



Burnout

Burn•out [**burn-out**] *noun* 1. The reduction of a fuel or substance to nothing through use or combustion. 2. Physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress.

The entrepreneurial popular press is filled with articles about burnout: employee burnout, CEO burnout, avoiding burnout, business burnout, overcoming burnout, work harder without burning out.

And, in August, those of us in the market farming community know burnout, especially in a drought year. If we aren't experiencing the rubbed-raw, sunken-eyed, hollowed-out sensation of being used up and hung out to dry ourselves, we see the haggard looks of farmers at the market, read their laments on blogs and listserves, or hear their stories over the phone.

But we also see the farmers who, while not exactly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as they unload their truck behind the natural foods store, don't look like they are on the edge of collapse.

What's the difference?

Burnout results from too much stress. Not just any stress, but distress: the bad kind of stress that results when we are unable to adapt completely to the things that disrupt our equilibrium. As market farmers, we've chosen to live in a stressful world, engaging in a business that hangs on the whims of nature and affords us little real control – yet that is also the beauty of what we do. The same disruptions that create distress can also result in *eustress*, the good stress that results in having a sense of meaning, satisfaction, or vigor, the same way we might feel after getting all of the transplants out before it rains: yes, we worked hard, we thought it was going to rain us out, we're dirty and tired and hungry and, no, nobody's made supper for the kids yet, but we did that work and now it's done.

Unfortunately, most of the burnout and stress-management advice floating around out there for employees and entrepreneurs simply doesn't work for farmers. Certainly, some of the tips - such as remembering to breathe deeply, eat well, and get enough sleep – make sense, but most of us don't have the option of simply popping off to the islands for week, or reducing the number of hours we work.

But here's what you can do: Keep some perspective. Have systems that work. Use labor wisely. Make your equipment work for you. Get in touch with some appreciation. Create resilience.

Keep Some Perspective

The growing season is always intense on the market farm. Mike Racette, who raises vegetables with his wife, Patty Wright, for their 150-member CSA at Spring Hill Community Farm in western Wisconsin, emphasizes the importance of understanding the emotional cycle of the seasons, and understanding that no matter what much you are mired in, this, too, shall pass. Particularly when it's time for the "grand letting-go of August," understanding that you've done what you can do and now it's time to move on can be an important part of maintaining your mojo into the fall.



Happy Hollow Farm's Liz Graznak, who grows four acres of vegetables for CSA, farmers markets, and restaurants in central Missouri, explained that her attitude takes a serious dip every July, but that it goes away in just a few weeks, as the days get shorter and cooler weather is on the horizon. "We switch into maintenance and harvest mode, and I know that the weather is going to improve," she says.

Having a community of growers is another way to get and keep perspective on your own success, failures, and hardships. Mike lives in a community flush with market farmers, and says that having the ability to pick up the phone and ask, "Is it hard over there?" makes a tremendous difference. The answer is almost always, "Yes." Everybody's dealing with the challenges of weather, weeds, and bugs, and it helps to be reminded of this.

Gaining a deeper understanding of industry norms made a big difference for Mike and Patty. After participating in the University of Wisconsin's Grower to Grower study to gather economic and labor data on Upper Midwest market farms, Mike and Patty realized that they were putting in far more hours than other growers operating on their scale, and realized that they needed to change their labor structure to transfer some of the burden. Having this data also provided an important tool for explaining to members why their prices were increasing.

Grower to Grower: Creating a livelihood on a fresh market vegetable farm, is available at <http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/grwr2grwr.pdf>.

At the same time you get perspective, you've got to keep track of what you need to do to make things better. I carry a pen and a stack of notecards binder clipped together in my shirt pocket to take notes about what needs to be done, what we need, and what can be done better. I review and organize this information more-or-less daily; Liz keeps a waterproof notebook in her hip pocket, and reviews the information as she needs it.

For both of us, this tool becomes the place to capture information from the esoteric to the mundane – and that mundane information often gets translated into lists that help us to think ahead. What do I need at the farm store? What needs to be done next?

Lee Zieke, of northeast Iowa's Willoglen Nursery, told me a long time ago that, "You've got to capture the pain while it's fresh." She and her husband, Lindsay Lee, found that the pain of the spring rush tended to fade by the time they sat down in the winter to make plans for next year, so they instituted an annual management retreat shortly after the planting season dies down – but before the pain dulls. Complete with an agenda and thorough note-taking, this off-site, overnight retreat provides a chance to reflect and document, as well as to chart out the course for the rest of the summer.

Systems that Work

Having the tools you need to do your work right is a crucial element of workplace satisfaction, and the most fundamental tools are the systems you use to get your work done. When you have reliable ways

of getting transplants in the ground, cool air in the greenhouse, and water on the fields, you position yourself for the sort of smooth control that results in exhilaration instead of despair.

“We never grew past the point of control,” explains Paul Arnold, of Pleasant Valley Farm in upstate New York. By keeping the size of their operation at a level that matched their skills, labor, and equipment, Paul and Sandy Arnold were able to manage weeds and fertility in ways that let them build on their successes. Weed-free fields made for a lower-stress working environment, because it felt fundamentally managed.

At Tipi Produce, Steve Pincus and Beth Kazmar grow 45 acres of produce. Because they have a deep well for irrigation, and the farm is all located on one parcel of land, irrigation is relatively easy. Steve uses drip irrigation on about 8 acres of plastic-covered beds, and irrigates the rest with a hard hose traveling gun, allowing him to cover a large amount of ground with limited labor. “With the extra work from the drought and having to turn off irrigation at nine at night, I’m tired,” Steve told me, “but not burnt out. I’m really into farming this year.”

At Rock Spring Farm, we use checklists around the farm to take some of what’s on our mind and put it somewhere else; they also make it easy for other people to do work that has a lot of details. When we were doing farmers markets and driving our own deliveries, I used checklists for loading every truck to ensure that I had everything I needed; after leaving the handcart behind on deliveries one-too-many times, I even put together a checklist for getting back in the driver’s seat of the delivery truck. Now, we use checklists to make certain that key equipment is hooked up correctly, and to help employees have consistent communication with wholesale accounts and our delivery partner.

Part of a good system is managing the flow of work throughout the season. Several years ago, Spring Hill Community Farm experimented with wholesale garlic production in addition to their CSA-only operation. Because the crop gets harvested all at once, they found that the large garlic harvest created a point load that disrupted the other time-critical activities on the farm, such as weeding and transplanting.

Similarly, Paul Arnold notes that expanding Pleasant Valley’s sales season to 52 weeks of the year actually cut down on the stress of the summer, because it spread out the income requirements of any given week.

Use Labor Wisely

In many ways, market farming comes down to timing: when crops are seeded on the right day and transplanted at the right time, weeded when the weeds are small, fertilized and irrigated at the right time, and harvested and handled quickly and efficiently, labor costs go down and every plant performs to its potential.

“We don’t try to make do with the minimum number of people on the farm,” Steve Pincus says. “We hire as many people as we can properly manage.” Running a profitable operation means that Steve and Beth don’t have to worry about every penny spent on labor, and can hire enough people to be certain that the necessary work gets done without placing undue stress on farmers and employees. At Tipi Produce, most employees work just 40 hours each week; many work less. This meets the employees’

desire to have a life beyond the farm, and makes certain they show up with lots of energy. “We try to hire healthy people who like to work with each other.”

At Pleasant Valley Farm, Paul hires every person who walks onto the farm in May, June, and July. “Strawberry and pea picking take a lot of time,” Paul explains, “but they provide cash flow that we can use to hire lots and lots of people to do the work of transplanting and weeding.” When most of his employees go back to school in August, Pleasant Valley’s crew is mostly left with harvest, while weeds and plantings are under control. Labor costs go down dramatically while the fall harvest proceeds.

At Spring Hill, Mike and Patty make certain they have enough labor to do the work that needs to be done, but they also make certain to leave themselves enough time to manage that labor. Employees need training and direction, and managing them takes time. “You have to understand what they can do, and what they’re not going to be able to do,” Mike says. They try to have enough employees working so that they can put people on the jobs they do best.

Make Your Equipment Work for You

Whether it’s a mechanical carrot harvester or a diamond hoe, you need the right equipment to get the job done. You need the right people to operate it. And you need it to work.

I’ve had the privilege of seeing a lot of farms, and the ones where the equipment works are the ones where the farmers and employees don’t look fried by the end of the summer.

Equipment maintenance is a key element of farm sanity. For years, Paul Arnold spent a portion of the winter maintaining his own machinery, carefully following the instructions in the service manuals. “I don’t enjoy working on machinery,” Paul told me, “So now I hire a mechanic to take care of my machinery in the winter.”

Things to Do Now (general sidebar for the article, wherever/if you think it fits, Lynn.)

You may not be able to act on much of this article right now, but here are some actions you can take immediately to relieve distress.

Get a notebook and a pen, and carry it everywhere. Write down lots of things.

Pick one activity that requires thinking about a number of things to do or gather, and make a checklist for it. An initial checklist can be easily added to and modified as you realize the need.

Start checking the oil in your tractors each time you start them. Grease machinery Zerk’s often. And sharpen your hoes for optimal performance.

Print out a positive email, or write down a favorable comment from farmers market, or even print out an inspirational Wendell Berry poem, and tape it to your bathroom mirror.

Paul maintains the importance sizing machinery right, and using it gently. Equipment that isn't stressed doesn't wear out and break, so you need to get equipment that's sized for the work you need it to do. That also means having machinery operators who know how to treat the equipment gently, and not ask too much of it. "Horsing my delivery truck along when I'm running five minutes late doesn't pay in the long run," Paul says.

Of course, spending a few moments to check the oil, grease the Zerks, and oil the chains help to ensure that equipment keeps working smoothly all year.

In the event that equipment does break down, "we always have two ways to get a job done," says Steve Pincus. The second way may not be as fast or as fun, but having a backup plan for every operation on the farm ensures that, when they do happen, breakdowns don't turn into crises.

For weed control, Steve notes that you need tools that work under a variety of conditions and at all stages of weed and plant growth. If you are controlling weeds by hand, that means you need hoes that slice tiny weeds next to 2-day old carrots, and you need hoes that can chop a pigweed that tall and going to seed. We send workers into the field with AccuSharp knife and garden tool sharpeners to keep tools sharp; every several hoeings, we also run the hoe blades over the grinder in the shop.

Get Some Appreciation

Making a connection with people who appreciate your work can make a huge difference. Liz, Paul, Steve, and Mike all cited the appreciation of and connections with their customers as a primary factor in their own satisfaction.

At Spring Hill, Mike and Patty create ongoing relationships with their members who come back year after year to work on the farm, and it helps to move their thoughts outside of the bubble of the farm. For Liz, the gratitude and support of CSA members and farmers market customers keeps her going when the going gets tough.

Depending on your farm's market structure, it may be especially important to let your employees hear positive comments from your customers. Print out a positive email from a CSA member, or jot a note in your notebook when somebody says something nice at your market stand.

Resilience

Whether the weather continues to get weirder or not, we need to build resilience into the systems we use to manage ourselves, our businesses, and our farms. Resilient systems absorb stress like a rubber band, returning to their original shape once the stressor has gone away. Brittle systems just break.

For resilience on a vegetable farm, few things can beat irrigation and refrigeration.

“You have to invest in the first things first,” Liz says – a sentiment that Paul and Sandy echo. Happy Hollow and Pleasant Valley both invested in irrigation systems early in their business development, investments that have paid off in spades during this drought year. Steve Pincus, of Tipi Produce in southern Wisconsin, says that moving his operation to a location that had good water was a revelation; when he moved Tipi Produce a second time, he established an irrigation system right away.

At Rock Spring Farm, building a cooler our first year meant that we could harvest produce all week long to take it to farmers market, rather than trying to cram harvest into market day or the day before; and our produce arrived fresher and lasted longer in the customer’s refrigerator because it had been thoroughly cooled. Sometimes, it wasn’t just a matter of convenience: a walk-in cooler meant that we could move harvest forward in advance of bad weather, or pick produce while the soil was still too wet for transplanting to make way for that work.

Keeping your overhead expenses low, and making investments to lower them further, also creates resilience. Permanent improvements in efficiency – such as the solar panels recently installed at Pleasant Valley Farm – can reduce future overhead expenses. “If we can lower our overhead,” Paul says, “We can get as small as we want to. That gives us something to look forward to.”

Loving It

At the end of our conversation, Mike Racette commented, “It’s still fun. It has always felt like it’s a choice. If I can choose to be in it, I can choose to leave.” Not feeling trapped may well be the best way to avoid being reduced to nothing by the first of September.

Paul Arnold summed up why he doesn’t feel burnt out: “I’m still doing what I like to do. I’m investing in the local community and helping to grow the organic community, and all I’m doing is growing carrots.” It’s important to remember that the work we do as farmers changes the world at the same time it feeds our children.

Chris Blanchard owns and operates Rock Spring Farm near Decorah, Iowa. In its thirteenth year of operation, Rock Spring Farm currently sells the harvest from 15 acres of vegetables and herbs to stores, restaurants, a wholesale distributor, and a distillery. Chris also offers education and consulting under the banner of Flying Rutabaga Works (www.flyingrutabagaworks.com).