

The only constant is change

From Ethiopia to Austria, our Lighthouse Farms have had to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Will their journeys ever come to completion, asks Rogier Schulte?

It is shaping up to be yet another difficult year, and this is no different for our Lighthouse Farms. Some of our farmers have suffered from COVID-19. Others have lost friends, colleagues or relatives. Our urban Lighthouse Farm in Cuba was struck by a devastating fire. But it is our Lighthouse Farm community in Ethiopia that has faced the worst of all challenges.

Armed conflict has ravaged the region for over nine months, with no end in sight. While it remains difficult to get reliable information on the fate of our Lighthouse Farm community, a BBC report of a missile strike at a local farmers' market feels too close to home.

Our local Lighthouse Farm representative drew international attention to the impending famine, when he called out for urgent help. Now people are leaving the area and their families behind and watching events unfold from afar in the hope that peace will prevail.

Our global network of Lighthouse Farms is a true mirror of all that is good in this world, and all that can go wrong.

I was meant to be in Finland right now, for a visit to our Lighthouse Farm at Palopuro. Instead, I find myself in full isolation, having tested positive for COVID-19, despite my double vaccinations.

I count my blessings that I live in a part of the world where all of us have access to vaccines, and my symptoms are blissfully mild.

But it is yet another reminder of one of the stark lessons that the COVID-19 era has taught us: prepare for a never-ending change of plans.



Moving from wine to worms

This is a lesson that many of our Lighthouse Farmers had already learned, long before COVID-19 arrived. Let me introduce you to Alfred Grand, who farms 90ha of arable land in Lower Austria. In fact, Alfred runs three successful businesses on the one farm.

The first thing you see when you pull into the yard is the VERMIGRAND facility. Here, millions of earthworms produce organic fertilisers, soil amendments and peat-free soil substrates in a unique continuous flow production unit. Think of it as an enormous indoor earthworm farm.

Most of the fertiliser is sold; some of it is applied on the GRAND FARM, where lucerne, winter wheat, seed-hemp, soya beans, oats, rye-vetch mixes and other crops are grown in a shallow-tillage (4cm) long rotation.

Finally, GRAND GARTEN is Alfred's youngest brainchild: a 1ha market garden that delivers vegetables directly to local consumers.

A never-ending change of plans

It didn't always look like this. When Alfred took over the farm from his parents he inherited three businesses of a different kind – a sugar beet farm, a restaurant, and a wine-making business. Alfred

didn't share his mother's passion for the restaurant, as it added two days of hard weekend work to the end of each long farming week. Nor did he fancy himself as a vintner, having failed wine-making school as a student.

In Alfred's own words: "I said OK, forget about wine making because I am one out of more than 20,000 wine makers in Austria. I didn't want to go into restaurants and say 'buy my wine because it's better, cheaper'. And so it was perfect for me to

“Anything can be made possible if we put our collective minds to it

say 'I'm out' and focus on something that no other guys were doing: vermiculture. Suddenly, I had no competitors.”

However, that transition was anything but straightforward. One of our students, Samuel van Rozelaar, documented Alfred's journey. He recorded each step of planning, decision-making, serendipity, dead ends, adversity, stumbling blocks and each time getting back up and trying again.

Setting up the vermiculture business is just one example.

After years of research, Alfred built his first facility in 2000, based on a design from Portland (US). But as soon as VERMIGRAND was ready to open its doors,

“Healthy soils for a healthy life”: Alfred Grand (third from right) is a regular host to groups of fellow farmers, policymakers and scientists, including Stella and Arni from the Wageningen Lighthouse Farm team (left).

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it was faced with a doubling of the Portland licence fee. So, back to the drawing board to design his very own continuous flow system.

Don't be waiting for the next rejection

Neither did the market garden get off to a flying start. Alfred recalls the endless paperwork and applications for investment grants. But then he, once again, decided to turn adversity on its head: "We kept going to the ministry and they rejected the project several times. They said: it's such a nice project but unfortunately we can't help you. And the last time, I realised: OK, now I don't have to apply again and wait three months for the next rejection. I can just start instead. And I did."

Fast-forward to today's challenges of the COVID-19 era. Is Alfred's journey now complete? By no means: it is merely the next step on a never-ending journey.

Alfred echoes the spirit of all Lighthouse Farmers when he reflects on the brave new world we live in: "People used to tell me: what you are doing is not possible, it won't work on my farm. COVID has shown us that anything is possible. Planes can stop flying, cities can be shut down. And yet food has remained on all our tables. Because we all said: it's essential. Anything can be made possible if we put our collective minds to it."

*In brief

➔ Farming everywhere is a struggle but the challenges are much greater in some parts of the world.

➔ Systems of farming can change where individuals along with other local farmers are prepared to change with them.

➔ Being left rejected is a frequent challenge when in pursuit of change but do not sit waiting to be rejected again, look for an alternative solution.