

The People Inside Food to Bank On Growing New Farms

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Scooping a handful of Whatcom silty loam from the swath of freshly tilled ground at Nandaño, mentor farmer Mike Finger drew a deep breath and remarked, "That's the forest soil smell, different than my ground, for sure."

I spent a stunning mid-May morning in Nandaño's fields with the very inspiring Food To Bank On (FTBO) team of Craig Lavallee, in his second year of expanding Nandaño's garden into a market farm, David Peterson, the hub of Double Rainbow Farms near Everson, and their mentor farmer Mike Finger, of Cedarville Farm, which lies directly between the two newer farms.

With 18 years of organic farming experience, Mike brings tremendous breadth and depth to his role as a FTBO mentor. "What's my job here," he asked, "—just to give as much advice as I can see to give?" He responded to



David Peterson and Craig Lavallee talk farming at Nandaño Farm.

our nods with advice ranging from "Grow Delicata squash!" to recommendations for soil amendments, ground preparation, watering systems, and marketing strategies, all interspersed with compliments on Craig's tidy layout and encouragement about the hurdles that small farmers face.

This comprehensive and knowledgeable guidance is ideal for Craig and David, neither of whom is new to growing things. Making the leap into the marketplace is tricky, though, as Mike comments, "You don't want to fly higher than you can crash!"

With his beautiful off-the-grid homestead near the Nooksack, Craig wonders if he can make a living from the acre or more that his garden has grown into. "My passion is for growing my own food and having a sustainable homestead and property," and farming is an evolution of that passion. Nandaño has developed gradually over the past 23 years, from sustainable tree farming on its 60 acres to vegetable production for the FTBO program. In his second year of the program, Craig says, "These food bank deliveries have really inspired me to grow more, and to provide food with the best nutritional value to those who can least afford it. It's very rewarding."

Production challenges are daunting for farmers like Craig, who had many questions for Mike, hoping for a few exceptional, efficient systems and methods to help him produce more.



Photo by Shonie Schlotzhauer

Mike Finger, of Cedarville Farm, illustrates various strategies for bed layout.

For Craig, the opportunity for mentorship is one of the greatest values of FTBO—in fact, one of the primary reasons he entered the program.

Mentorship is also key to David's third year of FTBO. "If I could have gotten this kind of mentoring when we started Double Rainbow Farms, I probably would have actually made money!" Over Craig's kitchen table, David and Mike spread out the soil test results from Double Rainbow and discussed an amendment plan. "Your organic matter is fantastic, but it's really acid; your big project will be liming," noted Mike, before delving into the minutia of micronutrient balances and how to achieve them.

David has his work cut out for him on the four plus acres that he's responsible for, but the farm is gaining momentum with an extensive roster of

restaurant and CSA clients and a growing reputation for specialty tomatoes.

Beginning as a community garden project with a half-dozen enthusiastic collaborators, Double Rainbow is still a community-supported farm, with David at the helm and many other hands pitching in. The Sunday and Wednesday work parties every week are a huge source of labor, community spirit, and moral support. To pitch in—and eat well—give David a call at 303-1391.

For more about Nandaño, Craig can be reached at 592-1154, and for Cedarville's CSA information call 592-5594 or visit Mike at the Bellingham Farmers Market.

For more information about Food To Bank On or to make a donation, call Shonie at 647-6902 or visit www.sustainableconnections.org. And don't forget to make Farm Fund donations at the Co-op registers.