

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Organic Farm a Dream Come True for Omaha Family

An Omaha family's dream getaway is now a viable southwest Iowa organic farming operation after a few years of hard work, the help of a local expert, and the USDA's Organic Initiative to make financial and technical assistance available to producers of all commodities.

The Konstantinovs found the undeveloped 102-acre farm of rolling hills in April 2006, about a two-hour drive from Omaha tucked away five miles southeast of Clarinda. Andre Konstantinov, a software engineer, who moved to the United States from Moscow, Russia, says he always wanted his very own *dacha*, a Russian expression for a home in the country.

He says most people in Moscow live in high rise apartments. He and his wife, Liz, were looking to replicate a *dacha*, with a cabin, a small garden, and a lot of open green space. "We weren't considering farming at all – maybe just a kitchen garden," said Liz.

The Konstantinovs have four children, ranging in ages from 9 to 21. They built a couple small cabins, a composting area, and other facilities as planned the first year, and named the place Double K Farms.

A New Adventure – Organic Farming

With their passion for organics, and after building a good relationship with several organic producers in the area, they decided they wanted to farm the land organically.

Before planting anything, Andre and Liz met with Kevin McCall, district conservationist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Page County. McCall assembled a conservation plan for their farm – a tool to help them to better manage the natural



Liz shows off a newly harvested cucumber from her organic garden.

resources on their farm. "We had no idea who NRCS was," said Liz. "Kevin laid out how to keep the water clean and how to reduce soil erosion. We felt we knew the land better, field by field, after talking to him and putting a conservation plan together."

In 2007, Andre planted organic corn for the first time on their 30 tillable acres. Liz says the family has always felt strongly about chemical-free foods. They had that in mind when they bought the farm. "It is a getaway, a garden, and a farm, but it is also a concept project for us," she says. "We have a motto of 'reduce, reuse, recycle' in all that we do here."

Dan Wood, an organic seed distributor from nearby New Market, soon became the family's mentor for organic farming. "We got lucky and met Dan when we first moved here," said Liz. "Dan helped us decide what types of seeds to

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plant, where to get them, and how to plant them – he was great.”

The family earned double the price of conventional corn the first year. In year two and three, they switched to organic wheat. Liz says they earned about \$16 per bushel in 2008, but just \$6 per bushel in 2009. With the market for organic crops down, they decided to let the land rest this year, and planted clover and grass for hay. “We quickly grew tired of the annual crop because of all the work it involves,” said Liz. The family was still at home in Omaha during the week, and spending weekends on the farm.

Organic Produce A Hit

While Andre farmed the land, Liz started her organic vegetable garden. A growing market for organic fruits, vegetables, and other produce is allowing this part of the operation to thrive. Liz grows asparagus, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, potatoes, eggplant, garlic, raspberries, and she specializes in herbs. She and Andre also planted two acres of aronia berries in 2009.

Liz says she can stay as busy as she wants trying to keep up with the demand for fresh organic produce. After marketing her produce at the Omaha Farmers Market and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), she decided to cut back to be at home in Omaha more often during the week. Currently, she sells her produce to Tomāto Tomāto, a year-round indoor farmer’s market in Omaha.

High Tunnel Help

The next project for the Konstantinovs is to build a seasonal high tunnel for crops. High tunnels – or hoop houses – are polyethylene-covered structures that help extend the growing season with more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crop growers. They benefit natural resources by improving plant, soil and water quality by reducing pesticide use and keeping vital nutrients in the soil.



Liz enjoys her patio outside the family’s small cabin.

High tunnels are used year-round in parts of the country, providing steady incomes to farmers – a significant advantage to small, limited-resource farmers and organic producers. These structures should not exceed a 30 foot width, and should be at least six feet tall to allow cultivation, harvesting, and other farming operations.

Iowa NRCS is going to fund the Konstantinovs high tunnel through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. The Organic Initiative offers already-certified organic producers assistance for applying new conservation practices to treat natural resource concerns, and offers participants transitioning to organic agriculture assistance to protect natural resources while meeting their organic certification goals.

Liz says the high tunnel will allow her to expand production of herbs and peppers. “I have been considering a high tunnel for a couple years,” she said. “It will make that piece of land really nice and provide warmth in the off season when we need it.”

To follow the progress of the Konstantinovs’ dacha and to read Liz’s monthly blog, visit the Double K Farms Web site at www.doublek-farms.com.

For more information about the EQIP Organic Initiative, contact the NRCS office located at your local county USDA Service Center or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/organic/index.html.

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