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Up Close: The Farmer and the Sell

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UP CLOSE

The Farmer and the Sell

Is it possible to help the green movement through capitalism?

Iwant GrowJourney to be the big name—what people immediately think of when they're thinking of organic gardening," says **Aaron von Frank '00** of the company he began with his wife, Susan, a little more than a year ago.

Most people don't associate big companies and capitalist dreams with sustainable practices, but most people aren't Aaron von Frank. With his well-coiffed hair and sparkling smile, von Frank walks out of his suburban home with his pet duck toddling behind him. This is not your stereotypical "tree hugger," and that might be exactly what von Frank wants.

Von Frank does not disparage the word "sustainability," but he has begun to feel it is not an adequate term. "It implies stasis," he argues, "and stasis is insufficient given

the level of global ecosystem disruption we're causing via an extractive economic modus operandi." If you're not entirely sure what von Frank means, he puts it more simply: "We're eroding one pound of soil for every pound of food we create with our 'biotechnology.' We've lost 75 to 95 percent of our seed agrobiodiversity over the past century."

That loss is a big problem, according to von Frank, because a genetic diversity of crops is necessary in order for survival. Von Frank gives the Irish potato famine as an example: one potato contracted a disease, and the result was blight across the region, as all of the potatoes were the same breed.

What's more, the nutritional quality of modern food crops has diminished over the years, as quantity has been valued

over quality. This is where GrowJourney steps in, and where the von Franks's own journey began.

A few years ago, Aaron and Susan were at a friend's home for dinner. The friend walked the couple through her backyard garden, where they spotted ground cherries, small fruits similar in appearance to a cherry tomato. After tasting them, they were blown away by the interesting flavor—something they never knew existed.

Shortly thereafter, the couple began researching the "secret world of wacky and unusual heirloom foods," and broke ground on their own plot at their home. Before they knew it, they had transformed their backyard into a horticulture oasis full of heirloom tomatoes, strawberries, and grapes, but also other non-traditional crops such as chufa

("earth almonds"), horseradish, three different varieties of elderberries, and Tromboncino squash.

It's all a part of the permaculture philosophy to which the von Franks have become avid followers. Permaculture—derived from "permanent" and "agriculture"—is a method for designing systems that are sustainable, and in turn, low-maintenance.

"Everyone thinks that gardening is time-consuming," he explains, "but those who think that are also the ones who believe you have to plow the soil and spray for pesticides and put down fertilizer. You don't have to do any of that. In fact, you're making it harder for yourself if you do."

Rejuvenated by their experiences with their own heirloom garden and aware of the dangers of a world with decreasing biodiversity, the von Franks decided to begin their own organic "seed of the month" business.

GrowJourney now distributes USDA-certified organic seeds to subscribers in 45 U.S. states, as well as Puerto Rico and Canada. Members receive five packs of seeds each month as well as access to online guides, tips, and plans for organic gardening—all promoting the permaculture method of growing.

Von Frank envisions building a global company with GrowJourney, but he is careful to note that the business will remain collaborative and supportive of smaller businesses. In fact, GrowJourney would help cultivate and "feed" other companies, bolstering them in an otherwise "dog eat dog" economy.

"Big companies don't have to be bad," he says. "It's all in how they use their size." **F**

—Lindsay Niedringhaus '07