



Neversink Farm sells tools and has online market farming classes for homesteaders.

How He Turned A Small Farm Into A Profitable Enterprise

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

In a few short years, Conor Crickmore went from working on computer systems in New York City to running an amazingly diversified small farm in upstate New York that's as profitable as many big farm operations in the Midwest.

In addition to vegetable crop production, Crickmore sells a line of hand-built tools, has a popular YouTube channel, and offers a wildly successful online marketing course for homesteaders.

Like most first-generation farmers, however, success did not come easy. He needed land but started out with only \$30,000 working capital. "At first, all we had was a hoop house, some chickens, and a roadside vegetable stand. We loved it, but the property was too small to support a family."

"There was a perfect farmstead near us on the river with buildings and an open field," says Crickmore. "The owners had a lot of property and only visited occasionally. We asked if we could lease it and convinced them

to take the lease payment in vegetables."

Soon Crickmore's Neversink Farm had pigs, chickens, a large vegetable garden, beehives, and even trout. It looked great and took lots of work but was barely profitable.

"The toughest lesson we learned was that hard work wasn't enough," says Crickmore. "Success is about making life easier so you can be more efficient, which is difficult to do when you're still learning how to farm."

So, the former computer engineer started coming up with systems, and he hasn't stopped. By 2020 they were grossing around \$350,000 a year. They operate an on-farm store, sell wholesale, offer farm tours, do occasional dinners on the farm, and just keep getting better at what they do. Each year they reinvest, and each year they do more with less. About 5 years ago, they bought the farm they were leasing.

Hoop houses are a big part of how they do more with less. The first year Crickmore started with a 30 by 50-ft. hoop house for

tomatoes. Each year, for several years, he added another structure.

"We started with about an acre and a half and have since scaled back to under an acre as we put more land under hoops," says Crickmore. "We've found that 1 sq. ft. of space under hoops is worth 3 or 4 outdoors."

Other farm life lessons include learning to grow what customers want. "When we started, we wanted to grow interesting things, but if you sell only half of what you take to market, you better change what you grow," says Crickmore. "What customers want are tomatoes, cukes, and salad greens, and they want them early in the season and late. Kohlrabi is not a winner."

Another life lesson was learning to experiment. This past year they transformed a hoop house into a fruit house. "We have peach trees, fig trees, strawberries, and blueberries, all things that are tough to grow outside," says Crickmore. "So far, it's been beautiful and good for us as a family. If it's profitable, we can expand, and others can see what we're doing and try it too."

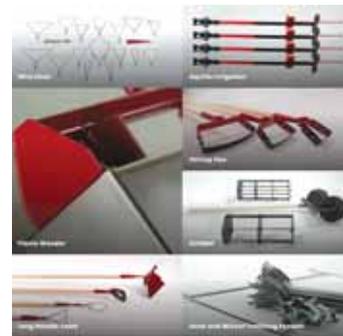
Helping others learn how to farm based on his successes and failures is what led to one of his most profitable farm enterprises. He started with on-farm workshops for market gardeners who wanted to learn what Crickmore was doing.

The course was so popular that five years ago he started the Neversink Online Market Farming Course, which now covers eight topics in detail. The first topic is "The Essentials of Market Farming" with 24 hrs. of online learning. Others, such as hoop house design and greenhouse growing, take less time. Since he launched the online business, it has grown rapidly.

Crickmore offers a lifetime membership for \$2,900. Members get access to new content as it's developed with no recurring fees, as well as Q&A sessions with Crickmore. They also get a discount on Neversink's line of hand-built tools.

"A friend of mine and I started messing around making tools that we liked or that filled holes in what was available or that we could make that were too expensive for us to afford," says Crickmore.

One example of the latter is the paperpot transplant system. "It's a tool we made less expensive and better too," says Crickmore. The farming course and the tool business have grown together. The course has several hundred members, with the majority in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Australia. The farm's website lists dozens of satisfied member farms. The list of tools continues to grow.



Tools featured and sold by Neversink Farm.

"We have members in 50 different countries in all and are exporting tools around the world," says Crickmore. "We have shipped tools to members in the Marshall Islands and Chile. Some are becoming dealers, selling the tools locally."

As the tool business has grown, Crickmore has been able to devote more time to it thanks to how efficient his farm operation has become.

"It's just my wife and me with one or two part-time employees on the farm," he says. "I find myself spending the majority of my time now making tools and doing R&D with our other four full-time employees."

Crickmore has another project in the works. He recognizes that his farming course is really for folks who are in their second, third or fourth year of farming. This one will be free, for folks dreaming of becoming a farmer.

"This course will be for people looking for land, to help them be successful starting farming," he says. "I plan to start with 30 lessons and then continue from there."

Another no-cost resource Crickmore offers is his series of 166 YouTube videos. Neversink Farm Gardening Basics is intended for backyard gardeners and claims more than 63,000 subscribers. Many are less than 2 min. in length, covering specific topics such as pruning cucumbers when trellising them.

Crickmore recognizes that it may be naive to think that every small town could have three or four families supplying the local grocery store. "I don't know if it's practical, but I believe it is a possibility," he says.

The farm is not open for drop-in visitors. Crickmore suggests contacting him online.

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Rootzone Heaters For Smaller Producers

BioTherm's new Rootzone heating kit offers small greenhouses, market farmers and hobbyists a professional, but less expensive option to start plants efficiently. The main cost savings of the Upstart kit is the heat source.

"It's simple because it uses a readily accessible 40-gal. gas-fired domestic water heater," says Jim Rearden, president of the California company that specializes in climate control systems. "The Upstart system is pre-plumbed and pre-wired and heats up to 500 sq. ft. of plant beds."

A thermostatic sensor measures the soil temperature to turn the heater off and on as needed to start seed propagation. The Upstart kit comes with one 4 by 25-ft. Roll'N Grow mat and sells for \$2,500. The mat connects to the gas water heater, which is purchased separately by the grower. Additional Roll'N Grow mats can be purchased to link together.

"This is the first preassembled small hot water system that gives smaller operations access to professional systems big growers have had," Rearden concludes.

To purchase check out BioTherm's website.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, BioTherm, 476 Primero Court, Cotati,



The Upstart system is pre-plumbed and pre-wired and heats up to 500 sq. ft. of plant growing.

Calif. 94931 (ph. 707-794-9660; www.biothermsolutions.com).

Rolling Backpack Sprayer

"This is my latest modification to make my life easier," says Billy Gilbert, Apex, N.C., who was tired of carrying around a heavy backpack sprayer.

"I've been using a backpack sprayer with a hand pump to spray weeds for many years. I recently bought a battery-operated spray rig from The Petra Company (www.petratools.com) which is easier to use but still heavy. When I spray weeds, I use six to seven backpack loads so it's a fair amount of work and it's also getting harder to fill the sprayer and strap it on.

"So, I came up with the idea of using the frame from a dead pressure washer and turning it into a carrier for the sprayer. Since the sprayer is electric-powered, I just have to pull it around and spray. When I'm finished, I take off the bungee cord and take the sprayer off the plywood base to flush it out. Works great."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Bill Gilbert, 979 Horton Pond Rd., Apex, N.C. 27523 (fl8aochief@gmail.com).



Backpack sprayer is mounted to an old pressure washer frame.