

How did you begin farming?

My dad is an inspiring plantsman, and we had a 20 acre apple orchard about ½ hour south of San Jose, CA. We worked all weekends at the farm, weekdays we lived in Los Altos selling apples from our suburban driveway. When it came time to choose something to study in college, I was delighted to learn Ornamental Horticulture was a career option at Cal Poly. Subsequently I continued the hands-on/learn-by-doing ethos with long term jobs at Swanton Berry Farm (a pioneer in union labor rights and organic farming), conducted entomology research at UC Extension in Salinas, ran a 500 person CSA, and worked for a produce distributor. The one thing I hadn't done was farm for myself. So, when renting a room on a man's property in Sebastopol eight years ago I was welcomed to farm an acre of it and he was happy to see it productive again. That is how Strong Arm Farm was born. Concurrently, I earned my Masters in Education while teaching Sustainable Agriculture classes at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Tell us a little bit about Strong Arm Farm today and how you got there.

Strong Arm Farm is a 2.5 acre CCOF certified Organic farm-homestead in Healdsburg CA. We grow and sell perennials, medicinal herbs, a few vegetables, cut flowers, as well as collect Sonoma Coast Seaweed. Around 2009, I knew a lady who worked for Seeds of Change, a provider of Organic seed. One winter day she had a big box of seeds in her trunk. I grabbed every packet that appealed to me (and then some!) That first year I trialed a little bit of everything: lots of herbs, flowers and a grand mix of veggies. I learned what grew well at the site, what I liked growing and what buyers wanted, I have been tinkering with this dynamic every since. I moved up to Healdsburg in 2012 and re-homed my farm, brining along my choice perennials: asparagus, skullcap and tree collards. It is much hotter and dryer at this inland location, which my body loves. I have formed relationships with preferred buyers over the years and have culled my breadth of offerings to just a few selections that do well in this and soil and climate, as well as earn their keep financially. I am now co-owner of this property and delight in the sustainable investment of growing perennial herbs, vegetables and landscape plants.

You didn't always grow medicinal herbs. What has been the evolution of the crops at Strong Arm Farm?

I started with vegetable crops as my primary plan. "A farm grows food?" right? However, I realized many other folks were already doing this better than I. Prices were so low for the effort and buyers still haggled for even lower prices! So instead of wedging myself in as a competitor I sought to excel at the oddball items, ahem, 'specialty crops'. Unique medicinal herbs, outstanding cut flowers and dried Sonoma Coast seaweed soon filled my farmers' market table, and also filled my pockets with dollars.

Observing a gap in our regional offerings, I scaled-up my seaweed wildcrafting. What had previously been a 1-day seasonal activity with friends has now expanded into a burgeoning business, harvesting upwards of 2,400 wet lbs a year. The wildcrafted seaweed is my farm's mainstay and financially supersedes all other grown crops. Luckily, the seaweed process is still totally fun and engaging. I've established myself as a bit of a local expert on this topic after 13 years of collecting on the pristine Sonoma Coast.

How does the medicinal part of the farm fit into the bigger planting and business picture?

The farm-grown herbs are now a smaller portion of my overall production and income. This may change as demand increases and prices become more sustainable for the local grower. I am currently trialing marshmallow, edible hibiscus pods, angelica and yarrow. The latter two providing the most dynamic sales opportunities with multiple buyers for various parts of the plant. For example Angelica; chefs are interested in candying the leaf petioles. Distillers and mixologists are interested in the seed for gin and bitters. Floral designers admire the beautiful large umbel flowers and herbalists appreciate the root. I love this cross marketing. All buyers partake in the medicine, support local agriculture, and in turn foster my woman-run, land-based business. Tapping into various communities of buyers/creators (florists, chefs, brewers, herbalists, eaters, curious plant advocates) dictates what I grow. I listen to and pitch ideas, offer samples to see what can and will be utilized, pay attention to trends and follow my intuition to develop my 'success' crops.

The Sonoma County Herb Exchange is a unique nexus of herb buyers and growers. I've been an active grower-member for 8 years. I enjoy the people, values and support of this exceptional group and have consistently trialed new herbs every year based on the needs of their buyers. Two herbs have been with me since the very beginning of my farm: Tulsi and Skullcap. These two are my staples. I also grow a lot of cut flowers, especially Tuberose Lily.

Tell us about your soil-management practices?

We became Certified Organic last year after growing with organic practices since the beginning. This designation represents an industry standard that can quickly bring clarity, legitimacy and trust to the consumer. I aim to have a farm of only perennials, solely to maintain the soil health and ease on the human body. Every disruption of the soil wrecks the structure and habitat of millions of soil dwelling organisms. Letting plants mature over many years in a stable and undisturbed soil ecosystem supports a lot more than just a steady income.

What considerations are unique to growing medicinal plants?

A base knowledge in horticulture helps with all plant growing. Propagation, pest management and harvest techniques are specific for every species. As with the harvesting of all delicacies, *stage of maturity* is crucial when cutting for optimal quality. I am a farmer not an herbalist, I prefer to sell all plant material fresh, that is the part I do best. When wildcrafting, the environment in which the plant/fungus/algae resides is embodied in the product, so careful observation and discretion is needed.

What would you recommend as good starter plant to folks who want to begin a medicinal garden?

Tulsi (or Holy Basil) is a easy starter herb since it can withstand various soil and climactic conditions. It's also a quick annual, and can be continually grazed. Tulsi is very effective medicinally which enables one to 'feel the healing happen'. For me it prompts happy and relaxed feelings and I make it part of my daily enjoyment. It grows well with other basils and calendula. Agastache leaves (also called Hyssop or licorice-mint) leaves are tasty raw with great cut flowers to boot. It always amazes me that these two delicious flavors can exist in one plant. Both can be dried, but I prefer raw bites of the leaf when I am puttering in the garden.

Where can people learn more about you and Strong Arm Farm?

www.StrongArmFarm.com

instagram #strongarmfarm

I teach Sustainable Agriculture courses at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Heirloom Expo in Santa Rosa September 6-8, 2016, I have a booth and may offer a seaweed lecture.

I offer various seaweed lectures and forays. See website for updates.