



Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO

December 5-7, 2017

DeVos Place Convention Center, Grand Rapids, MI



Organic Opportunities and Markets

Where: Gallery Overlook (upper level) Room F

Two experienced diversified vegetable farmers will share their organic production and marketing experience, highlight key farm practices, and answer questions.

MI Recertification credits: 2 (1B, COMM CORE, PRIV CORE)

CCA Credits: PM(1.0) CM(1.0)

Moderator: John Biernbaum, Horticulture Dept., MSU

- 9:00 am Spirit of Walloon Market Garden Start-Up and Growth over First Four Years
- Rachel Cross, Spirit of Walloon Market Garden, Boyne City, MI -- Primarily a sustainably-produced vegetable farm, but we also grow strawberries, raspberries, mushrooms, perennial herbs, and cut flowers. We focus on an ecologically and biologically based production system that prioritizes soil health, as well as plant and insect biodiversity
- 10:00 am Zilke Vegetable Farm: Diverse Production and Marketing for the Local Market
- Tom and Vicki Zilke, Zilke Vegetable Farm, Milan, MI -- A family-owned and operated farm, raising a diverse selection of vegetables and herbs in a sustainable and transparent manner on 40 acres. Dedicated to providing our community with food grown simply and sustainably.
- 11:00 am Session Ends

Spirit of Walloon Market Garden Start-Up and Growth over First Four Years

Rachel Cross, Manager and Owner of Spirit of Walloon Market Garden, Boyne City, MI.

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- **Overview**

Spirit of Walloon Market Garden is currently in its fourth season. We have about an acre in production, where we produce about 40 different vegetables, 40 unique flowers, a mix of perennial herbs, and strawberries. We grow in seven unheated hoopouses and one heated greenhouse. This year, we had two full-time seasonal employees from April to the end of October, and one MSU intern. For the past two years, we've grossed around \$100,000 on roughly an acre in production. I farm year-round as owner/operator.

We are located between Boyne City and Petoskey on Zenith Heights Rd on Walloon Lake. Our neighbors are a mix of cottagers and year rounders.

- **History**

- 2014: The farm was started by John Dindia on about a quarter acre of land owned by his family. This site was planted to perennial fruits, asparagus, and annual vegetables, and still serves as our wash-pack station and cold storage.
- 2015: I joined John as his farm partner, and we expanded to a site about 4 minutes away, owned by Dave Skornia, fifth generation farmer of Lakeside Farm. We employed one full-time seasonal person this year and one MSU intern. This year, we built...
 - A transplant greenhouse (early '15)
 - 3 14.5'x48' movable hoopouses (early '15)
 - Deer fence!
 - A covered wash and pack station.
 - 2 16.5'x48' moveable hoopouses (late '16)
- 2016: This year, we employed 3 full-time seasonal workers. John left the farm in August to further his education. This year, we built..
 - A 17'x 70 lean-to hoopouse
 - A 22'x96' heated transplant GH (late '16)
- 2017: This year, we are transitioning farm ownership to me. With the employees mentioned above, we added...
 - A 34'X 96' fixed hoopouse

- **Financing**

- We have grown the farm through three Hoopouses for Health loans and one Kiva loan.
- We have not taken out any loans with interest so far, but that will likely be changing.

- **Growing Practices**
 - **Fertility**
 - Our favorite compost is Morgan's Dairy Doo. Had bad experience in '17 with municipal compost.
 - We work with Midwest Bio-Ag products. Veg-Plus and K-Mag for micronutrients, NatureSafe poultry meal for N. Agrothrive molasses for N when tarping beds.
 - Morgan's fish emulsion and Humikelp for liquid feeds.
 - **Cover-cropping**
 - We strive to keep beds cropped at all times. We will seed single beds with an earthway or jang seeder as needed.
 - We use buckwheat in summer.
 - In fall, oat-pea for areas we want to plant early. Rye-vetch for areas that are planted end of May onwards.
 - **Weeds**
 - Stale seedbed with power harrow implement
 - Tarping beds with silage tarps for 3 weeks prior to planting. We will fully prep, add molasses to encourage microbial activity, water thoroughly, then tarp beds with black-on-white tarps to germinate weeds. They are then starved of light.
 - Black woven landscape fabric with burned holes. Don't use white!
 - Good ol' stirrup hoes and wheel hoes.
 - **Pests/Disease**
 - We do a lot to physically exclude. Remay, Dupont, and insect netting.
 - WP surround (Kaolin Clay)
 - Beneficial habitat (flowers, clover drivepaths).
 - We will spray neem for aphids, Bt for cabbage looper, and Serenade for any tomato diseases.
 - We will not use generalist insect neurotoxins on farm (i.e. Pyganic, Spinosad)
 - **Bed Preparation**
 - We use a Grillo with the power harrow attachment for general bed prep.
 - For tractor, we have a faux chisel plow, bed shaper, and tiller (rarely used).
 - In hoophouses, will use hand tools to prep. Broadfork, claw, rake.
 - **Tools**
 - For seeding, we use mostly the Jang single row seeder, but we also use the pinpoint and Earthway occasionally.
 - Grillo with power harrow and flail mower.
 - Broadfork, claw, and rake.
 - Weeding tools from Johnny's- stirrup hoes, wire weeders, tine rake, collinear hoes,.
 - Wheel hoe from Valley Oak- height adjustable.
- **Markets and Marketing**

In 2017, our income was split roughly 50-50 between wholesale and retail.

- **Farmers Market**
 - We attend market three days a week May- October in Boyne City and Petoskey.
 - We generally attend one market per week November- April.
 - Markets in our area are much stronger in the summer months with tourist traffic.
- **Wholesale**
 - We sell to a florist, 10 restaurants in 2017 (6 of them year-round), a subscription service, and two schools.
 - Wholesale requires a lot of good communication, but it can be much more consistent than retail.
- **CSA**
 - After 3 seasons of CSA, we did not offer shares in 2017.
 - Mostly for logistical reasons- CSA takes a lot of time in marketing, newsletters, distributions, etc.
 - We did offer a “farm rewards” program in its place.
- **Farmstand**
 - Added a self-serve seasonal farmstand in summer of ‘16
 - Honor system
 - Popular, but can be more management than planned.
- **Marketing**
 - Social media is key: Facebook, Instagram.
 - Taste the Local Difference
 - Attractive website
- **Secrets to Success**
 - **Partnership**
 - A farm partner brings fresh ideas, unique skills, shared responsibility.
 - Communication and long-term planning is key for lasting partnerships.
 - Even if/when partnerships end, still valuable.
 - **Moveable Hoopouses**
 - Our moveable hoopouses let us capitalize on that protected growing space.
 - Each moveable house hosts 3 crops per year.
 - Key in an area with a hyper-seasonal population boom.
 - **Mentorship**
 - Dave Skornia has been a key part of the farm.
 - Sharing land, tools, experience.
 - Doesn’t need to be the same kind of farmer to be a great mentor.
 - **Good employees!**
 - We look for people who are passionate over experienced.
 - Build farm community.
 - Train for a diversity of tasks, but let people play to their strengths.
 - Pay well.
 - **Crop Diversity**
 - We grow many things, and many unique varieties.
 - Some things can be sleeper successes, i.e. flowers, hot peppers.
 - **Strong transplants**
 - We grow all of our own transplants, with very few exceptions.
 - Soil blocks and Morgan’s 101 mean very healthy plants from the start.