

Green Acres Farm, *Escambia County*



Mark Casson didn't start in agriculture like most of our traditional farmers. A resident of Pensacola along with his wife and two children, the family began thinking about the possibility of starting a small scale agribusiness that would reflect their belief in the

importance of locally grown food systems. The Casson Family decided to make their move in the spring of 2007 and bought a farm in Walnut Hill, just a stone's throw from the Alabama line. Mark and Kimberly began work on building a sustainable operation that would eventually incorporate multiple species of animals and function as one of our agri-tourism destinations in Escambia County. Green Acres Farm is a small farm operation focusing on sustainable, pasture raised poultry, pork, lamb, and beef.

The farm sets on a tree filled ridge that the family manages to maximize its grazing potential for their livestock. The operation started with poultry, specifically chickens that would be pasture raised. They expanded from chickens to turkeys, sheep, hogs, and now cattle. All animals are grown on a mostly forage based diet, with some supplementation of other feed stuffs. Broiler chickens and turkeys begin in "tractors" or pens that have wheels and are moved around the farm. The birds forage for grass, insects, and other items and contribute natural fertilizer to the soil. Birds eventually are moved from a non-confined pasture system during the day to coops at night. Chickens are raised to market weight and then processed for sales to the large base of customers the Cassons have built over the years. The farm sells broilers several times per year and turkeys at Thanksgiving. Pre-orders are taken, but birds not sold through their local customers, go to a local farmer's market on Saturday. They also have a flock of hens for eggs and raise them on the same system as the meat birds. Lamb, pork, and beef were popular additions to the farm. Mark wanted animals that thrived on less quality forages and would tolerate our harsh summers without significant weight or production loss. Haired sheep breed were chosen, along with a heritage breed hog. Initially, breeding stock was purchased from operations in the southeast, but the farm is retaining females to build their own stock that performs in the conditions of the panhandle. Non-breeding stock are grown

for freezer meat sales, processed several times and are generally sold through pre-order.

Beef cattle is the farm's latest venture and is another reflection of the careful planning and research put in to select animals that will thrive in the wide variety of conditions we have to deal with in the far western panhandle. Mark and family consulted with the local Extension office on selecting a breed that would not only raise a quality meat product but have the ability to maximize profit through the sales of hides, horns, skulls, and other by-products. Florida Cracker and Piney Woods cattle were the two choices for the Cassons and the first females and bull arrived in the summer of 2011. The cattle are grass fed at the farm in Walnut Hill, but also on a small piece of land along Santa Rosa Sound, where they are an unexpected addition to the landscape. The cattle browse native trees and shrubs, helping to naturally clear the land. This reflects the producers' commitment to a sustainable, natural environment. Calves born in the spring, with an addition of several feeders, puts the farm on track to sell grass fed beef this fall. Selling additional products from the harvesting of cattle will increase sales and reduce the waste from processing.

Green Acres innovation is seen every day in their products, but their real innovation is in building their customer base. Mark started a small operation with the hopes of turning it into a thriving business. He studied his options and turned to the internet and word of mouth to promote his products. Green Acres has a Facebook page that they use to interact with customers and host profiles at several local grown food websites. They also host field trips periodically for younger children and Kimberly's blog sites have provided increased interest in the farm.

Improving Agriculture through Extension Involvement

The Cassons are an example of a farm family that every Extension office wants as a client. They are usually one of the first to try a new idea and work with other farms to help make their operations a success. Mark is quick to pick up the phone when we need to have a poultry question answered and has helped provide ideas for programs that will benefit all Extension clientele. He also recently joined our county Extension Council and serves to represent small farm operations in his advisory role for our agency. The Green Acres business models serve well to help educate other Extension clients on the value of taking your time, researching your idea, and marketing through a wide variety of channels. At the request of

Extension, they have hosted international groups to their farm to demonstrate sustainable agriculture practices to the visitors and then served their guests meals that included their own products as well as other locally available items.

Impacting Agriculture in the Northwest District

Green Acres has served as an important site to show the value of using research based information and proper planning to provide a quality product. Too many times agents work with clients who buy land, animals or crops, and equipment, only to see the operation fail because they missed a critical step along the way. Mark and his family have provided the model for the rest of our small farms clients in starting a business. Careful planning, research, and working with other farms will lead to a successful business. Mark goes through this process each time he expands into a new venture and it has shown worthy in that he has provided a quality product with healthy, thriving animals.

Mark also works closely with local, state, and federal government agencies to benefit his operation. Many small farms operations might be scared of the problems that could arise from this affiliation, but he has embraced the guidance and services each can provide. He's an important example within his subset of the farming community in showing how working together can be a huge leap forward to success.

The farm's foundation is set on working with what you have and being as friendly to your surrounding environment as possible. This is not only shown through the ways Mark manages his pastures, but also in selecting animals that will have less stress in the changing weather conditions. The family is committed to raising animals naturally with fewer chemicals and fill a niche customer market of customers that will pay a premium for that product. Animal waste is used to incorporate back into the soil as fertilizer, along with using poultry as a form of pest control. The beef cattle have been incorporated into a land clearing plan to take advantage of the breed's natural tendency to browse on native plants. Water runoff is always an issue with animal operations, but Green Acres uses their unique grazing plan to prevent any contamination.

In closing, Green Acres represents the future of small farms in Escambia County. With the increasing age of local farm owners, we need more people like the Cassons that take a chance on agribusiness. They have inspired local urban farmers to work to make even the center of the city a place to showcase what you can grow in your backyard. Green Acres brings people of all ages and backgrounds out of their comfort zone of suburbia and into the agriculture landscape of the country. Other farms benefit from their advocacy and we look to forward to working with the future generation of agricultural enthusiasts they are building locally. ■



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