



Photo by Lincoln Journal Star

John and Suzie Ellis prepare the produce for market customers.

Libby Creek Farm An Organic Alternative to Traditional Farming

***A North Central Initiative for Small Farm
Profitability case study***

***By Carol Doeden and Marilyn Schlake
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About the North Central Initiative for Small Farm Profitability

The North Central Initiative for Small Farm Profitability is a four-state, multi-institutional, farm-to-fork effort designed to improve the profitability and competitiveness of small and mid-size farms in Nebraska and the Midwest. This initiative brings together a unique and powerful blend of farmers, food and social scientists, marketers, extension educators, economists and others who are attempting to identify, adapt and apply practical, science-based, market-driven strategies that work.

Partners include the University of Nebraska's Center for Applied Rural Innovation (CARI) and Department of Food Science and Technology/Food Processing Center, Iowa State University, University of Missouri, University of Wisconsin, the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska, Practical Farmers of Iowa, and the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in Wisconsin. The initiative is funded by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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About the Case Studies

More than 40 case studies will be developed in the four-state region, including 26 in Nebraska. The case studies will focus on new generation cooperatives, networks for marketing high value crops and livestock, production and cooperative arrangements that increase the farmer's share of food system profits, community support of small and mid-size operations, successful capital transfer strategies that benefit both beginning and senior farmers, on-farm diversification, and successful use of the Internet by farmers and small rural businesses to market products.

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Introduction

Making the decision to farm in a non-traditional manner is courageous and risky, innovative and labor-intensive, visionary and revolutionary. Such farming practices are threatening to those growers who want to continue to work and live “the way we’ve always done it,” but rewarding in unexpected ways for those who take the plunge into the future. Entrepreneurial farmers who are willing to expend the necessary efforts are finding that they can live as they prefer and achieve success as small vegetable farmers, especially organic vegetable growers.

One such visionary is John Ellis of rural York, Nebraska, who, with his wife Suzie, owns the 69 acres of Libby Creek Farm. Using organic, eco-friendly practices, they raise a variety of vegetables for their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription service, and sell the rest of their produce at several farmers markets in southeast Nebraska. The Ellises have a greenhouse in which they nurture seedlings and grow flowers that will be either potted in attractive groupings, or sold as cut flowers. They raise free-range chickens for producing eggs and for butchering as broilers. They also have a straw bale building with a tiny

office inside. In the straw bale building, they sell produce on-site, wash vegetables prior to sale, and plan to locate their future certified kitchen.

John and Suzie have been growing and selling vegetables for nearly a decade but never have taken a formal class for their business practices. They identified several key areas where such a class would be of assistance to them. The books they keep are

Our Mission:

To grow and deliver high quality, organically grown products to surrounding communities in order to promote community stewardship and co-operation.

adequate for reporting to the Internal Revenue Service, but not for giving them a clear idea of how their business is performing or whether it is profitable. The couple wrote a mission statement for Libby Creek Farm and placed it on their web site. However as individuals, they have not resolved their different levels of commitment and dedication to the farm and to the idea of the

organic business as a philosophy and a life style. Finally, by their own admission, John and Suzie need help clarifying and executing their marketing skills.

Both Suzie and John have ideas for making the business better. The future direction in which the business may go is dependent on resolution of the couple’s challenges as much as on the changeableness of Nebraska weather and the area’s economy.

Meet the Ellises

Suzie Ellis, 44, was a city girl who grew up in York and always wanted to marry a farmer. “I like that John likes this. That is why I’m helping do it,” she said.

Suzie has a full-time job at the hardware store in York. She likes bringing home a regular paycheck, and enjoys the variety of working on the floor with customers, or in the office. Her job also provides the couple a certain level of financial stability although it does not include insurance. The financial stability has been important while raising their daughter, Annie, 17, now a freshman at Kansas State University.

John, 48, grew up on the 1881 Ellis Family Farm across the road, and has been growing

vegetables for his mother's garden, or for his own consumption all his life. To John, growing his vegetables organically is a philosophical choice as well as one of economics. John makes the effort to live and work as organically as possible, with most of his farming efforts directed at practices that heal the land as well as grow the food. Fortunately, organic produce is in demand among the people he considers his best customers; professional people who have little time to shop or cook.

John is now employed part-time as a program coordinator for the Nebraska Community Food Network, a program sponsored by the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society and funded by a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (S.A.R.E.) grant. Setting up a website for small farmers like him and cooperatives of small farmers is one of the food network's goals.



John and Suzie in front of their welcome sign on the farm.

John described his vision of the website: "Pork, chicken, vegetable growers, all the varieties Nebraska can produce, and producers looking for direct markets; they could be out in their field with a digital phone, update the amounts of fresh tomatoes [on the website]. People could call in their orders; he could call in his quantities. [You're] not gonna get any fresher [produce]."

Another of John's visions has more farmers farming cooperatively. They could then pool their produce together and have enough to go to a food processor.

One of John's ideas includes selling their fresh or processed foods to Nebraska institutions such as hospitals.

Beyond their paid employment, most of John and Suzie's time is spent working on their vegetable farm, getting ready for the next market, or the next subscription delivery.

The Farm

The original Libby Creek is a pretty stream in Wyoming, one close enough to the hearts of John and Suzie Ellis that they chose to name their crafts business and then their farm after the spot.

Libby Creek Farm consists of one small irrigation circle, a couple of small hay fields and rows of crops for market. The farm is set up for both pivot and ditch irrigation, a necessity in the middle of Nebraska where rainfall is uncertain. The vegetables grow near the house, greenhouse, barn and a straw bale building, the last built to house the business office and soon-to-be-completed certified kitchen.

Libby Creek Farm is certified 100 percent organic. John and Suzie do a lot of weeding and hoeing, instead of using chemical herbicides, but not so much that small plants, such as carrots, become scorched by the sun. Their garden isn't as "pretty" as the ones with rows of plants with bare earth in between, but the Ellises are helping the land to heal after years of conventional, chemical-intensive farming. In addition to minimal tilling to remove weeds, they grow crops such as rye specifically to be incorporated into the soil. Such plants are called green manure.

Early in the season, John and Suzie plan the garden for the Farmers Market and the CSA service using input from customers. The large variety they plant ensures adequate items available to sell at market or distribute in subscription baskets every week. What produce isn't packed for subscription pick-up is sold on-site at Libby Creek Farm, or in the farmers market at York or Lincoln's Historic Haymarket Farmers Market. John also offers other Nebraska-grown products as a way of assisting in the distribution and marketing for other producers.

The Ellises raise market chickens, both for eggs, and for broilers. Suzie drew the line at butchering, so they take their chickens to a processor.

As well as starting vegetable seedlings in a protected environment, Suzie uses the greenhouse to grow and arrange

plants in attractive containers for sale. She places different flowering plants with a couple of green houseplants, and creates a professional-looking arrangement. The couple also sells cut flowers in season.

John has 20 acres in alfalfa and pasture clover, which he either bales, or uses as green manure. Until he obtains his own livestock, he harvests and stores the hay. This year he has 550 dry bales of hay, a potential cash crop to sell to his neighbors this winter. He also raises wheat and rye.

How the Farm Grew

John couldn't keep the 1881 Ellis family farm after his father died. When John transitioned from traditional farming to growing organic vegetables, he learned he is not in control of the land, or of nature. "It rearranged my thinking," he said. "I'm just one

small piece of the puzzle, but I can coordinate what I do to try and work with nature."

One of the turning points for John and Suzie was 1993, the year it rained so much, when his garden flooded, then went to weeds. "I said, 'I will either learn how to garden right, or quit,'" he recalled. Shortly thereafter John attended a conference with the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, the Nebraska Fruit and Vegetable Growers and the Organic Crop Association. John began to grow food organically, taking his produce to the Farmers Market in Lincoln, and three years ago, began supplying residents of Lincoln, York and Aurora with weekly vegetables in season by subscription.

Getting started the right way meant John and Suzie sought out various kinds of assistance.

- They attended a "Product to Profit" seminar at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UN-L), East Campus Food Processing Center.
- The UN-L Wheat Lab did some milling and test baking of the Ellises hard red winter wheat, with good results.
- A food industry consultant at UN-L Food Processing Center, created the Libby Creek Farm website.

From Product to Profit

This program, offered through the University of Nebraska Food Processing Center, provides individualized consultation and assistance that is crucial to successfully develop a business. Assistance is provided in the areas of technical and business/marketing issues including:

- **Product development**
- **Business structure development**
- **Market selection**
- **Regulatory requirements**
- **Marketing and promotional strategy development**
- **Food safety and sanitation programs**
- **Cost analysis and pricing strategy**
- **Analytical services**
- **Packaging and labeling development**

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- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) assisted the Ellises in writing a grant proposal for a Value Added Market. Similarly, they are partnering with other growers for a Year Round Market.
- The couple is planning to cooperatively market 30 products from a dozen companies to 30 local grocery, supermarkets, institutions and gift stores, using a \$5,000 coop marketing grant through the Rural Development Commission.
- Libby Creek Farm also received a \$5,000 grant from the Nebraska Cooperative Development Center, which is a partnership organization between UN-L, USDA and the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.
- The UN-L, Department of Horticulture assisted Libby Creek Farm in receiving a \$3,600 Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant for using organic fertilizers in snap bean production. John applied fall and spring blood meal and chopped alfalfa for four plots, with the fifth in fall-planted clover to be used as green manure, which he then spread both spring and fall. The blood meal is no longer organi-

Organic Certification

Beginning on October 21, 2002, producers and handlers must be certified by a USDA-accredited certifying agent to sell, label, or represent their products as "100 percent organic," "organic," or "made with organic (specified ingredients or food group(s))." - USDA 2002.

For the latest information on Certification Procedures, visit these websites:

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/>

<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/orgcert.html>

<http://www.ocia.org/new/members/index.asp>

cally approved, but at the time was allowed. All five plots were planted to snap beans to check the yields and crops' response to organic soil amendments.

John has been in demand as a public speaker for SARE conferences, workshops and seminars across the state. His public speaking is an additional, unexpected source of income. John is also part of a SARE grant to mentor professionals about sustainable agriculture.

The Products

Community Supported Agriculture – a weekly basket to your table

The concept of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is based on the premise that the customers share in either

the bounty or the lack that Nature doles out in a particular growing season. For 18 weeks, beginning in May, pre-paid subscribers receive a weekly basket of produce. The package contains from four to eight different varieties, all seasonal and dependent on various growing conditions.

The CSA baskets may include fresh, organic vegetables, cut or potted flowers, Suzie's homemade wild fruit jellies, freshly ground flour and even popcorn. With CSA, urban people get to meet the farmer, to know that he is telling the story behind the food that they eat. Libby Creek Farm's 30 or so subscription customers pay in advance, advancing the Ellis' family's cash flow.

"Subscriptions are scary," Suzie said. "I like having the money up front, but things get

scary if there is not a lot to put in each week.” The CSA model says that 5 acres should feed 300 people. At that rate, John figures that with 100 families at \$300 per share, he could make \$30,000 off his 5 acres.

Fridays are a scramble as John and Suzie pick the fresh produce to go in the baskets delivered the next morning in

that goes into them. Some customers even give them recipes.

“That is what is good about that connection, they give us ideas and we can pass them on to the next guy or make it available to everybody. A sharing experience! Community thinking here!” John said with fervor.

ranging for someone else to pick up the food that week.

Marketing efforts by the Ellises include a website, www.libbycreek.com and flyers they send out at the beginning of a season to sign up CSA customers. Another effort included participating in the food fair at the Nebraska State Fair the past several years. John said it was successful in that it spread the word about his enterprise and what he has to offer. He is also envisioning future processing, presenting and marketing of his products.

As far as advertising directly to the people who have been their customers, both John and Suzie said there isn't any time for that. They never kept a log of the people who come through the Farmers Market, to send them information about their specials, or about the CSA program. After discussion, John said he could see how electronic or postal mailings to all those people who had actually tried their products by purchasing something at the Farmers Market might increase the CSA subscriptions. A side effect of that would be an improvement in their cash flow situation, as the CSA is all prepaid.

Libbycreek Farms Subscription Sales Pricing

(Spring 2001, Lincoln Delivery)

- ◆ 350.00 for full payment of 18-week produce subscription
- ◆ \$35.00 for season home delivery (available in city limits of Lincoln, Saturday p.m. only)
- ◆ \$100.00 for 18-week salad mix subscription (1/2 lb. per week)
- ◆ \$40.00 for 18-week egg subscription (1 dozen per week)
- ◆ \$160.00 for 18-week chicken subscription (1 bird per week)

Packages will consist of four to eight different items each week and will feed 4 to 6 people. Content will vary depending on growing seasons.

Lincoln. They make some last-minute decisions, depending on the ripeness and quantity of the vegetables they have grown, how much of a certain kind of vegetable they distributed the week before, and so forth.

One of the nice touches of the CSA is the note Suzie writes up each week, listing what is in the basket, sharing a recipe and news items about the farm. Some customers read those little notes religiously and appreciate the thought

CSA customers pick up their subscriptions from the Farmers Market on Saturday mornings, or for an additional charge, the package is delivered anywhere within Lincoln City limits. Even with convenient service, there are a few subscribers who simply cannot adhere to such a schedule. Some are away at different points during the summer, while others seldom actually cook; they just eat out. For those people, the Ellises suggest sharing a subscription with another family, or ar-

Farmers Market

The ideal Farmers Market customer is "...a single professional female, who is too busy or doesn't want to do the gardening. They'll buy, knowing they're getting something that is fresh and good, and they'll probably take the time to warm it up and eat it."

Many of the customers are repeats, not always on a weekly basis, but often throughout the summer.

There is little dialogue between producers until they arrive at the market. At that point each learns what items other producers have for sale. John said it was important to know if someone is selling something he doesn't have, or selling a different variety of the same kind of vegetable. If either of the couple knows that another vendor sells that item, the customer is referred to that person. If possible, they offer to get or grow such a product for the customers, especially their repeat customers.

John emphasized that cooperation among the producers is what makes the Farmers Market work so well. "The consumer knows you aren't afraid to tell someone: 'Oh yeah, you can buy from them.' The consumer then knows I'm not just looking out for myself; I have the consumer's interest in

mind," he said.

One unlikely way John markets his produce is by working with those other farmers at the Market when it

comes to pricing. Before the market opens, or quite early on, John or Suzie or even their daughter Annie will stroll through the market and note any price differences. John is forthright about asking other farmers what their price is. He tries not to undersell someone else.

"It's legal to be collaborative amongst farmers or growers. In some businesses it could be called price fixing, but in a commodity or a produce based, or a farmers market, apparently it is a legal thing to do," he said.

John doesn't calculate prices by figuring in his actual costs of production, partly because he and Suzie believe that would be difficult to do. If he thinks he cannot make a profit selling his product at a certain price, there are a number of options open to him as a vendor. Some vendors bring scales to the market so they



can weigh it out exactly and get the price to the penny, John said, but he and Suzie do not.

"If I can't make a profit, I either won't sell it that way, or I'll price it over and above, or I'll package it different, or I'll just be unique in the way I display and offer my product," John said. "We're still offering it a legal way, but we'll package it by dry pints or quarts, or bunches. I'll have a consistent unit that we have offered, and many times [my produce item is sold] the same way as many of the other vendors." Being consistent, he believes, is showing his integrity.

Markup for the produce sold varies tremendously by item due to the vast differences in the amount of labor involved. Suzie handles the books and she said she thinks their markup is approximately 25 percent. She said she factors both her labor and John's la-

bor into the cost of production.

When asked what the cost would be if they had to hire someone to do their work, Suzie laughed, and said they have disability insurance on John, hoping that he doesn't become sick. They do not have the cash to pay someone in that event.

"Our farmers market sales have been so good so far, early season," John said. "But, as we go on, once people have got a taste of everything we've got for the year, they aren't quite as enthusiastic. It seems like the sales begin to drop off." The drop in sales usually occurs when school is about to begin, and their young summer employees return to their studies. John and Suzie find themselves with many things ripe at once, and without their trained summer help available to assist in the harvesting.

John said one thing they have done in the past was, after the student workers return to classes, he promoted the idea of having subscribers come to the farm and harvest their own produce. He offered them a good deal, allowing them to pick freezing quantities. Although the turnout wasn't the largest, he plans to continue that program to get rid of the excess. Another solution John

came up with for the excess of things such as zucchini was to always pick it small and tender, and put it in the CSA weekly baskets. "We also take those gourmet size zucchini to the Farmers Market and people are just loving it," he said.

Late in the season, the bounty that is the harvest becomes apparent at the Farmers Market. "We've had our best displays [in] September, October," Suzie said.

Processing and other markets

The straw bale Farm Market building on John and Suzie Ellis' Libby Creek Farm is symbolic of John's never-ending quest for farming innovation. Other items, such as specialized equipment designed to plant and harvest mechanically yet gently, are staples on his farm.



John working in the greenhouse

For the straw bale building, John took an old corn crib from another farm, moved it over gravel roads onto a concrete floor on his property, re-roofed it, and built walls made

of straw bales. The straw is covered with a stucco-like material to keep the bales dry and pests from setting up housekeeping. Using straw for walls is an excellent way to have good insulation.

"I thought it would be fun to recycle an old building," John said.

Members of the Straw Bale Association of

Nebraska paid John and Suzie to do a workshop on their farm and spent three days getting the bales up on the building. They waited almost three months for the stucco to be applied, an event which inspired another workshop.

John uses the straw bale building currently for washing and packaging his harvested vegetables, and for popping popcorn for sale at the Farmers Market. He and Suzie hope to have a complete, certified

kitchen in the building so she can prepare more of her jams and jellies made from wild fruit and berries.

Suzie's jellies, according to their web site, "are made from farm-grown, hand-picked fruit, steam juiced for fullest flavor. Cooked in small batches -- just like Grandma used to make! No seeds or pulp. Elderberry, red currant, sand cherry, peach, gooseberry, jalapeno pepper, blackberry, black raspberry, strawberry, wild chokecherry, and wild plum."

The Libby Creek label is also on fresh-milled red wheat flour or white wheat flour, corn meal and soy meal. John sells popped kettle popcorn, un-popped yellow popcorn and small ears of Nebraska Red popping corn.

Local grocers occasionally purchase and resell some of the produce from Libby Creek Farm. John said the grocers haven't been as receptive lately, or perhaps he hasn't tried as hard to sell to them. The challenge becomes what to do with the mid-season excess of produce.

Abundance can work against the Ellises. Their customers are often overwhelmed with the sheer volume of gifts of other people's vegetables, too. When the sales start to slow at

the Farmers Market, Suzie and John freeze as much of their excess as they can, and the rest either becomes feed or compost (green manure).

"If we had our kitchen going, I'd like to have the subscriber CSA picnic, and put on a little workshop. See if maybe we can talk about how you can preserve some things [because] we know you are going to get a lot of it! When it comes to summer or winter squash, it may get to be overwhelming. It would be nice to show them how to turn that winter squash into a dessert they can freeze, then pull it out at Christmas time."

Reaction of the Neighbors

John's brother, with whom he farmed traditionally for years, isn't optimistic about John's chances of success. He believes the only road to success is continuing to farm as they have always done, only bigger.

The Ellises' neighbors, however, are starting to come around in their attitudes as well as literally coming over to talk and check things out. During a recent Libby Creek Farm open house, the producer across the road came by and asked for a separate tour. The man farms thousands of acres, but is curious about

farming organically. John said the challenge for his neighbor is that he is looking at organic farming for economic reasons, rather than changing his life style and way of thinking about why he is farming, or why consumers would prefer organic foods.

The longer Libby Creek Farm stays in existence, and thriving, the easier it is for the neighbors to understand some of what it is John and Suzie do, and to accept both them and their organic ways. John thinks the neighbors wondered how the Ellises manage to stay and make a profit with their relatively tiny acreage, but they have figured it out by now. However, he believes "organic" is more than just a crop you grow in a certain way; it is a whole life and way of thinking.

"In order for them to understand [how and why we have succeeded], I think the other farmers would have to get in the middle of it with themselves," John said. He thinks the only way to understand "organic" is to actually try to live that way, working to help heal the planet rather than hurt it. He also thinks it would take anyone as much time as he has taken to learn both growing and marketing.

Challenges to Success

Need for business planning and debt-reduction

When asked what image they were trying to portray to their customers, John said he thought that definition would emerge from the business plan he and Suzie have yet to make for themselves. He then confessed that even after all these years of struggling and working, they never sat down together and worked through a business plan for Libby Creek Farm. “That is going to be our downfall here, not having the financial thing figured out as part of our business plan,” John said. “We’ve gotten a lot of help from a lot of different sources – family, conventional bankers, credit card – sooooo...”

“So many unconventional ways of just staying afloat, which makes a person feel real uneasy,” Suzie chimed in. “We’re in too deep, but in a way I feel like maybe a person needs to be – we had to make a decision to keep on going here all the way along.”

Traditional farmers are being forced to get bigger or stop farming. A farmer the Ellises know, a midsize farmer at 850 acres, has a banker who is telling him if he doesn’t have 1000 acres, he’s not going to make it. Financial institutions

are discouraging those farming from 500- to under 1000-acre farms -- and farmers themselves are discouraging their sons at those sizes -- to not farm, because they think there is just no hope for them.

“That’s where I had to say there’s other things you can do,” John said. “They’ve got too narrow a vision if they think they can’t survive that way, there’s so many thousands of horticultural crops.”

Differences of opinion -- Keeping Perspective

Suzie and John have different levels of dedication to the farm. This is an issue they will undoubtedly work through when they take a business plan class. The farm is John’s life. He works constantly, by his own admission, and is of the belief that no matter how much he does, not everything gets done. So many things stand out, wanting and needing to be done at once, it is often hard for either of them to decide what to do first, what should take priority.

By holding back on a deep commitment to all things “organic,” Suzie balances John’s single-mindedness and need to accomplish everything. She thinks there should be some sort of separation, a demarcation of time and energy, between home and work.

“When I’m here [on the farm], we go at it so hard...I would not want to do it all the time,” she said. “It is difficult to keep things in perspective when I am here all the time, because there is never any time away unless you leave.”

Conclusion

Setting a new direction for a farm operation in a traditional rural landscape is a challenge. Neighbors will watch and critique the innovative producer’s practices and when needed, the resources to assist the producer are not always readily available. The Ellises are experiencing this lifestyle and farming change with determination and with a goal for the future—to create a viable, organic farm operation that meets their family needs and provides high quality produce for their customers. The Ellises have experienced success, are developing a good reputation and have a loyal customer base. The next step toward a successful operation is to create sound business and management practices that help track their income and expenses, enhance their marketing and promotional strategies, and minimize their personal and business risks.

Appendix A

CSA On-Line Resources

Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association. Inc., San Francisco, CA; <http://www.biodynamics.com/csa.html>

Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Research Brief #40: Managing a CSA farm 1: production, labor and land*; <http://www.wisc.edu/cias/pubs/briefs/040.html>

Community Supported Agriculture Resources for Farmers or Producers, Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, Agriculture Research Service, US Department of Agriculture. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/csafarmer.htm>

"CSA - A First Year's Experience," by J Bauermeister. *Bringing Home the Harvest: Inland Northwest Community Food Systems Newsletter* (Spring 1998); <http://www.uidaho.edu/inwcf/BHHSP98.PDF>

Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources, Wilson College, Fulton Center for Sustainable Living, Chambersburg, PA; <http://www.csacenter.org>