

The Statewide Committee for Research honors Alaska's

Northern Innovators



Tim Meyers The Tundra Farmer

Northern Innovators Hall of Fame Member

Dusty pickup trucks and Subaru wagons rattle into the dusty parking lot of the Bethel Farmers Market. Car doors squeak open. Women step out, carrying canvas produce bags. On this early June day in this southwest Alaska hub, the women exit one half hour after they entered, squinting into sand swirling from a Bethel wind, their bags bursting with greenery.

Tim Meyers and his wife Lisa, proprietors of Meyers Farm, will make a few thousand dollars in the five hours their market is open today. Though he's never sat down and figured out the numbers, Meyers thinks they are making a profit on their few acres of former tundra in Southwest Alaska.

"I started this with the intent to grow food for the family," he says. "Holy cow, it just exploded."

The local support has helped Meyers sustain his farm in Bethel, a place name that conjures tundra and ground blizzards, not salad greens. Yet the tundra has proven deceptively rich.

"This is a good place to grow food," he says. "If we're going to have food security in Alaska, this is where it's going to happen."

Inside the market building that Meyers constructed, eight people form a U that extends from the door to Lisa, who is weighing produce. She stands next to Tim, who is packing veggies and fruits in boxes and canvas bags.

"I didn't expect you'd have something this early in June," says customer Diane McEachern, a 16-year Bethel resident who has stopped visiting the large grocery store in town but hits the market twice a week. "That kale is gorgeous."

Growing up, Tim Meyers did not dream of tilling the Alaska tundra. He learned farming at his grandparents' dairy farm in northern Wisconsin but a love for flying brought him north. In 1976, he landed a job with a Bethel

flying service. Also working for the airline was his future wife, Lisa, who grew up in Stony River, 230 miles up the winding Kuskokwim River that flows through Bethel.

They married, started a family and purchased some acreage in Bethel. To feed a succession of four daughters, they planted a garden. Things grew so well that Meyers converted more land for planting. He extended his growing season by months with the use of plastic; it covers high tunnels, which resemble translucent Quonset huts, and knee-high low tunnels.

The results: Potatoes as sweet as apples. Salad greens with a tangy bite. Strawberries that melt on the tongue.

Meyers was surprised at what the land delivered. Then he found a 2008 National Geographic magazine with the cover story "Where Food Begins."

Inside, he saw a map of the world showing fertile soils in dark green; these places feature "mild temperature and adequate rainfall (that) help sustain exceptionally productive soils." Alaska featured only a few spots that were spinach-green, and they did not include the sunshine-rich Interior, nor the Mat-Su valley, an area north of Anchorage quilted with farms. One of the few places deemed excellent for growing was the Kuskokwim River valley.

"Once you strip the tundra off you've got a phenomenal piece of land," Meyers says.

Salmon have been swimming up the Kuskokwim and depositing their carcasses in the river delta for thousands of years, enriching the soil. He supplements his dirt by grinding up chum salmon and dumping the fish slurry into a pair of 2,000-gallon tanks. Those he aerates, to stimulate bacteria, which digest the fish and turn it into fertilizer. He spades the soil with the ground-up chum in the fall and not much else.

"I've got lots of fish, rock powder (lime), and chicken manure," he says. "I feed biological life to the soil."

Bethel is a great place to be an entrepreneur, says Meyers, who also owned and operated a construction business in town. Alaska Airlines jets that make their final approach over Meyers Farm carry his produce to stores in Anchorage. A stream from which he pumps irrigation water curls around his property. When he needs a few bolts or two-by-fours, a hardware store is five minutes away. And Bethel's population of 6,000 is large enough to give him a steady stream of Farmer's Market customers.

"It's the perfect-size community to do what I do," says the lanky 58-year-old, gesturing with hands large as grizzly paws. "The last few summers were bad (rainy and cool), but if we have weather like this (a hot day for Bethel at 74 degrees), I can export a lot of stuff."

The only farmer in southwest has had a day, so far, that has gone like this: wake at 3 a.m. to chicken screaming; sting dog with pellet gun (too late to save chicken); make coffee; ride four-wheeler to fields leased from airport; water potatoes, carrots and experimental-but-possibly high-profit Rhodiola; ride four-wheeler home; eat breakfast; water crops on home acreage; swing open Farmer's Market shutters with Lisa; set out produce with proper price tags; turn on electronic scale and calculator.

With the market now closed until Wednesday, Meyers squints out at the horizon of low tundra plants, now hovered over by Lapland longspurs floating through mating displays. On the plain of the Kuskokwim, he envisions a few more farm plots, pushing up vegetables that could supply all of Bethel, and beyond.

"You can think outside the box because the box is so small up here," he says.