

Featured Guest Interviews

Vannah Roddy (@encompassfarm, encompassfarm.com)

[00:00:00] **Vannah Roddy:** I'm Vanna Roddy. I am a first-generation young farmer. My farm is called Encompass, and I'm in Black Mountain, North Carolina, which is about 20 minutes outside of Asheville. Most of my sales go into Asheville through a customizable veggie box. I do a single farmer's market where I mostly sell flowers, and I grow on a network of seven suburban front yards.

[00:00:26] **Diego Footer:** Got a lot of interesting stuff there that I want to dig into. Getting your start in the Asheville area. I've always heard that's a competitive area for farming. What was your experience like going into that market?

[00:00:39] **Vannah Roddy:** Absolutely. When I first started farming, I definitely dreamed about the farmer's market.

[00:00:45] I loved being there as a customer. I assumed that I would do multiple markets and that would be my main sales outlet. But my first season was spring of when COVID first hit. And so not only was I struggling with competition against other established growers, I was really struggling with people not showing up to markets or market rules being constantly changing due to COVID.

[00:01:10] And so I think I'm one of those growers that benefited in one sense, but also dealt with a whole new host of challenges because of the pandemic. I definitely came up with the whole veggie box program as a response to COVID. So most of my sales shifted to my online store, which I had already had set up.

[00:01:31] And yeah, almost a hundred percent of my revenue then started to become veggie boxes, which people ordered directly from me and picked up at different locations around Nashville.

[00:01:42] **Diego Footer:** With starting off that veggie box program. That's, you know, what I call a non-in-person sales model. So your people are placing those orders through email, online, but the challenge of that is you got to get those customers in first place.

[00:01:57] And a lot of growers use the farmer's market to build that initial customer base, and then say, 'Hey, by the way, you can order online,' and then they transition them over or get them to also order online. With COVID, how did you start to build up that initial customer base for that veggie box program?

[00:02:17] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. I would say that my email list is my most powerful subscriber generation tool. I do a weekly email that outlines a bunch of recipe ideas based on what's currently in season, so based on what I'm harvesting that week. And there's direct links after all those recipes to then purchase a veggie box.

[00:02:40] I have about almost 400 subscribers to that email list, and I generate new customers through that every day. People sign up for the email list directly on the homepage of my website, and I also collect emails at the farmer's market.

[00:02:56] **Diego Footer:** So the email list having recipes, is that primarily how you would describe that newsletter, it's an email series that goes out or is it farm-based, but it has recipes in it, or is it more recipe centric?

[00:03:11] **Vannah Roddy:** I would say it's recipe centric. Occasionally, I do farm updates, especially right now, as I'm in kind of the middle of a big transition, but it's mostly there to provide value for potential customers, gain trust, get them engaged with the program and then, yeah, occasionally, I'll do farm updates.

[00:03:33] **Diego Footer:** With getting people onto your list, you've built up a sizeable one now that works for you, what's been a strategy or some strategies for getting people to sign up? At the farmer's market, that's the easy way. If you put a list out, Hey, sign up for our email list, get these updates, but for non-in-person subscribers, have you found anything that's really worked for you to get people to join?

[00:03:59] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. I'm constantly plugging it on social media. And Instagram is the main platform I use. I guess I'm of that age bracket, I can't figure out Facebook. But Instagram, yeah, that's the big one.

[00:04:13] I'm trying to convert followers into email list subscribers, just because Instagram it doesn't really translate into sales for me.

[00:04:22] **Diego Footer:** With transitioning them over, is it just some call to action in the post? Hey, here's our latest recipe or picture of something that's been made, sign up to get these recipes in the link in the profile, is that kind of the process?

[00:04:38] **Vannah Roddy:** Exactly.

[00:04:39] **Diego Footer:** Got it. And you found that's worked pretty well for you. So given that Instagram's out there, do you just find that's if you think of a typical marketing funnel, that's like the top of the net, people who just want to learn more about your farm, they go to Instagram, they can easily browse through.

[00:04:53] Then as they become more engaged, they're looking at all the posts, reading the posts. Oh, she's got a newsletter, I'm going to sign up for that?

[00:05:00] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. And I think it's an incentive as well because it's free value.

[00:05:06] People, it's really easy for them to click and sign up. It's an easy leap from just, 'Oh, Hey, here's a bunch of pretty pictures,' narrowing the funnel into, 'I can also, get this service.'

[00:05:17] **Diego Footer:** Sure. And I'm thinking now, the formatting of the newsletter itself 'cause one thing a lot of people who do CSA and stuff, they'll stick a recipe in there.

[00:05:28] So you have a recipe in there, and then after it, is it sign up for—or buy this produce? What's the verbiage you're using to communicate, 'Go here to buy?'

[00:05:42] **Vannah Roddy:** Absolutely. There's about six to seven recipes in the email, but there's a link to purchase at the very top of the email. And then there's the recipes and then a secondary link at the bottom.

[00:05:54] So it's showing up twice for them. Also, at the top of the email is just like, here's what's in veggie boxes this week, giving them an idea of what the harvest will look like. Then the recipes provide even more ideas as to how to use it. And then they have multiple options to click and buy.

[00:06:12] **Diego Footer:** Got it. And how do you find recipes have worked as an email series. I don't know about it, I've never asked people. I could see some people say, 'Yeah, it's played out. People don't need that as much now. They've seen it too much.'

[00:06:27] But it seems like it's really working for you. What's been your experience to getting success out of a recipe centric letter?

[00:06:35] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. I think it has a lot to do with the particular customers that I'm chasing. Like, my ideal customers are, urban professionals or parents, people who just want to grab the box and go at the farmer's market, and then have a bunch of easy ways to prepare it.

[00:06:55] So I try to keep the recipes super simple. I want to keep their time in mind. They tend to be under 15, 20 minutes in preparation. And so I'm really catering to the family, the busy family who just wants to be able to pick up their veggies, make a couple easy meals for the week, and do it all again next week.

[00:07:16] **Diego Footer:** Got it. And these recipes, are they only in the newsletter? Do you also list them as like a blog?

[00:07:22] **Vannah Roddy:** They're only on the newsletter.

[00:07:24] **Diego Footer:** Got it.

[00:07:25] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah.

[00:07:26] **Diego Footer:** Thinking about the veggie box, it's different than a CSA in your case, right?

[00:07:32] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely.

[00:07:33] **Diego Footer:** And what would you say makes it different than a CSA, for somebody listening to this?

[00:07:39] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, I'd say the biggest thing is that it's not the whole season long commitment, so folks can choose their subscription length.

[00:07:49] And they can buy a single box, which is \$28. They can buy a one-month subscription. So four boxes, which the price goes down to \$25, and then a three month subscription, 12 boxes, the price goes down to \$23 per box.

[00:08:05] So they're being incentivized to subscribe for longer, but people have that flexibility.

[00:08:12] **Diego Footer:** I see how they can be advantageous for the customer because some people get that 25-week paralysis of, 'Oh, I got to write a \$900 check or whatever it comes out to right now. And I'm not going to collect on all of that for 25 weeks.'

[00:08:26] So this makes it easier for customers to potentially dip their toe in the water, participate in the program. With potential...with having subscribers that have different terms and different sign up dates how's that worked out in terms of crop planning?

[00:08:48] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. It's interesting, for sure. I tend to... I'm at a pretty small scale, and so I'm always struggling with, can I accept the amount of customers that are interested this week? In the wintertime, that's a really true for me when the plants slow down, I'm always trying to fill veggie boxes compared to the amount of demands that the program has.

[00:09:16] In the summertime, it flips. I have way more veggies than I have demand for the veggie box. And I imagine that's just because people have so many other options, and that's why I keep my one farmer's market, so I bring excess to the market.

[00:09:31] And then in the wintertime, when things slow down, I have a cap. I can only accept like, 20, 25 subscribers a week, and then the single box goes away. So in the wintertime, they only have the option to purchase just one month or three months.

[00:09:48] **Diego Footer:** Got it. So you treat it as the longer subscribers, in essence, get priority or a locked-in spot, and then you only have so many spots to offer. If there's surplus

spots, okay, if, for example, if you had 25 spots, if the three months filled up all 25, there's no one month. There's no single.

[00:10:08] If there was room after three months, then it goes to the one month, and then it goes down to the one week box.

[00:10:14] **Vannah Roddy:** Exactly.

[00:10:17] **Diego Footer:** Got it. Where would you say your distribution is across those groups? If you had, a hundred customers, or let's say, 24 customers or 25 customers like you do, where's that breakdown?

[00:10:28] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, I... So about a month ago, I just brought the single boxes back. Historically, that was always most popular, but I've found in recent months that the three months subscription is my—is majority of my customer base.

[00:10:46] And again, I think a lot of that has to do with people just want to sign up and pick up their boxes for 12 weeks and then not have to think about it again for another three months. And so that also has to do with, I have a really great core of people that resubscribe every single month or every single three months.

[00:11:08] **Diego Footer:** With the one-box product, have you found that's been useful as a hook to get people to try? Where three months can be daunting upfront, it's like a, 'I'll try it for one box. If this works, then, go back.' How's that worked?

[00:11:27] **Vannah Roddy:** That's been the most powerful tool I have. Again, small growers know that the quality of their produce, there's, when people try it, they want it again.

[00:11:37] And so at the single box, I allow people to customize it, and it's definitely a pain in the butt for me, but 75% of them end up turning into one-month or three-month subscribers. I also make little fridge magnets with QR codes, so every single new person who purchases a single box gets their veggies.

[00:11:58] They get the email list, and they also get this little fridge magnet with a QR code. My logo's on it, my website's on it, they can just scan it, and I just, yeah... Convenience is where you get people coming back.

[00:12:10] **Diego Footer:** I like that. So it takes them right to the store and then they can read up from there.

[00:12:14] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah.

[00:12:15] **Diego Footer:** With the boxes, you mentioned that the single box, you let first-time customers customize that. Are all the boxes—are all subscription lengths, I should say is the better way—customizable?

[00:12:27] **Vannah Roddy:** Yes.

[00:12:28] **Diego Footer:** So full customizability across the board, what's made it successful for you to manage that in terms of logistics? You mentioned your small farm, relatively small customer base, so there's always going to be a limited amount of product.

[00:12:44] Does it just come down to your online platform and really dialing in your inventory, so you're not overselling what you have?

[00:12:53] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. And there's a lot of challenges that come with this, but I'd say I have it relatively dialed in at this point.

[00:13:02] I use Square for my website, and people customize at checkout. And what that looks like is they... I have the entire list of what I'm growing for that season. And they have the opportunity to opt out of three items.

[00:13:18] So they can choose—I don't like tomatoes, I'm going to opt out of those. I don't like kale. I'll opt out of that, and I will then give them double of something else that they do choose.

[00:13:28] **Diego Footer:** So in terms of customizability, is it, they can pick every item and quantity of every item or are there more saying, 'Here's what I don't like. What's left is what I like,' and then you determine.

[00:13:39] **Vannah Roddy:** Yep.

[00:13:40] **Diego Footer:** So it's the second.

[00:13:41] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely.

[00:13:44] **Diego Footer:** Okay. Okay. And then when assembling these boxes, that's always a tricky part. I think one thing I've learned talking to people about selling online is they think the selling online part is relatively time...timeless.

[00:13:56] There's not a lot of time commitment into putting stuff into a store and getting it set up. Where there is a lot of logistics is on the backend packing. What's your process if you have 25 different boxes, and they're all potentially different, of making sure that each box is packed correctly and goes out correctly?

[00:14:19] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. Post-harvest is my biggest challenge, for sure. And a lot of that has to do with the fact that I'm growing on multiple locations, but also in front yards.

[00:14:31] And so, I don't have a dedicated space to pack boxes. What usually ends up happening is I harvest all morning and then bring them all back, actually, to my personal home, set up a table, do all the washing, and then pack there right into my car. And it's the biggest challenge, it's... I could grow more.

[00:14:53] I could grow more, but I couldn't pack more at once. And so right now, I just have a Google spreadsheet. I have the customer name, the date that they subscribed, the subscription length and anything that they opted out of.

[00:15:07] And I actually don't use boxes. I use plant-based biodegradable bags, and I write in Sharpie the name on the bag, and then if they've opted out of anything, and then pack right into it.

[00:15:20] **Diego Footer:** It'll say, you know, Cameron, no tomato, no kale.

[00:15:26] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah.

[00:15:27] **Diego Footer:** And then is it just, you set up a mini farmer's market at your house there, and you just got the bag, you got the list, and it's just, boom. Heavy stuff on bottom light stuff on top all packed up?

[00:15:37] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. Yeah.

[00:15:40] **Diego Footer:** With having customers order boxes in advance, there's a few options you can do to get those to customers. There's delivery, there's picking up at a farmer's market, there's picking up it just another agreed upon location.

[00:15:57] What have you found has worked best in terms of a model to, one, make it convenient for customers, two, make it convenient for you, and three, make it so most people show up in a relatively tight window and show up?

[00:16:14] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. So I have four pickup locations currently. I'm looking to scale that as I also scale the farm. But right now, the main pickup location is at the farmer's market that I do. And that's really valuable for me because I'm already standing there.

[00:16:33] I already know I have, say, \$250 in sales on the coolers behind me, and I'm just selling the excess on the table. So that feels really good to just show up to the farmer's market and know what I have, but my particular market really struggles with parking. And so I know that it's likely stressful for my customers to be driving around in circles, trying to find a place to park.

[00:16:58] And that's why I started reaching out to mostly other local restaurants in the area. One of the main one's in west Asheville, it's an outdoor pickup location under a covered patio. So people don't even have to go in, they just park, they grab it, and then they're gone. The second one is at a distillery, local distillery that makes really unique products and same story.

[00:17:23] They just—there's great parking. They go in there, they grab it. They're gone. And then Yeah. The third, the fourth location actually has cold storage. And so that's the biggest window that people have.

[00:17:35] Typically, they only have an hour at the restaurants to come pick it up because they're sitting in a relatively open area, but the fourth pickup location has cold storage. They have about four hours that they can come pick it up.

[00:17:49] **Diego Footer:** At that location with cold storage, do you stay at that location or is there just a cooler, and the process is, Hey, they go in, they find their bag, and they go?

[00:17:58] **Vannah Roddy:** Yep. Because all the bags have names on them. They just let the staff know, Hey, I'm Cameron, I'm picking up my veggie box, and the staff will go and grab it for them.

[00:18:08] **Diego Footer:** Okay. Got it. That's cool. So even the staff on that end manages the pickup for you, really nice. With four different pickup spots, one of them is fixed, right? That's beyond your control, the farmer's market, it is when it is.

[00:18:21] You can't change that or move that. With the other—well really, two, because one is managed by the staff and it's in the cooler, so people can pick it up. If you count the farmer's market as one day, are you at the other two locations another day or another two days? Are those on different days? How's that work?

[00:18:43] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, farmer's market is Friday, and then the two kind of self-serve pickup locations are on the same day. I don't hang out at either of them. I just drop the boxes and go, and they have different time windows to come pick them up.

[00:18:58] And then same story with the fourth pick-up location, with the cold storage. That's on a Monday, and that's really close to where I live, that's in Black Mountain. And so I just drop them off, I go. Yeah.

[00:19:10] **Diego Footer:** Okay. So that's cool. So you're not even at these pickup locations, you're not there waiting around for all the boxes to be claimed. They're just stacked—or sorry, the bags to be claimed. They're just there. And then customers come get them during the window and then that's it.

[00:19:24] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. And I think that has been a challenge. Originally, the only pickup location was the farmer's market and then an in-person meet thing in Black Mountain.

And it was a very personal relationship because I have a small subscriber base of really consistent repeat customers.

[00:19:43] A lot of them have really missed that interaction as I've transitioned and as I've grown, but I don't really have a solution to that yet. Yeah.

[00:19:52] **Diego Footer:** Yeah. What's the... With a limited number of subscribers, why so many pickup locations? Are they just in different geographic areas, and you're trying to make it more convenient versus, farmer's market's one and X location is pickup two? Why so many?

[00:20:16] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, great question. I just created the additional two pickup locations like, two weeks ago. And so originally with 30 subscribers, I only had two pick up points. But this fall, I'm going from about 10,000 square feet in production to about over an acre.

[00:20:35] And yeah, so I'm—before I even put crops in the ground, I want to make sure that I have the other locations in order to grow my subscriber base.

[00:20:45] **Diego Footer:** With some other people managing some of the plots that you're transitioning off of, have you ever looked at having some of those people manage some of the pickup locations just to have a face of the business there?

[00:21:02] **Vannah Roddy:** I hadn't thought of that, but that's a great idea, especially because people are really interested in the new farmers that I'm bringing on. Yeah, that would be great/

[00:21:11] **Diego Footer:** I guess for the people that you're bringing on, they're essentially apprenticing, they're learning. It just gives them a little bit of experience with sales along the way as well.

[00:21:20] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. I love that. I'm definitely going to do that.

[00:21:22] **Diego Footer:** That's cool. What about delivery? I don't know much about the geography of Asheville. Some people, meaning farmers, really see the benefit in doing customer delivery to the point where they'll hire somebody just to do the deliveries.

[00:21:41] With the geographic dispersion, in Nashville, of your customer base. Is that something that makes sense or would that be a benefit?

[00:21:50] **Vannah Roddy:** Honestly, I had never even considered it. I'm pretty much, up until this point that I've brought on apprentices, I'm a one woman show. And so it didn't make sense for my time. It didn't make sense financially to hire someone just to do it.

[00:22:04] And I've never had a problem getting people to come to the pickup locations mostly because I've timed them so that people, as they're getting off work, can just stop and grab it and go home anyways.

[00:22:17] **Diego Footer:** Sure. Yeah, no, I like that. And one thing you mentioned you're missing that personal connection at those pickups, and I think that's just the reality of some businesses as they grow, right? Like, the more customers you get, the more—the less you can touch each customer personally.

[00:22:36] How have you tried to make up for that, are there ways? Is it more emailing? Is it just, 'Hey, if you want to come talk, come to the farmer's market?' What's the strategy for navigating that?

[00:22:47] Because I think this is a worry for a lot of farmers is, if I go online, if I do delivery, and I'm not doing delivery, if I have these unmanned pickup locations, I'm not getting the touches with the customer and I'm not building that connection as if I was at a farmer's market where I'm seeing the customer face to face. What is—what do you think is going to work for you there, or what is working for you?

[00:23:15] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, I think what I'm experimenting with is because these new pickup locations are restaurants, just sitting down once a month at one of them and letting the subscribers know, 'Hey, I'll be there during your pickup window. You want to, sit with me and chat or grab a drink or eat with me, let's do it.'

[00:23:37] Because the one pickup location, it's a local butcher bar. So they do local grass-fed meat, and then they also have burgers and sandwiches and that stuff. And I planned that pickup location during their Monday burger night special.

[00:23:52] And so it's again, another incentive to be there. You get a deal on a great burger. And then once a month, I'm sitting down eating that burger anyways, come hang out.

[00:24:04] **Diego Footer:** When you think about having that core subscriber base, the group that comes back week in and week out, how do you increase or build up that rapport?

[00:24:18] Is it just finding the right customer in the first place? I know that sounds, how do you even do that? But turnover in a lot of CSA programs is fairly large in some CSA's. And really, I think to be successful in a CSA model, really an online store model, is you have 50 plus percent of your customer base that's just quote, regular and they come back all the time.

[00:24:43] Quality of produce gets you a little ways down the road to doing that, packaging, delivery, price, that helps along the way, but a lot of it is, 'Well, hey, I could go buy this produce somewhere else.' What do you want to do to, or what do you think that makes that core sticky?

[00:25:03] **Vannah Roddy:** Absolutely. I think the biggest benefit is just knowing who your ideal customer is. And at this point, I'm in my second season. And as soon as an order comes in, I can tell this person is high maintenance. They want all of the options to opt out, and they're contacting me additionally for more things.

[00:25:29] Whereas the orders that come in for three-month subscriptions, they've opted out of nothing. They show up on time every single week. Those are the customers that I'm touching more. I'm going out of my way to follow up with them and get them coming back and create a relationship.

[00:25:45] And it comes back to again, what clients do I want to serve and finding your niche in that way is yeah, I'm really catering to the busy people, the people that are working and just want to grab the bag and go and make a quick meal.

[00:26:04] **Diego Footer:** As a newer business, a growing business, sometimes there's pressure to say, 'All customers are ones that I need to keep. I might not want to keep them all, but I need to keep them all.'

[00:26:19] How do you reconcile between growing in higher maintenance customers that you know, in a perfect world, you'd rather replace with a more ideal customer?

[00:26:30] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, it's a hard lesson I had to learn. There are a lot of missteps and challenges, definitely. There are customers who no matter what you do, they're not going to be happy.

[00:26:43] And so there's really, to me, there's no point in pursuing that customer. Whereas the customer who wants what you have and will show up every week to get it, those are the people that I spend my time getting to know and making sure that their needs are met.

[00:27:01] **Diego Footer:** As you build up this core customer base, there's a couple of different ways to grow a business and a couple of different schools of thought on how to do it. One is you get more of those ideal customers.

[00:27:12] Say you're just selling more product to more customers. Another is, these customers that I have are really loyal. They're the super fans, and the strategy is I'm going to offer them more stuff. Maybe that's add-ons to the bags. Maybe that's flowers, like you have, maybe that's aggregating product.

[00:27:35] As you grow and look forward to growing. You're obviously adding more land, so growth is in the future. How do you think about growing, is it scaling up, getting more customers, or is it about providing more to the customers that you already have?

[00:27:51] **Vannah Roddy:** That's a great question. And at the end of the day, I think it's going to be more about providing more to the customers I already have. Because if I just wanted to move lots of product, I would be a wholesaler.

[00:28:06] But the veggie box program is super valuable to me because I get the highest dollar for what I'm putting in the boxes, and I'm providing the quality, and I'm providing service to these people, and so I'm able to charge what I want.

[00:28:24] And I think, keeping that in mind as I grow is what's going to help me continue with this success. Because if I just start focusing on, okay, I've scaled up, now I just need to move all this product really quickly. I think the heart of what the veggie box is would be a little diminished.

[00:28:45] **Diego Footer:** And with ways to provide more to them, do you offer add-on options to somebody who subscribes for the three-month option? Do they have the option—I guess let's go through some of these logistics before I get to that.

[00:29:00] So each week, if somebody signs up for a three-week subscript—three-month subscription, they don't have to touch that subscription during those three months, correct?

[00:29:11] **Vannah Roddy:** Correct.

[00:29:12] **Diego Footer:** Okay. If somebody wanted to add on, get more of what you have, do you have a way to do that?

[00:29:20] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. Similar to their options to opt out at checkout on Square, they have options to add on. And currently, those options are flowers, so they can add on a bouquet and they can add on seasoning blends.

[00:29:36] So I... I dehydrate like, green onions. I dehydrate poblano peppers and blend them with sea salt. I have three different blends, and people really love those because again, it's reinforcing the quick and easy meal model.

[00:29:51] So I'm bringing them one step closer to a complete meal if I'm also offering them a seasoning to put on their vegetables, which I make from essentially waste products on farm, like the trimmings from green onion tops are what get dehydrated and put in the green onion blend, that kind of thing.

[00:30:10] And I am adding on the new land where I'm getting laying hens this year, and so eggs will be an add on here in the future. In the past, I've added on other people's products like bread and local—locally made chocolate and those things were less popular.

[00:30:29] It was more of a hassle for me to keep them in stock and communicate with the other producers than it was to offer them at my scale at that time. I may try it again once I have a better facility for storing that stuff, but yeah, it was very seasonal. So like around Valentine's day, the chocolates were popular and that kind of thing.

[00:30:52] **Diego Footer:** No, I like that idea. And I guess people can always come to the farmer's market if that week they want to pick up more and get more. 'Cause the farmer's

market, the great thing about that is anything that doesn't go out in the bags can go to the farmer's market is a sales option to just another way to maximize that you're selling as much as you can.

[00:31:10] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. And I don't have add on options for additional veggies, just because one of the biggest pieces of feedback that I get is wow, you give me a lot of veggies every week already, which has always been interesting to me because it doesn't feel like a lot to me.

[00:31:27] But I guess to people who are used to eating like vegetables as a side dish or that kind of thing, it is a lot for them to move through in a week.

[00:31:37] **Diego Footer:** So it's... Yeah, I guess that they're not asking for it, why offer that option, right?

[00:31:41] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah.

[00:31:42] **Diego Footer:** And with what you're doing, you mentioned earlier you're a one-woman operation. So you're a grower, you're doing all the post-harvest, you're doing all the packaging, all the fulfillment yourself.

[00:31:52] At 25 people, say your max now, is that manageable by you? And if it's manageable, is that like you, 10 out of 10 goal level, 10 out of 10 stress level, or is that relatively comfortable? Where does that fit in the scale of how much one woman can handle?

[00:32:13] **Vannah Roddy:** It's very comfortable, and that's why I want to grow. As I grow, of course, I'll add staff, but yeah. And like I said, you know, I'm at a 25 subscriber cap, not because it's the limit of what I can grow, but it's the limit of what I can process on the backend without a wash pack or cold storage. And yeah, I think that once I grow, providing myself with additional tools to ensure my success, I think it will be even more manageable.

[00:32:49] **Diego Footer:** One of the thing I'm thinking of, knowing that you started on a smaller amount of land, for somebody doing a program like this, I think initially, there might be the inherent perceived obligation to provide a lot of diversity in the box.

[00:33:08] So customers need to get 10 crops, 8 crops each week. You didn't have a lot of land to grow on, and that land was even probably a little more challenging because it was split up against a bunch of urban plots.

[00:33:22] When you put these bags together, how did you approach, okay. It's not just salad going into the mix. It's not a salad subscription, but it's a veggie box of, I need to grow enough to keep it interesting, but I also have to realize, Hey, I don't have a lot of land here, so I can't grow 50 different crops. How'd you end up at what you ended up with?

[00:33:48] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, that's something that I've changed up a lot as I've observed the customer demand. And most of my career as a farmer, whether that was working for other people's farms or even my first year as Encompass, I was a salad farmer.

[00:34:04] I was growing lettuce really intensively, mostly salanovas. And I realized that it wasn't what I wanted to do, what wasn't what I preferred to eat, either. And so I've really—it's been such a gift to be able to transition to veggie boxes for me, because it allows me to grow more diversity.

[00:34:24] And again, you're right. There are some crops that just doesn't make sense to grow at a small scale, but the cool thing about the veggie box is I can charge whatever I want for that crop because I'm putting it into a box with a set price.

[00:34:38] So I grew potatoes on a small scale, and I love it. I grow broccoli and cabbages. I grow bulb onions and garlic and put them in veggie boxes. And those are all things that like traditionally, small farmers have said that they can't make money on, but I really enjoy it. I'm making a living. It's what I prefer to eat as well.

[00:35:01] Yeah, and it's what my customers really want. And again, because I'm year-round, it also feels like I'm more of a valuable part of a real local food system. When I can provide these higher nutrient value, higher calorie crops that are actually supporting people. Yeah, I really, I enjoy that aspect, and I've enjoyed figuring out how to make that work for me.

[00:35:26] **Diego Footer:** I like that. And given that your main email newsletter has recipes in it, do you plant crops thinking, 'Okay. I'm planting crops people can make meals with.' Because I think, I don't know. I don't know what other CSA farmers do, but it could be really easy to say, 'All this looks cool. I want to grow it.'

[00:35:46] And I think people like it, and they grow a bunch of stuff, and the box doesn't really...it doesn't all fit together as a meal when you get it, or you have to add on a bunch of stuff to make it as a meal, it's all like random vegetables. So when you design your bags each week and your farm planning, knowing that you do these recipes, are you trying to think, okay, what I'm putting together could come together as a dish?

[00:36:12] **Vannah Roddy:** I really love that idea, and I hadn't planned it in that way, but I might, moving forward. And I think unintentionally, that's been a by-product just because of...

[00:36:28] ...I bet that, can you hear me?

[00:36:30] **Diego Footer:** Yep, I got you. The last thing I heard was unintentionally, by-product.

[00:36:33] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, just—a lot of the crops that I select are like, old school Italian heirlooms, just because that's what I like to cook with. My family is Italian. And so, a lot of the recipes I end up sending out are recipes that then honor those heirloom varieties.

[00:36:49] So I grow like red torpedo onions and like, long, sweet peppers, *corno di toro*. And especially this time of year, a lot of the recipes that I'm sending out with tomatoes and squash and all those summer staples, they tend to be very Italian.

[00:37:08] **Diego Footer:** Yeah, right on. That's cool. I love the approach to doing it. And one thing I realize is you found the mix of, I'll say happiness in business of I'm growing stuff I like for customers that I like, and it can provide me a living while doing it.

[00:37:26] So that's really cool. For people that might want to go down this model, what words of advice would you have if somebody who wants to maybe start small, do a subscription like this, and even maybe starting on a small land base?

[00:37:42] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, I would say for starting a veggie box program like this, especially where you're offering a lot of customization, make sure that you're chasing the clients that are going to serve you. For a while, I was casting a wide net and only bringing in a couple of fish.

[00:38:02] And now that I know where to market to and what customers I want, and I have a really good relationship with the customers that keep coming back, I know, you know, who to pursue. And those people, they support me, and I'm so grateful to them for that. Yeah, so...yeah.

[00:38:22] **Diego Footer:** If you have 10 customers that you have an interaction with or try the box, how many do you think out of those 10 eventually come out as loyal, sticky customers at the end that you want to have?

[00:38:36] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah, that percentage has definitely changed over the past season. At first, it was pretty low, again, because I was casting that wide net. At this point, over half.

[00:38:46] **Diego Footer:** Okay. That's pretty good, pretty good. And given one other negative on CSA's, or long-term CSA's is it's so much pressure to deliver on the farmer's side.

[00:38:56] And I've heard people say things like you get paid upfront, maybe say in March, and by the time you get to September, you feel like you're working for free because you got paid so long ago.

[00:39:08] With these shorter subscriptions three months, do you feel like that solves some of those problems? One, it's lessened the pressure and then at least every three months, you're getting paid versus every well, it's not—what is that...three months is 12 weeks, versus six months later?

[00:39:24] **Vannah Roddy:** Definitely. I worked on a lot of CSA farms before I started my own farm and heard the same things over and over again both from the customers and from the farmers. And the farmers especially, like, even the customers, everyone was ready for it to be done at the end of the season.

[00:39:43] Whereas this model, occasionally, especially during the cold months, three months even feels like a long time. You know, I—when people end up resubscribing, and there's that kind of turnover where the money starts coming in again, that feels great, obviously, but yeah, there's...

[00:40:02] CSA is great for a lot of people. And this is the exact opposite of a CSA in a lot of ways, just based on what I had observed from both farmer quality of life and the CSA customer.

[00:40:15] **Diego Footer:** Yeah, I guess that's also the nice thing about a one-month subscription. On one hand, it's not, maybe it feels a little less risky—or more risky 'cause it's one month. Are they going to come back next month? But if they do just keep coming back, it's nice to have cashflow coming in all the time and get that little bump.

[00:40:30] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. And if you provide a quality product in the beginning, and then you follow up after the end of their subscription, most people resubscribe right then and there. It's not a hard sell, which is pretty cool. The one month. This is definitely my favorite. Yeah, it's my favorite option.

[00:40:49] **Diego Footer:** Has that been a good sales pitch, too, to try us for a month?

[00:40:54] **Vannah Roddy:** I hadn't—yeah, I hadn't said that in the past, but I may try that.

[00:41:00] **Diego Footer:** Yeah, I just think of that from like, a lot of the box services you see online, or commercials for meal prep services on YouTube and stuff, it's, first order is 10 bucks or something like that.

[00:41:13] And then it's Hey, okay, we got you in, and you get to see what you get to experience it. And then, we'll eat the first order because it's all about long-term customer value at the end of the day, lifetime customer value.

[00:41:23] So if you got to eat it a little bit on the first month, hopefully that customer in the term lifetime more than pays up for those missed on the first order.

[00:41:32] **Vannah Roddy:** Yeah. I think what you said about the meal prep industry is really valuable because for me, looking to other industries to try and figure out how to market has been super valuable.

[00:41:46] I don't want to replicate the same programs that other farmers have 10 miles away from me. And so looking to the other industries, the frozen meal deliveries and that kind of thing, can be really valuable for people when they're trying to figure out how to move their product.

[00:42:02] **Diego Footer:** Right on. I love what you're doing. I love the fact, to hear you're growing and expanding and that it's working for you.

[00:42:09] For people that want to check out what you're doing, follow along with you on Instagram, and we'll maybe model what you're doing, where's the best places to go?

[00:42:18] **Vannah Roddy:** Absolutely. So you can find my farm on Instagram at [Encompass Farm](#). And if you're looking to grow in the same model using urban sites, using front yards, I provide a lot of growing content through [Encompass Land Design](#) on Instagram. And my website is EncompassFarm.com.

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