A cooperative partnership with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D)

**Introducing Soybeans to the Sugarcane Rotation Reaps Great Economic and Conservation Benefits**

**Seasonal High Tunnel Success**

Growing Healthy Fruits, Vegetables, and Children in Sabine Parish

March 2014
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On the Cover

Sabine Parish producers Jodi and John Harris have grown it all—vegetables, fruits, pastured chickens, dairy cows, berries, goats, and more—and they have produced cheese, sourdough breads, and yogurt from their harvests. Now, they are growing their vegetables and fruits in a high tunnel, or hoop house. To learn more, see pages 4 and 5.

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High tunnels, or hoop houses, are gaining in popularity among produce farmers across the country. Primarily, because they extend the growing season. Here, in Louisiana, we normally have mild winters. This past winter, however, proved to be an exception. Snow, sleet, and ice were a common occurrence. Producers Jodi and John Harris shared photos with us of their hoop house during one of the snow events (see below right). Notice the end flaps are up in the photo. They said the temperature was so warm inside the hoop house—even in the snow—they had to raise the flaps! I would have to say, it appears the hoop house is working!

The Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative is just one opportunity producers have with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to improve farm operations through conservation. Conservation doesn’t cost, it pays—sometimes now, and other times into the future. The paycheck comes in soil saved, nutrients managed, increased production, and many other benefits depending on the farm, its location, and the needs of the land. Conservation delivers peace of mind knowing you are protecting your farm’s natural resource foundation for agriculture viability for the generations that will follow.

A common thread that runs through all of our success stories is the desire to be proactive in addressing the realities of agriculture production today while leaving the land better for the next generation. Our service is to help you accomplish this on your farm or ranch. Stop by our office and find out how.

Kevin Norton
State Conservationist
Louisiana
In 1989, New Orleans transplants Jodi and John Harris learned quickly—if you wanted to purchase organic food in Sabine Parish, you either had to visit a farmers’ market or you had to grow your own. By 1990, they were growing everything they needed on their farm in Sabine Parish.

The Harrises have grown it all—vegetables, fruits, pastured chickens, dairy cows, berries, goats, and more—and they have produced cheese, sourdough breads, and yogurt from their harvests.

“We believe it’s vital that our children grow up eating natural, healthy foods,” said John Harris.

“And growing our own food became an educational opportunity for our kids,” said Jodi Harris. “I homeschooled them, and it made sense to work it into their curriculum.”

In 2011, the Harrises attended a workshop hosted by the LSU Ag Extension Service that provided information about high tunnels and the assistance the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) could offer through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Jodi and John were intrigued by the possibilities the high tunnels could offer, and it was not long before they contacted NRCS and began construction.

Seasonal high tunnels, commonly called hoop houses, are structures made of plastic or metal pipe and covered with plastic or other sheeting. They are easy to build, maintain, and move, and they provide an energy-efficient way to extend the growing season, reduce or avoid use of pesticides, and reduce run-off. Unlike greenhouses, they require no energy, relying on natural sunlight to modify the climate inside to create favorable conditions for growing vegetables and other specialty crops.

“The hoop house has allowed us to have a much longer growing season for our plants,” said John Harris. “It helps reduce pests naturally, and it is virtually maintenance free. Plus, I’ve never seen sugar snaps grow as tall as these have!”

The Harris’s high tunnel success has garnered quite a following in Sabine Parish. Several farmers in the area have toured the Harris’s farm and talked with them about the process and the benefits. As a result, 10 high tunnels have been installed in Sabine Parish, and 16 applications have been received for the first round of EQIP funding in fiscal year 2014.

Since installing the high tunnel in 2011, the Harrises have installed a micro irrigation system, cross fencing for rotational grazing of livestock,
and planted pollinators in their pastures and woodlands through NRCS’s conservation programs. They have future plans to install a solar-powered livestock watering system.

“We learn more and more every day about conservation, and we try to pass the message along to others,” said Jodi Harris.

“We want to make sure that we leave this place better than we found it, a better place for our children,” said John Harris.”

“The Natural Resources Conservation Service provided technical and financial assistance to the Harrises through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

“Weing a good steward of the land is important to us. We aren’t trying to make a million bucks, we are just trying to create a nice life for our children.”

Jodi Harris
Focus on Results

Did you know?
Innovative sugarcane farmers are introducing soybeans into their rotation and reaping great economic and conservation benefits.

Sugarcane is a perennial grass crop that is grown in southern Louisiana. Stalks are planted in raised beds, and the regrowth is harvested for 3-4 years. Between the last harvest in the winter, and subsequent planting of a new crop the following fall, cultivation is often used to keep fields free of problem weeds like bermudgrass. Although effective at controlling weeds, cultivation during this fallow period leaves the soil bare and susceptible to erosion.

Innovative farmers in Louisiana are beginning to introduce soybeans into their rotation by ‘fitting’ this crop into what was once the fallow period. The economic benefits of this cash crop allows sugarcane producers to offset most of the fallow costs normally incurred. What may not be obvious are the powerful conservation effects of introducing this legume into the rotation. Soybeans protect the soil from erosion and scavenge residual nutrients, resulting in improved water quality downstream. Soybeans also break up the monoculture of sugarcane and introduce a different root system into the soil ecosystem. This helps to improve pest pressure and promotes a diverse microbial population and rooting zone.

This summer, we will feature a farmer effectively utilizing soybeans in rotation with sugarcane and discuss how they have successfully transitioned into this system.

Submitted by Chris Coreil, State Agronomist, Alexandria State Office

Around the State

Feb 8
St. Mary SWCD Tree Planting: On February 8, 2014, the St. Mary Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), with help from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency, 4-H, and many other volunteers, planted 50 live oaks along Louisiana Highway 182 in Baldwin, Louisiana. This work was accomplished through an Apache Tree Grant that was awarded to St. Mary SWCD to continue the Louisiana Highway 182 beautification project.

Feb 27
Northeast Louisiana Water Management Meeting: On February 27, 2014, a Northeast Louisiana Water Management meeting was conducted at the Ag Auditorium in Bastrop, Louisiana. Participants discussed the Southeast Arkansas Feasibility Study planned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This study will examine the economic feasibility of transferring water from the Arkansas River into southeast Arkansas and northeast Louisiana to benefit area agricultural producers.
**Feb 28**
**Louisiana Day at Poland Junior High School:** On February 28, 2014, the Rapides Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), along with special guests Alphonse the Alligator and Terry the Turtle, participated in “Louisiana Day” at Poland Junior High School. Poland Junior High hosts this event each year to give students an opportunity to learn about the food, culture, and wildlife of Louisiana. Rapides SWCD employees, Brenda Archer and Marilyn Rabalais, taught the students about animals that are found in a wetland habitat, how wetland areas play an important role in our ecosystem, and the importance of wildlife conservation.

**Mar 1**
**Capital SWCD Hardwood Seedling Planting:** On March 1, 2014, Capital Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS Denham Springs Field Office personnel hosted a hardwood seedling planting project for members of the Walker, Louisiana, Cub Scout Pack #479 and Boy Scout Troop #479. Scouts planted 100 nuttall and cherrybark oak seedlings and 50 buttonbush seedlings on Capital SWCD board member Steve Horvath’s farm in Livingston Parish. Orientation was provided by Steve Horvath; on-site assistance was provided by Lynwood Abbot, Capital SWCD Technician; and soils instruction was provided by Brandon Waltman, NRCS Soil Scientist. The scouts learned about soils, forest management, woodland functions and values, and other important conservation topics. Through this activity, the scouts earned their environmental science merit badges.

**Mar 10**
**University of Louisville Visits the Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center (PMC):** Twelve volunteers from the University of Louisville visited the Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center through Operation Nehemiah on March 10, 2014. The group assisted PMC staff with ground cover and construction of new planter boxes. Additionally, the students were able to learn about Louisiana’s coastal concerns and how the Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center contributes to saving our coast.

**Upcoming Events**

**Mar 31 - Aug 30**
**“I Remember...” An Art Show of Environmental Significance:** The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act Task Force in Partnership with the Louisiana State University T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History will exhibit the “I Remember...” art show featuring select archival materials from LSU Libraries Special Collection, photographer Lane Lefort, and artist Marian Brister Martinez at the Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

**Apr 12**
**Party for the Planet 2014:** Earth Day at the Alexandria Zoo

**Apr 27**
**Louisiana Earth Day 2014:** Baton Rouge