



PROFILES IN soil health

Scott Park, Park Farming, Meridian, CA
1500 acres, certified organic
Crops: Arugula to zucchini, including wide
variety of seed crops
Covers: Multi-species



unlock the
SECRETS
IN THE
SOIL

Soil health approach yields sustainable dividends for California farmer

When Scott Park began his farming career more than 40 years ago, he farmed pretty much the way everyone else did – conventionally. But Park realized his business model wasn't sustainable. "Profit margins were quite slight. Everybody was glad I was farming, but there wasn't much left for me at the end of the day," he said.

"So adjustments had to be made one way or another to figure out how to make this thing go," he said. "I felt I was heading to a dead end."

Park's idea for a new direction came when he began working the ground of some farmers he'd never worked with before.



Thanks to his focus on soil health, Park says "I feel the environment is better, I think the soil is getting better and, importantly, my pocket book is getting better."

"I brought some heavy duty equipment to churn up the hard clods typical in the area," he said, "but when I started working up the field, the ground turned over like butter. I knew it was a similar soil type to what I farmed next door but it acted completely different. I hardly had to use any of the equipment. Those farmers hadn't beat up their soil and I knew they knew something I didn't."

With that revelation, he began focusing on improving the health of his soil, too.

According to Park, centering on soil health and, in his case, transitioning to organic farming, “changes your mindset from reacting to being proactive.” “Soil health fits proactivity very well, so our approach generally is to try and make the soil as healthy as possible, plant the crop and get out of the way,” he said.

Park describes his farming system as being “driven by building up the soil,” with practices he calls “The Five C’s.” “Number one’s cover crops; two is crop rotation; three is compost; four is conservation tillage; and five is controlled traffic,” he said.

The five major practices need to be used with a systems approach to be fully successful, says Parks “Each one of them has its own value but you can’t, from my perspective, pull one out from the other five. If you have really good cover crops and you’re doing crop rotation, but you’re not using controlled

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traffic or thoughtful handling of the soil and you’re compacting it, then the good you have done, you destroy, so each one of them is necessary,” he said.

In the midst of California’s historic drought, Park’s soil health approach has yielded a key dividend: more water in his soil profile. “I have processing tomatoes that were planted 32 days ago and they have not been irrigated yet. So where is that moisture coming from when it’s been so dry?” Park said.

The secret, he said, is in his soil. Park said healthy soil serves like a sponge to collect and hold the little rain received and it gives him the confidence that it is going to be there at planting time.



Park Farming in Meridian grows a wide range of organic produce and crops, including quinoa, which is seen here.

“I have gone 32 days without having to turn water on so that is just an example of building up the soil and having the soil save you headaches and expense... and it’s a healthier plant with a better developed root system,” he said. His soil health-centric approach has yielded many dividends.

“Our farm, I’m comfortable in saying, is getting better every year,” Park said. “And the people working for me get better every year--they are making more money. I feel the environment is better. I think the soil is getting better and, importantly, my pocket book is getting better.”

It’s the just the kind of sustainable business model that Park had sought to achieve.

“To me soil health makes me money -- both in lowering my variable costs and in good yields and good quality,” he said. “So if you can package all of it where everyone is benefitting from your farm system then that is probably the most rewarding part of what I am doing.”

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