

Sol Flower Farm

Andy Szymanowicz - Journey into Farming

ANCRAMDALDE



In addition to vegetables, Andy grows many types of flowers on the farm.

EARLY INFLUENCES

"I grew up in an upper middle class suburb of Rochester. There were a few farm fields left, and we were lucky enough to have a small plot of land that backed up to an apple orchard and a corn field. I really wanted a vegetable garden of my own. The first crop I ever sold was when I was six [years old]. I grew a bunch of gourds, and around Halloween I put them in my wagon and I toted them around the neighborhood and rang people's doors and sold my gourds... I think my grandparents had a lot to do with [my interest in farming], because they were still connected to eating farm food. It was a big deal for me when I was a little kid to go spend a weekend alone with my grandparents. We would harvest all different kinds of stuff at their local farm, and then we'd bring it home. My grandma and I would just can for the rest of the day, and that's when I was like five or six [years old], too, so I think it all started making sense early. That was my favorite thing to do when I was a kid, and so those are my earliest memories... When I was 15 years old I got a job at a plant nursery, and I worked in greenhouses all through high school, and worked on landscaping crews, and I headed up the school garden in the courtyard when I was in high school. I was always seeking to be working with plants or outside... Even when you asked me when I was five, my mom says my answer was that I wanted to be a farmer, even though I didn't know, really, what that was."

Farming Journey

Originally from: Rochester, NY
Type of Training: Apprenticeships and school training program
Land Search Length: 6 months
Land Source: Leased land

Sol Flower Farm

First Year: 2007
Location: Ancramdale, NY
Land Base: 10 acres
Markets: Farmers' market (Millbrook), CSA with on-farm pickup, farm stand (Herondale) and local restaurants.
Products: Vegetables and flowers

LEARNING TO FARM

"I got a job in Vermont when I was 21, at Farm and Wilderness, which is a really cool place. They run kids' programs, and it's based on an organic farm. That was my first farm job, and I ended up living there for two years. I fell in love with the organic farm, and that's where my whole life became farming. I haven't stopped since then, since that summer, and I've just worked on farms ever since. From the beginning of working on any farm, I was always trying to learn as much as I could, because I knew that I wanted to have my own someday... I went to the Center for Agroecology in Santa Cruz—they have an apprenticeship program there that you pay for, because you're going to school and you get all this field experience."

AN EARLIER FARMING ENDEAVOR

"I met a friend at that school, and we decided we wanted to try to do something ourselves. I had learned a lot and I wanted to try to use it myself and not work for somebody else. We started a small farm, these two acres we rented north of San Francisco, and we started a market garden and CSA. After that farm in San Francisco, I wanted to come back east to farm, because I missed it on the East Coast. I hadn't had that much experience working with tractors, and I felt like that was my missing link to getting bigger. I applied to a lot of farms to be a manager-type person, but when I got out here to do my interviews, I realized that I hadn't had experience working on a larger scale farm, and growing on the East Coast is different than growing on the West Coast."

RETURNING TO APPRENTICESHIP

"I wasn't set up to be a manager, so it really did make sense for me to go back to apprenticing. So I did one more year at Brookfield Farm with Dan Kaplan, and he's a great guy to learn from. He has a really highly thought of apprenticeship program. I went from owning my own business back to apprenticing, and I went there really focused, wanting to learn these certain skills that I lacked. I knew a lot about growing, but I didn't know a lot about managing a large-scale CSA, or tractor work, or growing on the East Coast. So that year was awesome, but I also knew that I could never apprentice again. At the end of the season, I really remember feeling like I was ready. Overall, I did three apprenticeships, so I apprenticed for almost 5 years, and I felt very confident that I could do this by myself. I struggled in other ways, but I felt like I was really prepared to start this business as far as growing was concerned."

FINDING LAND, GETTING STARTED

"That fall, when I was finishing up working at Brookfield, I was constantly looking for opportunities and land. I think it was through Land Link that I found a piece of land in Hillsdale. The location seemed perfect. I was young and eager and didn't think about the future of my farming career. I didn't know how big I wanted to be, so starting out with a couple of acres was really comfortable to me. I took a loan from my uncle for \$20,000. I should have taken more, I think, but I was worried. Looking back, there's a lot of things that I struggled with that if I just took out a little more money, it would have made my life a lot easier... I knew that I loved CSA, but being new to an area, I think it's really hard to just start a CSA. I also don't think it's the wisest thing, to get CSA members your first year, because you just don't know how it's going to go. So I spent the first year just hustling it to anyone who would buy it. I did farmers' market and got into restaurants and stores and things like that."

GROWING THE BUSINESS

"The land that I started my business on, I thought it would have been a little bit longer term, and it didn't work out that way." After his first year, Andy found a new land situation: "I lease [my land] from Jerry and Iva, who have Herondale Farm, and it's been amazing. I lease buildings from him, and then we share the farm store... The scaling up was kind of intense in the beginning, but I had demand for it, and I just felt like I could do it. When you're running a bigger operation, knowing when to hire someone to do things for you is a huge step in learning how to manage a farm. I'm trying to learn to delegate more, and to let go of some responsibilities, so that I can have another life, too."

FEEDING PEOPLE

Sol Flower now has a CSA and sells produce at their farm stand and at farmers' markets: "We have an interesting demographic here—urban people that want to escape to the country on the weekends, and then they find themselves in a field picking beans or whatever, which they're craving. I am filling some need for folks from the city to interact with their food and their farm. I feel good about that. But I'll feel better when I can service other people, too...this year I want to start getting other people involved, like the locals here who might see the food as inaccessible. I'm working with the Northeast Community Center in Millerton, trying to get some low-income shares to people."

WHY FARMING?

"I love seeing people walk away with bags full of my produce and flowers. I love the connection with the community. Being people's farmer is really awesome. And I get to live a lifestyle that really works for me. I eat the best food. I know the best food producers. I'm contributing to making a change in our agricultural system... This is what I know how to do and this is what I love doing."



Sol Flower shares a farm store with Herondale Farm, where they also lease their land. Above, an event cohosted by Sol Flower and Herondale Farms. "I want to become more of a community farm, having workshops and a space for people to gather, not just being a farm but being a center for people to learn and to celebrate."

Relationship to the Land



"I love it here. There's so much beauty surrounding this land. We have a great little creek that runs through our land, which we rely on for irrigation and a quick cool down in the hot months."



Farming Together: "I wasn't expecting to feel so isolated and alone my first year of farming, and I figured out that I'm not a person that wants to just be working alone in the field all day. So coming down here [to lease land at Herondale Farm] was a huge thing for me. This farm is very active, and so it's really awesome to be farming around other people."



Farming at multiple locations: "Our fields are dispersed in different locations on our road, which can be challenging. We're in the truck often, but we make it work."



The greenhouse: "We start the greenhouse in March, and we work in here all spring, and then we're done here at the end of June. It then becomes a curing room for onions and winter squash, and so it has a function pretty much all year round. It's the birthing canal."

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The U-Pick Field: Andy plants a U-Pick field entirely for his CSA members. "It's really cool to see our members and their kids out here. They're having fun and further connecting with the farm and their food."