

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Organic Initiative Helps Muth Experiment with Cover Crops

Funding through the USDA's Organic Initiative is helping Sioux County organic farmer Ron Muth experiment with cover crops which help suppress weeds and supply nutrients to his row crops and his vegetables.

Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Organic Initiative offers already-certified organic producers assistance for applying new conservation practices to treat natural resource concerns, and offers participants transitioning to organic agriculture assistance to protect natural resources while meeting their organic certification goals.

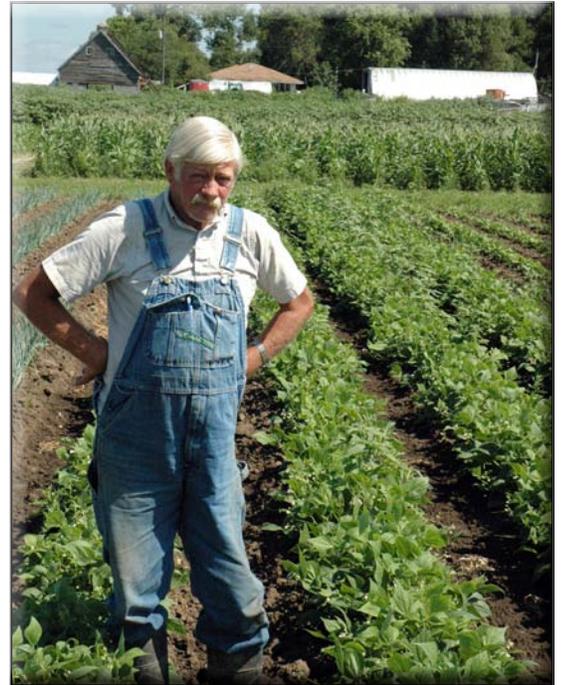
Muth, whose farm is near Ireton, grows 60 varieties of mostly organic vegetables, along with more than 100 acres of a corn, soybeans, alfalfa, oats and wheat rotation – all organic. He started growing organic vegetables eight years ago, and he says it is a continuous learning process. "I imagine if I do this 10 more years it's still going to be a learning experience," he says. "People in the niche part of agriculture share ideas well, so I've learned a lot really fast."



*Ron Muth is using an oats cover crop to help suppress weeds in his sweet corn.*

He says his forte is tomatoes, peppers, beets, carrots and onions. "I'm getting better at sweet corn – I've always fought the weeds and bugs," he says.

Muth says he is constantly trying new things to grow a better crop, and to suppress weeds, a major issue for organic farmers. His most recent experiment



*Veteran farmer Ron Muth began organic farming just eight years ago.*

was sewing an oats cover crop into sweet corn to help reduce weeds.

He says the key is to plant sweet corn at least a week before sewing the oats – that way the slow-growing corn has time to grow before the fast-growing oats take over. "It really works neat," he says. "The first time I tried this I put them in simultaneously and the oats grew too fast too soon, so this year I planted the sweet corn first to give it time to establish." He says this may be the second consecutive year he gets all the sweet corn out of every patch.

Muth is using an oats cover crop because of its availability and because of wet ground. However, he plans to go with a rye cover crop on much of his cropland next year.

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In addition to cover crops, Muth is utilizing the Organic Initiative to implement three other conservation practices including conservation crop rotations, nutrient management and pest management.

He employs three to five part-time workers to pull weeds, harvest, clean vegetables, and load and haul produce to farmer's markets in Sioux City, Akron, and Hawarden. "I pride myself on a neat, pristine presentation at the farmer's markets," says Muth. He has also sold tomatoes, peppers and green beans to local restaurants.



*Organic farming is hard work. Ron Muth employs three to five part-time helpers throughout the year.*



*Green peppers on the Ron Muth farm were close to harvest-ready in late July.*

Muth says some of the myths about organic farming are not totally true, like the overall cost per acre to grow a crop. "We're led to believe that growing an acre of vegetables is very expensive compared to row crops, but it isn't," he says. "And your net return per acre is considerably higher [in organic farming]."

He says the key is managing labor costs. "Growing organic vegetables is [labor] intensive," he says, "but what I like about it is the initial investment per net return of dollar is a pretty nice deal."

Muth is one of 200 Iowa farmers and specialty crop growers who have taken advantage of the Organic Initiative the past two years. The Initiative was introduced in the 2008 Farm Bill through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Since then, NRCS has provided nearly \$5 million in financial assistance to Iowa farmers through the Organic Initiative.

Like many small, organic farmers Muth is looking for an edge over the competition. One way to get that edge is to extend the growing season. And he is going to try to do that by installing a seasonal high tunnel system for crops.

High tunnels – or hoop houses – are polyethylene-covered structures that help extend the growing season with more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crop growers. They benefit natural resources by improving plant, soil and water quality by reducing pesticide use and keeping vital nutrients in the soil. High tunnels are an eligible conservation practice through the Organic Initiative.

These structures can't exceed a 30 foot width, and must be at least six feet tall to allow cultivation, harvesting, and other farming operations. "I've been researching high tunnels for about three years," says Muth. "The Organic Initiative will help the high tunnel pay for itself much sooner."

For more information about the EQIP Organic Initiative, contact the NRCS office located at your local county USDA Service Center or visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/organic/index.html](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/organic/index.html).

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