



"I'm Fred Monroe, and my wife Michelle and I own Monroe Family Organics in Alma, Michigan. We've owned this farm since 2011, but I've been farming for pretty much my entire adult career. This is my passion.

I grew up just a few miles south of here, and when I was a kid, my family had a bunch of animals and a garden. Well, when I was fifteen, I had a big garden of my own – I just really enjoyed it. The next winter I read-up a bunch about how to grow things for market, so by the time I was sixteen, I was able to take the big family van and load it up with vegetables and sell at the Alma Farmers Market. I decided I wanted to do this as a career, so I applied to MSU and got into their horticulture program in 2001. It was interesting because at the time, everyone in horticulture was doing it for landscaping – that's where the money was at – but I was one of the handful of people who was into vegetables. I interned at Angelic Organics, which was one of the largest CSAs at that time, and also at MSU Student Organic Farm. Then, after I graduated, Michelle and I moved out to Northern Ohio and I worked at Chef's Garden, which serves the high-end restaurant industry with all sorts of weird vegetables. When I went to Chef's Garden...well, they are not certified organic. They use some chemicals and different things, and I felt kind of uncomfortable with the chemistry of it all. And you can see it in the environment around you – these chemicals change things. I did that for five seasons, and then this land became available for us to rent from some friends of ours; so, we both quit our full-time jobs and moved back home.

Organic farming is what I had wanted to do from the beginning - most of the reading I had done had been from Elliot Coleman and some other like-minded authors. Plus, my mom had always been into healthy eating and natural eating, so I kind of took that perspective as well. For me, it was just a very natural transition. So, we were certified organic right from the start.

The first year, we farmed on just the front field, which is about three acres, and had just one hoophouse. We didn't even have electricity out here, and had to use canopies to wash and pack under. We are now actively farming on eleven acres, and have a one-and-a-half-acre blueberry patch. We have seven of those hoophouses, we have a greenhouse, and we have this barn – with electricity. We have two full-time, and four part-time folks. Some of our specialty crops are spring mix, onions, potatoes, and carrots; our carrots really are the best carrots around. We run a 300-350 person CSA that runs for 19-weeks, and grow vegetables from mid-February through mid-December to fill orders of other kinds of buyers: co-ops, the Argus stores, a few restaurants, and other CSAs like Allen Neighborhood Center's Veggie Box.

ANC's Veggie Box supports a community of producers. It's a great match for the work that we're doing. It allows us to sell a variety of different crops, and sell in meaningful amounts. It's a sure way to get our fresh food out to families we wouldn't otherwise be able to. These families, I mean, you are eating produce that was grown right here in your climate - in your soils, by people who live in your community. It's just overall a much better and deeper relationship with your food and your community versus going through a checkout line and never speaking to another person there.

I feel like most people have no relation to or understanding of what goes into this business. There is a major misconception of what farming is, based on subsidy farming from back fifty years ago. And this is just far different. It's so physically demanding, and so difficult to find people to work in this kind of environment. It demands, between management, physicality, and mental endurance, far more than what the vast majority of people are used to. Every year it feels like a marathon. When we get to the end, we're exhausted. We take time to heal. And then we come back for another year. It's a really pushed, pressed existence, and I think people should know that.

In our society, so much money and so many resources get funneled to those who are already wealthy. Well, this – this is a movement against that. This is about funding people who are honest and straightforward. I mean, small-scale farmers, we're really down-to-earth. We're just regular families in your community. And that's what Veggie Box is supporting.”