

CASE STUDY #2

The farm is a certified naturally grown farm in the Piedmont region of Georgia. The farmer grows vegetables for direct sales at farmers markets, restaurants, and a community supported agriculture program (CSA). In the past the land was used to grow cotton, so the farmer has revived the soil to a healthy condition over the years. The farmer sells to a city in Georgia with a population around 120,000.

WHY ORGANIC?

“This is my second career, I guess you could say,” says the farmer. After retiring from a career in research and development, the farmer moved back to Georgia, where he had grown up, and started an organic farm. His son was very interested in organic farming as well. “We dove right in and started learning how to farm.” One of the goals was to work with his son to grow a family business. The farm is operated with help from the farmer, as well as his wife and son.

“We decided to go organic because we are convinced it is a more sustainable way to go. We agree with the lifestyle and think it is a healthier option,” says the farmer. “We can’t change the way everyone eats but we can be an alternative for people that want it.”

CROPS PRODUCED

When the farmer bought the land there was just a farm house. First they built a barn and an equipment shed and began farming. As the farm continued to grow, they continued building their infrastructure. They built a cold room for storage that has turned into a root cellar. They then added a commercial cold room to the barn. Next, they built a kitchen for bringing crops in to wash and process them. In the coming years, they plan on adding a certified kitchen so that they will be able to process their crops into value-added products.

The first garden was during the fall season on a one-fourth acre of land. The next summer the garden grew to one-half an acre. They then added their first hoop house. They have grown every year since then. This season they will grow on about five acres and in five hoop houses.

“We literally plant hundreds of different types of vegetables and different varieties of vegetables,” says the farmer. The farm has five hoops houses that allow them to grow in the winter. These vegetables include: lettuces, kale, spinach, carrots, beets, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, turnips, bok choy, sugar snap peas, onions, strawberries, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, zucchini, squash, okra, watermelons, cantaloupes, and the list goes on. The farmer

can also open the hoop houses up for production in the summer. He has had a very successful pepper crop in the past. The farm gets transplants and seeds from a local business.

Some vegetables have been harder to grow than others. Brussels sprouts have been especially tricky. The farm is still trying to bring in a successful crop of brussels sprouts. Peas and beans have been very labor intensive. "You have to pick and shell them on the farm and bring them fresh to market. There is a lot of work there" The first three years that farm harvested lima beans, they were hand shelling them. Since then, they have invested in a sheller. "These peas and beans are very labor intensive, but it is a great reward to bring them to the customer. There are certain products that you have a hard time finding fresh at the grocery store, especially purple hull pink-eyed peas. These are a southern favorite, so there is a real demographic that comes to the market looking to find those products."

The farmer has not worked with any animals. "It is not economical or time well spent unless you focus completely on that."

The farmer keeps a mantra of "feed the soil." Pests and weeds have been a challenge the farmer has to overcome. The land was originally used to grow cotton, but has built up a living soil over the years. The farmer uses cover crops to add organic elements to the soil and promote microbial growth. He also uses contour plowing to reduce erosion. They use no synthetic chemicals on the farm. If things are extreme, they will use an organic certified insecticide very sparingly. They also use plant beneficial crops to attract good bugs to the area. The farmer plants buckwheat, which acts like an herbicide. Buckwheat also attracts bees and wasps that attack the larvae of pests. The farmer has released a ladybug population to abate pests such as aphids. The farmer uses a soil test to determine what macronutrients need to be added. They have not had any problem with phosphate, but have added green sand to add potassium in the past. The farmer also plants legumes to increase nitrogen. The diversity of their crops is very beneficial to the soil. The farmer also keeps his own compost that is added to the soils. Other fertilizers he has used include: horse manure, llama manure, composted plant matter, and chicken feather meal.

The farm uses a drip tape to irrigate their crops. With this application, the farmers can make sure that the water is very focused on each plant. The farm has two wells and a 5,000 gallon tank that can water about one-third of the farm.

Most fields are hand seeded and weeded. The farmer has some machinery to till between rows that can keep weeds under control. "You reach a certain size and you can't manage it by hand." The farmer has a bush hog that he can use in the pasture, but it can't get into the garden. That area is weeded by hand.

The farmer says that they are over the top with making sure that the product they sell at the market is perfect. Adding a certified kitchen will allow the farm to use product not sold at the market as well as those crops that are imperfect in value-added products. They are interested in canning, pickling, making jam, jellies, and salsas, and freezing.

MARKETS

The farm is involved in a local farmers market. They also sell to local restaurants and have their own CSA. The farm has expanded every year in the restaurant and wholesale markets. “We focus on our direct to consumer market. That is what allows us to do what we do. The wholesale business would be very hard to survive in.”

The farm started selling their produce at a small market at a restaurant in a near-by city. Along with other farmers selling at the restaurant, they decided that they needed to expand into a real farmers market. With a group of community activists, they started a farmers market to promote local agriculture and culinary efforts. “It’s a great system. It builds relationships. It builds a community. It’s a really nice positive thing to be involved with.”

The farm has a Facebook page and a website. They both inform the customer about what the farm does, where they are, what the seasonal crops are, and direct them to the CSA website. The farmer says that the best marketing the farm does is at the farmers market. Having a great product and interacting people helps spread the word about the farm. The farmer has formed many relationships with families at the market. “I’ve watched families grow in number and watched those kids grow up. It’s great knowing that you are a part of the community. We have families come visit the farm. People don’t realize where their food comes from. They get processed food from the store and that’s it. They lose that relationship with their food. A part of what we are doing is helping them grow that relationship.”

At the market, they use their large variety of crops to draw in customers. “For example, we will have three different types of cauliflower: the orange, the white, and the purple. That can really catch someone’s eye.” The produce is extremely fresh. For the mid-week market it is picked the day of and for Saturday morning markets it is picked the day before.

“The restaurant market is not as interesting from a business point of view, but it is an outlet that has been a nice supplement. Chefs are looking for unique things that they can’t get from their distributor.” The farmer says that heirloom tomatoes are very popular with restaurants. “Restaurants are happy to get what we have. They are very busy people. They don’t buy huge volumes. It’s a give and take. “

The farm maintains a CSA program through locallygrown.net. Members sign up and pay up front. Then throughout the season they order what they want from a list of available crops.

Then the amount comes out of their account. The farm allows consumers to pick what they want, making their program very flexible. If members are out of town for a week, they don't have to miss a week of crops. They can simply order more on other weeks. CSA members can pick up their order at two different sites: a local restaurant and the mid-week farmers market. The farm has also opened up the CSA site to restaurants. It has been very successful. The restaurant can see what is available and order on the site. Then the farmer will take them their order.

FARM MANAGEMENT

The farmer did not come into this experience with a specific plan, but he did have specific goals in mind. He knew we wanted a diverse variety of plants and maintain a balance between supply and demand. He did not come from an agriculture background. "It's been a hands-on learning experience." The farmer says that other farmers were very helpful as well.

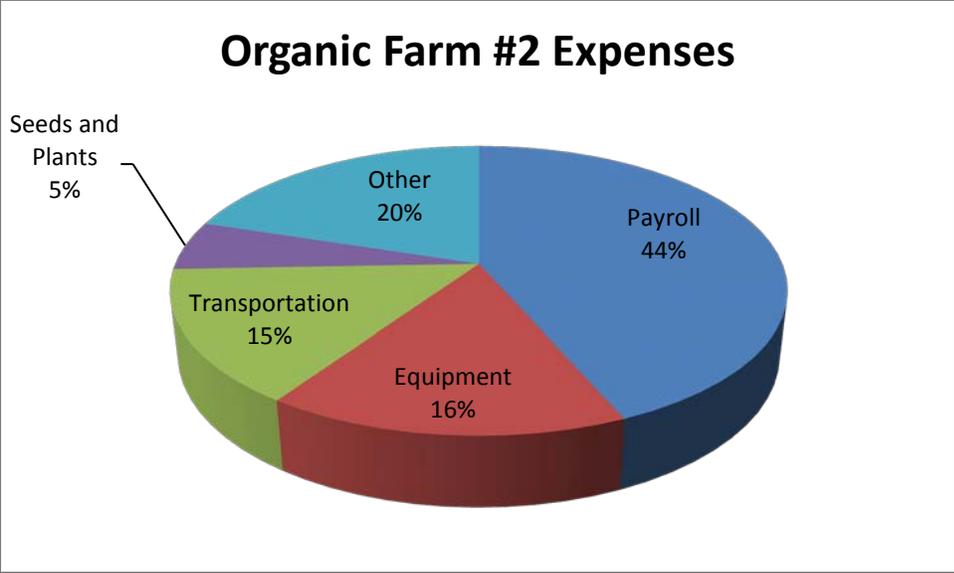
Two years ago, the farm had grown to the point that they needed more employees, in addition to the farmer, his wife, and his son. They added a full-time worker and a part-time worker to their farm.

The farm is not currently an LLC, but the farmer will probably make this transition at some point in the future. The farm is under an umbrella liability policy. The farmer is more worried about employees getting harmed by equipment than their product harming the customer. They have a system to rinse and clean the product, store in a correct temperature, and sell the product the next day. Being a certified naturally grown farm, farmers keep each other in check. They inspect each other and make sure that everything falls in line with certain standards.

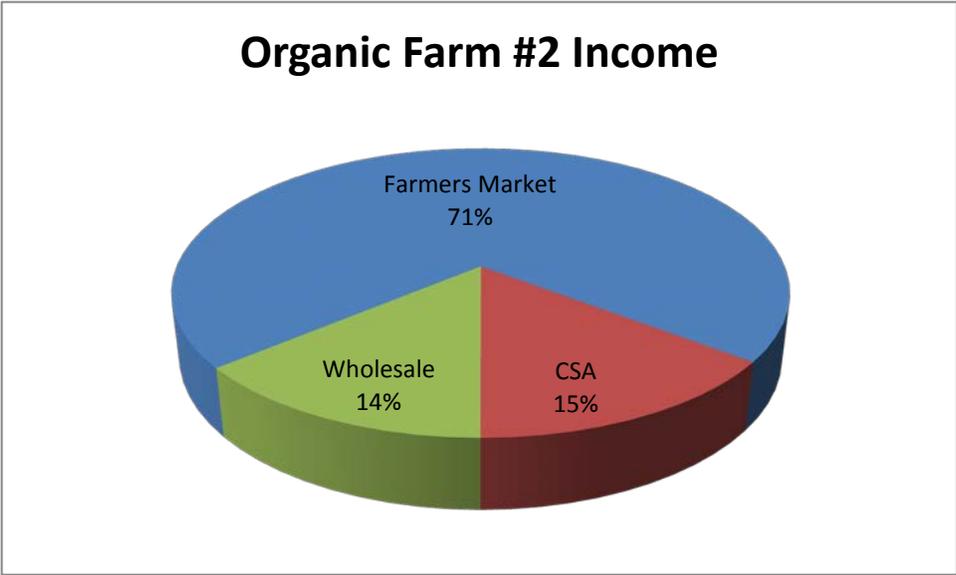
When it comes to additional training or education, the farmer says that Georgia Organics has been a great source of information. "Farming is a lot of hand-on learning, especially in sustainable farming. Conventional farmers have extension to help, but that is not also available for organics." He also says that USDA has helped some as well. The farm has received grants from the USDA to build wells and hoop houses.

FARM ECONOMICS

The majority of the farms expenses come from payroll (44%) with equipment (16%), transportation (15%), seeds and plants (6%), and fuel (5%) coming next. Other makes up the last 20% of the farms budget. This includes: chemical inputs, fertilizers, fuel, maintenance, taxes, utilities, fees, and other miscellaneous expenses.



Farm income comes from farmers markets (71%), community supported agriculture (15%), and wholesale markets (14%).



CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The farmer has encountered a number of challenges. “The biggest challenge in starting the farm was just learning how to farm. It’s a lifetime process, I think. We will have to adjust, modify, and deal with both nature and the market. Some attitude and perceptions of organic have been challenging too. There are a lot of naysayers out there.” The challenge of starting a

farm without a background in agriculture has not come without a great reward. “I am very proud of what we do here, but also out in the community. My favorite part of working on the farm is eating what I have grown. I love the satisfaction of planting the seeds, stepping back and hoping I did this right. Then seeing it come to terms. I love the community that farming has brought along with it.”

The farmer is very supportive of new farmers. “Dig-in and start small and carefully. Don’t expect to become a big successful business all of a sudden. Do it carefully and thoughtfully. I would encourage them to get started, but they have to realize that it is a commitment. It isn’t glamorous. It isn’t easy, but if you are willing it is very, very rewarding. “