

Another Conservation Success Story...

Clayton County, Georgia

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NRCS Assists a Farm in the Heart of the City

By Karen Buckley Washington, Lawrenceville

Clayton County landowner Curtis Ballard has a farming background that dates all the way back to his childhood in the Midwest. Now, he is successfully reviving those skills with help from the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

"I've been farming since I was knee-high to a duck," said Ballard. "I was raised on a farm in Southern Illinois. When I left home I said I wasn't going to do this no more and now, we're right back at it."

Ballard was in the construction industry for many years. When he noticed a sudden change in the industry, he began farming.

While Ballard's 11-acre farm is located just steps away from the airport, in Riverdale, the view of his operation is far from urban.

"We grow everything from tomatoes, cucumbers, collards, radishes, squash, onions, Chinese cabbage, bell peppers, Irish and sweet potatoes and different types of kale to watermelons and cantaloupes – we even raise chickens," said Ballard. "We have a tractor from 1943 that I found, repaired and started using. It works just fine."

Aspiring to grow pesticide and chemical-

free produce, Ballard and his wife, Debbra, were looking for better watering methods for their crops, to reduce use of chlorine-treated city supplied water. They also wanted to build an onsite shelter to sell produce and run a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program from. After attending a conservation workshop, Ballard contacted his local USDA-NRCS Service Center for assistance.

"I saw that they (NRCS) had a lot to offer, to help small farmers enhance their properties," said Ballard. "We worked well together."

NRCS District Conservationist in McDonough, Shaun Ford, helped Ballard develop a conservation plan and with Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) cost share funding, he has installed a micro-irrigation system and a high tunnel house. He is also completing construction on a produce shelter.

"When we first started, Curtis was interested in irrigation," said Ford. "They were irrigating with movable spigots. Since then, he's installed a well so we could support a micro-irrigation system. Once next year's spring crop comes in, they'll be switching over, 100 percent to the micro-irrigation system and the high tunnel. We also have an application for him to do remote water sensors next year, so he can really be precise on how much water is needed on each field, bringing him to a higher level of water conservation. The high tunnel is a pilot project. Curtis has decided to take this on and he was approved for it. We're going to monitor and see what type of production he gets from it for the next three years. He'll also plant a cover crop, to increase his nitrogen. The shelter will allow them to start their CSA and sell the freshest vegetables, right on the farm. You know, it's just amazing what they've done."

Ballard applied for Certified Naturally Grown certification and hopes to be approved by next spring. He's also started a program called '10 Rows for 10 Kids' where children from



Curtis and Debbra Ballard (Left) with District Conservationist Shaun Ford (Right).

the community can plant a row of vegetables and learn about where their food comes from. Additionally, he's hosted a community garden and hopes to provide fact sheets on the produce they sell, including the vegetable's origin, nutritional values and preparation tips.

As the infrastructure implementation nears completion, Ballard looks forward to returning his attention to growing produce.

"Vegetables are like kids, you have to babysit them all day long, but I love it," said Ballard. "NRCS saw what I was trying to do and they invested time in me. If it wasn't for the program (EQIP) I wouldn't be nearly this far along - I mean not even close. It's not a walk in the park, but it's worth it. They put me about five years ahead of the game. The program is a 'thumbs up' – 100 percent. You just have to apply yourself to it and do the work."



One of the many varieties of radishes that Ballard grows.



Ballard's test crop of kale



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Clayton County Soil and Water Conservation District

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