



“My name is Sarah Geurkink, and I am the Farm Manager of the Student Organic Farm at MSU.

I graduated from college in 2008, which was terrible timing. I had gone to school in West Michigan at a small liberal arts school and studied International Development and Business. I had originally thought I wanted to do microfinance or something like that – help people start small businesses. I was looking for some kind of nonprofit job, but there wasn't much of anything since the economy had crashed. So, I became an AmeriCorps Member with the Red Cross as the International Programs Coordinator. It was a lot of fun and I had a great boss who really helped me learn how to be an adult human. Anyway, while I was doing that, on Fridays I volunteered at a farm. Just for fun. Well, my AmeriCorps term was expiring and there weren't really a lot of jobs still, and I was like “I'll just work at the farm full-time for the summer. It will be a good story someday.” And then I really liked it. And I was like, “Well, I'll just work at the farm for another year and then I'll get a 'real' job,” right? And so, I did a second year at that same farm and they hired me on as a manager – which felt really good as a newly established adult. And then I was like, “Okay, I'm just going to do it for one more year.” I didn't consider farming a real, legitimate career for myself, and I thought that eventually I'll get a 'real' job. It took me a long time to understand that, no, this is something I want to do. I want to keep doing this.

Then, I met my partner. He was going to move to Seattle to get his PhD, and I decided to go with him. Shortly after I got there, the University of Washington was looking for a farm manager for their student farm program, and I threw my hat in the ring and got the job. That was hugely impactful. Again, I had a great boss and advisory group that were very supportive about the farm, its students, and me. I learned a lot. It had started as a vibrant community of students and faculty members who started a garden at the university's Botany Greenhouse grounds. They had just been awarded a

larger, half-acre plot of land, as well as the grounds of a large apartment complex on campus. They hired a UW Farm Manager – me – to develop and maintain the sites, as well as to create programming and connections to academics in the three departments that financially supported the farm. It was really fun for me to do farming, work with young people, connect with professors, and try to connect the things happening at the farm with classroom learning. But then we were looking to come back to Michigan to be near family. I had heard of the SOF, and I just applied and got a job here in 2017.

The SOF has the Organic Farmer Training Program – OFTP – which is a nine-month program that offers a mixture of classroom and field education to aspiring farmers. Katie Brandt teaches the course. They're learning about organic certification and crop rotation, marketing, fertility, pest management – all the things about farming. But also, the deliverable at the end of the nine months is that they are each developing their own farm business plan.

I also work closely alongside Daniel Seggebruch, who is the Assistant Production Manager. He's such a talented farmer. We have a CSA with around 140 members, and we sell to MSU dining. Oh, and we have an online store, too. But I think one of things that we do that is the most impactful is offering employment to undergraduate students. The undergraduate crew learns the ins and outs of running a diversified organic vegetable farm. It's really awesome to see the students grow into their time here. That's actually my favorite part of the job.

We sell to Allen Neighborhood Center's Veggie Box program. I think that ANC providing a market for local produce and helping to aggregate it into a more holistic sales model is fantastic. Because that's labor farmers don't have time to do, so it's just really supportive. Veggie Box is a convenient market that offers this localized, communal system for local food production and consumption.

Farming is just so much harder than it looks. Getting that Veggie Box always looks so nice, but there is so much involved in getting that put together and looking nice. I think it's really easy to judge quality of produce, the mood of the farmer, and the compromises farmers have to make. But there is a lot of physical fatigue, decision fatigue, natural forces trying to make you fail... there are a lot of natural variables that make farming hard, but there are the basic variables of life, too: like childcare, healthcare, and student debt. Of course there are a lot of great things too, but I hope that people understand that when you want to support local food, it's not just about getting the perfect vegetable. It's about supporting the system. Supporting the farmer.

ANC's understanding that a farm system can't always be controlled, and their ability to be flexible and dodge inevitabilities along with us is great. ANC takes the risk alongside the farmer – with dozens of farmers. So yeah, it's really nice to have a customer who is so understanding of farm systems. And through Veggie Box, we are able to expand who can get our high-quality food. Plus, Veggie Box offers a great, unique way for farmers to team up and support one another in ways that would be so difficult, otherwise. Farming is an industry where it doesn't feel as competitive or cutthroat as other industries – like, we're all in this together. And ANC, Veggie Box, exemplifies that.”