

The Invisible Farmers Feeding a Region

Ellen Frisch



Ellie Chapple plants vegetables that will help to nourish school kids and restaurant diners alike. E. Frisch photo

Nate Cummings and Ellie Chapple may not fit the picture many people have of a Metchosin farmer. You won't see their farm name roadside, and they aren't regulars at local agricultural events or community meetings. "We are not your average local farmer. We don't live together. We are not life partners. It's not our family's land. We commute every day from outside Metchosin."

In 2021, after being matched with a local property owner through the Young Agrarians Program, the duo launched Sweet Beans Farm. Their first season was spent preparing the land and installing a poly tunnel. From there, they began nurturing relationships with chefs in Greater Victoria restaurants and providing in-demand produce and florals.

Five years later, that first half-acre plot has become almost three acres spread across three properties, with growth coming through networking, partnerships and relationships with other farmers and property owners. They use permaculture techniques and focus on regenerative agriculture.

"Without the community support and encouragement there's no way we could have expanded in the way that we have, and we're so grateful for other farmers and community members who just help us out." That spirit of cooperation includes working together on vegetable sales, buying seeds locally, and sharing equipment.

Sweet Beans' business model is also unusual. The farm focuses on wholesale customers. It currently supplies 10-15 restaurants and has now received its first large-scale production contract with a not-for-profit society that makes hot lunches for approximately 1300 students a day throughout southern Vancouver Island. The contract begins with this fall's school opening. To meet that demand, Sweet Beans Farm has ramped up production to between 2,000 and 3,000 pounds per week — a significant increase from the couple of hundred pounds per week produced in the beginning.

Learning as they grow

Nate and Ellie found each other through the restaurant industry during the pandemic. Both lost their jobs when

COVID brought restaurants to a standstill.

After a long period thinking about moving into production, Nate contacted Ellie with the knowledge that she had 10 years of experience as a florist in Victoria.

Neither arrived with years of farming experience. They learned through books, YouTube and community networking. Nate touts John-Martin Feltier's book, *Market Gardener: A Successful Grower's Handbook for Small-Scale Organic Farming* as a "pretty amazing book."

"And that is what we did. Now we've grown, and are getting into our own context for what works for us and our customers," says Nate, "Anyone can do it. It's really rewarding."

Growing what customers want

Their first clients came through restaurant connections. "Ellie and I both have worked in the restaurant industry for 10 plus years, and we had a lot of connections already through the years. Now we keep meeting people and keep selling produce to new clients." That network has also encouraged Sweet Beans to grow unique crops and respond to specialty requests. One example is *Delosperma* (ice plant), an edible variety of succulent. "It's crunchy and juicy — kind of like cacti, but with a very bright cucumber-like flavour. Fantastic!" The philosophy is straightforward: "Hey, if there's something that

you want, just let us know, and we will try and grow it for you."

Commercial sales are managed through Local Line, described by Nate as a "farmer's kind of website." It allows the farm to post weekly availability and assists commercial buyers to place orders online. "Because we live in Victoria, we're heading downtown every day. Typically, harvest days are Tuesday, but we're flexible if some chefs want deliveries Thursday or Friday."

Farming and business development remains largely a two-person operation, although they are now able to hire help on the farm. Ellie's flowers continue as a smaller part of the business, with bouquet subscriptions, bouquets located at local businesses, and a handful of contract weddings.

For all its unconventional elements, Sweet Beans Farm offers a straightforward lesson: farming doesn't necessarily

require a family farm, generations of experience, or even living in the community where you grow. Nate and Ellie started small with good connections, hard work and a willingness to learn. Now their three-acre operation is producing thousands of pounds of food each week for the wider community.

"We're very fortunate to be part of the Metchosin community," says Ellie. "We are aware of how important this land is not only for the municipality of Metchosin but for the surrounding communities as well, and to preserve it as ALR and farmland at this point in time is crucial to the food security of the south island."

Their story is a reminder that farming has room for new people, new ideas, and new ways of connecting farms with the communities they feed.



Nate Cummings tries to stay cool as a cucumber while planting tomatoes in the big greenhouse! E. Frisch photo