

# Another Conservation Success Story...

## Peach County, Georgia

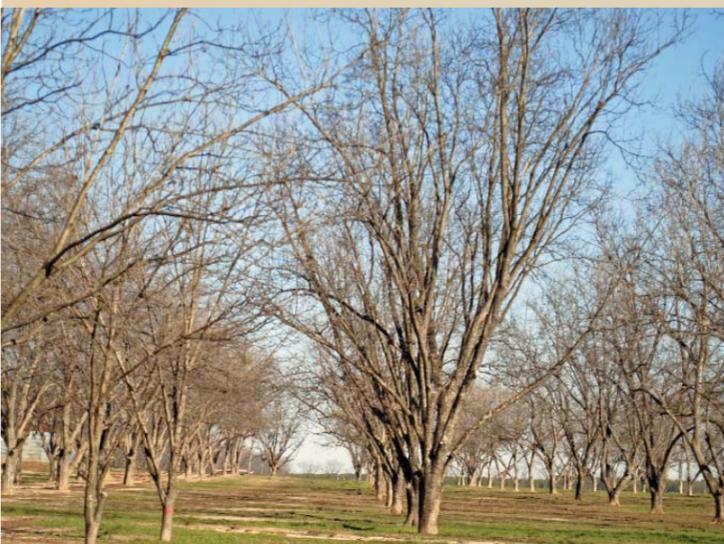
February 2011

### Pecan Grower Plants Clover to Help Produce Nitrogen

Ten years ago, Thomas Mason wouldn't have believed he would be managing more than a dozen pecan orchards in Peach and Macon Counties.

A decade ago he simply had a vision. Mason saw that pecans were a commodity that had the potential to be a high-demand global product; a product that countries like China would buy in droves.

"In 2005, China bought 5 million pounds of pecans. In 2010, that number jumped to 100 million pounds of pecans a year" Mason said.



Stofler Orchard is one of the Mason Pecan orchards where clover was planted.

Back in 2000, Thomas Mason was still operating a successful construction business full-time. When he wasn't building homes, he was learning all he could about pecans.

It wouldn't be until 2007 that he would switch over into his pecan operation full-time. That's when the housing industry went under and Mason gave all his attention to pursuing a new way to make ends meet.

"Unknowingly, it gave us a new business venture," Mason said.

As Thomas, his wife and three children have worked to get the family business off the ground, they've also taken time to focus on improving the way they irrigate and fertilize their orchards.

Thomas Mason's son, Trent, learned about the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the agency's programs through his involvement in the Georgia Pecan Growers Association as a board member.

The NRCS offers technical and financial assistance to pecan growers like the Masons to

improve their orchards by helping them save energy and money.

Pecan growers have always struggled to find more environmental and less expensive ways to fertilize thousands of acres of trees each year.

"It's an expensive farming operation to be in. It can cost \$1,200 to \$1,500 an acre to bring crop to harvest each year," Mason explained.

After Trent Mason looked into NRCS programs and how they could assist the family farming operation, he passed that information on to his sister, Tiffin. She reached out to the Macon County NRCS field office and applied for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Mason Pecan International, LLC was awarded an EQIP agreement. That EQIP contract helped the Masons convert their irrigation system on a Macon County orchard from diesel to electric power.

This relationship with the agency has since grown to consist of a current EQIP contract that includes planting clover on roughly 600 acres of Peach County orchards owned by Mason Pecan.

Once clover is established and allowed to mature, nitrogen fixing nodules will form on the roots to produce and release nitrogen. One essential factor to remember when establishing clover is to be sure that the seeds are pre-inoculated prior to planting. Without the pre-inoculants, the clover will not produce an adequate number of nitrogen fixing nodules.

"Three years after establishment, we have seen clover provide 30-40 pounds per acre additional nitrogen to orchard soils and we expect that this will rise to a point as the organic matter levels increase," Dr. Lenny Wells explained.

Wells is a Horticulture Pecan Specialist and researcher at the University of Georgia's Tifton campus. He works closely with pecan growers like Thomas Mason and educates them about using clover.

Instead of spending up to \$140,000 on nitrogen fertilizers, Thomas Mason hopes the clover will save him thousands of dollars a year. Although it will take time and patience to see the benefits of clover, Mason is optimistic that it will work.

"I think it's a chance. It can eliminate a lot of burden of buying nitrogen," Mason said.

NRCS District Conservationist Ray Jones has worked with the Masons to get the clover planted



Tiffin Mason (Left), District Conservationist Ray Jones (Center), and Thomas Mason (Right) have worked together to implement the EQIP agreement.

and continues to monitor its progress and its benefits to the family's orchards in Peach County. Jones said working with the Mason's has been great.

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"For the first time in my 27 years as a conservationist we are able to reach out to the fruit and

nut producers in a meaningful way to assist them in reducing energy consumption, pesticides and water use. The Masons have shown the true nature of people willing to follow our lead on implementing new technologies in helping the land and conserving our energy and water resources," Jones said.

In addition to adding much needed nitrogen as fertilizer for the orchards, clover also serves as a



This is clover located in one Mason Pecan orchard.

benefit when it comes for pest management. Clover increases the amount of beneficial insects in an area which in turn will have an adverse affect on undesirable insects.

 **NRCS** Natural Resources Conservation Service

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