

## NRCS Helps Farmer Install Well, Prepare for Organic Certification

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*Flowers, Miss.* — Robert Short has used organic practices on his farm for years, long before the natural food movement became trendy.

“Organic – we never heard of it,” the Mississippi farmer said. “This is what my grandfather did 60 years ago. We couldn’t afford to buy fertilizer, so we cleaned out the chicken houses and spread it across the fields each year.”

Short still uses horse manure today and refrains from pesticides.

“We do well without having to add a bunch of things to our land,” he said of his four acres studded with lavish rowcrops. He grows sweet potatoes, cucumbers, corn, tomatoes, eggplant, melons, cantalope, okra and beans.

He also uses crop rotation and many other environmentally friendly practices prescribed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Short is transitioning to a USDA certified organic farmer. Although he said he hasn’t used commercial fertilizers in six years, to become certified, he has to develop an organic farming plan and grow organically for three years before gaining the certification.

“We’re working with Mr. Short on that plan right now,” said Raymond Joyner, a supervisory district conservationist with NRCS.

Short is an NRCS customer, participating in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). A well, funded through EQIP, helped his produce survive the drought that left most of the state without any precipitation for any months. In late July, he was harvesting tasty butterbeans and watermelons – so tasty he also has contracted with NRCS to erect a game fence to keep out the hungry deer and rabbits.

Gardening is an integral part of the Short family. His grandchildren, children, neighbors and friends all work in the garden, learning his “green thumb” as well as how to cultivate the earth.

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“We live off this land,” he said, noting they go to the grocery store for few items. One of his favorite dishes from his garden is squash, which he cooks down with peppers, rosemary and butter. His daughter said she makes a good squash dish.

His granddaughter, Camiren, helped him pick one recent Wednesday. Her favorite item to pick is butter beans, she said. “I always try to get young people involved,” Short said.

Environmental education is important to him, and today, youngsters are not exposed enough to the outdoors and agriculture, he said. “I decided I would take my old years and teach young people how to feed themselves.”

Short said today’s youth are interested in organic. “I find the younger people are more interested in organic food,” he said. “The news of being obese is scary to them. That’s the question they’re asking now.”

Short wasn’t always a farmer. He lived in Jackson from the 1970s to th 1990s, and he returned to Flowers to take care of his aging mother. While living with her on the same land his ancestors had worked, he began taking advantage of the rich soil.

Short was injured in an accident, paralyzing him. He said he never forgot the time he believed he would truly die, and he stumbled to a corn field near his home. “I knew I didn’t want to die in the house,” he said.

He did not die that day. And actually, with time, he eventually started walking again. “Have you heard of a miracle,” he asked. “I am one. I thank God for every step I take.” Every step, every day, he said, will be taken in honor of God and protecting the natural resources created by Him.

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Robert Short (right) shows off some of the butter beans grown on his four-acre farm. His granddaughter, cousin and daughter help him raise vegetables at his transitioning to organic farm.