

**KEN DAWSON**  
**Owner, Maple Spring Gardens – Cedar Grove, NC**

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Interviewer: Kate Medley  
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Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

**[Begin Ken Dawson Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Kate Medley:** I'll kick things off saying this is Kate Medley interviewing Ken Dawson at his home outside of Hillsborough in Cedar Grove, North Carolina, on June 19, 2011. I'll get you to start out by just telling us who you are and what you do.

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**Ken Dawson:** Well I'm a farmer; that's what I do. **[Laughs]** Farming has been my full-time occupation since 1984. We grow vegetables, small fruits, cut flowers.

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Yeah, we raise produce for local markets. Everything we grow is sold within 25 miles of the farm, primarily through our Farmers' Markets and our CSA. And this has been—our marketing has evolved substantially over the years, but we grow essentially the same crops that we have for the past 28 years or however long it's been.

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We first raised produce and sold it in the Chapel Hill area close to 40 years ago. It's been a full-time proposition for 27 years now. And so in a nutshell that's what I do because that's the primary focus of my life. **[Laughs]** It consumes my life during the growing season.

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**KM:** Tell us where you're from and your birthday.

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**KD:** My birthday is August 28, 1950. I was born in Farmville, Virginia. At the time I was born my father was a high school Vocational Agriculture Teacher and my mother was 20 years old. And when I was two years old we moved to Richmond where we lived for 10 years and then we moved to Banner Elk, North Carolina, where my father taught at a small junior college for four years. And then we moved the summer before my junior year in high school to Eden, North Carolina, about 70 miles from here. My father was teaching at the community college at the time. My mother was a college student herself. Having gotten her kids old enough to go to school, she went back to school herself. And in the fall of 1968, I came to Chapel Hill as a freshman at the University of North Carolina.

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I've lived in Orange County, North Carolina ever since, for the last 43 years. I never graduated from college and I never left Orange County. *[Laughs]*

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**KM:** We're in Orange County?

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**KD:** We're in Orange County now, yes.

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**KM:** And how did you come to be a farmer?

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**KD:** *[Laughs]* It was a long history. When I was growing up, my grandfather was still farming the farm that my father grew up on, that my grandfather grew up on, that my great-grandfather grew up on. And it was my favorite place to be. I never lived there except during the summers, but when I was about eight years old, I started going and spending a week with my grandparents in the summer on the farm and absolutely loved it.

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You know my dad had left the farm at the first opportunity and became a teacher, which my mother did later as well. But I liked being at the farm with my grandparents. When I was 12 my grandfather first hired me and paid me wages. I think I made five dollars a week that first summer. I learned to drive a tractor that summer and did a few other useful things around on the farm. You know, the summer I was 14 I earned 15 dollars a week plus room and board for probably a 50 or 60-hour workweek and the following summer I made 20 dollars a week and I saved all that money and that was my spending money for the year.

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I loved it. You know, I liked everything about farming. I never wore shoes except to church on Sunday. And, you know, I learned—the summer I was 15, my grandfather was sick a lot. That was the last year he grew any tobacco. It was a very small-scale; it was just he and I and one other young guy occasionally. And he was sick a lot that summer. And so the work of cultivating the corn and mowing hay and so forth, that fell to me and that was—that was a great summer for me, and I grew up a lot and assumed a lot of responsibility for keeping things going when he wasn't able to. And every Saturday afternoon we fished.

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So that was that, and when I was in my mid-teens I had a thought that I was going to someday come back and take over the farm there. But then in my later teens I kind of got that

notion out of my head. My grandfather and I did not get along as well by the time I was 16 or 17. When I was 18 I grew a beard and he refused to look at me even though his father had worn a beard halfway down his chest most of his life. You know, he would actually get up and walk out of the room when I walked in because I had a beard the summer I was 18. This was 1968. Somehow it symbolized something to him that he didn't like.

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So I went to college. I had no thoughts that I was going to farm. And I went to [the University of North] Carolina with the intent of majoring in Chemistry and fairly quickly got that notion out of my head and studied Psychology and Sociology. My last official major at UNC, before I dropped out for the last and final time, was Religion. So my college career was a progression from Chemistry to Psychology to Religion to dropping out of school and planting an organic garden.

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And so one thing led to another. My first experience growing vegetables in this area as an adult, it grew out of an over-sized household garden that had surplus produce and we started selling a little of it. And I found something I really loved to do. And it took several years—most of my twenties I was not really farming. I was, like I said, I worked on a dairy farm part-time for five years. I did carpentry work. I drove a milk truck. I worked for a friend of mine delivering bottled water for a while. But for most of that time I knew that what I wanted to do was farm and it was a matter of getting my life to a point where I could begin to do it.

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So 1981 was the first year that we sold some produce at the Carrboro Farmers' Market. And then since 1984, we've been there consistently throughout.

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**KM:** What did the Carrboro Farmers' Market look like in 1981?

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**KD:** [*Laughs*] A lot different than it does now. Nineteen eighty-one, we sold for eight weeks that summer and we had a borrowed rotor-tiller, a corner of someone's pasture. We slept in—it was not where we lived. We slept in the garden and got up at first light and picked our produce and took it to the Market. Consequently, we were never at the Market when the Market opened at 7 o'clock. We would get to Market about 9 o'clock. The Market would be half over. We'd pull in on the corner and sell what we had. And there were probably an average of fewer than 20 vendors at the Market at that time. It was before the Market moved to its current location. We had two shelters, each with 16 selling spaces. One shelter was usually full and the other one was sort of the overflow.

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And actually, in 1984, we were back at the Market then, we were in the second shelter which was—you know, it was not the desirable place to be and I would spend a lot of time standing at my table in that shelter where there were three or four other vendors, thinking if I could just get over there in that other shelter I could sell something because there were no customers in our shelter. There was nobody there. But that was the starting place.

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**KM:** And what were you selling?

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**KD:** Lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower. Later in the season tomatoes, peppers. Essentially many of the things we do now—no one had ever heard of arugula in those days. It didn't exist as far as we knew. But basic spring crops: leafy greens and root crops; and the summer crops: tomatoes and squash and cucumbers and so forth. Yeah. It was a very—the Carrboro Market was a very modest beginning and a slow growth for a long time, but slow and steady.

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**KM:** Had there been other markets of that sort in the area?

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**KD:** There was what was referred to as a curb market on the eastside of Chapel Hill before the Carrboro Market started. I was never a part of that market. I think probably some of the original members of the Carrboro Market, when it formed as an entity, had been involved in that market but I'm not clear on the history and the connection there. But nothing like the Carrboro Market. The Carrboro Market's original location was about three blocks from where it is now. There was a shelter built with some Federal grant money on a leased parking lot. The Market had a 10-year lease from—it was a parking lot for a mall across the street and the Market had a 10-year lease with the mall's ownership.

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And when that lease was about to expire and we were unable to renew it for more than a year at a time, that's when we began the process began evolving towards developing the current Market location.

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**KM:** And that was not your only outlet for your vegetables at that point, right?

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**KD:** No. We were selling at that Farmers' Market and we were selling to a small grocery store, locally owned store, called Wellspring Grocery, where we consistently did business throughout the '80s. And in '91, Wellspring Grocery was bought by Whole Foods. We continued to raise crops for Whole Foods for another 10 years.

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So for the first 20 years of our business, our marketing was approximately half and half divided between what we were selling to the grocery stores and what we were selling at the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

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**KM:** And you grow your crops organically and what did your clientele at the Carrboro Market in 1981, for instance, how did they react to that?

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**KD:** I don't have specific memories about that. We were growing vegetables organically because we believed it was the right thing to do. You know, I had our first garden in 1972; we'd followed organic methods. One of my roommates at the time was cooking at the first natural foods restaurant in Chapel Hill. He had grown up on a farm, a tobacco farm, in Eastern North Carolina. I had grown up working on my granddad's tobacco farm. Certainly organic farming wasn't the family background, but Michael had heard of something called organic farming, and he thought we should try to grow our household garden organically. And so we had Rodale



Press's *Basic Book of Organic Gardening*. That was our guidebook. And so I was doing a lot of reading at the time on anything pertaining to agriculture: conventional, organic, and otherwise. And during the '80s I really became convinced that it made a lot of sense that where agriculture was headed didn't make sense.

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And so I was growing vegetables organically, not because it was a favorable market niche, but because I felt like it was the right thing to do; it was what I wanted to do. And that's what we offered our customers.

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I think there was always a certain amount of people at the Carrboro Market who appreciated that and liked what we were doing. Over time, the public awareness of the issues surrounding that has grown a lot and the clientele has as well. But it was pretty early on. You know, this was 30 years ago.

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**KM:** Did you for instance sell an organic tomato or just a tomato? I mean did you call it organic?

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**KD:** I think we did from the beginning. Yeah. We promoted our product as organically grown. Some people had an idea of what that meant and some didn't. This was long before there was any such thing as organic certification. It was before the USDA got involved in it. It was not a regulated term. Organic meant what anybody said it meant at that time. **[Laughs]** We had other vendors at the Market, you know, from a conventional background who would put up a sign

saying *organic*, often misspelled, because they had used some manure on their garden or something. A lot of people just didn't have any clear idea and this was way before any attempt to really define and regulate it by anybody other than people within, you know, the organic farming movement who had some idea of what it meant. But to the general public it was not understood. It's still not well-understood but, you know, more so now than then.

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**KM:** And who was the clientele at the Market in the early days?

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**KD:** [*Sighs*] You're asking me to remember things half my life ago. [*Laughs*] Ah, it would be hard to say; I think there was a pretty good spectrum of the population of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, but far fewer young people than there are today. The average age of the Market clientele now is much younger than it was 10 years ago even. Of course 30 years ago I was much younger than I am now and most of the people looked older. But now [*Laughs*] of them look younger. I was 31 the first year we sold at the Carrboro Market. I'll be 61 this summer, you know—a lot has changed.

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But I would say it was a fairly broad spectrum of the population of the town at that time. I don't have real clear memories about the demographics of the Market from the early years—so much smaller than today. We did not, however, see many college students at the Market or young families in their twenties then. I would say the demographic was much more middle-aged and older people then than it is now.

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The customer traffic flow through the Market has shifted over time to later in the morning. It used to be that all the action at the Market happened between 7:00 and 10:00. In the early years of being at the Market, if you hadn't sold it by 10:00 you weren't going to sell it. People came early. They shopped and they went home. And now they've shifted much more. We have more customers at the Market in the last two hours than we do in the first three now. But we also have a lot more young people we see. And that's really changed dramatically in the last five years. My perception is that we see far more college-aged students. I mean it's a college town. There's, you know, 20,000 or more college-aged people in Chapel Hill and 10 years ago you wouldn't see maybe a few dozen at the Market on Saturday. Now there are lots of college-aged people there but also a whole lot of young families, young parents, you know, baby carriages. Baby carriages increased, you know, 1,000-percent in the last 10 years at the Market. Young families who are concerned about what they're eating, young mothers who want to know all about my farming practices—are you putting anything on your food that's going to poison my baby?

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I have daughters who are young mothers who, you know—same thing. They're concerned about what their children are going to eat, so in the last 10 years that's been the biggest demographic shift at the Market—is a much younger clientele. But it's hard for me to remember that much about the clientele from 30 years ago other than that it was a fraction of what it is today.

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**KM:** How has your approach to growing vegetables and selling them at a market changed over the course of these 30 years?

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**KD:** I'm much more a businessman than I used to be. The first year that we sold at the Market that was the year that my wife, Libby, and I got married. And we had entered a joint venture together that spring. I was going to grow vegetables and she was going to sell them. I was a shy young man, who didn't like to go to town much. I did not like to interact with people very much. And I wanted to be barefoot and work in my garden. And I was going to grow vegetables and Libby was going to sell them.

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And I knew little or nothing about running a business and did not think of myself as a businessperson. I was a gardener. And in 1981, we actually planted the garden that year. We did not know that Wellspring Grocery was opening its first store in Durham that year. We knew about the Carrboro Farmers' Market and Libby had gone around and talked to some chefs in the nicer restaurants in town and their response was favorable. That was our initial marketing survey. She went and talked to four or five restaurant chefs and they said yeah, "You grow it, we'd like to buy it."

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So we entered the business. I was not a businessperson. I have become a businessperson and quite successful at what I do and my orientation is much more businesslike and, you know, I have learned to be an employer. I've learned to manage a considerable cash flow over the course of a year and so I approach the farm now very much from a business perspective. You know, I'm in my sixties now and I'm looking at this being a business that will fund a retirement for me that I expect to embark up on in a few years.

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So it—it's evolved dramatically along those lines. I still enjoy growing vegetables but early on that was what I was interested in doing and the business aspect of it was, "Maybe I can make enough money selling vegetables; I don't have to have a job and do something else and I can do what I love to do." And of course, when you take what you love to do and try to support yourself doing it, you have to learn about running a business. So, I've learned a lot.

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**KM:** Nowadays you sell all of your product at the Market or through CSA, almost all of it.

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**KD:** Almost of it, yes.

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**KM:** From a businessman's perspective why is the Market a good outlet?

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**KD:** I get to keep all the money [*Laughs*], other than what we pay the Market Manager.

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**KM:** Which is \$14?

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**KD:** Well, you're talking about the weekly selling fee? At Carrboro, we have two spaces at the Market. My weekly selling fee is \$35 at the Carrboro Market. We sell at two Farmers' Markets

and through our CSA, all of that is retail sales. And so the profit margin on every box of tomatoes is way greater than it is wholesaling them. You know with wholesaling the tomatoes, the profit margin might be 20-percent after expenses are covered but then if the retail dollar is twice as much as that then the profit margin is, you know, many times over.

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So it is far more profitable for us to sell product retail at the Farmers' Market or through the CSA than wholesaling. So in the last 10 years we have transitioned away from doing about 50-percent wholesale to doing almost 100-percent retail, either through the Farmers' Market and the CSA and the profitability of the farm has increased dramatically, you know, several hundred times-percent—several hundred-percent times, yeah.

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**KM:** And you were telling me earlier just about the experience of selling directly to your customers and talking with them about your practices and your product. Do you want to comment on that?

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**KD:** Sure. You know for about 10 years while we were selling a large amount of product wholesale to grocery stores we maintained organic certification. Several years back when the USDA assumed ownership of the term *organic* and required everyone who wanted to use the term to play by their rules and jump through the hoops, at the time that occurred we still maintained certification. And after we stopped wholesaling I decided that it wasn't worth my while to put the time and effort into doing all the paperwork that the certification required. It was a very difficult change to make because I had—had a reputation in the community as an organic

farmer. I had sold produce in Chapel Hill for almost 25 years under a sign that said *organic produce*. And the decision to drop the certification meant that under the law of the land I could no longer put up a sign with the o-word on it. And it was almost an identity crisis. I was going to go to town and sell my product without the *organic produce* sign hanging over my head that had been there for decades.

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And that was hard; it was hard to let go of that. I haven't changed my farming practices, but I no longer have that identity that's expressed through our signs, you know. If a customer comes up to me at the Market, and it happens every week—people want to know about our farming practices: do we farm organically. If they ask me directly, do we farm organically, I will tell them yes. It's illegal for me to do so according to the USDA's law. But it's also a truthful answer. And I don't skirt around that you know in terms of what I have written to put on my website about organic. I tell about the history of the farm and so forth and what we've done but I can't say that our product is organically grown anymore directly.

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But, nevertheless, I can still talk directly to customers face-to-face about what we do and what we don't do. And more and more people—whereas I think the majority of the general public doesn't really clearly understand what organic farming means, people assume that if you farm organically you don't spray anything, you don't use any pesticides and it's not true. There are many pesticides that are approved for organic production. People want to know: do you use pesticides, do you spray anything? The truthful answer to that is yes, and the truthful answer is also we farm organically.

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It's hard to explain all of that while you're trying to wait on 10 people at the same time. And so, you know, the amount of conversation I can have with people at the Market is quite varied to be able to tell people what they want to know at a level that they can understand in the context of waiting on a lot of customers. But the Market provides a great opportunity for education of people to explain some of the complexities of these issues and so forth. And a lot of people do want to know.

**00:24:10**

**KM:** What does it look like out here on your farm?

**00:24:14**

**KD:** What does the farm look like?

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**KM:** For someone that may never get to visit—

**00:24:19**

**KD:** Right. Well, I have been told it's quite beautiful. [*Laughs*] Every now and then I stop and notice. It's always a reminder to me when someone who has never been to the farm comes and says, "Oh, it's such a beautiful place," because when I walk out the door I'm on the job. And I'm on the job during the growing season 60 or 70 hours a week and I meet my staff at 7 o'clock in the morning with a clipboard with lists and this is what we're going to do and who is going to do this and this is what we need to harvest and this is where it needs to go. I'm at work and I'm



running a business and I often forget to stop and look up and think oh yes. I'm awfully lucky to go to work in such a beautiful place.

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It's rolling land. We own 61 acres of land and about 40 of that is wooded. We have some beautiful wooded land that I do not spend much time in this time of year because that's where the ticks and the chiggers live, but we have about 20 acres of open land and that's where all the farming activity occurs. That's where all the farm buildings are and so forth. It's hilly. It slopes downhill to a pond that we use for irrigation and swimming and fishing. Most of the farm slopes to the west and to the north. We're on a ridge. It's one of the higher points in the county, where we are, so we catch a lot of wind. It's a great place to watch the sky and watch the storms pass. It is a beautiful place and I'm glad when someone comes and reminds me to stop and look up and—and notice it.

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I have spent most of the waking hours of my adult life outdoors. And I'm thankful to be able to do so. There have been many interesting transitions over the years since we bought this farm. This was a worn-out run-down tobacco farm when we bought it. The level of bio-diversity in the fields was not high. You know, there's not a lot in a tobacco field to draw a diverse population of insects, birds, and so forth. And over the years it has evolved enormously in complexity and, in particular, I've enjoyed watching the bird populations change. You know, I began learning about birds as a small child. By the time I was six years-old I could name every bird that was pictured in the bird books that my parents had and provided me with and I knew their calls and so forth. And I've commented several times this year there's more birds and more different kinds of birds on the farm nesting here this summer than we've ever seen.

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So one of the pleasures of my workday is stopping and noticing what birds are singing and who's out there and who's passing through. We saw some birds migrating through the spring I've never seen in my life in 60 years of watching birds. I saw some birds coming through that I recognized from pictures in the books when I was a kid that were here. And so I've enjoyed introducing my young staff that comes to work—say, "Okay, do you hear that bird? Do you know what that is?" And of course they don't, but by the time they leave here they will know a lot more about identifying birds by sight and by song than they did when they came. So that's one of the pleasures of the job.

**00:27:27**

**KM:** Here we are, middle of June. Tell us what's growing and what an average day looks like on your farm.

**00:27:38**

**KD:** Okay. June is a transition month. We start our planting season in the field around the first of March. Spring, cool-weather crops: leafy greens, root crops, the brassicas (cabbages, broccoli, cauliflower) and so forth. By June those crops are just about all gone. We're at the very tail end of harvesting spring crops. And so June is a transition month. We're finishing up harvesting the last of the spring crops. We're beginning to harvest the summer crops.

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Just this past week I mowed down the remains of the field where we had most of our spring crops, the broccoli that was long-since gone to seed and so forth, mowed that down and planted it in a summer cover crop of cow peas and buckwheat and millet, something to improve the soil over the course of the summer until we need to plant that field again. We just this past

week harvested the first tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants in the field. Those are our primary crops to harvest in July, August, and September. We're still planting more of those. We will do our third and final planting of peppers and tomatoes and eggplants this coming week, the end of June. Those will be crops we'll harvest in September and into October.

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Starting in two weeks we'll begin planting the first seeds for the fall broccoli crop. So we essentially have three seasons of the year in terms of what we're harvesting: the spring season for cool-weather crops; the summer season for the crops that like hot weather; and the fall season for the cool-weather crops, the same ones we grow in the spring. Those seasons, of course, merge seamlessly, one into another, but really it is three distinctly different types of planting seasons and so forth. So June we're transitioning from one to another.

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A typical day, the weekly schedule is different depending on what day of the week it is. Monday, from now until October every Monday, my crew is picking tomatoes. We pick tomatoes on Mondays. Monday is almost always a big harvesting day. Earlier in the season we're picking strawberries every Monday. Some things we pick three times a week. Sometimes we pick—some things we pick only when we're ready to go to Market. Strawberries for example ripen quickly so we pick them Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and put them in the cooler. Tomatoes we typically pick certain varieties Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Other varieties we pick Monday and Thursday and then sell them as we need them. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the days that we harvest product and pack and deliver our CSA boxes. We have 185 CSA members. We deliver some of those boxes on Tuesday and some on Wednesday. Wednesday we also go to an afternoon Farmers' Market in Durham. Friday, all the way through the season, is devoted primarily to harvesting and preparing for Market on Saturday. Saturday we're going to

two Farmers' Markets; it's our biggest market day and so Friday most of the day is taken up with harvesting and marketing.

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So Mondays—tomorrow morning I have eight young people on the payroll this season. Some of them are full-time and some are part-time, so on any given day Monday through Friday I have six people here. And then we have two people working with me at the Carrboro Market on Saturday, two people working with my wife at the Durham Market on Saturday. So Monday morning I'll meet my staff with my clipboard and my list and the Monday morning routine: unload the trucks from Saturday and everything that's empty on the trucks that came back from Saturday; wash all the buckets and the flower buckets and produce containers and so forth, odds and ends around the bar getting things squared away to start the week; and then we'll pick over all the tomatoes. A lot of the flowers are cut Monday, things that have bloomed out over the weekend and so forth. And then most of the rest of Monday is devoted to working the field, growing crops. Other than certain things that we need to pick every Monday, we'll busy ourselves Monday. We're not marketing produce on Monday. We're not packing CSA boxes. So it's a day to stake tomatoes. Tomorrow we'll be planting—our final planting of tomatoes will go in the ground tomorrow. And then things like weeding and mulching and trellising blackberries and things like that, mowing—Monday jobs.

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And then on Tuesday, the day is largely dominated by harvesting and packing our CSA boxes and delivering those in the afternoon, but that's the smaller of our CSA days so that only occupies part of the day and then we'll have some time in the afternoon to do other fieldwork. Wednesday is completely dominated by preparing for the Farmers' Market in the afternoon. One of my employees goes to the Market that afternoon. And then we harvest and pack and deliver

105 CSA shares on Wednesday. So that day almost all of it is taken up with harvesting, packing boxes, going to Market, and delivering the CSA boxes.

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Thursday is another day to actually grow something, so we'll have something to harvest the rest of the time. And then on Thursdays we'll pick—a lot of our tomatoes are picked on Thursday for the Saturday Market so that we don't have to do all of it on Friday. Fridays we're harvesting for Market. Saturday we go to Market. Sunday is everybody's day off except I'm back and forth outside irrigating on Sundays but I try to have a day off on Sunday.

**00:33:04**

So that's a typical day in a week [*Laughs*] and that's the typical week this time of year.

**00:33:12**

**KM:** And tell us about your Market routine, the Saturday Carrboro Market routine.

**00:33:18**

**KD:** Okay. Yeah, I go to the Carrboro Market every Saturday, with the possibility of maybe one or two Saturdays off but generally I am personally at the Carrboro Market every Saturday from sometime in March until sometime in November. I will miss one Saturday in August because Libby and I are going to Glacier National Park for a week. It's our thirtieth wedding anniversary in August and we're leaving—we're going to turn the farm over to the crew for a week and we're going to Montana.

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**[Laughs]** So you were asking about Market day. Yeah. So, with the exception of the possibility of one or two days off during the season, I'm at the Carrboro Market every Saturday for somewhere between 30 and 35 weeks out of the year—March 'til November.

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This time of year on Saturday morning I typically get up at 3:00 or 3:15. I will leave the farm at 4:15. We have all of the produce, with the exception of any fruit that we have—all the produce is loaded on Saturday evenings—or Friday evenings, rather. So on Saturday morning I will get up and—and get myself awake enough at that ridiculous hour to drive to town, load any fruit that's in the cooler on the truck, sometimes depending on how dry it is I may be out putting gas in the irrigation pump about 3:30 and starting some water to run while I'm gone and so forth. I'll leave here at 4:15. I'll get to the Market about 5 o'clock. The Market opens at 7:00. It takes about two hours to set up for me and two of my staff people that will be there at least part of that time.

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We have a young couple living on the farm with us this year and Kathleen typically goes to Market with me in Carrboro, so she'll be riding in with me and then our other staff person who helps at the Market lives in Carrboro and walks to the Market. And she comes a little—she comes around 6:00. So Kathleen and I'll get there at 5:00 or a little after, begin to set up, and Sara will join us around 6:00 and we'll get set up.

**00:35:29**

This time of year we start having—the Market officially opens at 7:00, but we'll have some customers about 6:30 or so as we're still continuing to set up. And then the Market operates from 7:00 until noon and at noon we'll pack up. We get out of the market around 12:30, quarter of 1:00, come home, unload anything that's left that needs to go back in the cooler,

immediately go to the greenhouse and water what needs to be watered and go start the irrigation pump and come in and count the cash and take a nap, and don't go out on Saturday night much.

**[Laughs]**

**00:36:06**

**KM:** That's grueling.

**00:36:08**

**KD:** Yeah. Weekend social life for marketers is pretty much non-existent. You don't go out on Friday night because you've worked an eight or ten or twelve-hour day or more. And you're getting up at, you know—I mean the average amount of sleep that I go to Market on is probably about four hours on Friday night—four or five maybe. On a good night I'll get five and a half hours sleep. On a bad night I might sleep three hours and get up and go. And, you know, by the time we get home from Market, it's been—you know, it's been about nine hours so we've done a nine-hour workday before lunch on Saturday, on four hours sleep and, as I said, we don't go out on Saturday night much. It's grueling.

**00:36:53**

You know, I love the Market. When I started at the Market 30 years ago I was very shy and it was difficult for me to interact with customers. It was actually—it was painful for me to speak to customers when I first selling at the Market. That's changed a lot. I enjoy the Market. I really thrive on the interaction with people there, being able to bring them a good product, to please them in their desire to buy what I have to sell and to turn all of our hard work into a box of cash. And I enjoy the Market a lot. It's grueling. It—it's very exhausting.

**00:37:31**

**KM:** Tell us a little bit about presentation of goods at the Market.

**00:37:38**

**KD:** It's very important. We work hard at it. I refer to our display at the Market on Saturdays as our Saturday morning art project. We set it up. It looks pretty. I have heard many, many times and always am gratified to hear people come by and say, "You have the best-looking stand at the Market." We work hard at that. It happens that both of the young women who are working with me this year are very artistic and so I quickly turned over part of the display to them and said, "All right I'm going to set up the flowers over here and I'm going to sell flowers and you girls take care of the rest of this." They do a great job.

**00:38:16**

That's something that has evolved and progressed dramatically over my years at the Market, is people's presentation at the Market. When we first selling at the Market 30 years ago people brought produce, generally unsorted, ungraded, unwashed, and put it on a plywood table or something like that. We were, I think, the first farm that started grading tomatoes: wiping them off with a damp cloth so that they were clean and put on the table uniformly ripe and so forth. Prior to that people were taking tomatoes straight out of the field, half-ripe, ripe, green, perfect, cracked—whatever and just piling them on the table. And we started sorting the tomatoes out by a quality by a degree of ripeness. Every tomato that we take to market is hand-wiped with a damp cloth before we go. And so they look nice.

**00:39:10**

And so sometimes people come along and say, "Oh, these are the most beautiful tomatoes," and other times people come along and say, "You couldn't have grown these. They're



too pretty. Homegrown tomatoes don't look like this." But the level of—and sophistication of presentation at the Market has increased dramatically. We've certainly been a part of that. The competition at the Carrboro Market is fierce. It's intense. And when I say that I don't mean that it's an ugly thing or a negative thing; the level of competition has made us all better at what we do. Somebody is always raising the bar to the next level.

**00:39:45**

You know my strategy for years, for decades, was to go to Market with great-looking product, present it on the table nicely, and sell it. And we did well. We were really ahead of the curve in terms of the vendors and quality of what we were growing and presentation for a long time. And we're not anymore because we have a lot of very good growers at the Market. A lot of, you know, other growers have gotten much better. We have younger growers who have—there are several farmers at the Carrboro Market now who learned their craft working for some of us who are older vendors and now they're there on their own. And so they started at the market way above the level of where people like myself started at the Market. Where we were learning it all, these people had the opportunity to come along and learn from us. And so when they started at the Market, they already knew about presentation and that sort of thing. And some of these young folks are doing a great job now.

**00:40:38**

One day I looked around at the Market a few years back and it suddenly dawned on me that everybody at the Market but me had a tablecloth on their table. And I just never—you know it didn't seem important to me. I had unpainted homemade plywood tables that I had used for years and I so-covered them up with produce you couldn't see it anyway. And I looked around; hmm, everybody has got a tablecloth. I guess I better have a tablecloth too. But somebody is always raising the bar and making it look this much better and that much better. So in order to

just be able to maintain at the Market now, we have to constantly keep getting better. It—it used to be easy to be ahead of the game and it's not anymore.

**00:41:17**

**KM:** What's the hardest part about being a farmer in North Carolina in 2011?

**00:41:29**

**KD:** Ask any farmer about farming and the weather is bound to come up soon. The weather is always a challenge. It seems to me that the weather is becoming more extreme and unpredictable. I mean extreme weather has always been a factor. But every year the local weather sets records for the hottest hots and, you know, last summer was the hottest summer in recorded history in this area. The droughts get longer. The hots get hotter. And yet we've had colder than average winters in recent years. It turns on a dime. So the weather is always a big challenge.

**00:42:16**

I remember my granddad saying to me in the 1950s, and he had farmed in the same farm his whole life, and he said it looks like every year there's some new insect in my garden that I've never seen before. Well that process certainly continues. You know, the human population of the world is so mobile now that insects and diseases are moving around the world quickly and every year we're seeing new pest problems that we've never had before. That's certainly a challenge. There's a new stink bug that came from Asia into Pennsylvania a couple years ago that looks like it—we started seeing a few last fall but it's a very serious concern right now. This is an imported, invasive insect that is potentially devastating for a lot of farm crops. It's proving to be very difficult to control by organic and conventional methods. There aren't many conventional

pesticides that will kill this sucker. And this one was unknown in the United States five years ago and now it's here.

**00:43:19**

So we have the extremes of weather to deal with. We have new pest problems to deal with all the time. Those are certainly challenges. For me, because of my age, the work simply gets harder every year. Things that I took for granted that were a piece of cake when I was in my thirties are not so easy in my sixties. **[Laughs]** And it's harder just to keep up. Fortunately, you know on the plus side of things I have more—every year there are more interesting and talented and bright and enthusiastic young people who want to come work with me. Part of that I think is just the times. There are a great many young people in their twenties right now who are very interested in food and where their food comes from and farming and how it's done. And several of the young ones that I have working with me this year are seriously interested in farming on their own and they're here to learn. So that's a really—that's a big plus.

**00:44:21**

And I think interest in locally produced food and good quality food is at an all-time high right now, so that's a favorable thing. At the same time, we have more competition than we've ever had in the local markets. So it would be hard for me to say what's the hardest thing that I have to deal with, but, you know, big challenges are the weather and an ever-evolving cast of characters in the world of pests, and increased competition.

**00:44:55**

Our sales at the Carrboro Market rose steadily every year for close to 25 years and then they leveled off. And now we're just trying to maintain, primarily due to increased competition. There are no more customer parking spaces than there used to be but there's a lot more product

at Market and a lot more good solid growers there who want to sell the product, too. So that's a challenge.

**00:45:22**

Our sales actually declined for a couple years at Carrboro and then last year picked back up again in part due to the extreme weather we had last year. We came through that a little better than some of our competition and had a really good fall after a brutal summer.

**00:45:40**

**KM:** Which kind of brings me to what do you see as the challenges facing the Carrboro Farmers' Market?

**00:45:49**

**KD:** Increased competition from other Farmers' Markets. You know, Farmers' Markets are all the rage right now. Everybody wants to have one. I got an email invitation last week to participate in a brand new Farmers' Market in Chapel Hill, less than 10 miles from the Carrboro Market. So in the bigger picture of things I would say an increasing number of Farmers' Markets and an increasing interest in the population in going to Farmers' Markets is a good thing.

**00:46:21**

What's beginning to happen in some parts of the country is that there are so many markets that the customer-base is getting diluted—excuse me. So certainly one of the biggest challenges for the Carrboro Market is dealing with increased competition from other Farmers' Markets in the immediate area. There are more customers in this area shopping at markets than ever before, but they have more market choices to go to and there are other markets that don't have the parking constraints that we have in Carrboro. And that's a huge issue. If we had another

200 onsite parking spaces, it's just hard to imagine how much product we could sell at that Market in a five-hour morning. But we don't. And it's a big limiting factor.

**00:47:22**

The Market has no geographic area to grow. We really cannot grow our Market vendor membership base much because it's a limit. Our management is always looking to find new ways to get more customers at the Market, but we're seriously constrained by parking. We hire off-duty traffic cops to direct traffic in the parking lot just to keep it moving, but sometimes there's a line of cars backed up out on the street waiting for a place at the Market. And some of those people just simply go somewhere else. That's a big challenge, a very big challenge to the growth of the Market.

**00:48:02**

You know, I'm very happy with our level of sales at the Carrboro Market. At this point in my life I don't need to see it grow. I don't need to see my sales increase. But I'd like to see them maintain for a few more years, because these, you know—I spent much of my adult life developing a business that did not pay me very much income for quite a few years. And now I have a very successful business and a few years time to generate enough income to be able to retire while I can still walk upright.

**00:48:38**

I don't intend to be at the Market when I'm 85 years old, but the oldest member of the Market sells directly across from me and he's 84. And he's there every day with a full table. So when I get tired and think about complaining about coming to the Market on three hours sleep and how much it all hurts, and I look at this guy across the way who is 25 years older than me, I just hush my mouth. **[Laughs]** He and his wife are quite an inspiration. Yeah. He'll be there as long as he can walk just because he loves to do it.

00:49:08

**KM:** Who is he?

00:49:11

**KD:** Delton Zachary. I believe he's 84 and his wife, Hazeline, is 81. They've been married for 65 years now, since she was a teenager. I forget how many years he's been at the Market, not as long as we have but probably close to 20 now.

00:49:27

**KM:** Delton and Hazeline?

00:49:29

**KD:** Delton and Hazeline Zachary, yeah.

00:49:35

**KM:** What do you think the Carrboro Market does particularly well?

00:49:44

**KD:** It's a fabulous Market and comparing where it is now to where it was when I started selling there the—not only the volume of product and volume of numbers of vendors there has increased dramatically, but the diversity of what's offered at the Market is just amazing—so many different products that were not at Market even 10 years ago.

00:50:12

The Market is the sum-total of the efforts of everybody there but the total is greater than the sum of its parts. You know we—the Market is what it is because of the efforts of all of the vendors and the Market's management. But collectively we create something pretty wonderful, pretty phenomenal.

**00:50:36**

I think we're very fortunate with the Carrboro Market that the people who were there a few years before I began—I first sold at the Market in its third year in existence and then I was absent for two years and I've been back full-time since the sixth year of the Market—but the Market was already, by the time I was back there in '84 the Market was an incorporated entity with a very clear set of bylaws and rules.

**00:51:02**

Those have evolved over time—never dramatically. But the people who were involved in setting down that initial framework of the Market did really well. They had the vision and the foresight and the knowledge to be able to create a great legal, structural framework under which the Market could operate.

**00:51:29**

The Market has always been governed by a seven-person Board of Directors, elected from the membership. I served on that Board for 20 years consecutively before I went off of that Board in order to serve on the Board of the Durham Farmers' Market for a few years. This is my first year of not serving on a Market Board in 25 years and let me tell you; it's a relief [*Laughs*] but it was a privilege and a huge responsibility to be involved in the governance of the Market for a long time. I was Market President for six years in Durham and three years—or six years in Carrboro and three years in Durham, a thankless task but an important one, and I think the

Market has been well-governed by an evolving cast of Board Members who have taken it seriously.

**00:52:12**

There's always a level of grumbling among the membership, people who are unwilling to serve on the Board, but are always finding fault with the decisions the Board makes. But my experience from being on the inside of that for a long, long time—of the governance of the Market—is that the people who have served on the Board in Carrboro have done so with the best interest of the Market in mind rather—even though at times it was contrary to their best personal interest of their own business.

**00:52:46**

I mean we are a collection of individual businesses and we're all there in head-to-head competition on Saturday trying to get the same customer dollar in our box. But the members of the Market who have served the Market in governing it have done so selflessly and with a lot of integrity for all of these years and the Market as a whole has benefitted tremendously from that.

**00:53:14**

You know, I've seen that from the inside and I've served with a lot of different Market members over the years and, with very few exceptions, I would say that those who have served the Market have done so with the best interest of the Market in mind. Good decisions have been made. I haven't always agreed with all of them, but the Market has been well governed for a long time and we've all benefitted from that.

**00:53:36**

We've had good staff working for us. We've had—for many years the Market Manager was a member of the Market, one of the farmers. And we changed away from that—three, six, eight—around thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years ago; we first hired management outside the



market. And about six or seven years ago we increased the Market Manager's job from, you know, one or two days a week kind of job. Our first Manager who was not a Market member was a schoolteacher. And this was a Saturday job basically. But then we changed and developed it to be more of a job to—it's currently considered to be about a 32-hour a week job and it has been for seven years now. So it's not quite a full-time job but close to it, and our Managers I think have made it a full-time job even if they didn't get paid a full-time salary for doing so. But we've had several excellent managers, who have served the Market very well. One of them I'm pleased to say is a former employee of mine who worked here at the farm before she was Market Manager.

**00:54:55**

So the Market members who have governed the Market and the Market staff that's been hired have all done an outstanding job for many years and it shows.

**00:55:07**

**KM:** Are there things that I haven't asked you about that you want to share with us either about the Market or about farming?

**00:55:22**

**KD:** Farming has always been a hard life and a hard way to make a living. It has largely consumed my life for close to 30 years. And I wouldn't have it any other way. You know, I've loved doing it. It's changed for me a lot over the years. The work is hard, and it's hard to do that work and make a good income doing it. A great many people work very hard at farming and don't make very much money for it. On the whole our society does not reward its farmers very well. I think that's typical around the world.

**00:56:05**

I had some visitors from Japan one time who in my conversation with them it became clear that in their country farming was a very low status occupation. I would say that's true in this country as well although there is a trend towards people, you know, with the emphasis on knowing your farmer and knowing where your food comes from, farmers who are marketing locally and direct have increased in status in the United States in recent years. People are recognizing the importance of the people who grow their food. But historically our culture has not considered farmers to have the same status as doctors and lawyers and so forth. And they have not been rewarded financially in the same way. Some would argue that it's a more important occupation. **[Laughs]** However, it's not an easy way to make a living, that's for sure. The work is always hard. But you can do everything right and the weather or some new pest can take it all away from you. So there's always the uncertainty of it.

**00:57:12**

I feel like I have done it well. I continue to do it well. It makes a good living for me more than I ever could have dreamed was possible and that is in large measure due to living in the community where I live. Having markets like the Carrboro Market have made it possible for us to make a good income on a small-scale farm doing what we do. But it's always hard. Every Monday morning it's—you know, here we go again. Here's another 70-hour workweek and it's relentless. So it's hard, but it's a good life too.

**00:57:46**

And it's very exciting to me to work with young people who think they want to undertake this life. You know I have this young couple working with me this—here this year and they were farming on their own last year, selling at a couple local markets, very small-scale on rented land, but they think they want to do it on their own. And so, you know, this is a good opportunity for

them to see what it's really like. When they get off work at 5 o'clock and you know they've had supper and they're sitting out on the balcony of the building where they live and I'm on the tractor until 8:30 they—they're getting a real good window into this is the reality. If you want to make it in this business this is what it takes.

**00:58:23**

But there have been others that have worked here that have gone on and are doing it well on their own now. And that's very gratifying to me. You know I consider that some of my best crops and products are the young farmers that have passed through here that have gone—and there are several both in this area and in other states who have been here and went on. I'm very proud of those people, those young people that have become a part of our extended family.

**00:58:50**

We're very, very fortunate to live in the area where we do. There are many places in the country, many places in North Carolina where I could live that I could not make a good living doing the kind of farming that I do. It's possible because we have the consciousness in this community, the level of affluence in this community and the level of interest and people who set a priority on buying good food and we have venues like the Farmers' Market to be able to sell the product. So the local culture and geography has been kind to us and it's made it possible for us to be very successful here, yeah.

**00:59:32**

**KM:** Thanks again.

**00:59:35**

**[End Ken Dawson Interview]**