



# SPADE & PLOW

## SIZE:

26 acres

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

4

## PRODUCTS:

Diverse vegetable crops, including artichokes, swiss chard, tomatoes, and garlic.

## MARKETS:

CSA, farmers' markets, restaurants, wholesaler

## COUNTY:

Santa Clara

**Spade & Plow, a small farm operating out of San Martin, is a family run business with a focus on serving Santa Clara County.** It was started in 2015 by three members of the Thorp family: brothers, Sam and Nick, and their father, Mike. Each of the founders brought experience with a different aspect of agriculture to Spade & Plow. Mike Thorp's expertise is in organic production. Having become a certified organic farmer in the early 1980s, Mike spent most of his career working for organic companies such as Cal-Organic and Earthbound Farms. Sam had prior experience in wholesale and distribution, while Nick specializes in equipment design and construction. The Thorps' different skill sets and their ability to work together has been one of Spade & Plow's greatest assets.

Although they grew up farming in Monterey County, the Thorps "really wanted to be in Santa Clara County" because, as Sam says, "we saw an underserved need for organic and local produce" here. Yet finding land in Santa Clara County was harder than they anticipated and has remained Spade & Plow's biggest challenge. In 2015, they were able to rent a 10-acre plot just off the side of Highway 101 in San Martin. They added another 27 acres in 2017. Since then, their landlord has taken back 17 acres from the second leased field, reducing their acreage by nearly 50%. Two-year lease terms also create considerable uncertainty for this growing business and make it too risky for Spade & Plow to invest in certain types of farm technology, infrastructure and some crops, such as fruit trees, berries, and perennial flowers. In a few more years, they hope to be in a position to purchase farmland of their own within the county.

# “CREATING A STRONG INDUSTRY HERE AROUND AG WOULD CREATE MORE INFRASTRUCTURE, AND CREATE MORE INTEREST, AND HELP BRING OUR COSTS DOWN AND OUR SALES UP.” —SAM THORP

Spade & Plow runs a popular Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that delivers boxes of fresh, certified-organic produce to about 220 customers. The Thorps were attracted to the CSA model because of the opportunities it provides for personal interactions with their customers and to grow a wider variety of crops. Their CSA boxes are highly customizable: customers can select different share sizes, different delivery schedules, and they can pick from a variety of seasonal, organic fruits and vegetables. Spade & Plow has also developed partnerships with local businesses like Pasture Chick Ranch in Hollister and Chromatic Coffee in San Jose, which enable customers to receive other local products in their CSA box. Having diverse market outlets is important to Spade & Plow, which also sells its products at farmers' markets in Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Santa Cruz counties, to restaurants, and to a local distributor.

**Although the road to building an environmentally and financially sustainable small-scale farm in Santa Clara County is by no means an easy one, farms like Spade & Plow show that it is possible.** Yet despite their successes, there have been challenges along the way. In addition to the struggle to find a place to farm, it was also challenging to get into farmers' markets. The Thorps knew that to gain entry to highly competitive local farmers' markets they would need to offer something that set them apart from other vendors. Initially, they were given access to one farmers' market to sell a unique variety of artichokes. When they expanded their produce offerings, the farmers' market manager pushed back until Spade & Plow explained that they were selling produce that had

been grown in Santa Clara County. In this case, being a Santa Clara County farmer did not help them gain access to the market, but did enable Spade & Plow to sell their full range of produce there.

When asked their advice for new farmers, Sam emphasized the importance of connecting with other farmers. Good relationships with other farmers help create access to resources, such as land, equipment, and information. But they also see a strong community of farmers as integral to the future of farming in Santa Clara County. As Sam says, “creating a strong industry here around ag would create more infrastructure, and create more interest, and help bring our costs down and our sales up.” Spade & Plow also prioritizes building community. One of the ways that Spade & Plow has engaged the broader community is through their use of social media. Their active social media presence has connected them to new customers and highlighted the importance of fresh, locally grown food from Santa Clara County. Partnering with chefs is another way Spade & Plow works to create a community that is excited about regionally-grown food. Ultimately, Spade & Plow sees a well-informed and engaged community as essential for increasing the viability of Santa Clara County farms as a whole. Sam expects that if customers were more aware of the importance of having agriculture in the community--the agricultural benefits that go beyond food to include economic diversity, ecosystem services and climate change mitigation--they would be more likely to spend their money on local food and vote for policies that support small farms.

