



## The *New* American Farmer

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### Molly and Ted Bartlett, Silver Creek Farm

Hiram, Ohio

#### Summary of Operation

- 15 to 20 acres of fresh market vegetables
- Transplants grown in greenhouse, including herbs and heirloom vegetables
- 100-member community supported agriculture (CSA) operation
- 600-700 blueberry bushes
- Flock of 100 sheep
- 1,000 chickens and 50-75 turkeys annually

#### Problem Addressed

*Better connecting to consumers.* Molly Bartlett sold her produce successfully to large wholesale markets and upscale Cleveland restaurants for years before she decided there had to be a better way. The back-breaking work seemed to bring few rewards of the sort she had sought when she began farming. Her goal was to produce good food for people who appreciated the “craft” behind farming.

“We weren’t doing what we always thought we’d do: make a direct connection to a local body of consumers in our community,” Bartlett says.

*Undertaking community supported agriculture.* Bartlett and her husband, Ted, mulled over how to best market their small farm and decided to focus their efforts locally. Starting a community supported agriculture (CSA) operation seemed a great way to connect with their customers while bringing in a steady income. CSA involves consumers as shareholders in the farm in exchange for fresh produce every week during the season.

#### Background

Bartlett brought to the farm 15 years of experience in marketing, having worked for both a major Cleveland department store and a family-owned design business. The jobs served her well; at the time, she and Ted did not know they would run the most retail-oriented farm in northeast Ohio.

The Bartletts tested their green thumbs for 12 years before buying Silver Creek Farm. They bought a small farm when both worked full time — Molly in retail, Ted as a philosophy professor — and raised a bounty of vegetables for themselves and their five children. They also grew sweet corn, which the kids sold at a roadside stand, and invited their friends to garden on the plot.

Bartlett wanted an enterprise she could share with Ted, and she wanted to translate her growing affinity with the nation’s environmental movement into action. In 1987, they were ready to become full-fledged farmers and purchased a 75-acre tract near Hiram. Located about 40 miles from both Cleveland and Akron, the farm was ideally situated for direct-marketing opportunities.

“Farming seemed to be a very natural aspect of our interest in the environment,” she says. From the first, they grew their crops and animals organically.

### Focal Point of Operation — Education

“We grow the whole gamut,” Bartlett says, including 20 varieties of greens, squash, heirloom tomatoes, oriental vegetables, blueberries, raspberries, rhubarb, carrots and potatoes. Much of that goes to their 100 CSA shareholders, with the remainder sold at their on-site farmstand.



*Molly and Ted Bartlett offer unusual options, such as eggs, flowers or hand-knit sweaters, as part of their CSA farm.*

Silver Creek Farm, Ohio’s oldest CSA enterprise, offers its members a plethora of options. They can buy shares including eggs, chicken, lamb, flowers and/or hand-knit sweaters. Such choices add more income while helping other organic farmers with whom Bartlett partners to broaden the possibilities.

The Bartletts grow herb and heirloom vegetable transplants in their greenhouse and raise 100 lambs a year under their own meat label for direct sales. They raise between 800 and 900 meat chickens, which are processed by a neighboring Amish family and sold at the farm. They also offer brown and green eggs from heirloom hens.

They practice a four-year rotation that makes good use of their 20 acres of fertile ground. Annually, 10 or 12 acres are devoted to vegetables, with the remaining ground in cover crops. They compost their sheep and poultry manure before spreading it on the fields. Some compost is saved for the greenhouse as a soil medium. “It’s our most important secret,” Bartlett says.

If compost is their production secret, then bringing the customer to the farm is their best marketing strategy. In the beginning, the Bartletts planned to grow vegetables and sell their produce wholesale and directly to restaurants in Cleveland. Bartlett joined an Ohio Cooperative Extension Service project, “It’s Fresher From Ohio,” that sought to examine the possibilities for direct farm marketing. The project gave Bartlett the opportunity to meet a group of Cleveland chefs, and both soon came to the natural conclusion that she could sell them fresh, locally produced food for their upscale menus.

In 1992, they took a new tack. Rather than delivering to retailers, the Bartletts would draw customers to farmers markets and the farm itself through CSA. CSA fit perfectly with Bartlett’s desire to teach others about good food. Gradually, they stopped doing the farmers markets to concentrate all the elements — production, harvest and distribution — at the farm.

“One of the most important issues to me is helping to educate people about food

sources,” Bartlett says. “We wanted to make our farm a place where people could come and learn about food production.”

The Bartletts have hosted groups from every corner — schoolchildren by the busload, foreign visitors, numerous farmer tours and friends and neighbors attending chef-prepared dinners. They received a SARE grant to teach the old art of canning to CSA members. Bartlett has taught classes on making dilly beans, herbal vinegar, canned tomatoes and beer, and publishes a weekly newsletter to generate interest

in the harvest, complete with recipes. In 1999, they received another SARE grant to hold a farm festival, giving farmers a venue to sell their produce as well as to conduct “how-to” workshops of their choice.

### Economics and Profitability

Silver Creek Farm’s CSA enterprise has proven more profitable than other direct-marketing channels such as selling to restaurants and farmers markets. Centering sales on the farm makes most financial sense, Bartlett says.

“In the big picture, CSA’ers are more loyal than any other market,” she says. “But I don’t want to have all my eggs in one basket, so we continue with other options.”

The Bartletts have never advertised their CSA. They have no trouble selling shares to 100 subscribers, with a return rate near 85 percent eager to pay \$375 for a working share or \$475 for a full share.

“We’re profitable,” Bartlett asserts, although it wasn’t always that way. They

never expected to turn a profit in the early years, especially with building and equipment expenses and new enterprises such as raising Lincoln sheep. For years, the Bartletts sustained the farm with revenue from other sources — Molly’s work as a potter and Ted’s university teaching career.

“We wouldn’t have been able to take the risk we took in farming without those jobs,” she says. “The sheep didn’t pay for themselves for four years. You can’t start any business without knowing that it’s risky, and having capital from other things helped us limp along.”

The CSA operation went far toward making them profitable. Knowing they’d get an influx of \$45,000 cash each May became a great security blanket, allowing them to buy seed, new equipment and extra labor.

### Environmental Benefits

Like any organic farmer, Bartlett has devised a multi-tiered plan to manage pests without pesticides. With lots of observation, she learned to plant certain crops — such as arugula and bok choy, which attract flea beetles in the spring — at different times to avoid seasonal pests. Rotation remains key, as does using products such as fabrics that blanket crops in a protective cover. They regularly plant a mix of vetch and rye covers, along with other green manure crops. “Our customers aren’t interested in looking at flea beetle-damaged produce so we don’t grow arugula in the spring,” she says. “Produce should look really good; I have art in my background and I want things to look pretty.”

Before the Bartletts bought the property, it was farmed by tenant farmers with a common Ohio rotation of continuous corn. The first time Bartlett walked across the field, she literally lost a boot in the mud. Today, it’s a vastly different place, something she attributes to cover crops, spreading compost and aggressive crop rotation.

“Yields have increased, soil tilth has improved and the populations of beneficial insects are ever present, as are numerous species of birds,” she says.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Beyond Bartlett’s 100 shareholders, Cleveland and northeast Ohio residents have diverse opportunities to visit Silver Creek Farm. The farm stand is open Wednesday through Saturday, and Bartlett advertises the availability of tours, picnics and slide shows in her newsletter.

“I want people to come to a farm and see where their food is grown and how it’s grown,” Bartlett says. “I want them to bring a picnic lunch and sit under a tree and eat — or wander the farm — and have respect for the people who grow their food.”

As for her family, Bartlett feels a life of hard work in the open air making and preparing food has offered “the best” to her children, now grown and off the farm. Always interested in food, Bartlett finds cooking with farm-fresh or farm-preserved produce a wonderful beginning to any menu.

“Good food tends to make healthy, happy people,” she says. “This type of work is so very satisfying, and our kids have a deep appreciation for good food and a good lifestyle.”

Finally, her type of farming has created opportunities to meet “ingenious other farmers and grand people of all stripes.”

### Transition Advice

From experience, Bartlett advises a diversified income stream. “Have some off-farm skills or job skills you can do right from the farm to generate income,” she says.

CSA farmers need to develop “people skills” to relate to the community. Bartlett

also advises looking for opportunities to team with other farmers, with whom she co-sells products.

“You can work together to buy hay or sell another farmer’s eggs at your market,” she says.

### The Future

Despite how far they’ve come, Bartlett poses more marketing challenges to herself, such as how to attract an even more local customer base to the market. “It is still easier to attract people from the city and suburbs than our neighbors,” she says.

She and Ted hope to be able to restructure the CSA enterprise so they can slowly hand over the reins to a core group of members. Looking down the road toward retirement, they want to have more time for family, their new nonprofit educational center and, perhaps most important, quiet walks in the fields and woods.

■ Valerie Berton

### For more information:

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*Editor’s note: In 2002, Molly and Ted Bartlett took “an earlier-than-expected leap toward retirement,” ending much of their commercial farming operation. After decades of farming, they wanted to spend more time with their family and travel. To that end, they sold their flock of ewes and disbanded their CSA enterprise. They still grow chickens and vegetables for themselves and local market customers. The Bartletts are working to put a conservation easement on their farm to ensure its continued use as an agricultural site far into the future.*