

## Greenswell Growers: Virginia Cooperative Extension Mentors Growers in GAP Certification Preparation

### PART 1: Introduction to the Farm

Today we are with Greenswell Growers and Carl Gupton, who's the CEO of Greenswell Growers, and we're going to share with you about their amazing operation here that they have in Goochland, Virginia.

Thanks Amber.

Tell us a little bit about the operation, what you all are growing, and how you started.

So, this idea started about six or seven years ago with our three founders, and they came up with, it was a partnership with Feed More, our local food bank. It's the largest food bank in the state of Virginia.

They wanted to get fresh produce to their constituents, and they got about 25% of what they gave away was fresh produce. The other 75% were canned goods. So, Doug wanted to move that number from 25% to 40% and he didn't know how to do it, so went out and met with the farmers trying to get B's and C's that didn't quite make it to market. What he found was didn't quite work out the way he wanted to, but what they came across was a small hydroponic farm that was out-producing a large scale farm next to it, and said, "Hey, there's something here".

And today, what you find out here, is we've got an acre and a half under roof growing baby leaf greens. Green leaf, red leaf, arugula, and romaine are our kind of main products that we're growing. They work into three different blends: Essential Green Leaf being our green leaf, Vibrant Greens Blend, which is our green leaf, red leaf, and arugula, and then our Refreshing Romaine, which is our green leaf and romaine blend.

That's fantastic. There's a lot of lettuce here. Where do you actually sell to?

Feed More takes 5% of everything we grow. That's kind of our deal that we started with, so the other 95% wind up in the market in different ways. We started the business, we had a lot of food service customers. We partnered with performance food groups here in Richmond. We kind of proved our greenhouse out. We also sell to a lot of retailers. We have Food Lion, Harris Teeter, Kroger, as our three main broad-line grocers. We also have a lot of the smaller grocers we work with: Elwood Thompson here in Richmond, Libby Markets, Good Foods Grocers. They helped us with our training wheels to make it to the "big boy" side of things.

Tell us about the whole production cycle. How does that actually work??

The channels come in. The channels go and we backfill them with peat moss. Peat goes into the channels. We drop a hundred or so seeds automatically into the channels. Those channels then swing 90 degrees, go back into the greenhouse, germinate. Germination is about 48 hours, so it's a pretty quick process. Then those channels will incrementally move through the system and they do that by one channel comes off here at the end, one channel goes back in and everybody moves up one place. It's an auger screw pulling those channels forward. It's a computer automated system that tells us which channels to pull off of that.

These channels would go into the packaging room. The channels will swing 90 degrees, two circular blades will de-cap the lettuce, kick it off onto a conveyor belt, that conveyor belt can either decide which direction it's going.

Is it going food service or is it going to our retail packaging?

Retail packaging from seed to your fridge--No human hands touch the product and it's able to do that through automation.

Carl, tell us how much lettuce do you grow at any one time, and what's the rotation scheme?

We grow in these 18-foot-long channels you see in the greenhouse. Here we have about 13,000 of those channels in the greenhouse at any given moment. We harvest at about 28 days on our green leaf, 21 days on our red leaf and arugula. So with that, we'll harvest around 2,000 to 2,500 pounds a day out of the greenhouse, and we will look from there what we need product mix-wise. Restaurants have a little different demand than what retailers do. We're seeing our business transitioning to that. I will say our main product that we have out there is our green leaf. We think that's what differentiates our product. It's got a crispiness to it. It's got a crunch to it. It's got sweetness and flavor to it. It's different than your traditional icebergs and romaines.

## PART 2: GAP Audit Preparation

Carl, in thinking about your markets, tell us about food safety. As we've toured your facility today, we've seen many signs and just really amazing food safety efforts that y'all are doing. Tell us how you got into food safety. Why is that so important?

Yeah food safety is one of the things that we're selling here--what we believe to be a clean fresh product. Well that clean fresh product you have to have the food safety standards out there. One, to get in with these major retailers, but two, to make sure you're doing everything you can to keep pathogens out of your product.

We put a lot of time and effort, with your help, at the front of it, of building our food safety program out that I think it's a top-notch program. It's just like anything you're trying to be as safe as possible, there's always a chance for something to happen, but you've got to minimize those risks. And to do that, we strategically built out our facility with that thought in mind. Our packaging room is very close to the outside environments. The greenhouse we limit the amount of people going in and out of it. We try to manage our water sources for everything, and everything that we do, we're trying to inspect that we're making sure we're doing everything we can.

Well it looks like you are doing a fantastic job! [We're trying!] I noticed besides the signage, again, the closed access and even having like keypads.

Yeah. We have key fobs to get into packaging room, head house, in the front door.

Tell us some of the other food safety practices you are doing besides the ones I have mentioned.

Well, I think one of the bigger ones that you have to go through is training. You have employee turnover, so it's something you really have to watch out for. Every employee that comes in gets trained the day of, even the temp workers before they go into the packaging room. Understanding cleanliness habits, cleaning versus sanitizing. We're both HGAP Plus certified and we're FSMA certified. We've passed both

audits with flying colors. It's a lot of paperwork, not going a lie, but it's paperwork that we think has value in what we do.

So, if you had advice to any other growers that were considering GAP, of course, based on the markets that they're trying to access, what would your recommendation be to them?

The practices that come out of it and then I guess a little bit of self-reflection that you get is very key to your process. It helps you define your process of what you're going through, and what does that mean to go from point A to point B to point C, and what problems could come up along the way. And you document it all. I mean documentation is the key thing to these programs.

The other thing I would say is use technology as much as you can. Automate. The Microsoft Suite can help you with a lot of forms and different things like that to self-generate with it.

So did you find the process with extension and the support for that to be a lot of challenges with that, or...?

No! I found your group at the extension office is a huge advocate with us. It wasn't do this, do that, do this. It was think about doing it this way. What will your process allow you to do? How can you do it? It's not cookie cutter. Nothing in any one of these operations is an off-the-rack quality program. You've got to tailor it to what your needs are and what your concerns are.

So true.

Well, Carl, this has been fantastic, [awesome] I'm personally so gratified because I know I worked with you folks when it was still in the process of being built. [Yes]. I'm just really happy to see! You all are doing a fantastic job in terms of food safety, but also in terms of your business model and your passion. And I just wish you all the best.

Thanks Amber. Thank you for all your help along the way.

You're welcome.

END SLIDES

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