



# Cooper's Farm and CSA

One in a series of profiles for the  
Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation



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Supporting the long-term viability of farming within the Ontario Greenbelt is a primary objective of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation. This profile of Cooper's Farm and CSA is one of a series capturing the business practices and management skills of successful and innovative Greenbelt farmers.





# Cooper's Farm and CSA

## Introduction

Steve and Lisa Cooper have been farming since 1993. Together they run a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) venture, take part in five farmers' markets, and operate an on-farm store and roadside stand. Their farm is in Zephyr in Durham Region, northeast of Newmarket.

Their CSA offers subscriptions for vegetables, beef, chicken, turkey, eggs, pork, and the "Super Duper Cooper Special" that combines all the CSA offerings. Participants can come to the farm to see how livestock is raised and produce is grown, and the Coopers are always willing to answer questions. The CSA was launched in 2007 with 50 families, and has now grown to 550 in the summer and 250 in the winter. Their on-farm store is open five days a week from June through October and every other Saturday in the winter, selling pickles, jams, jellies, preserves, beef pie, shepherd's pie, and beef tourtiere, and offering CSA pick up. During the summer, the roadside stand is open seven days a week.

The Coopers farm 100 acres and rent another 300 acres nearby, using it for their livestock production and CSA, as well as pasture, hay, and growing some feed crops.

When they started farming in 1993, the Coopers established a beef cow-calf operation similar to one run by Steve's father. They soon realized they could not make a decent living with 150 cows and some cash crops.

Steve had been growing and selling sweet corn since 1981, when he was 11 years old. The Coopers were invited in 1999 to join a committee planning a new farmers' market in Newmarket. This led them to expand produce

## Company Aspirations

The Coopers are clear in what they want from their business: independence in terms of self-direction (accountable only to themselves), financial sustainability from the farm (no off-farm work), and an enjoyable lifestyle. They appear to be meeting these goals.

offerings beyond just sweet corn, and they gradually grew to be participants in nine farmers' markets. During this time, they tried many different kinds of crop and livestock production, from raising meat goats to selling produce in the wholesale market, but it was not until Lisa lost her job in 2004 that they committed to working full-time in the farm business.

The Coopers realized that further education would be critical to their success. Steve enrolled in the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP) in 2005, and completed the CTEAM (advanced farm management) program offered by Dr. Larry Martin. Lisa also completed the AALP program.

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The Coopers built an agri-entertainment/education business by setting up a corn maze, offering farm tours, and building their CSA program. This was all part of their move away from commodity agriculture to direct marketing, where both Steve and Lisa feel they have found their niche.

### Successes

The business is meeting its main objectives by providing two full-time wages and continuing to grow. The Coopers consider their farm to be a work in progress, always changing and adapting to customer demands. They continue to diversify their customer experiences.

The Coopers were recognized with a major award as Canada's Outstanding Young Farmers of 2010, a tribute to their innovation and farm management.

Success is attributed, among other things, to:

- Continued education. Both Steve and Lisa returned to post-secondary education at Ridgetown College and participated in the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program. Steve also completed the CTEAM program, an advanced farm business management course.
- Willingness to listen to others and apply those learnings.
- Embracing entrepreneurship. A "go for it" attitude and a drive to please customers are essential in their type of business.
- Having a plan and sticking with it, but also continuously revising it to evolve with changing opportunities.
- Learning from mistakes. The Coopers reflect: "I wish I had gotten smarter earlier. We wouldn't be where we are now if we had not made those mistakes." Notwithstanding the value they place on those painful lessons, they stress the importance of looking forward without dwelling on the past.
- Family support. Lisa and Steve cite the encouragement and the hands-on farm support they have received from their families as important to their success.



## Current Challenges

The Coopers stress the importance of always looking for new opportunities. Deciding on new directions is the biggest challenge facing the Coopers at this point.

They consider their farm unit as the asset base upon which other businesses can be built. The most obvious options are those they can implement within their farm store. There are a number of potential agri-tourism enterprises which would be natural fits with their current operations, undertakings in which others have been successful in Ontario.

Their CSA customer base includes teachers who co-ordinate school culinary programs and use the CSA contents for school lunches. There are opportunities to build on those connections in terms of hosting school groups or growing the CSA program.

The Coopers believe that with the addition of appropriate facilities it could be possible to host a variety of functions on the farm. They are also interested in the concept of incorporating on-farm dinners with celebrity or local chefs. These initiatives have not been investigated to the extent that they would need to be prior to undertaking a new venture, but the Coopers are open to the concepts at this point.

## Strategic Focus and Decision-Making

The Coopers have an informal strategic plan which they revisit frequently. They believe their next step in operating the expanding business is the creation of a more formal plan and a shift in their personal focus to managing from that plan: "It is a struggle to function at the management, executive, and working levels, and devote enough time to all things."

Mutual respect and capitalizing on their respective strengths are cited as keys to their success. They operate as Co-CEOs, jointly discussing major decisions but not getting involved in each other's specialty other than as a sounding board. Lisa is the Treasurer, the "face of the farm," and operates the CSA program. Steve is the Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, and the agronomist, growing 91 crops. Notwithstanding the adoption of management practices beneficial to the business's success, the Coopers' acceptance of the need for change was the critical factor in their decision making. The Coopers credit the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program and its international travel component with the broad outlook and critical analysis skills which inspired their fundamental shift from beef production to consumer marketing of produce.

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The Coopers state with only a hint of humour that they make their best decisions when they are 2,000 miles from the farm, emphasizing the importance of perspective and dispassionate assessment.

Key decisions over the last 30 years for the business have been to:

- Exit commodity production and find a new niche.
- Focus on profitability since the establishment of the Greenbelt meant they could not sell their land for a developer price.
- Establish a customer base through direct marketing, thereby building value in the business beyond that of the land.

### 3.5 Best Management Practices

#### Marketing

The Coopers have developed a multi-faceted farm-market operation, seizing new opportunities and responding to customer feedback and market trends. The innovation in this business, unlike many other farms, is in marketing with new variety trials identifying product diversification opportunities. Through customer testing in co-operation with the Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association they explored customer service enhancement. The Coopers monitor and analyze consumer spending and disposable income data, and interact with customers at farmers' markets and on-farm to identify trends.

“ Maintaining frequent contact with customers is considered important to success, and the Coopers share plans and weekly updates with customers and solicit feedback.

The Coopers note: “We are pioneers in a new area, among the first people to bring scale to a CSA and do it as a business that is part of a regular family business.”

The Cooper's Farm promotion and outreach strategy favours social media and word of mouth over media advertising. “Spending money on advertising doesn't pay like good word of mouth does.” They maintain a comprehensive and appealing website and use Facebook and Twitter to generate awareness and interest. Maintaining frequent contact with customers is considered important to success and they share plans and weekly updates with customers and solicit feedback.

Groupon has drawn large numbers of customers/fun seekers to the farm and the corn maze. The Coopers explain: “When growth stagnated, we had to look at what could be done to overcome the stagnation. It was a struggle to get people to the corn maze at first because of the farm's location on a side road and competition nearby. We participated in a Groupon promotion, selling 3,000 Groupons. This took us from no customers to a field full of cars.” For four years the Groupon effort delivered 10,000 people. In 2014, the Coopers elected to forego Groupon, believing they had built a customer following for the maze, and they had their best season to date. Groupon is now an accepted and commonplace strategy to increase customer traffic in many lines of business, but when the Coopers started with Groupon in 2010, their foresight was truly innovative.

#### Financial Management

Steve's participation in the CTEAM program provided managerial accounting skills which he considers extremely important. He finds it difficult to formally benchmark against other farm businesses because their operation is so multi-faceted and the production component is only part of the enterprise. Compartmentalizing their business records into two or more enterprises might be a strategy for the Coopers to consider, thereby generating financial and costing reports that could be compared to similar businesses.

Efficiency and cost containment are important in Cooper's Farm management, but product quality and presentation are their top priorities.

## Human Resource Management

The Coopers consider themselves as coaches rather than managers of staff and they are strong believers in accommodating their peoples' learning curves. "Empowering employees to make decisions shows faith and trust. If employees do something wrong we consider it our fault, not theirs. We do not chastise or penalize for decisions that don't go well."

When hiring, the Coopers appreciate that most staff come without qualifications for either farm or retail positions, so they hire on potential. Personality, existing skills, and the ability to learn are the prime criteria when recruiting.

## Risk Management

Cooper's Farm employs relatively little in the way of formal risk management strategy and programs. Diversification in farm products, the agri-tourism component, and multiple marketplaces (farm, farmers' markets, and CSA) afford some risk protection. They also participate in the AgrilInvest program.

The Coopers have adopted only those practices and participated in programs with the potential to deliver on their business objectives.

- **Formal Food Safety Planning.** The Coopers are cognizant of food safety and cross contamination potential on the farm and at their markets. In their direct-marketing environment, a formal plan is not required by buyers. They practice food safety protocols and practices that are part of their culture.
- **Traceability and Certification.** Likewise, while these practices are becoming commonplace on many farms to satisfy market demands, the Coopers are not asked by their customers to provide these formal product assurances. The Coopers manage these issues on a personal basis to develop the customer trust that is critical to success.

## Outside Advisors and Support

Networking with a wide array of individuals and organizations contributes to awareness, knowledge, skills, and opportunity identification. Among their network, the Coopers cite the Ontario Berry Growers, Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association, Ecological Growers, York/Durham Farm Fresh, Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Conference, CTEAM Alumni, and Canada's Outstanding Young Farmer program.

The Coopers have limited involvement with governments and agencies. As an independent producer and marketer of unregulated products (no marketing boards), Steve and Lisa encounter few

requirements to develop relationships with government organizations, and see few benefits to Cooper's Farm pursuing relationships beyond the municipal government level. They have not to date taken advantage of government shared cost funding or the Growing Forward 2 program.

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