So, it's still so local that there's still a relationship, even at those places. The fact that the market and then the local retailers, it just starts to feel like a much smaller community. So, that's really cool.

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And then, the community of growers is amazing too, connecting with other people, kindred spirits who are willing to make a lot of sacrifices in their lives to do this wild experiment of growing local organic food has been pretty amazing as well. Just meeting people, not only in Virginia, but all over the Southeast and mid-Atlantic and stuff is really cool as well.

Sarah Rodriguez: You mentioned that there weren't that many smaller farmers when you came to Virginia. How have you seen that community change over time?

Daniel Gagnon: It's definitely grown. But a small business is a small business, and the statistics on any small business aren't great.

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Half of small businesses don't make it to the end of their first year. I might be butchering those statistics. I just know they're not good. Most small businesses don't make it to year five. Farms aren't any different, if not worse, just because of the physical and financial pressures of trying to farm. Just like you'd see in the restaurant scene, I think too you see a lot of stuff come and go. There's been a lot of farms that have come and gone. That's sad to see and experience. But then there's a lot of us who would—and especially, it's almost like you have an incoming class, sort of.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cohort.

Daniel Gagnon: Yes, exactly. That's a better word. We know our friends who are starting at roughly the same time. Those are maybe the bigger relationships with a few others that get made along the way, depending upon how our paths cross.

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It's different for us because we've been raising four children at the same time. So, we don't maybe have the time to socialize with other folks because kids are still a huge part of our non-farming time, which isn't very much to begin with. So, that's good. What we're seeing is that we are collectively being more productive, more consistent. For a local food economy, we

need this competitive cooperation. It's competitive because we're going to these farmers' markets, and we can tell that we're all competing for a lot of the same customers. Yet, we're cooperating because we know that we can't be the only game in town. If we were the only farm that was at the farmers' market, it wouldn't be enough to have a robust farmers' market, never mind a robust Richmond metro food community.

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So, there has to be a critical mass. And I think we're still building that critical mass. But at a point, that critical mass is out of our collective hands. It has to be something bigger that involves government policy, whether that's on the local city level, state level, and certainly a federal level at the Farm Bill. That has to get it a little bit bigger and better. Then, it gets into, why do farms fail, and why there maybe aren't as many of us? Just because it's so risky and it's so hard that people start it and they're like, this is too hard for the amount of money that we're going to make. Or you're just like, want to do the dream, but it just gets too much money, and you can't get your head above water quick enough to make the investment work.

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So, I think the community can be bigger, the community of growers that is, be bigger and more prosperous with things that maybe we can control but also things that we can't control that are bigger picture.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you see other people taking on regenerative agricultural practices? Do you communicate with other growers about that? How does that knowledge-sharing work, if there's a network for that?

Daniel Gagnon: I think what's cool is that most of farming is using regenerative agricultural practices in some form or another. I drive by conventional farms that are growing corn and soy and wheat.

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And I pay attention to those farms, and I have been driving by many of those farms for over 15 years, and I will notice things like, oh, you're growing cover crops this year. I don't even know the person, but I've been going by their place for a long time. I'll be like, cool, all right, looking good. Or they may be no-tilling. I'm like, good, okay, all right. It's not like somebody's nailing regenerative and everybody else is crappy or performing all these agricultural sins or whatever. It's like, is this collective mass moving towards regenerative? And I almost think that we have to. It's a matter of how quickly we can do it, and that's where policy and other stuff can come in and make us move faster.

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But I like to think of the growers like us who are going to direct-to-consumer on a small scale really putting these practices into extreme practice using them all to a high degree. I think we are pulling folks along with us, showing that it's possible, that it's not an all-or-nothing. You can try to use the ones that maybe work for you. And it doesn't need to be all or nothing on a farm. Maybe somebody's growing 100 acres, and they're like, oh, I'm going to try regenerative ag on these 10 acres. That's still better than being an all-or-nothing.

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But there's still a lot of education and a lot of communication that still needs to happen that, again, most of us are just working our tails off trying to raise a family, don't have a lot of money.

Who's going to do that teaching? It has to come from other entities. I mean, there's a lot of sharing that goes on just because I talk to friends all the time. Are you doing this? Have you tried that? Are you doing this? But in terms of, again, moving things forward quicker, there's probably other entities. I've seen some great presentations from NRCS, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has been—I've seen some great lectures from them on regenerative principles and how to put them in action, conferences, periodicals, things like that. I'm working with Virginia State, not so much Virginia Tech, although Virginia Tech has been at conferences, or sometimes they're on the organic side, but Virginia State's in our county, so we connect with them a lot.

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And that's helpful to build those relationships because we do something that's totally experimental, and then we hang out with them. Then, they're like, hey, what the heck are you doing over there? I'm like, I don't know. This is what I do. It works. And they're like, oh, cool. And then they may talk to another grower who does it. So, it's important to have those entities that are at the center of the wheel and going out and seeing and sharing involved. That happens too. But yeah, we need more of that, and it needs to be more intentional.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'm curious, especially as someone not from the South, what are your thoughts on doing this type of work in Virginia? Does it seem like doing that type of work in the South? Does it seem like just doing that work in Virginia? What is the idea of the South play into the work you do? You mentioned it a little bit when it comes to the soil, but I'm curious if there are any other ways you think of it.

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Daniel Gagnon: Well, I think it's like any farmer—so in the South, we're going to—you have to figure out—any farmer is going to sit down and be like, what can I grow, where can I sell it, and what are the best ways for me to put this puzzle together? And that's like, even in our small community, somebody who's growing—so, we bought an expensive parcel that's way smaller in acreage near a population base, and we had to make sacrifices to do that. That was a decision that was intentional but was tricky because we didn't actually know whether we could farm on this small of an acreage.

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But we had to just look at what we had, what do we have as assets, either in the soil or in the place or in the weather or in the community, and how can we really leverage those for success? And then, what in our place is going to be a challenge or a risk, and minimize that risk so it doesn't take us out of business? So, having proximity to a lot of people may make sales a little bit easier. Having a small piece of land limits crop selection or quantities and equipment and certain things like that.

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So, I think every farmer, though, regardless of where they are, is looking at those sort of things and seeing what they can do. In the South, it could be that—or at least as I've seen it from friends who are growing south of here and then compared to friends who are growing north of here, the South has its challenges, but it also has some great things going for it. Those are things that I see us taking advantage of. We still have enough light to grow in wintertime. Winter growing and the skills to grow in winter are improving amongst growers. More investments in

covered spaces, high tunnels, and greenhouses, that minimizes risks when it comes to extreme weather, but it also extends the season.

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And that doesn't just mean—generally, it was thought of as a way to help people in cold climates get things to be more summer-like earlier, but it's actually ways in which we can, in the South, have crops be more spring and fall-like in the winter. And we are at a latitude where there's enough sunlight to do it. North of here, it gets considerably harder, no matter how much heat you put into that greenhouse because there's just not enough sunlight. The sun is too low in the sky. Yes, maybe you can add lights, and maybe LED lights are making that a little bit more cost-effective, but for the most part, that's a limiting factor. But for Virginia South, there's enough winter light that more winter growing is possible. And then could that be where the summers are getting hotter and maybe harder, where the seasonality of growing changes in a more untraditional way?

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So, summers become less productive, but winter and spring and fall become considerably more productive with different techniques. Those are the things that I think are unique and different. The other thing about growing on a small space versus a large one that may or may not change folks' perspective or growing methods in the South is that it's much easier to improve a small piece of land than a large one. We can dramatically just re-engineer a couple of acres of soil that you can't do on the hundreds of acres of soil, really anything above five with the amount of compost and minerals that we can bring in.

Daniel Gagnon: …and that, like, dramatically increase quality. Because it's almost like a really large garden at this point. So, like, maybe thinking about, like, "Okay, southern soils are challenging, but is less more? Like, are we more resilient? Is quality better by going a little bit smaller than trying to maintain hundreds of acres or thousands of acres, depending upon your growing style?" And then, as the demographics change, like, that's– like, it seems like there's more population growth. In some southern areas, you're just going to see maybe more sales opportunities, and as there are more sales opportunities, there are just going to be more farms. But of course, that just depends on where people are moving from.

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But I was just reading this morning about how the Southeast continues to be one of the fastest-growing areas in the country, and that's going to change things. How it's going to change things, I don't know. But if farmers are paying attention, which they are, then we're going to see them take advantage of maybe new population centers and new population growth in a way that could change their farms. So, yeah, we'll be looking at it from however the community's changing that can support a farm, and then how do maybe farms change, depending upon, like, maybe how the climate is changing, [Laugh] and then how the two interact, I think, is what will be interesting to watch. And then, like, how consumers' food choices change.

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I always like paying attention to how, like, peasant food becomes gourmet food ideas. [Laugh] And whether, like, just people appreciate more southern cuisine in a way that just makes it more desirable in a way that then makes the crop quality demand increase. That happens in certain places, too. So, yeah, I don't know, I think it's just fun to watch and to see what happens. And I

think how the Southeast, at least as much as I know of Virginia, just has its own unique way of doing things culturally, but yet we're all kind of trying to, at least on the farming sustainability side, do these different things, and then it ends up, like, becoming its own unique thing.

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So, like, sustainability with a southern twist would be, like, a really cool thing to watch and see how it develops versus– that become unique pressures because of the climate, and then the history and the culture, and how they all interact is going to be uniquely different to the Northeast, the Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, the Southwest, and stuff.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. I guess one of the last things I'll ask is, any favorite memories from your time on the farm that you want to share? Maybe some of your first big successes, any recent successes, anything that stands out?

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Daniel Gagnon: I know that, like, one of the things that we've gotten, like, feedback from over the years that was one of the qualitative signs that things were getting better was the ways in which kids responded to eating our food. That was really cool and exciting, and it was, like, really, like, "Okay, we're doing okay. This is working." And we saw that because we were both raising our children and seeing them eat vegetables, and then the feedback from either the kids themselves who would say something to us or the parents. And it was often like, "Oh my gosh, my kid will only eat your whatever, vegetables, or carrot, or tomato." And that happened, like, so many times. Like, hundreds of times now. It's like, "There's something to this." And what is that?

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And a lot of that is just, like, I think, as adults, we, like, can justify, [Laugh], like, that we should eat things, and we can convince ourselves that they taste good because we know that we should eat them. With kids, like, there's none of that, so we're getting, like, a raw, unfiltered opinion, which we know the kids do, right? So, that's really cool. So, that's been really awesome. So, then, that boiled down to– an anecdote was, one time– I've told this story a bunch to customers and such, but we've been raising our farm as we've been raising our kids. Like, they're so intrinsically linked in our lives because they basically started together. My mom was watching our youngest son one afternoon, I don't know, five, six years ago.

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And she was watching him for the afternoon and brought him back home around 4 or 5 o'clock, right at the end of the workday. This was in early winter, and I was harvesting carrots in one of the high tunnels. As she was coming up with our son, I was coming out with this big bin of carrots. And he came over and is like, "Hey, dad, good to see you," and we hugged and whatever. And then, he just hopped right into the bin of carrots that were still dirty, like, I'd just pulled them out, I hadn't washed them or anything, and just wiped it off on his shirt and just started, like, Bugs Bunny, just mowing them down.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Daniel Gagnon: And I didn't think anything of it just because he was the youngest of four, and our kids have just done that occasionally. Not always, but it wasn't that out of the ordinary for them to just want to, like, munch on something as we're working.

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But my mom was like, "Oh my gosh." [Laugh] Like, couldn't believe what she was seeing, which in itself wasn't unusual. But then, what she told me was, "This doesn't make sense to me." And I was like, "Why, mom?" And she was like, "I was trying to feed him carrots all afternoon, and all he would do was take those little baby carrots, and just dip them in dressing, and just lick the dressing off, and then not eat the carrot." And she couldn't understand why as soon as he went home, he just went straight to the bin of carrots and then just mowed them down like Bugs Bunny. But to me, like, that was like, "Of course." Those carrots, they're either super bitter, or they're flavorless, but they're not good. The carrots that we can grow in Virginia, especially in the wintertime, are delicious. And that's because, like, four of the various reasons.

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One, we super re-mineralize that soil, so the carrots, for the most part, as best as we could do, provide them everything that they need to grow a great carrot. They had just been pulled out of the ground, super fresh, super crunchy, like, "Okay, just needed to wipe the dirt off, but they were good to go." We had a variety that was meant to be consumed fresh. So, when you look at what's available carrot-wise, most of the carrots we get at the store are storage carrots, so they're bred to be harvested, tops taken off, put in a bag, and then to be consumed at a later date, not to be taken out of the ground with the tops on and be consumed within a few days. And then, especially when it comes to carrots and the ways in which we know California and other places can't compete, is that carrots get considerably sweeter in the wintertime.

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So, a root is an energy storage vessel, and most of the roots that we grow on the farm, like carrots, beets, they're biennials. So, they're growing one season to photosynthesize, store that

energy in the root, to then go to seed the next year. So, different from an annual, different from a perennial. But it's like, "I'm going to save this energy. Boom, I'm going to go now in year two, have that much more energy to produce all the seed that I need, make sure my carrot genes continue on." So, it's an energy vessel, and that energy, though, in the wintertime, changes from one of predominantly starch-based sugars to one of, like, sugar-sugars. [Laugh] So, they get sweeter, and they're just awesome. So, when you put all those elements together, you just get a kid that just runs up to a bin of dirty carrots and just mows them like Bugs Bunny. [Laugh]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Love that.

Daniel Gagnon: So, I think about that one a lot. And that's the story I re-tell the most because it just kind of sums up so much of what– it's a child, it's all the local food stuff that we can do really, really well, the intergenerational aspect of things, and the family element that just kind of cracks me up as well.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's so great. Awesome. Well, thank you so much. We'll go ahead and wrap up. Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you want to mention quick before we wrap up?

Daniel Gagnon: No, I don't think so.

Sarah Rodriguez: Great.

[End]