



We Went Organic Before It Was Hot!



Dave Campbell has been involved in organic farming since 1967 when his father started. At that time, Campbell sold organic meat to a local health food store. Later, he operated an organic dairy farm with his father in Illinois and eventually in Wisconsin.

Today, Dave and wife Mary own and operate a 224-acre certified organic “Lily Lake Organic Farm” which is located in northeastern Illinois between Chicago’s suburbs and DeKalb County. Campbell and his family moved to the present farm in 1988, which was farmed by Mary’s family since 1834. By 1991, the entire farm was certified organic.

The Campbell operation personifies just what can be produced—and learned—on a small, organic farm. For nearly two decades, Campbell has tried different options and methods in search of the ideal balance for healthy and valuable agricultural products and production methods and management that protect—if not improve the land’s natural resource base.

All farmers know how important soil is to their livelihood. Traditional production agriculture values soil as well, but smaller organic farmers work with their soil in a slightly more intimate fashion. They are more familiar and perhaps a bit more connected to their land. They manage it and nurture it in order to create a soil quality that is naturally and holistically superior.

Growing organic is in no way easier than growing traditional row crop, ag commodity crops, and grains. While the size of the operation is small, the amount of labor and management required for success is not small at all.

The risks organic growers battle are similar to the larger, traditional operations, but solutions and options are remarkably different. They must be approached and applied in a totally different manner. Organic growers are a different breed of farmer, but they work with and depend on the same growing mediums and need support and technical assistance in conservation solutions like any other farmer.

Like many organic growers in Illinois and the Midwest, the Campbells have found allies and partners in their agricultural journey. They’ve made new friends, serving as a mentor and teacher to newfound organic growers in Illinois.

“We never stop learning,” Campbell says. “And we never stop looking for new ways to find success and win on all fronts.” He is a believer in the value of cover crops and knows first-hand how their proper use increases yields, reduces weed competition and solves other problems.

Campbell’s farm is complete with needed conservation practices like grassed waterways which reduce water erosion and keep valuable soil on the fields where it belongs. “Conservation methods and organic farming go hand in hand with each other,” says Campbell. “It’s just a natural fit.”

The Campbells work closely with other organic growers, University contacts, and local vendors. They regularly hold field days and tours on their farm to showcase what they’ve learned and share their success with folks who are new to or moving towards their own sustainable farming operation.

Dave Campbell speaks to a crowd during one of his farm field days. Teaching other growers what he has learned is key.



Campbell's organic farm includes wheat, corn, oats, soybeans and hay are the primary crops along with small amounts of buckwheat and cover crops. Alfalfa/grass hay was grown extensively during transition years and shortly thereafter. The Campbell family also raises a few dairy heifers on the farm.

Regardless what Campbell studied in college, just listening to him chat with the crowd at his most recent field day he speaks like a soil scientist about the makeup and qualities of his soils. He uses words like 'sustainable,' and 'balance' or 'harmony,' and he knows all the organic solutions for dealing with nutrient issues or pests in ways that involve planting something as opposed to spraying something.

In addition to farming, Campbell currently serves as an Advisory Board member to the Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP) at the University of Illinois and as secretary/treasurer of Organic Farmers Agency for Relationship Marketing (OFARM).

The Campbell farm is significantly smaller than many in Illinois. His equipment may be smaller and perhaps a little older. But his inputs are less and his sell price is higher. He's a busy man who is happily running a truly sustainable farming operation and who takes great pride in teaching others who want to do the same — find success.



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For more information on organic farming, visit these resources:

Organic Farmers Agency for Relationship Marketing (OFARM) at www.ofarm.org/

Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP) at www.asap.sustainability.uiuc.edu/

Midwest Organic Farmer's Cooperative (MOFC) at www.midwestorganic.com/

Josh Brown's story at www.farmerbrowns.net

Illinois Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at www.il.nrcs.usda.gov

Illinois NRCS Field Office located in your county's USDA Service Center.

Harnessing USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs to Support Local and Regional Food Systems

