

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### From Film to Farm: A Real-Life Fable

*Anne-Marie Hardie*

The journey of Fable began in perhaps one of the most unlikely places—the spare bedroom of film editor Tom Deacon's home. It was the winter of 2015. Tom had made the decision to adopt a healthier lifestyle, which included eating local, non-GMO, pesticide-free food. He quickly discovered that sourcing a continual supply of local, organic produce in the Hudson, New York, area was a challenge.



And so, with no land and zero farming experience, Tom made the decision to bring raised soil beds into his apartment to grow his own produce. Little did he know that this small bedroom would become the foundation for a new business.

*Pictured: Started in a spare bedroom, Tom Deacon's growing business, called Fable (for "farm to table"), expanded to include 200 growing towers of leafy greens for local restaurants and grocery stores. A Kickstarter campaign helped him raise the funds to rent greenhouse space.*

Initially focused on local greens and produce, Tom decided to place an avocado pit in water to see if it would take root. To his surprise, the pit grew to be over a foot tall, causing Tom to wonder about what other produce could be grown in water. From his initial research, Tom discovered that hydroponics could be a technique that could grow more produce and with fewer pests. So Tom made the decision to invest in eight ZipGrow towers, which he mounted against the wall in the bedroom. The towers were primarily used for leafy greens and herbs, although Tom admits he did also try a tomato, but it became a bit unruly. For the additional produce, Tom continued to grow produce in pots and a raised soil bed.

As the supply became more abundant, Tom reached out to local restaurants to see if there was an interest in locally grown greens. The response was almost immediate. In fact, Tom shares that by the time he emailed the last restaurant on his list, he already had received a positive response. The company, Fable, was born, named to encapsulate the farm-to-table movement that drove Tom to grow his own produce. Tom knew he

was on the right path so, this film editor quickly delved into the life of a farmer.

As the possibilities of the business continued to bear fruit, Tom realized that he'd outgrown the spare bedroom.

"The small little apartment room turned into a jungle," shared Tom. However, opening a new business—including renting land and setting up a heated hydroponic greenhouse—required a substantial investment. To help with the venture, Tom launched a successful Kickstarter campaign that not only brought in additional income, but helped increase the awareness of Fable.

The campaign helped provide the proceeds for Tom to rent a portion of land from Sundial Farms in Ossining, New York, including one greenhouse. The initial equipment purchase also included 200 grow towers where Tom planted basil, kale, Swiss chard, sage, thyme, tarragon, parsley and chives. He also planted garlic, providing yet another crop for his growing client base.

With the intent of continued expansion, Tom made the decision to hire a farm hand, Anna Alleva. Anna was instrumental in helping to raise the 35 chickens, which Tom brought on for fresh eggs, and to begin the process of growing several field crops, including tomato, squash and cucumber.

"Given my lack of experience, we did fairly well that first year," said Tom. "In fact, we grew over 600 pounds of tomatoes and started attending farmers markets to sell the excess produce."

In addition to the restaurants, Tom had now begun to sell herbs at the local grocery retailers and had also added a local hospital to his list of produce clients.

A year into his venture, Tom shares that each day continues to be filled with positive surprises—from the success of the crops to how well the chickens have done on the property. Although, he admits that the learning curve was steep and a lot of the process continues to be learned through trial and error.

"One of the biggest challenges in horticulture is that in this field, if you make a mistake, it can take months to correct," said Tom. "There are certain things that you only get one chance, and if it fails, you have to wait another year to try again."

Fable experienced this struggle this past fall with their field pumpkins, when the farm quickly learned that stronger barriers would be required to keep out the local animals.

"For anybody that is looking into getting into farming, it is important to do your research," said Tom. "But beyond that, this industry requires patience; you can't let any mistakes discourage you, but instead to keep on persevering."

It's the continued positive reception from his growing customer base and the beautiful fresh produce that has made all of the hard work well worth the effort.

The success of Fable, shares Tom, is a direct result of a lot of hard work and the support that he's received from both the local community and his family. Over the past year, he's had residents volunteer at the farm,

including one resident, Cheryl, who's expressed an interest in raising bees this year. His family—in particular, Tom's father, Tom Deacon Sr.—was instrumental in setting up the farm, including getting the pumps working and installing electric fences around the animals.

With his eye constantly on the future, Tom continues to look at ways of growing fresh produce locally. Recently, Tom hired a farm manager, Anna Zabirowa, who brings with her six years of industry experience, which will help bring Fable to the next level, including running a CSA in 2017. Future plans also include growing exotic produce—like avocados, pomegranates and oranges—and expanding the farm to supply produce to additional restaurants and markets in the local area. **GT**

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