

# Davidson Farms, *Washington County*

Submitted by Extension Agent(s): **Matthew Orwat**

**M**r. Paul Davidson is the deserving recipient of and proud to be the 2013 Washington County Ag. Innovator of the year. Mr. Davidson began his farming operation in 1988 growing field peas on his long-time family property between Chipley and Vernon. His hobby farm soon expanded to growing watermelon and cantaloupe as well as a large variety of seasonal vegetables, hay, and corn.

After working in industry for 22 years, Mr. Davidson decided to change his career, turning farming and produce sales from a hobby, into his full-time occupation. In 2006, he successfully made this transition with the help of his wife and three children who have all had an active role in the operation of his farm. Throughout this period, he began to increase direct farm sales to individuals and grocery stores, farmers markets and restaurants from Panama City to Destin.

Two factors contribute to the innovative nature of Paul Davidson's farming operations: (1) methods used to market his produce and (2) techniques used to spread out yield over a longer growing season. In 2008, while selling produce in various market venues and to traditional buyers such as stores and restaurants, Mr. Davidson decided he could obtain a better marketing niche by opening up his own produce market. An unused site was available at the

intersection of U.S. 90 and State Highway 77 - a prime location in Chipley; thus, Main Street Market was born.

Since then, Mr. Davidson has been able to direct market his seasonal produce at a retail level while also offering produce from other local farmers. In addition, specialty products including Amish cheeses, organic milk, soup mixes, old fashioned candies and seasonings are sold through Main Street Market. This operation allowed Davidson Farms to see a significant increase in profits. His children have been active in the management of Main Street Market with one serving as produce manager before enrolling in nursing school. The involvement of the Davidson children in farming and marketing efforts has given them valuable life skills. Davidson also has a collaborative partner in his production operations with another local farmer, Billy Brock.

To increase the length of his watermelon and corn season, Davidson staggers his planting dates and grows crops on both irrigated and non-irrigated ground. This is done so produce is consistently ready to sell at Main Street Market over an extended season. This technique was developed through field trials with UF/IFAS Washington County Extension Agents and Specialists. Paul considers the addition of irrigation a major contributor to the success of his farming operations.



Today, Mr. Davidson uses his website and Facebook to increase awareness of his market and farming operations. He considers social media and internet technology to be a valuable component in generating a market for his produce.

## Improving Agriculture through Extension Involvement

Throughout his farming career, Paul has utilized the expertise and assistance of Washington County Extension Agents and has assisted the office with many endeavors. He has done on-farm melon trials and demos with state specialists and county agents. He has also cooperated with specialists and agents in identifying disease and insect problems that could impact other growers. Through this partnership, Extension is better able to anticipate potential insect and disease problems of area cucurbit crops and enhance their educational programming. Paul has assisted agents with timely market information on many occasions. This information increased the quality of Extension articles, fact sheets and services. He has attended the January Cucurbit meeting hosted by Washington and Jackson County Extension many times over the years as well as donated produce and supplies to agents and Master Gardeners for their projects.

## Impacting Agriculture in Northwest Florida

Paul has positively impacted Washington County agriculture in several ways. He provides fresh, local produce to the residents of Washington County and



purchases local produce to augment his own stock at Main Street Market. He is a source of information for other growers and cooperates with Extension to timely identify and address agricultural production and marketing issues. Mr. Davidson is also a member of the Washington County Farm Bureau and has been asked to join the Overall Extension Advisory Committee to offer input to ensure the relevance of the UF/IFAS Washington County Extension Office. Mr. Paul Davidson has been an innovative farmer throughout his career and is the ideal candidate for the Northwest District Ag Innovator Award. ■

