Fiddlehead Farm is not large, and if you ask owner, Katie Coppoletta, it doesn’t need to be. From crops growing every month of the year, to blossoming hedgerows full of life, Fiddlehead Farm is a cornucopia of good stewardship on display. It’s hard to believe the busy operation “was just a cow pasture” a decade ago.

Careful conservation planning allows Coppoletta and her team to maximize production on just six acres of cropland and three seasonal high tunnels in Corbett, Oregon. The average farm size in Multnomah County is 50 acres according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

For its size, Fiddlehead produces an impressive harvest. Their organic vegetables and herbs can be found at two farmers markets, two retail grocers and in the ingredients lists for Portland Juice Press and Hot Winter Hot Sauce.

“It’s much more efficient to be a small organic farm. Input costs are lower,” said Coppoletta.

But maintaining a high output on just a handful of acres means taking special care with the farm’s most precious resource—soil. Working with her local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office and the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Coppoletta has developed a conservation plan to give her farm an edge in productivity and resiliency.

The biggest difference at Fiddlehead starts when the last vegetables are
picked from the field. Rather than letting the soil rest until spring, Coppoletta gets right back in the tractor and sows a crop she never intends to harvest. Cover crops are used to protect the soil from erosion, restore nutrients lost in the previous harvest and maintain biological activity critical to plant health. In a very real way, cover crops keep the soil at Fiddlehead Farm alive during a time when many farm soils sit idle or dying. When it comes time to plant in the spring, those extra nutrients combined with less erosion give food crops a major head start.

“Our soil organic matter is incredible!” said Coppoletta. “We have great water retention and less watering is needed in the summer. It’s been interesting to observe the benefits of working with the ecosystem and see the economic benefit conservation has through reduced erosion, pollinators, so many things.”

Cover crops have also led to weed suppression—a challenge on organic farms—and less fertilizer usage. It’s a major step to sustainable food production that makes Fiddlehead more resilient to fluctuations in the market and climate; and for Coppoletta, it’s just the beginning.

Fencing has been erected to protect the small acreage from wildlife that could make quick work of Coppoletta’s peppers and snap peas. And hedgerows full of native flowering plants border the fields to attract pollinators and support the micro-ecosystem that keeps her crops productive.

“Hedgerows are an easy, beautiful way to build biodiversity,” said Coppoletta. NRCS has also assisted with protecting high traffic areas with gravel, a practice that reduces erosion and improves water quality downstream. Fiddlehead sports three seasonal high tunnels, one of which was acquired with assistance through the EQIP High Tunnel Initiative. Essentially greenhouses without a heating system, high tunnels can extend the growing season and even open up the possibility to harvest crops not common to the area or particular season.

“It’s been cool to see NRCS also support smaller farmers,” said Coppoletta. “I lean really heavily on NRCS and the SWCD for assistance, and with someone else there, it’s nice to have that accountability.”

Conservation planning and assistance is available from NRCS regardless of farm size, and cost-share programs are available to help producers offset the costs of adopting conservation practices. Use the “What’s Available in My County?” map for an interactive look at conservation focus areas in your county.
Cover Crops and other conservation practices allow Fiddlehead Farm to grow over 100 varieties of certified organic vegetables in a space smaller than most public parks.

For more information about conservation practices in Multnomah County, contact the NRCS Oregon City Service Center 503-399-5741, East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District at 503-222-7646 or West Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District at 503-238-4775.