

Featured Customer Vignette

Location: Piatt County, Illinois

Featured Customer: Allen Williams

Farm Operation: 1,700 acres, 400 organic

Date: October 2007



Meet Illinois Farmer Allen Williams

Allen Williams has been farming since 1972 and every year that passes brings him new ideas, new strategies, and new ways of doing things better. While making a profit is a priority for Williams, so is taking care of the land that makes it all possible. Williams continually finds new ways to improve his operation, the quality of his crop, help his bottom line and improve the quality of his soil and water resources. He has a passion for finding out why one way works better than another. He has an inquiring mind and the patience not to just listen to the ideas of others but to actually test things out for himself so he can see it and make it happen.

Williams operates about 1,700 acres, 400 of which are certified organic. As former Chair of the Piatt County Soil and Water Conservation District, Williams' experiences, experiments and values are slowly permeating the county, spreading the good word of conservation much farther than just his own land.

Decades ago, Williams had concerns about soil and water quality and conservation of the same. He continues to find innovative ways to manage his crops in a more sustainable way—improving the crop and (saving) making money simultaneously. He's a strong believer in trying new things and is always experimenting with ideas and concepts in an effort to learn more and understand more. Whether he realizes it or not, he's a researcher—trying new technologies, traditional management strategies, and combinations of the two.

“I've had my share of failures, but that's where you learn the most.”

As a true conservation farmer Williams used no-till for years. After he encountered complications with some of his specialty crops, he went back to reduced tillage. Now he uses a mix of the two. With organic crops, management of his land can be labor intensive. But with Allen's detail-oriented mind, he keeps a sharp eye on what's working, what's not working, and makes minute changes, monitoring the outcome and finding the best solution.

Experimenting with organic crops has taught him that it is possible and profitable to raise a high quality crop that brings in a high price



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by meeting consumer demands. Williams raises corn and soybeans on most of his land but also grows specialty grains, blue corn, white corn, and food grade soybeans for tofu. Other crops Allen has grown include sunflowers, rye, barley, caola, vetch, cuphea, buckwheat, popcorn, field piece and forage crops. He's found innovative ways to control pests without chemical inputs—walking that organic line and finding just how beautifully nature can provide for itself when properly managed.

With the help of others, Williams turned his farm into The Stewardship Farm, a working farm dedicated to using research, observations and demonstrations to develop and promote agricultural systems that foster stewardship of natural resources, strengthen the economic health of farmers and rural communities, and contribute to a healthy food and water supply.

An inventory of conservation practices on his land includes 4.7 miles of grassed waterways, 3.1 miles of grassed ridge terraces, two aluminum toe wall structures, 4.2 miles of field windbreaks and 10.3 acres of restored prairie.

Cover crops are of special interest to Williams because they solve problems that his special organic management techniques can cause. "I've tried different cover crops and have found that they offer so many benefits—they protect the soil from erosion over the winter, they offer habitat for wildlife, and they add nutrients my crops can use next year," he explains.

While he's done a great deal on his own, Williams has had help on his journey. He's received technical assistance and consultation from the NRCS for years. With involvement in NRCS' EQIP, he's received guidance and financial assistance for help with nutrient management techniques, crop rotations, grassed waterways, mulch and no-till, and terraces designed to control erosion and preserve soil quality. Other conservation solutions working hard on the Williams farm include windbreaks, prairie restoration, a wildlife pond, filter strips, field borders, and cover crops.

Williams also plans to experiment with the new Drainage Water Management techniques. He works with many different local, state, and private organizations to accomplish his business and stewardship goals. Partners include the University of Illinois, Extension, the Illinois Stewardship Alliance, Illinois Sustainable Ag Network, and independent advisors such as Dr. Bill Becker.

"I'm a believer in using personal conservation plans or watershed planning efforts to help get long-term projects, practices and priorities on the land," says Williams.

He isn't shy about his diversified operation. While he is surrounded by traditional corn and soybean operations common to the landscape of Central Illinois, he has courageously explored niche markets and found good success there. Williams is often found speaking at meetings where he shares his stories and the lessons he has learned. "I've had my share of failures," he says. "But that's where you learn the most. And we've had many successes and learned so much along the way."

Even though he remains the only organic producer in Piatt County, Williams encourages other farmers to explore the profitable possibilities that exist. He stands as an example of a producer who values the precious resources that make agriculture and our nation what it is.

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