



REDEFINING URBAN FARMING

Benjamin Curtis is growing Full Rotation Farms from the ground up by utilizing other people's yards.

by Ronni Wilde, for The Bulletin Special Projects
photos by Kevin Prieto

Full Rotation Farms, a successful urban farming operation created a year ago by Bend massage therapist Benjamin Curtis, is testament that with determination and grit, anything is possible. In early 2016, Curtis had a box of seeds, \$7.13 and a vision. But that February, he launched his Full Rotation Farms Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, and has since grown 1,500 pounds of vegetables on 2,100 square feet of land, supplying as much as 50 pounds of food to an average of 50 people a week during last year's growing season.

For eight months last year, Curtis worked six days a week, he said, and during peak season, he worked 12-hour days for six straight weeks.

"Urban farming is complicated due to having multiple plots," said Curtis. "It can be difficult and filled with logistical challenges. However, even though I wanted to quit many times, I did not. The pros outweigh the cons.

"Farming for my outstanding CSA has given me deep fulfillment, more courage and less depression, and there is a smaller carbon footprint (than with traditional farming)," he added.

With a CSA, money supplied by the members builds the farm, so they each own a share.

Despite the challenges in operating a CSA, Curtis remains passionate about growing for himself and others because he believes there is a global crisis due to the shortage of fresh food grown without chemicals.

"We have a serious food problem, and people don't even know," said Curtis, who is a U.S. Navy veteran. "If it were a perfect world with healthy food, I would not be so passionate. I want to help solve this problem, be a man of action, and put my money where my mouth is."

The mission statement for Curtis' CSA reads, "Full Rotation Farms is determined and committed to doing whatever it takes within the framework of integrity to change our food system by building and educating a healthier food culture, empowering people through direct contact and practicing small-scale organic methods so we can consistently serve your family with the freshest cut produce possible."

Curtis began taking an interest in farming while growing up in small towns around Oregon, he said, and while attending school and living in Utah, where he worked alongside his stepfather in a fruit stand. He said he learned entrepreneurial skills at that time, and began growing food for himself.

"I've been feeding myself for my entire adult life, and I knew I wanted to be a farmer," he said. "I've always wanted to live off grid, fully in nature. I'm really into self-reliance, because it teaches self-esteem. I lacked that in the past."

Over the years, he practiced small-scale farming techniques, planting

garden boxes on rooftops in Portland in 2002, working and managing a half-acre vegetable plot in Hawaii from 2008 to 2010, and growing food on a half-acre mini-farm in Alsea, Oregon in 2011.

In recent years, Curtis said he has been inspired by Bend urban farmer Jim Fields, who has a 10-acre plot right in the middle of town off Pettigrew Road. Fields Farm also offers a CSA program, and has been supplying produce to Central Oregonians since 1989.

Though there are other urban farmers in the region, what makes Curtis' approach unique is that he does not own the land he uses. He farms in other people's yards. With the blessing of participating homeowners, Curtis cultivates lawns, gardens and unused land and turns those spaces into productive food-producing plots. In 2016, he utilized three yards on the Westside of Bend, and was feeding 13 Full Rotation Farms member families by April 15. By June, he was in peak season, and continued to supply vegetables through December.

"On those 1-degree days, the veggies survived because I used a special cloth and greenhouse materials," said Curtis. When the snowpack became too thick, he stopped harvesting. "But in spring, some of those vegetables will still be OK," he said.

"This has been a big ordeal," said Jason Friedman, owner of Center for Life Chiropractic and Wellness in Bend and a Full Rotation Farms member. "Benjamin and I have been friends for a long time. He spoke to me about urban farming awhile ago, and he really decided to go for it. I'm very proud of him, because besides the physical burden, he also had to learn about major farmer juggling, like rotating crops and dealing with the weather.

"It's like he got a master's degree in organic farming in one season," Friedman added.

Among the vegetables Curtis provided through his CSA last season are kale, chard, an assortment of beets, salad greens, carrots, Pac Choi (Asian greens) and tomatoes. He also hunted and cultivated mushrooms to add to the food baskets. To participate in the CSA, members pay an upfront fee of \$150, which entitles them to a weekly pick up for four to six weeks depending upon the quantity of vegetables supplied. Curtis customizes baskets for members based on family size and preferences.

"I've been a member of a CSA before, and there isn't usually this much variety," said Friedman. "You get to choose what you want each week, so you're not stuck with food you don't want. It's hard to grow things here, which makes this even more impressive. It's pretty amazing to become so adept at growing so much food for so many people in this climate."

For the coming season and into the future, Curtis has set lofty goals, and is working hard to make them happen. As of early 2017, he has 15 members in his CSA, and hopes to grow that number to 30 by this year's peak season. He plans to start distributing food as early as the end of March, and has been growing an assortment of food over the winter in his indoor nursery to accomplish that goal. He has also recently acquired a three-year lease on a one-acre plot on the Westside, and hopes to secure



Rural backyard before Full Rotation.

one more yard for this season.

To move forward on the one-acre plot, Curtis estimates that the cost for fencing, irrigation, equipment and insurance will be in excess of \$10,000. To procure the needed money, Curtis has established an online crowd funding account on Go Fund Me and a loan campaign through Kiva, an international nonprofit group money lending program.

"I will continue to farm multiple yards if I get them, but the focus is the acre," he said. "I am looking for investors. I want to make some money and reinvest it, pay off the loans within a year, and then get a bigger loan to grow the business."

To date, Curtis supports himself with his massage therapy practice, but hopes to be able to make a living off Full Rotation Farms eventually.

"I started this with no money — I don't suggest that," he said with a laugh. "It's best to have at least \$6,000 to start with, and don't quit your job. Doing therapeutic massage has allowed me to invest in Full Rotation Farms and survive as an urban farmer in my first year."

In addition to retaining a CSA membership, Friedman has invested in Full Rotation Farms to help Curtis grow the operation.

"I wanted to support a friend who is very forward-thinking. I'm honored to be a part of that," said Friedman. "Growing food instead of grass is a very green thing to do. Curtis went out on a limb and literally removed someone's yard to do this. It takes a forward-thinking homeowner to do this."

While Curtis' desire is to grow Full Rotation Farms as his business,





Same rural backyard after Full Rotation.

the other side of his passion lies in teaching others how to grow food.

"The barriers to entry in farming are astronomical," he said. "That's why I want to teach young people how to farm a yard with real-time training. At my first location, it was not unusual to have young people show up wanting to help. But due to time constraints and land restrictions, I was forced to turn them away, which broke my heart."

To offer mentoring and training to those who want to learn urban farming techniques, Curtis hopes to establish "Farm Fit Day" events on Saturdays during the 2017 growing season. During these programs, volunteer participants will work the land alongside Curtis while he trains them. They will gain skills, and may walk away with some fresh veggies too, he said.

Friedman said he has found purchasing vegetables from Curtis to be beneficial in many ways.

"It's less expensive than going to the store and buying organic produce because there are no middlemen involved between the farmer

and the store, and the vegetables are fresher," he said.

"His vegetables are much more bio-available for our bodies because they are grown right here and are acclimated to our climate like our bodies. For those of us who understand that food is medicine, you understand that there is good medicine and bad medicine. This food is more suitable for us than organic food grown far away."

Because of their membership in Full Rotation Farms, Friedman said his family tends to eat more vegetables.

"My 8-year-old son loves rainbow chard," said Friedman. "Getting your kid to eat greens is really great. I didn't even know he liked chard until we became members."

The ultimate benefit, Friedman said, is how good the vegetables taste.

"He picks the food a couple of hours before he distributes it, so it's fresh, alive and delicious," said Friedman. "It tastes like nature intended it to taste. It just couldn't be better."

For more information about Full Rotation Farms CSA or its funding campaigns, call 541-241-4101 or visit fullrotationfarms@gmail.com.

No Yard? No Problem — Small Space Gardening

As Central Oregon grows in population, more and more of its residents are living in homes and apartments with tiny yards, and in some cases no yard at all. While that can be a challenge to those interested in growing food, all is not lost. Container gardening can be a fun and simple way to put a green thumb to work and grow a few veggies on a patio, deck or even inside on window sills.

Benjamin Curtis, urban farmer and founder of Full Rotation Farms Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, began his operation without a budget, and suggests that anyone can do the same.

"You can go to landscape companies and get free black pots, or offer to do some work for them in exchange for pots," he said. "I was so broke, I started with yogurt containers. You can also make planter boxes out of wooden pallets."

If a garden will be in window sills, Curtis recommends putting the containers in south-facing windows for maximum sunlight. If it will be created in a small space outside, a "greenhouse" can be made out of large sheets of plastic, he said.

For watering outside, rows of containers can be lined up on a patio or dirt patch, or raised beds can be created. Lining up the containers in rows simplifies the watering process, he said, which can be done with a watering can or hose. A watering device can even be made out of a milk jug by poking holes in the top, he said. If the garden is inside, Curtis recommends using drip containers that won't leak onto the floor, or taking care to use something to catch the water that flows out of the pots after watering.

When you are ready to plant, Curtis said seeds can be purchased online, or at home improvement or farm and garden stores such as Wilco.

"Seed packets tell you what to do," he said. "Just follow the directions. Growing only one item, like tomatoes, may be a good way to start." If you don't have a sunny location, he suggests looking for plants that like shade, such as spinach. To create a larger variety of vegetables or a continued harvest, he recommends staggering crops by planting a new row of seeds every two to three weeks.

With a little work and a few months' time, having homegrown vegetables without a yard can be a reality.

"I grow food in my indoor nursery year-round," said Curtis. "Right now, I have leeks, tomatoes, broccoli, pea shoots, kale, spinach and lettuce. I am eating a salad a day out of my winter crop."



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