

Another Conservation Success Story...

Screven County, Georgia

May 2010

Organic Farmer Finds Niche Market

Relinda Walker has spent her life transitioning from one career to another, but from the day she was born, her fate was sealed--she would become a farmer some day. "My dad bought his first tractor the year I was born," she laughs.

Like many children raised on a family farm, she grew up, went to college and moved away. "I started life as a math teacher, then worked for an educational testing service. Later, she moved into management with technology companies in New Jersey and was an executive when she learned that her mom was ill.

"After my mom died, I moved back," she said. She convinced her dad to let her use the land to transition to organic agriculture and he was right beside her every step of the way. "I can't imagine how I would have done it without him," she said. "He's taught everyone here



(Top) Relinda Walker pulls one of her onions

(Bottom) She shows off one of her special varieties of potatoes.

(small community of Sylvania, Georgia) how to check to plant a seed at the right depth," she added.

She sought out various USDA agencies to help. "when I moved down here, I made the rounds--Farm Service Agency and then Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)," she said.

"I knew there was a natural fit, but I didn't know what. In spite of goodwill, the programs didn't really fit this type of operation," Walker said. "To be honest, I was very frustrated in the beginning; there was just barrier after barrier. In the end, Austin (Blackburn, NRCS District Conservationist) made it happen!" she added.

She eventually heard about a job with Georgia Organics and ended up experimenting with conservation tillage and, like her father, sharing her knowledge with other farmers.

She received some matching funds from the Georgia Association of Conservation Districts to retrofit pivots.

"I had crops up a hill--peanuts, peas, onion seedlings, we were watering with a traveler. I hated every time we cranked it up; we were wasting water; there was too much pressure and all of the crops got water whether they needed it or not," she said.

The cost-share helped her install a solid set sprinkler system.

"The water savings is tremendous! I really think it is one of the best investments I've made on the farm," she said. "It's expanded my ability to do intensive management of my vegetable crops and to grow things with less water. I would say I've saved money--definitely saved a lot of labor," she added.

Although no longer a math teacher, Walker continues to educate and share her newfound knowledge throughout the southeast. She supports the NRCS mission too. "I like the mission side of it (NRCS)--what you're there for and what you're trying to do," she said.

Worth noting, Walker Farms is among the first to successfully grow an organic onion seedbed and she sells organic onion seedlings to other farmers.



(Top) Is a solid set sprinkler pressure system that disperses irrigation water to crops on Walker Organic Farms (Above) Pump and Well

After planting two crops and watching them fail, her perseverance paid off and Walker Farms harvested the first Georgia crop of certified organic peanuts to go to market in the spring of 2007.



(Top) Organic Vidalia Onions (Bottom) Green Beans

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