DEMING, NM—Learning is important to Don Hartman. He’s a modern farmer’s farmer, which means he is a little bit of a researcher and scientist, part engineer, a full-time businessman, and an industry maverick. What sets Don apart is that he continually strives to improve his farm, become more efficient, and utilize the most innovative practices that both work and are cost-effective. While his farm is foremost a business, it has also become a type of lab. “True innovation happens here,” Don says.

After successfully running a farm for over thirty years, Don’s hard work has earned him a running list of agricultural achievements, awards, and accolades. Over the years he’s been awarded Conservation Farmer of the Year, the Outstanding Farmers of America National Winner, and the Border Foods Extra Mile Award. He and his family have also been named the Luna County Outstanding Ag Family of the Year and, most recently, Farm Family of the Year by the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau.

Don served for twenty years on the Deming Soil and Water Conservation District, just stepping down this past year. He actively represents New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau in politics. He is also the secretary of the Outstanding Farmers of America.

Because of his experience, successes, and innovation Don is often asked to consult and share his expertise with academics, researchers, international pepper experts, other farmers, the media (as big as the Washington Post) and even federal agencies like the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS).

Don isn’t just a learner or expert consultant though, he’s also a teacher, a mentor, and someone who cares about giving back to the agricultural community. He’s been placed in the 4-H Hall of Fame for doing things like instructing shooting sports, helping kids raise and show hogs, and donating literally tons of chile for the Luna County 4-H Chile Roast Fundraisers to support scholarships and 4-H trips. It is not
uncommon for Don to host visiting classes from NMSU, where he is known to answer and pose questions to the students, even brainstorming as a group. Once Don dug pits on his farm so that the 4-H and FFA students could practice their soil judging for a competition, and this helped propel the local team to place 2nd in the Western regionals, with Don’s son placing 4th overall in the nation for land judging. And when-ever there is a congress with the Outstanding Farmers of America, Don is a part of the talk to the local high school in the meeting location.

Matt Wiseman is the District Conservationist for the NRCS Team in Don's region. Wiseman himself had utilized Don to help train new NRCS employees who may be new to agriculture or who may have come from out of state and lack knowledge of local practices. As Wiseman points out, a new employee might try to set up a windbreak on the prevailing wind side without considering turn rows or farm implement / harvest lanes. You can learn quite a bit spending time with farmers during field operations, just being observant.

Don Hartman’s farm is in the small high desert town of Deming, New Mexico, located halfway between El Paso and Tucson along the I-10, which skirts the southwest part of the state, some 30 miles north of the Mexican border. Although situated in the Mimbres Valley, at an elevation over 4,000 feet, the land appears flat in all directions. Vast wide-open spaces of grayish and yellow grass stretch out, spotted by bushes of dark green mesquite and creosote and beyond that, the Florida mountains. It’s dry and dusty here, rain is minimal, and most of the year it is warm to hot, perfect for growing onions and chile.

It’s late January when we visit Hartman Farms. We

Chile Peppers

drive along a lane bordering one field, passing the house, an open metal barn filled with equipment, and a couple of parked tractors. The farm is expansive, neat and well-maintained. We find Don, busy overseeing a machine turning over and spraying long rows of dark, pungent compost. The sky is sunny and blue, the weather is nice, and flocks of noisy cranes circle overhead.

After some brief introductions, Don starts explaining how he’s “cooking” the compost, making sure it has enough moisture and is staying at the right temperature. He starts telling us how you can tell if it’s ready or not by the smell and just like that, class is in session.

Don starts the tour of his fields, explaining the
crop rotations, cover crops used, and overall plans. Since it’s winter, many of the fields are covered in milo or winter cover crops.

Walking down the row, Don points out two sections, showing us different kinds of wheat cover crop. “Seems like that one down there is a little harder… one is from Texas and the other one is from Oklahoma, and they’re both cheap… whatever’s cheap.”

Managing efficiency and cost is huge to Don. “To be successful it’s not about how much you make, it’s about how much you spend. Just don’t spend more than you make.” On the surface, this sounds like easy advice, but Don’s strict adherence to this maxim has been critical to his success. If it’s a one-note song, he’s turned it into an award-winning hit.

Don grew up farming, not more than 20 miles from where he is now. His dad had a tough break with the bad farming times of the ’80s and went broke. “There was nothing to do,” recounts Don, “except go work for another farmer. So, I did, and he taught me how to do get by with nothing and he gave me a lot of advice. It’s all I ever wanted to do. And I grew up working for him until I got out of high school.” After high school, Don and his wife, Cheryl, moved out to a rented farm starting from scratch. She worked at the USDA Farm Service Agency and he farmed, putting everything they made back into the farm.

In 1995, Don and Cheryl got an opportunity to buy the farm they were renting, and they scraped enough together to do that. In 1997, Don had his first Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract with NRCS for laser leveling his field. This made it easier to keep water on the field and also saved time and labor irrigating since he didn’t have to be out there babysitting the field, because when you’re sole proprietor, time is money. Don received the first of his awards, Conservation Farmer of the year, for his success with laser leveling. He joined the Deming Soil and Water Conservation District around this time starting his 20-year run.

In 2003, Don started his second EQIP contract with NRCS to install sub-surface drip irrigation on his farm. Don thinks he may have been only the third person in the county to try drip, which, back then, was an investment that cost almost as much as the farm itself. It was a hard decision, but cost containment was viewed as the best strategy to survive economically. Don and Cheryl went on a 10-year plan to pay it back, but they worried they might never pay it off. With their savings and better crop quality and yields, they paid it off in only three years.

“The drip, it’s not just saving water,” Don says, “it’s about fertilizer placement. You can put fertilizer through the drip tape, you can get right there in the root zone, you don’t have to push it over or move it out of the away, so, you can cut down on the amount of fertilizer use when you put it through the drip. There are a lot of your crop protection chemicals
you can put through the drip. Saves time, saves exposure, no off-target drift, so there’s a lot of benefits and when you add all those up…” Looking back on it seven years later, in a 2010 article about that decision to switch to drip, Don said, “I probably wouldn’t be farming now if I hadn’t converted to drip.”

Don shows us the control panel to the drip irrigation system.

As we continue walking along the fields, Matt asks Don about the other latest enhancements Don has made under his most recent Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contract and Don answers to each one with the experience of someone who’s tried it, scrutinized it, and measured it for value. There’s the GPS targeted spray application (AKA Smart Sprayer): Don says that “prevents overspray, prevents skipping spots too.” The Variable Frequency Drive motor (VFD) which is an enhancement to the drip irrigation system: “…you can have a smaller field and it will actually slow the motor down, to where it’s just pumping the right amount of water without over-pressuring the system.” The remote monitoring: “I can actually log into the computer in my house from a phone, and that computer is connected to the other farms and their drip systems, so I can turn the water on or off. From my desk or from my phone.”

Matt continues down the list of all the CSP enhancements—use of legume cover crop, plant tissue testing, etc. Most have worked, but not all of them are smashing successes. There is the wildlife stand Don tried, but he doesn’t do that anymore because it had limited benefit and didn’t make sense economically. And he has mixed feelings about the sustainability of the land application of treated manure—those compost piles he was tending to when we first drove up. He’s not so sure about the sustainability part because you have inputs like the fossil fuels the tractors use churning and spreading the compost, and the water needed to keep it moist. He keeps with the practice because he finds value in that the compost acts like a sponge on the field, greatly increasing the water holding capacity of the field.

While Don certainly does care about conservation, those efforts must serve his business interests. For the most part, they do. “Farmers are always the biggest environmentalists and conservationists that there are,” he says, a line I’ve heard often since joining NRCS. “If we don’t take care of the land were not going to be in business.”

Don’s ability to straddle the line of innovation and sound business practice is one of his big strengths. When deciding to invest in something new, he wants to justify the cost, to make sure that he will make enough ROI to pay for the capital improvement. He does his research, tries it out, and if it works, he adopts the practice. If it doesn’t, he tweaks it or moves on.

Don used to use soil fumigants like Telone, K-pam, Vapam, and Chloropicrin, but it got to where his yields were declining so he thought there had to be a different way, a better way. He started doing some research and worked with NMSU on the issue. In the end, he didn’t like what the University was concluding or recommending so being “stubborn and hardheaded” he kept on researching and trying things out. “I kind of went maverick,” Don says, “and started doing my own stuff. I found stuff that really works well that others said wouldn’t work here.” After trying various cover crops, he’s realized he likes Austrian Winter Peas, which grow like crazy and use hardly any water.

“To me,” Matt says, “the success of the CSP was to help you get into cover crops that you weren’t really doing before.”

Don says, “I’ve learned good healthy soil has a lot of bacteria and fungi in it, and you really need to keep a living root in the ground, all the time.”

“And what do you see as the economic value to the cover crops? Telling a farmer to plant something that you are just going to plant into the soil, sometimes doesn’t seem very economical.”

“It’s not as bad as what you think,” Don says. “You’re gaining more than what you are spending. And it goes back to my advice, don’t spend more than you make. There’s value in it or I wouldn’t continue to do it. I’m not being subsidized, I’m not in CSP anymore, my contracts expired but I’m still doing it. So, I find value in it.”

This is what Matt Wiseman happily refers to as adoption. But there are an additional couple of factors that make Don special. One is that he keeps pushing innovation, taking it to the next step, whether
it’s figuring out the right cover crop and time to plant it, or engineering his own fertilizer infusion system to work with the expensive valuable drip system, or tweaking a seed inoculation process. Don is always searching for a more efficient, cheaper, better way. The other big factor that sets Don apart is his ability to see the bigger picture of agriculture. He looks to spread that knowledge to anyone willing to listen.

“I believe in sharing,” Don says. “There’s a lot of guys out there, that everything is a trade secret and you’ll lose your competitive edge if you share it with everybody else. We’re all in this together. And I believe in neighbors helping neighbors, that’s what we are supposed to do.”

Don Hartman has been successful, not only because of his relentless attention to detail and cost containment but also through his vision and ability to see that bigger picture and how it all fits together. When asked what his greatest achievement is, he doesn’t hesitate to cite his work with drip irrigation. But not just his drip irrigation. Rather, the thing Don Hartman is most proud about—which in his typically modest fashion he points out was a group effort—is the work he did spreading drip-irrigation in the region. When Don transitioned to drip-irrigation, he was one of the first. Then he and the Deming SWCD board held workshops and brought in experts. Matt Wiseman points out that historically, most farmers flood irrigated their fields. Now, 80%-90% of the farmers are using drip. Don estimates that represents about 18,000 acres.

Conservation can be good business. Don’t be afraid to try new things. “You have to be able to change with the times,” Don says. “You can’t always afford to be the first guy to change but you sure can’t afford to be the last.”

You can find more information about the USDA NRCS and the programs they offer at www.nrcs.usda.gov or by visiting your local NRCS field office.

To view all of the pictures taken from the interview, visit the online album at https://flic.kr/s/aHsmLMifeP.

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