



Doudlah Farms Uses Cover Crops to Armor Their Organic Soil

Producing Nutrient Dense, Safe Food



Above: (L to R) Lucy, Mark, and Jason Doudlah, of Doudlah Farms, LLC, and David Gundlach, NRCS District Conservationist, in Cooksville, Wisconsin, on the Doudlah farm acreage in front of an old Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) truck his grandfather drove.

Organic farming is a regenerative way of life for Mark and Lucy Doudlah. Owners of Doudlah Farms, LLC, and FarmRite Organics, the Doudlahs farm 1,750 acres with 20 different varieties of crops in Cooksville, Wisconsin. They also raise free-range, soy-free, organic poultry and eggs, grass-fed pork and grass-fed beef. Mark attributes much of his organic success to the use of cover crops.

In 1982, when Mark was a sophomore in high school, his dad rented him the first farm they purchased. “This was my first experience taking care of land on my own,” said Mark. From there, he worked at Agrecol, one of the largest producers of native local eco-type seed and plant species in the Midwest. In 2008, Mark’s father, Earl, was diagnosed with cancer. Around the same time, Mark decided to farm full time on 1,400 acres. “With news my dad had contracted cancer, I knew I wanted to make a healthy change on the farm. When he passed away, I decided to transition 40 acres to organic in his honor,” said Mark. “This was a paradigm shift for me; I wanted to be a part of the solution,” added Doudlah. Mark hasn’t looked back, and today, the Doudlahs have transitioned all 1,750 acres they currently farm to organic production.

On those 1,750 acres, they grow over 20 different varieties of crops including black beans; pinto beans; dark red kidney beans; corn; seed corn; vetch; rye; winter wheat; winter barley; soybeans; food grade beans; forage peas; red, white, blue, and yellow flint corn, sunflowers; barley; buckwheat; oats; mustards; clovers; sorghum; and various cover crops.

Mark is a mentor, a key note speaker, and has held annual farm field days reaching over 1,000 farmers, promoting organic production. “He’s an educator of soil health, plant health, organics, and how it relates to human health,” explained Lucy. Mark notes how small of a community organics is, and how nice and open the farmers are to sharing ideas and collaborating. “When

I go somewhere as an organic producer, we are a community trying to help everyone move forward,” added Mark.

Mark also talks with many conventional farmers as a speaker at field events, promoting the use of various cover crops and trying cereal rye, one of his first cover crop successes. “I always ask, why aren’t you doing crimped cereal rye? It will give your soil a rest; let soybeans, the most erosive crop we grow, become a regenerative year for your soil by using cover crops,” explained Mark. Doudlah also promotes the use of essential oils in organics. He explains, “I hear, I can’t do organic because I can’t use anything to treat the fields. We’re using 8 essential oils to treat our acres and protect our crop. We use garlic and clove oil for weed and insect control, to name a few.”

Mark attributes his organic success to the use of various multi-species cover crops. “The really cool part is how the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has actually helped and allowed us to do conservation practices, like cover crops. Had we not made that connection of cover crops and organic practices with the help of NRCS, we wouldn’t be here today. Organic is all about cover crops for me,” said Mark. “My grandfather was the NRCS District Conservationist for Dane County in the 60s, so, in this family, we have a long history of conservation; I knew I needed NRCS help to make the transition a success,” said Mark.

In 2008, Mark worked with the NRCS to try different multi-species mixes of cover crops on different fields. He also signed up to do residue and tillage management using no-till, strip-till and direct seeding methods. In 2014, Mark decided to plant cereal rye during the organic transition phase with the help of the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). He continued his use of multi-species cover crops on different fields, learning and growing from his experiences through the help of EQIP. “We planted cereal rye on all our corn acres. I



knew I needed to transition to organic, but I am farming one third highly erodible land. After learning about crimped cereal rye, I thought we could do it," said Mark. Doudlah offers some advice for organic farmers wanting to try cereal rye, "Getting the cereal rye in timely in the fall, right after harvest is key. The cereal rye provides a nice, thick mat, which armors the soil from further erosion the rest of year, conserves the moisture, and feeds the biology a slow feed of carbon long-term. The root system of the rye is what typically feeds the soybean that year. The biomass above ground feeds the soil as it decomposes."

Mark also used the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to provide conservation cover for monarch butterflies and other beneficial insects on his farm. The Doudlahs are currently working with NRCS to plant over 60 acres of pollinator habitat on field borders and to act as a buffer around their organic farm. They are also working to enhance their field borders by planting conservation cover to reduce water induced erosion along the edges of their fields. "The yearly CSP payments help protect pollinators and also helped us invest in the right equipment to plant cover crops successfully on our farm; it allowed us to plan and save for 5 years to get the tools for this to work," said Mark. "The Doudlahs are making a positive change in the food production system by promoting the connection between the health of the land and human well-being. They are implementing conservation to restore soil health, improve water quality, and increase wildlife habitat," added Dave Gundlach, District Conservationist.

To further his soil health and organic advocacy, Mark is a member of the Cropping Systems Advisory Board of the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania. Rodale researches organic agriculture best practices, sharing their findings with farmers and scientists throughout the world. Mark has a passion for advocating policy that supports farmers and educating consumers about the health of organics for people and the planet. "One of our biggest challenges is educating the public about the importance of food safety and the benefits of eating organically," said Mark. The Doudlahs want to pass on these valuable lessons to their children, Emily and Jason, regarding biological production agriculture, a rural work ethic and involving them in the organic conservation community.



Financial and technical assistance provided by NRCS helps Mark to successfully run his organic program. "Transitioning 1,750 acres has been a tremendous undertaking and a steep learning curve. In the transition years, you are using organic inputs and getting conventional prices, so financial and technical assistance from NRCS through EQIP and CSP can help. Fundamentally, I believe in organics, so we were all in," added Mark. "The demand is rising for organics; we want to be more than sustainable; we have to be regenerative; organics are the future; nutrient dense, safe food is my goal," explains Mark.

Mark and Lucy have plans to continue their passion for organic agriculture. "Our vision long term is to create a holistic wellness center to include organic food and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), hold field days and events there, and more. Our daughter, Emily, is studying chiropractic and holistic medicine. We can incorporate her studies into the center and our son, Jason, plans to incorporate his studies in agriculture and agronomy," said Lucy.

The Doudlahs were recently awarded a U.S. Department of Agriculture Value-Added Producer Grant. Taking their various products from conventional to organic is considered value-added. "We really want to leave a legacy, something our kids can be proud of and continue," explained Lucy. "Dave Gundlach, my local NRCS District Conservationist, has made working with NRCS really easy. The financial gain has always been a benefit to do the right thing conservation-wise. Working together is a win-win for the consumer, the farmer and for regeneration of the landscape," said Mark. "We wouldn't have been able to do cover crops on all our acres without the help of NRCS or add monarch and pollinator habitat." Lucy adds, "NRCS makes us feel good about doing the right thing for our land."



Clockwise: The Doudlah family and David Gundlach view freshly planted pollinator habitat as a field border.

Jason Doudlah in his field of sunflowers.

Lucy Doudlah inspects pollinator habitat growth.

A bee flourishes on the organic Doudlah fields.

Mark and David inspect the organic corn crop.

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