



## Getting To Know “Farmer Brown”



USDA often touts their “Know Your Farmer; Know Your Food” initiative, designed to assist small and local food producers and hook them up with businesses, schools and families who want healthy food options. Well, if you live in Illinois and if you or your children attend Southern Illinois University, then

you get an “A+” just for reading this story. Why? Because you will officially KNOW something about your food and the farmer who grew it.

His name is Josh Brown. His family farm, home to his wife and their three children, is located on 70 acres in Jackson County, which is in the southern tip of Illinois. Sixty-five of those acres are hardwood trees, which only leaves Brown five acres for his organic, local fruit and vegetable operation. Five acres may not seem like much compared to most farms in Illinois, but for a small scale, organic farm, five acres is more than enough.



One of several varieties of lettuce grown on the Brown Farm.

### *In The Beginning...*

Brown started out as one of the first CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm in Southern Illinois. In a CSA, consumers buy “shares” in the spring and every week they get a basket of whatever produce is in season. This allowed him to get started because the capital was paid up front. He was able to focus on production, not marketing or advertising early on in the venture. Generally, CSAs are very diversified in terms of variety of vegetables, which can be logistically challenging to manage. For this reason and many others, Brown chose to simplify his operation which allowed him a way to develop a better plan and a wholesale strategy focused on fewer crops.

Brown began growing vegetables and herbs and sold produce at small farmer’s markets in Carbondale and southern Illinois. He offered a wide variety of different veggies and became well versed in the art—and science—of small scale crop production. “It’s a tough row to hoe,” explains Brown, “because organic operations like mine are intense on labor and low on income—not the best recipe for success.”

Add to that equation a few very dry years followed by wet years and flooding and a severe spring storm or two that took out 30 fruit trees. “We’ve got good ground here. I’ve had some great people helping me out, and I’ve collaborated with other growers and fellow farmers to learn more and more. I’ve been persistent. It took all those factors working together—plus a few more—to make our farm what it is today,” he adds.

In nearby Carbondale, Illinois Brown found a Co-op and began working that system with some crops, vegetables and tomatoes. Brown knew if he was going to do this and do it well, he needed to do it bigger. More importantly, he needed to do some serious thinking and some planning. Strategic planning, that is. In 2009 he developed a new Farm Plan. He decided wholesale distribution was the way to go. That would mean **more volume** of crops and **less diversity**. And it would also require more efficient use of time and labor inputs.

## Time To Grow...

Whole Foods Market, one of the world's leading natural and organic grocer, has an outlet located in a suburb of St. Louis. With the 'green' scene picking up speed and consumers in search of more 'local' food, Whole Foods faced a classic 'supply and demand' situation. They needed everything locally grown they could get their hands on—whether it was certified organic or just local—they wanted it.

"My bigger market? It was right here," Brown explains with a smile "One of my big markets was right here in Carbondale at Southern Illinois University. Bill Connors, the food service director with SIU, became interested in local food in response to the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act that requires state institutions source 20% of their food locally by 2020." SIU had a need. Brown was there with a good product.

Brown recognizes it is not easy for every organic grower to find such sizeable and sweet niche markets, but with good networks, successful outreach, and a lot of persistence, it is possible to offer superior produce to clients, find new markets and develop them over time.



Organic Kale is one of several food products grown on the Brown Farm.

## Investing in Infrastructure...

"I'm a jack of all trades, but I'm no soil scientist," Brown explains. He knew he was farming a good Burnside silt loam with plenty of nutrients. But, he knew he needed to create better tilth for long term productivity. Organic matter was the answer. Brown knew some neighbors who had more than their fair share of livestock manure and he made them an offer for 450 tons of it. Sold.

"I needed to invest in my infrastructure. For farmers, that's your soil. So that was the first thing we did. We built raised beds with 4-6 inches of composted manure," he explains. He also uses an 'old-fashioned' soil-building technique called "cover crops."

Brown is a firm believer in what cover crops like buckwheat, hairy vetch, and rye grain can do to naturally reduce pests, slow weeds and provide effective and low-cost inputs. "We took pictures, made movies of the whole process and posted it on YouTube and there we were "Farmer Brown's Production Company, LLC" -- at your service."

With information for his baseline soil data, they planted early in 2009 and harvested that fall. Brown's operation was already certified as organic by the Midwest Organic Services Association (MOSA), a regional group that supports and serves as a third-party organic certifier.

Even sweeter was the next chapter when as a now registered vendor, Farmer Brown could supply his product without a contract. With refrigeration supplies and sustainable containers, Brown provided 4,000 to 5,000 heads of lettuce to Whole Foods and to Southern Illinois University Food Service for a price they liked, an income Brown loved, all for a product customers want. That's better than a tri-fec-ta!

Brown's lettuce options were wide—he could supply romaine, butter head and red-leaf varieties. Tomatoes were okay, but it wet conditions hit hard in 2009 for good tomatoes. 2010 will be better. Brown has experienced some pest problems but learns new creative and organic techniques with every passing season.

It's important to note that organic farming is not Brown's only business. As a smart business owner knows, having a diverse approach and multiple income sources is key to a successful long-term strategy. Brown's wife works outside the home, they manage and rent out a vacation home on the property as well, and in Brown's "spare" time, he plays in a band. "We have more than one iron in the fire and we've tapped into agritourism markets for part of our income as well. It's a good, solid and sustainable system and it's working well for us," he explains. The Brown family also has a Forest Management Plan hard at work on their property. With this they create a sustainable forest and timber operation and income.

## Learning New Lessons, Making New Friends...

Farmer Brown also opens his farm up to embrace and involve his local community. He sponsors farm tours, supports the local Co-op and works with the Illinois Stewardship Alliance to get the word out about quality local foods and the benefits they provide. The off-shoots of that kind of PR results in new friends, a steady supply of good workers/volunteers, good press and, as always, more opportunity.

### The Process



Harvesting by hand



Washing the lettuce



Ready to ship

Farmer Brown has no livestock (just two dogs) and has transitioned his operation more towards the production of low work level crops, more durable crops. For example, Winter Squash is very durable and low maintenance (unlike Summer Squash). His team has a system; they know their roles and perform in sync like true professionals. He still depends on good planning, but he permits and encourages flexibility whenever he can. He partners with other organizations and people who can help him continually improve his operation like the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

"I've created a five-year plan with my local NRCS folks and they've given me great ideas for new options on my forested ground. Together, we're doing things that encourage wildlife habitat. We're finding effective ways to control invasive species, which can be a real problem down here," Brown explains.

Like most organic produce growers in Illinois, Brown is pleased that USDA and NRCS are actively reaching out to work with organic producers. "NRCS knows soil and water like nobody else. And since those two natural resources are what makes my livelihood thrive, I'm interested in what they can show me."

Brown has a contract with NRCS for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, known as EQIP. He's also signed up into the new Conservation Stewardship Program. This Fall he will install his first 'high tunnel' greenhouse/hoop house structure. As part of this organic conservation pilot practice, use of the high tunnel and its affect on conservation issues will be monitored and compiled with data gathered nationwide.

"I'm excited to see what the high tunnel equipment can do for issues like water and moisture, pest management of ALL types, and maybe giving us more time at the beginning and the end of the growing season—that could positively impact local diet and health, veggie crop markets, and bumped up my profits a bit," Brown explains.

Jackson County NRCS District Conservationist Scott Martin and Brown have become friends and have learned a lot from each other. "After working with Josh and watching how he manages his land, I knew he was perfect for CSP. All of the ways he farms—reduced tillage, regular use of cover crops, recycling of nutrients and everything he does for soil quality—it's exactly the kind of good stewardship CSP was built for," Martin adds.

Both Brown and Martin confirm that growing good food and growing it in a healthy and sustainable way isn't just good business sense. It's more of a movement. It has been for some time. There's a new crowd coming into the production side of things. Brown grows a lot of good things on his ground—but a passion for taking care of the Earth, a feeling of gratitude and contentment are priceless by-products for him and his family.

If the business and lifestyle described here include items you want to plant and grow in YOUR garden, maybe organic farming is in your future. If so, keep in mind that NRCS technical specialists, science-based technical assistance, and conservation solutions and programs work for ALL types of Illinois producers.

### What Does Your Organic Garden Grow?

Farmer Brown's Farm has a long history of diverse crops and cover crops, including:

- Kale
- Garlic
- Bell peppers, hot peppers
- Lettuce (variety)
- Spinach
- Butternut Squash
- Acorn Squash
- Basil
- Cilantro
- Sunflowers
- Cock's Comb
- Green Beans
- Carrots
- Winter Squash
- Flowers

For more information on organic farming, visit these resources:

Organic Farmers Agency for Relationship Marketing (OFARM) at [www.ofarm.org/](http://www.ofarm.org/)

Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP) at [www.asap.sustainability.uiuc.edu/](http://www.asap.sustainability.uiuc.edu/)

Midwest Organic Farmer's Cooperative (MOFC) at [www.midwestorganic.com/](http://www.midwestorganic.com/)

Josh Brown's story at [www.farmerbrowns.net](http://www.farmerbrowns.net)

Illinois Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at [www.il.nrcs.usda.gov](http://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**