



Organic Farming Is “In The Family”



Duane Baker made the switch to organic but he started long before organic was “cool.” He did it a long time ago and he did it right. “I’ve been farming my whole life,” Baker explains, “and I’ve always had a strong desire to grow things and do things the right way.”

Baker’s Father and Grandfather were early organic farmers who used a simplistic approach that was common, sensible protocol back then. Over the years, USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and many other partners helped him find success along the way.

When chemical dependency and inputs were made available and their use was the new normal, during the late 1950’s, 60’s, and 70’s, Baker tried a few of the new options but stood out as the only ‘organic farmer’ in Crawford County, Illinois. “Everyone thought I was nuts,” he adds. “I tried farming with heavy chemical add-ons but I knew there was a better way.” In the 1980’s, Baker experimented with a back-to-basics, more sustainable farm operation. By cutting his inputs and chemical costs, he kept the farm alive and profitable.

Over the years the University of Illinois offered a number of special research projects and farm tours. Baker took the plunge and got involved with these programs and with those of other conservation-oriented partners as much as he could. He worked and collaborated with other organic operators in Illinois and other states, learning from them and sharing his own knowledge and successes as well.

To address erosion and other natural resource concerns on the farm, Baker worked with NRCS to develop and implement a Conservation Plan. A number of practices like grassed waterways and a grade stabilization structure were some of the innovative solutions put to work on his Crawford County ground. NRCS also helped Baker create a livestock waste management system, build a pond, and form a pasture and hay planting operation for his herd.

Organic crops grown on Baker’s farm included a variety of marketable organic grains like buckwheat, spelt (a low-level gluten grain), open-pollinated corn, hybrid seed corn and organic popcorn.

Baker has always been a believer in the value that carefully selected cover crops add to his operation. “My regular cover crops include hairy vetch, red clover and rye—they always did well and gave the protection and nutrients my crops required.”

Baker’s long-standing education on organic systems came from many different sources and organizations, including good old-fashioned experience—that’s what taught him why organic is better and how to make it work. In 1997, Baker’s ground was officially certified ORGANIC.

Years on organic ground has taught Baker the importance of managing and maintaining soil health and soil quality. “When your livelihood depends on what comes from the soil, you’re a fool if you don’t treat that soil like it’s GOLD!” Baker is also a firm believer in regular soil tests, every year or so, because he’s learned it is crucial to know—and not to GUESS—what your soil needs.



Photo: USDA-NRCS, Plants Database
Hairy Vetch

“My regular cover crops include hairy vetch, red clover and rye—they always did well and gave the protection and nutrients my crops required.”



Photo: USDA-NRCS, Plants Database
Rye



Duane Baker and other organic specialists examine organic soybeans growing in Dave Campbell's farm in DeKalb County.

In 2001, Baker served on the steering committee that eventually became the Midwest Organic Farmer's Cooperative (MOFC). In 2008, he retired from farming. His children were not able to take over the operation, leaving the difficult task of finding a worthy landowner to care for his family's ground. Baker sold part of the farm to an old friend and neighbor and the rest is now in the hands of an Amish family who are committed to continue his sustainable organic operation and care for the land with the same passion its grown accustomed to.

"The new family also has access to small, organic niche markets which are set up for exactly what these fields produce. I've left my farm in good 'organic' hands," Baker adds. He continues to support the MOFC and serves as their Seeds Coordinator, helping more farmers find success, profitability, and a quality operation in organic farming.

For more information on organic farming, visit these resources:

Organic Farmers Agency for Relationship Marketing (OFARM) at www.ofarm.org/

Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP) at www.asap.sustainability.uiuc.edu/

Midwest Organic Farmer's Cooperative (MOFC) at www.midwestorganic.com/

Josh Brown's story at www.farmerbrowns.net

Illinois Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at www.il.nrcs.usda.gov

Illinois NRCS Field Office located in your county's USDA Service Center.

Harnessing USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs to Support Local and Regional Food Systems

