

# PROFILES IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Loon Organics

Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## PREFACE

Today's aspiring farmer is confronted with many sustainable agriculture resources, which generally fall into two categories: inspiring narratives and technical bulletins. This case study seeks to integrate these two types of resources into a technical case study format. It combines a detailed narrative with embedded technical assistance via links to finance, production, and marketing resources. This "one-stop shop" case study format provides beginning and transitioning farmers with both a motivating story and the contextual understanding needed for integrating the nuts and bolts of sustainable farming into a real-life enterprise. This prototype case study is intended for eventual inclusion in a database of case studies that is in development.

Recent trends related to local food and the changing demographics of American farms are creating a whole new enthusiastic generation of aspiring farmers. While this enthusiasm can carry beginning farmers through many an exhausting day in the field, a healthy dose of realism is essential to long-term success. According to Nick Olson, Farm Beginnings Organizer for the Land Stewardship Project, "Beginning vegetable farmers tend to fail for one of two reasons: weed pressure or financial pressure." Although it may seem logical to focus on learning how to grow crops and worry about the rest later, there is a "three-legged stool" of farming: production, marketing, and financial management. As the story of Loon Organics shows, when all three components are addressed from the outset, farming dreams can be realized.

You may have already discovered that "cookie cutter" approaches don't work well in farming; what works on one farm or for one farmer may not work for another. There is no formula or tool for getting you from A to Z, but the case study does step you through what beginning farmers need to think about before starting their own enterprise.

It is recommended you read through the case study once from beginning to end, then use it as a reference document and revisit appropriate sections as needed. Although a PDF version is provided, reading the case study online is optimal due to the number of external resources to which it is linked. The case study has also been laid out with as many internal links as possible to help you navigate the information and find resources that are relevant in multiple locations.

***"Beginning vegetable farmers  
tend to fail for one of two  
reasons: weed pressure or  
financial pressure."***

Resources are provided as links within the text and in various sidebars called “Educator’s Perspective: Resource Tips” or “Farmer’s Perspective: On the Bookshelf.” Other sidebars called “At A Glance” and “Farmer’s Perspective: Lessons Learned” provide supplemental details and insight.

## Farmer’s Perspective: Lessons Learned

### Adam and Laura’s Top Ten Pieces of Advice for Start-up Vegetable Growers

1. Work on vegetable farms of different scales, crops, soil types, and marketing outlets.
2. Seek and cultivate relationships with mentors.
3. Start small and increase business gradually. Learning how to have continuous product throughout the season is a genuine challenge.
4. Rent land and borrow equipment until you are confident of your long-term commitment to farming.
5. Support yourself off-farm for the first 4-5 years in order to reinvest all farming profits back into the business, save for future capital purchases, and avoid all debt other than a farm mortgage.
6. Join farmer-based agricultural organizations and engage in farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities such as tours, field days, conferences, and workshops.
7. Enroll in a farm financial planning and analysis course and get a great accountant.
8. Explore and take advantage of traditional farm programs, loans, and small business resources through the USDA, FSA, state agricultural departments, university extension services, and community colleges.
9. No matter what, take at least one day or half a day off each week.
10. Have fun and don’t forget your sense of humor!

## ABSTRACT

Loon Organics was established in Minnesota in 2005. It is a certified organic vegetable farm that provides product to consumers through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions, a farmers market, and wholesale outlets. This case study describes how the husband-and-wife team became interested in farming, how they got their training, and how they transitioned from farming on land rented from mentors to buying their own 40-acre farm. Diverse aspects of their operation are described, including business and production planning, infrastructure and equipment, horticultural practices, and marketing models. The finances section is particularly detailed and valuable due to the financial data made available by Loon Organics. The unique challenges of managing an organic CSA operation are highlighted throughout the case study.



## INTRODUCTION

Laura Frerichs and Adam Cullip sit side by side in front of their colorful flower garden, swatting away mosquitoes on a warm fall day (Figure 1). Laura calls out a greeting to a customer who has stopped by [Loon Organics](#) to pick up her weekly share of vegetables. It is clear that these young entrepreneurs have gotten comfortable in their role as market gardeners over the past five years and that they are already part of the community around their newly purchased land. Laura and Adam's story shows that combining hard work and dedication with excellent recordkeeping, planning, and marketing skills can put beginning farmers on the road to success.



*Figure 1: Laura Frerichs and Adam Cullip in front of the flower garden on their recently purchased farm in Hutchinson, Minnesota.*