



# LIVING LOCAL

## CROSS FARMS

*Written by Chandler Joiner*

Carol Cross grew up in a farming family. She spent her childhood tending the family garden, canning vegetables for the winter, and watching her father and grandfather farm their 500 acres. She decided to continue the family tradition, and her and her husband, Shawn, have been growing their own food for over 25 years. About a decade ago, their small vegetable garden began garnering interest from their neighbors, and nine years ago Cross Farms was born. What began as a lifestyle choice, has grown into a 3½ acre Naturally Grown farm in Berlin, Maryland. Throughout my time interviewing Carol, I learned that while their business has had its challenges, Cross Farms is dedicated to providing for the needs of their community.

Whether you are starting a small backyard garden or expanding into a farming operation, one of the first steps should always be deciding what to grow. When considering what to grow, it is very easy to see how passionate Carol is about offering the community a wide variety.

“Making decisions on seed choices is something I love to do. I usually start planning next year’s list before this season is over. When we first started as vendors in farmers markets, we grew all the usual vegetables - corn, tomatoes, and squash. We soon discovered that those vegetables were at every farmer’s booth. I wanted to try something different. I wanted to introduce customers to purple string beans or purple pea pods. I wanted a rainbow of colors for our vegetable selection. Now we grow all the basics, plus we always offer something different. This year we will have 11 types of squash, 5 types of beans and 15 different types of tomatoes, plus a large selection of other vegetables.”



**CAROL AND SHAWN CROSS**  
*Founders of Cross Farms*

While deciding on what to grow has always been fun for Carol, knowing the amount of crop yield she would need to help their business take off was an initial challenge. “Our biggest challenge in the beginning was learning that growing only two or three rows of squash starting in May will not last until September. When we started farming as a business, we did not consider how much more we would need to be planting of things like squash, string beans, and cucumbers. We did not know the demand for certain products, and it took us a while to learn the market.” When referring to knowing the “market”, Carol means learning what consumers are looking to purchase. Knowing the market can ensure that you are growing the right amount of certain high demand products to be able to sell throughout the season.

To meet the high market demand for certain products while maintaining their natural growing methods, Carol and Shawn intercrop their plants with “friend” plants. “Some vegetables you can plant side by side and they do extremely well, such as amaranth next to tomatoes, peas next to carrots, and cabbage next to lettuce. All these pairings grow well together and do not have any competition. But, say you put a watermelon next to your potatoes, you will not get any watermelon, you want to follow a ‘friend’ list, as well as know your ‘enemy’ plants.” Carol is referring to the concept of companion (or friend) planting. Companion planting is a natural growth method utilized by many small-scale farms to help improve the vigor and health of plants in a small space. Companion plants can improve flavor, repel insects, deter diseases, and encourage faster growth. For example, basil is a good companion plant for tomatoes because it deters aphids, which can devastate tomato crops. However, cabbage would be an “enemy” plant because it will take away nutrients from the tomato plants, preventing growth.



Intercropping is only one of the many ways Carol and Shawn protect their crops and their land. They also place a strong emphasis on soil health and are constantly working to recondition the soil for the next year’s crops. “We use crop rotation to promote healthier soil, cover crops to replace nutrients, and compost. We rotate crops every year and grow cover crops, such as red clover and peas, and we test the soil every two years to know where we stand. We then plant different cover crops depending on the results of our soil tests, so we are always adding the correct nutrients back into the soil.”

Soil testing is incredibly important for a variety of reasons, the main being that frequent soil tests help optimize productivity while protecting the land from over or under application of nutrients. Soil tests help farmers to know the nutrient status and pH level of their soil, allowing them to manage their soil in the healthiest way possible. Throughout planting and growing seasons, soil fertility constantly changes. Nutrients in the soil increase with the addition of manure, compost, mulch, and/or fertilizers, and nutrients are removed from the soil as plants grow and crops are harvested. Soil tests give farmers a look into what they need to do to maintain correct nutrient levels for their future crops. Cross Farms’ consistent soil monitoring and management has improved the quality of their soil dramatically. “The biggest change we have seen in our land is that the soil is not compact anymore. We now have more organic matter in our soil and have seen an increase in earthworms over the years. We have better drainage for the plants and our planting season has absolutely extended; plants are making it through the hotter months.” Overall, soil tests are a cost-effective way for farmers to protect the long-term health of the environment and their crops.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

3/4 of the world’s flowering plants and approximately 35% of the world’s food crops depend on animal pollinators to reproduce. It is estimated that 1 out of every 3 bites of food we eat exists because of animal pollinators like bees, butterflies, moths, birds, bats, beetles, and other insects.

Another cost-effective way to encourage growth and protect the environment is to plant for pollinators. One of Carol’s major recommendations for any gardener or farmer would be to focus on building up habitat that attracts birds, insects, and other pollinators. “Something as simple as a wildflower garden can be beneficial.” On Cross Farms, they have various groups of wildflowers to attract pollinators, along with multiple bird feeders, and they are a certified bee friendly farm. On-farm pollinator conservation is a win-win situation for Cross Farms and the pollinators. Pollinator populations are declining in many parts of the U.S., and these declines are harmful to agricultural productivity and the health of our natural environment. Adding pollinator habitat to farm production increases the number of crop pollinators, which, in turn, leads to higher quality and quantity crop yields.



Carol is an incredibly experienced farmer who can offer ample advice to new gardeners and farmers, but her number one recommendation would be to just go for it. "Please just try it! It is very rewarding, and every day you will absolutely learn something new. Start small with a few plants and expand each year, try different types of vegetables and herbs." Carol understands the important role farmers play in our watershed and she encourages everyone to come to their farm to simply learn. "I absolutely encourage people to come and experience the farm. They can learn how we grow and see the various stages of growth. They can learn that what you do today will make a difference in next years crop. I want children to experience a blueberry bush for the first time or see that a cucumber vine can run six feet long. It is amazing to see the expressions on some peoples faces when they learn something new."

During this time of social distancing and immense precaution, Carol encourages the community to continue learning. "If you need any advice starting your own home garden absolutely give us a call, I am more than happy to help!" Carol and I began our communication at the beginning of quarantine, and throughout our multiple phone calls and email exchanges, I discovered the incredible dedication she and Shawn have to our community during this unusual time. As a nation, we are facing an unprecedented situation. I am so grateful that small-scale community farms such as Cross Farms are rising to the occasion of providing fresh and accessible food for community members in need. For the duration of one of our phone conversations, Carol was actively delivering fresh produce baskets to elderly community members in Snow Hill who cannot risk leaving their homes. Cross Farms heard the call of their community, such as mothers with infants too young to leave the house, homebound seniors, people with compromised immune systems, and busy parents working from home. As Carol lovingly puts it, "I want those who are afraid to leave their homes and go to the store to have fresh options."

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**Carol Cross**

When you chose to buy local, you are supporting committed and passionate farmers like Carol and Shawn who are willing and able to change their means of operation to provide for those in need during a time of the unknown. When it is safe, I encourage you all to go out to these small-scale farms and meet these amazing people. We should all get out there to learn how our food is grown, know where it comes from, and support those who want the best for our community.



Cross Farms produce is currently available at their farm stand located at 9933 Pitts Road, Berlin, MD. They also sell at The Berlin Farmers Market, which is open on Sundays from 9:00am - 1:00pm. Please visit The Berlin Farmers Market facebook page to learn more about their safety precautions. Due to COVID-19, Cross Farms is also offering farmside

pick-up and a delivery service, please call (410) 251-6824 to schedule a pick-up or delivery. They also offer a variety of boxed vegetables at wholesale prices for canning or freezing. For further inquires please email [crossfarms@mediacombb.net](mailto:crossfarms@mediacombb.net) or visit their Facebook or Instagram.

 [@crossfarms2011](https://www.instagram.com/crossfarms2011)