

PARTNERS

Promoting the business success of our customers and the rural community



- + Fall 2020 Market Outlook
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MAKING SLOW MAGIC
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A MARKET FARMER

Making Slow Magic

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METRO DETROIT MARKET FARMER ALEXANDER BALL SUCCESSFULLY CREATED A COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA) BUSINESS WITH TWO ACRES OF LAND, A UNIQUE BUSINESS MODEL, SUPPORT FROM HIS LOCAL CUSTOMERS AND A LITTLE HELP FROM GREENSTONE FARM CREDIT SERVICES.

By Jean MacLeod



“It’s been insanely hard,” Alex states emphatically, while adding, “But I love the challenge of a ‘slow farming’ business. It fuels me every day. I’m always asking, what can I do next? How can I get better?”

Eight years ago, at age 18 and with no previous experience, Alex researched the internet for how-to-farm information and leased some land to begin growing vegetables. The first year on his rented acreage, two gentlemen walked out of the woods and informed Alex that a pipeline was being built across his fields the following season. He didn’t give up, but admits it was a continual struggle to find land to lease over the next four years.

Making the decision to finally buy his own land was almost as frustrating. After looking at nearly 50 properties, Alex found two acres of zoned land with affordable taxes, five miles from his home in Romulus – but he couldn’t find a lender willing to finance a small farm.

“I was desperate,” Alex recalls. “No one would give me a loan. I went to the Farm Service Agency for help and they wouldn’t help me, which was really demoralizing. They did tell me to check out GreenStone, so I called and talked to Senior Financial Services Officer Michael Niesyto at the Ann Arbor branch. I emailed him with information about my finances, my website, and my business plan, and a day later Mike said, ‘hey, I like what you’re doing. I think we can work with you!’”

“I met Alex in 2017 when he was looking for a lender to finance a two-acre parcel,” recounts Mike. “Early on in the conversation I could tell his passion for agriculture was immense, and he seemed to have really great character. Those subjective measures can really go a long way when a lender is working with a young, beginning or small customer.”

Alex spent the first year as a property owner clearing out lowland forest and getting the acreage in shape while maintaining his greenhouse production. He spent the next two seasons building drainage and irrigation systems, ditches, levees and ponds on what he realized was wet, tired land.

“I was barely making enough to cover my expenses.” Alex says. “I was living below poverty line. But I just had a dream, and I knew the only way to get it done was to get into the field and plant as quickly as



possible, with as little debt as possible. I was in the business for the long-term and I told myself, no rush -- I was going to take about three or four years and just do it right.”

Alex’s Old City Acres farm specializes in small-scale, intensive market gardening. The farm’s returns per acre are relatively high compared to sweet corn production at a large operation, for example, and Ball has found farming year-round under hoops, low tunnels and plastic to be a very solid investment.

Formula for success

It’s not just that Ball tends to his tender winter greens and spring and summer vegetables organically, sustainably and lovingly, as the Old City Acres website states; it’s that Alex has created a community of regular customers eager to support his produce and endeavor.

“Oh man, we have a ravenous fan base,” he jokes. By design, he sells flexible, 12-month CSA memberships and delivers vegetables

to just three areas: Romulus, where he grew up and has family and friends who want to buy from him; Ypsilanti, a college town outside of Ann Arbor’s market-saturated reach; and, the rural neighborhood surrounding his own farm.

“I’ve really cultivated an awesome following over the last eight years,” Alex says. “I see my customers more like family. And having that customer base has been a lifesaver.

“You only need 50 solid customers with a \$20 per week membership. So instead

- Opposite page: Alex Ball sells flexible, 12-month CSA memberships and delivers vegetables nearly year-round from crops grown under hoops.
- Top of page: Farmer Alex Ball tends to his tender winter greens and spring and summer vegetables organically, sustainably and lovingly raised, as his Old City Acres Farm website states.



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of doing a shotgun approach, I’ve been refining my products and cultivating the relationships I have with these people. My customers can choose which vegetables they want to buy, and they can choose their own schedule. Because of our flexibility, we’re attracting a diversity of untapped, younger consumers. It’s a very customer-oriented CSA model. The produce is fantastic, but on top of that, I make sure our service is even better. I quickly realized that if you take care of people, then they are there for you when you need them.”

This past March, Alex needed his base of loyal supporters more than ever when the COVID-19 hit Michigan and threatened his business. Overnight, farmers markets shut down and restaurants canceled their wholesale produce accounts. Regrouping, Alex and a couple of friends built an entirely new driveway for the farm and put in a small parking lot. He then installed a self-serve farmstand, complete with refrigerated coolers, in front of Old City Acres farm and opened the doors to capture drive-by business.

Ball feels that 2020 has been more difficult than the first tough years on his property, when he was turning a forest into a farm. He believes that COVID-19’s trial by fire forced him to build a solid infrastructure that will help him stabilize his operation for the years ahead. Agile thinking is part of Alex’s formula for success, which also includes developing a niche market with high-quality product, creating a strong and growing community, and providing superior service that reflects the needs of customers.

“I realized really early on in farming, that if I couldn’t adapt I was going to quickly fall by the wayside,” Alex comments. “COVID is hard and it’s been rough getting through it. But farmers deal with difficulties all the time; hard is a normal thing in agriculture. We can do this.”

Growing upward

Ball doesn’t plan to expand to a larger property any time soon. His plan is to grow his farm upward, rather than outward, using his current acreage to its peak capability while running an all-year, greenhouse-aided

➔ Left: Spending the time to ensure his produce is fantastic is important to Alex Ball, but he knows his service needs to be even better. Alex has quickly realized that if he takes care of his customers, then they will be there for him when he needs them.

operation. At this point, Alex is only using half his property. He expects to be cultivating both acres over the next three to four years, and has thoughts of using the wet forest land for mushroom production.

“If I want to expand certain crops, there is rentable land down the street from me. To buy more land, I would have to scale up my infrastructure, buy more equipment, hire employees and take out more financing. Right now, my risk ratio is safe. If I had a huge operation, things like flooding and COVID-19 could take me down. I am more comfortable with slow, incremental growth,” says Alex.

“I’m a big proponent of slow food,” he adds. “Local food, traditionally prepared. I’ve never been in an insane rush to be the biggest or fastest producer. I’m 26, and I have the time to start small, avoid unnecessary debt and live a profitable, agricultural lifestyle close to community.

“It’s a slow model that works for me.” ■

ALEX BALL’S ADVICE FOR NEW FARMERS

Find an internship. If I could do it over, I would spend a couple of years working on a farm, getting hands-on experience in the field, before launching my own operation!

Educate yourself. I read tons of books, and grabbed any opportunity to learn about agriculture. If I heard about a workshop and I thought I might learn just one thing from it, I’d attend. University extensions have so many useful, free resources. Michigan State University Extension was especially helpful; I could download entire books on farming best practices.

Develop colleagues. Find peers with similar farming practices you can talk to on a weekly basis. I have a farmer friend who also has a fairly wet farm, and we talk regularly about crop fertility and water management.

Know your niche. The best part of my work is interacting with so many awesome people. I could never drop off crops at a hub and let it go off somewhere else. I like that personal touch, and my business segment is a consumer-friendly model built all around community.



AGRICULTURE – OPEN FIELDS BLOG BRIEF

GreenStone publishes regular updates on our Open Fields blog. Check out some of the posts you may have missed at greenstonefcs.com/openfieldsblog.

Commodity Report:

posted at the end of the month

Dr. Kohl: Common Questions

Dr. Kohl reviews lessons that this pandemic experience taught us about the strengths and weaknesses of the agriculture industry.

Commodity Report:

Wine Outlook

While the pandemic has taken a major toll, the wine industry still looks bright - continuing to grow, with the expectation of more investments.



Grow Forward Grant Recipient Spotlight: Jared Hautamaki

“I am quite happy to be making some positive change,” Jared Hautamaki states. As a part of the Native-American community with a small farm, I appreciate all that GreenStone has done.” ■

