



TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH





GRINNELL HERITAGE FARM

GRINNELL, IOWA

In 2007, Andrew Dunham moved to central Iowa to become a 5th generation Iowa farmer on Grinnell Heritage Farm. The farmland has been in his family for over 150 years. Andrew's education in ecology and experience from working with subsistence farmers in the Peace Crops in East Africa furthered his passion for organic farming. "No debate," he says. "I would either be an organic farmer or not a farmer at all. I have no interest in farming conventionally."





ANDREW IS STRONGLY COMMITTED TO NOT USING HARMFUL CHEMICALS ON THE FARM. AS A FARM WORKER, HE DOES NOT WANT THE EXPOSURE TO CHEMICAL PESTICIDES.

He and co-workers harvest many vegetables by hand. Andrew emphasizes he doesn't want any farm staff to spend hours each day handling produce treated with chemicals that could put them at risk for cancer or other diseases.

When Andrew and his family arrived at the farm, they began to transition the land from conventionally farmed corn and soybeans to producing organic vegetables, flowers and herbs. During the transition period, the Dunhams faced a steep learning curve around organic methods that required patience. Initially, the soil was in poor health; it was compacted, tight and prone to crusting over. Now, Andrew can see real results of how organic farming practices have revitalized the farm. "Life is coming back into the system," he said.

Andrew encountered another issue common to new organic producers: weeds. The farm had a substantial bank of weed seeds present and it took time to gain control. When farming organically, Andrew says, "You need to be patient; you can't just try for one year. It takes several years to create a successful management system."

For support during the transition, Andrew contacted the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to inquire about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. Through the program, he received both financial and technical assistance on a range of farming practices such as cover crops, crop rotations and nutrient management. The program provided Andrew with essential resources to manage the transition period. And applying these farming practices have dramatically improved the health of Grinnell Heritage Farm's soil. Visitors to the farm have told him that a stroll in the fields feels like walking on pillows.

For Andrew, one of the biggest benefits of working with NRCS was the opportunity to plant native shrubs for wildlife habitat immediately. He was interested in planting habitat, but would have been forced to wait several years to increase farm sales and afford the investment. With NRCS's financial support, Andrew planted habitat areas during the transition period and saw immediate benefits. After a few years without any sightings, he has documented the reappearance of snakes – in fact,

Andrew keeps a running list of encounters. "This year we saw six snakes so far," he said. "Just to be clear, I want snakes. They take care of rodents and are wonderful to have on the farm." Andrew directly attributes the return of these slithering farm hands because of the wildlife habitat planted with NRCS support.

After his positive experiences, Andrew is encouraging more organic producers to work with NRCS. He also hosts farm tours for NRCS employees to learn more about organic production. Andrew believes helping increase NRCS staff's knowledge and comfort with organic production supports positive working relationships with organic farmers.

NRCS works with producers on a range of practices integral to organic systems. Based on eligibility, producers may receive funding to cover up to 90 percent of the cost of implementing each practice. Growers interested in learning more about opportunities to use EQIP as well as other financial and technical assistance, should contact their local NRCS field office.