

Instagram helps drive farm's direct sales

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press



Margarett Waterbury/For the Capital Press
Lettuce starts grow at Black Locust Farm in Boring, Ore. The farm uses social media such as Instagram to promote itself to customers.

BORING, Ore. — Social media doesn't come naturally to most farmers. But farms — especially farms that depend on direct sales to restaurants and consumers — might be uniquely poised to benefit from social platforms such as Instagram.

After working for established farms in Vermont and Oregon, Dan Sullivan, 31, started Black Locust Farm in 2015. Located in Boring, Ore., the farm is part of the Headwaters Farm Incubator Program. Administered by the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District, the program is designed to help early-career farmers launch new ventures.

Black Locust Farm leases 2 acres at Headwaters to grow specialty vegetable row crops marketed exclusively to restaurants in the Portland metropolitan area. Major crops include greens, chicories, alliums, edible flowers and root vegetables.

During its first two years, the farm has relied heavily on social media, specifically Instagram, for marketing. Sullivan uses the social pho-

to-sharing app to showcase new crops, give updates about what's happening on the farm, and interact with the farm's restaurant customers.

One of Black Locust Farm's clients is Sarah Minnick, co-owner and chef at Portland restaurant Lovely's Fifty-Fifty. She says Instagram has been the single most impactful component of her marketing strategy. "As far as advertising goes, it has made pretty much the only difference in business for us. Instagram can be very genuine," says Minnick.

Instagram lets farmers such as Sullivan piggyback on their clients' marketing efforts. When chefs like Minnick tag their farmer suppliers in photos, their followers can see it — and, critically, chefs follow one another.

"A lot of my customers who have very serious followings are avid social media users," Sullivan says. "When they post my veggies, they tag my name, and through them I've gained a lot of followers."

"I see many farms using social media to target not their customers, but other farmers," Sullivan explains. "Instead, I'm using it as an advertising channel, a way to capitalize on my customers and my relationship with those customers."

Sullivan acknowledges that social media and farming aren't always completely compatible. "As a farmer, I'm treading a line between modern society and something a little less tangible. I try to play to that a little bit — I don't want to over-post. I don't like to use mine for anything other than farming. I'm not into sharing the rest of my life that way."

Yet he maintains that Instagram's impact on his

business has been a positive one, and says he's planning

to do more in the years to come.

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