

AN AD HOC NETWORK IN WISCONSIN

Meet Michael Noreen. He is the field production manager at Burning River Farm in Frederic, Wisconsin. The farm's eight acres of Certified Naturally Grown veggies supply a 200-member CSA as well as a bustling Saturday farmers market.

In Michael's corner of northwestern Wisconsin, there is a loose network of about 7 or 8 other farms who take a similar approach to farming—they grow fresh, healthy food without chemicals and sell it directly to consumers. The number of like-minded farmers in the area has been growing slowly, but steadily.

These farmers get in touch mostly on an ad hoc basis to share advice and equipment, or help each other on projects that require extra labor or specialized skill. Often a few farmers will combine their orders for items like potting soil or soil amendments to access a bulk discount or to save on shipping. For Michael joining with other farmers on something like a bulk order is "kind of a no-brainer—it's fairly easy and there's a financial benefit for everyone." The savings can add up to several hundreds of dollars.

Occasionally, some farmers will organize public events like screenings of films related to food systems and local farming. These kinds of public-focused events help raise awareness about local and sustainable food in the broader community and help to bolster the market for all local farmers.

Local farmers also host events that are specifically for farmers. These include field days and farm visits, as well as round-table discussions with focus groups on topics like seed variety selection, soil fertility, harvesting efficiencies, and crew management and hiring. These kinds of events provide a forum for farmers to share and learn from each other.

Aside from the cost savings Michael gets from the knowledge sharing and joint ordering, he also feels he gains an important sense of community. In his words, "it feels good to see others doing similar work. You could feel out on the fringe if you didn't have a network." In an occupation that can be isolating, the value of feeling part of a community should not be underestimated.

As for advice to others interested in forming their own local network, Michael says "it's important to just get out there and talk to people, and to take the time to see where ideas go." And that goes for farmers using natural practices as well as those farming conventionally. Michael maintains that even if you have concerns about some of their practices, "you've got to let them in, share what you're doing, but not in an aggressive preachy way, just be a good neighbor. And then they'll have a better idea of what you're doing and might even try some of it—they might even get to like your kale. You don't have to just be friends with organic growers." ■

