

Producer profile

Full Circle Farm
Carnation, Washington

Full Circle sustainability
by Mike Oseland

(*Sound Consumer*, May 2005) — Full Circle Farm is the manifest destiny of Andrew Stout and his wife and partner, Wendy Munroe. It was more than a decade ago, after completing an internship on an organic farm in Minnesota, that Andrew and Wendy dreamed the farm dream. To turn that dream into reality, they raised money by selling homemade organic egg rolls at Grateful Dead shows.



It takes a lot of talent to run a farm – a mechanic, harvest crew, an accountant, a greenhouse manager, packaging shed manager, field managers, a general manager, owners and a mascot.

Today, Full Circle Farm has blossomed into a 140-acre organic produce operation in Carnation, Wash., along the banks of Griffin Creek and the Snoqualmie River. With the help of a handful of employees, they cultivate more than 75 varieties of fruits and vegetables, notably vibrant and luscious greens, Lingonberries, salad mix and baby greens, baby turnips, culinary and Chinese herbs, rosy red and white oblong French breakfast radishes, and a rainbow of potato varieties. PCC's produce department has been selling Full Circle Farm produce for the past 10 years.

Rocky start

Full Circle's first five acres were at the base of Mt. Si in North Bend, Wash. The ground was so rocky and conditions so unfavorable that only three acres were tillable. But Andrew and Wendy applied their novice farming skills to grow their first crop, and their marketing ingenuity to get the produce directly to consumers.

Andrew's vision drove Full Circle Farm into a growing success through direct marketing, the hallmark strategy of the small farm business model. He began selling Full Circle Farm produce directly to

A visit to the farm

Seeding starts inside the barn. Soil-filled trays are laced with seeds dropped from a hopper, then moved down a conveyor belt and into one of three heated greenhouses where the seeds germinate into starts. There, the starts wait to be transplanted into the fields.

In a clearing next to the greenhouses, material for more greenhouses lays bundled under tarps. It's for a new project at Full Circle — hydroponic herbs and

grocery stores — PCC was among the first — as well as restaurants and farmers markets. He also started a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, which now has more than 500 subscribers.

PCC has long been a direct marketing conduit, buying direct from farmers. By avoiding distributors, the farmer gets a larger share of the food dollar and is able to sustain the farm operation. The consumer gets fresher food and a better dollar value for organic. The community also benefits with local money staying in the local economy. When this full circle is complete, our food security is in the hands of our local communities.

Since the inaugural harvest in North Bend, seven years of growth ensued. Andrew and Wendy augmented by leasing nearby acreage. The logistics mounted as working several fields required moving lots of equipment. The time had come to move. With the help of FarmLink, a service offered by King and Snohomish counties that connects future farmers with land and services, Full Circle found its home on an 80-acre parcel in Carnation four years ago.

Andrew and Wendy now provide a home to help others grow their dream of farming, offering an internship program for apprentices. Over the years, they've trained 36 interns; 14 have started their own farms — in Maine, Alabama, Montana, California and Rhode Island.

"We've also been contacted by the Agriculture Department of the country of Nepal," says Andrew, "to see about bringing in apprentices from Nepal. The country has a four-acre organic demonstration farm outside Katmandu, and they want to know how we can host Nepali interns so they can take organic agriculture back to their country. We're trying to formalize this now, working on the details. It's amazing what the Internet can do!"

The Stouts also advocate their principles with local decision-makers. With a grant from King County, they're working to get more local products into the marketplace. "What we do is work with other growers, such as Willowrose Bay Farm on Guemas Island, Alvarez Farms in Sunnyside, Frog Song Farm on Fir Island, and Sunny Slope Ranch in Wapato," says Andrew. "We include what they grow in our CSA program or sell it through our existing accounts. Sometimes they don't have a direct marketing approach; sometimes they just don't want to do the distribution. But when we band together, we benefit from the economy of scale and everyone realizes we each don't have to reinvent the wheel."

Meanwhile, spring has arrived and so have the greens from Full Circle Farm. You'll find the mixed baby salad greens, bunch spinach, and some smaller, sweeter new spring kales and chards in PCC's produce section. In PCC delis,

tomatoes.

Across the driveway in the packinghouse, potatoes are being cleaned and sorted. The potatoes are stored in the dirt they're grown in to slow down sprouting.

Greens are processed at the side of the packinghouse. It's a race to handle this delicate crop properly. Within one hour of harvest, the greens are run through a hydro-cooler to take off the field heat and dirt, whirled in an industrial size salad spinner to remove excess water, boxed and, finally, put into cold storage.

In the future, the farm is looking to expand the facility to include retail salad packaging, a move that requires HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) certification for the highest standard of food safety.

Behind the barn is Wendy's wild-looking Chinese and medicinal herb garden. The radish patch already has been harvested; only a few cracked crimson globes remain strewn throughout. The next patch over, the baby turnips are about two weeks from being on the table.

The threat of drought doesn't worry the folks at Full Circle. Griffin Creek frequently floods. In addition, a warm, sunny winter lengthened the growing season. If the risk of early planting pays off, they'll be five weeks ahead. It should be another good year on the farm.

look for the mixed baby salad greens in a fresh, seasonal salad. They're all a delicious way to support local agriculture and get the most from your food dollar.