Nestled in the rolling hills of Palouse, WA, Runner Bean Ranch is using organic methods to grow beautiful, nutritious food and share the surplus with everyone they can - proving how a local farm can be the foundation for a healthy and equitable community.

Runner Bean Ranch is a small family farm run by Guy Spencer and his mother Beverly. Recently certified as ‘naturally grown,’ they employ organic methods (and don’t use synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, or GMOs) to grow a wide variety of vegetables and raise sheep.

This year, they have gone above and beyond participating with the Whitman County Farm-to-Pantry purchasing program, providing fresh produce for 11 food pantries around the county.

Guy Spencer was kind enough to answer a few questions about the story of Runner Bean Ranch and how the farm works with local food pantries, as well as sharing his vision for what ‘local and sustainable food’ can be.

What is the story of Runner Bean Ranch?
My Mom had been working in the school's cafeteria and I had been working as a farm hand. Being in a rural area our small schools just don’t have the tax base or the money to feed the students healthy food.

My feeling is that students should be provided a breakfast, a lunch, and something they can take home with them after school. It breaks my heart to think that sometimes the only meal a kid gets in a day is the one meal they get at school. That’s just not right.

We are going to prove that you can grow high quality produce, get it to the people that need it the most, sell it for wholesale prices, and still turn a profit. There is also the fact that it’s the right thing to do. I feel like the food we produce has a very high value but that value isn’t measured by money.

Understand the Economics of Farming
• While farmers are willing to participate in programs that serve the hungry, many farmers are hard-pressed to give away product that they might be able to sell.
• If possible, develop some type of purchasing relationship – even if it is small! Many times farmers will donate on top of purchased amounts.

Make it Easy for Farmers!
• Clear and consistent communication is key!
• Find ways to minimize additional work to farmers by helping clean, pack, transport, etc.

Thank the Farmers
• Farmers are passionate about what they do and love to work with other passionate people. Taking time to acknowledge their work and contribution can help build long-lasting relationships.
How do you work with food pantries in Whitman County?

A garden produces every day so we look at the pantry schedule, see which pantry is open that day, harvest and box produce, and print out an invoice. The produce is delivered, signed for, and we go back home. The produce is distributed that day. It has worked best for us to actually go to the pantries rather than the hubs. A few days later we get a check.

How did these relationships develop? How have they evolved?

We attended a round table meeting organized by COA, we felt it was pretty telling that out of all the farmers that were invited to that meeting only my Mom and I were there.

I can’t express enough how glad I am that we went, it was like we were seeing things for the first time. I also have to admit my skepticism, I saw the enthusiasm but I have seen that before and have never seen any follow through. Paige cornered me at that meeting and insisted that we sell produce to the food pantries, I told her that we were happy to just donate produce, I said we didn’t really need the money because the market paid so well and that donating produce mid-week helped with our harvest schedule anyway. I thought it would die on the vine. Then, Paige and Sarah showed up at our farm with a contract. I can’t tell you exactly how it all fell into place but once we realized that we could get a fair price for our produce and that we could deliver produce five days a week. There just didn’t seem to be any reason to do the Market anymore. It has been the best thing.

How does selling to food pantries (and donating on top of that) work with your farm design and economics?

Well, it works perfectly. We deliver what we feel is a good product and we get paid what we feel it’s worth. We aren’t really taking an economic hit because we are able to efficiently move so much more produce.

My Mom and I feel very lucky to have this farm, this food security. We feel it is our obligation to raise as much high-quality, nutrient-dense produce we can.

What challenges have you faced, and how have you worked to resolve them?

Well, it was a little rocky at first. Once we got the schedule dialed in, though, it smoothed right out. The hardest part of all of this was figuring out the schedule. Meshing harvesting with distributing, it turns out that the less you think about it the easier it is.

The food pantry has been a blessing to us. It allows us to harvest whenever it’s necessary and it’s a good feeling knowing that the produce is going to be well received. We no longer struggle with the irony of selling produce to markets we can’t afford to shop at or restaurants we can’t afford to eat in. Healthy food shouldn’t be a luxury, it should be a right.

It’s been satisfying and humbling. We have met a lot of really good people that are committed to helping people get food. Really good people some working for very little some just volunteers, but always the same volunteers and that speaks to the integrity of those people. I am humbled by their efforts, their spirit, and their positive attitude. It’s something I have never experienced at the Farmers Market.

This has been a really good experience for us, mutually beneficial. When I started farming I had this feeling like I was part of something bigger than myself, working with the food pantries makes me feel like what we are doing is important.

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email growingconnections@northwestharvest.org, or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423