

Feature Story

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High tunnel extends winter crop for Florence farmer

By Judi Craddock
NRCS Mississippi
judith.craddock@ms.usda.gov

Florence, Miss. — Mary McGee’s late father couldn’t read nor write. But he knew how to farm.

He could farm so well, his daughter said he had a PhD in making things grow. He taught her how to transform idle soil into lush farmland and to take care of animals.

Now, her Florence farm produces beautiful vegetables – and she’s using the lessons she acquired from her father to show Rankin County residents the science of farming.

“It was just life – watching things grow,” McGee said. “It was my calling and destiny to farm.”

McGee’s farm employs environmentally friendly practices, both good for her production and the earth. She has worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to fund and execute these programs.

She built a farm pond to provide water for her cows and stabilized the terrain to prevent erosion. She also used NRCS funds to construct additional fencing, which allows for cows to be rotated among smaller fields. The NRCS is a sub-agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The NRCS has worked with her to apply the correct amount of nutrients to her soil as well as control some woody brush on her property.

Most recently, she built a high tunnel, or hoop house. A high tunnel is plastic wrapped around a metal frame that provides a warmer climate for fruits and vegetables. This allows McGee to lengthen her growing season by 10-12 weeks.

All of these improvements were partially funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, one of the cost-share programs offered by the NRCS. Soil Conservationist Murray Fulton and Soil Conservation Technician Mark Scott worked with McGee to apply to EQIP several times since 2004.

McGee worked in financial management her whole life, working for Trustmark Bank and Appliance Parts. But she gardened through all of it. When she retired in 2005, she became a full-time farmer.

Over the years, she purchased adjoining land to add to her father’s original five acres. She bought 40 acres in 1995.

She raises beef cattle on that land, which now boasts 30-plus cows. Her collection of animals also includes milk cows, hogs, chickens and a Brangus bull she affectionately calls Buddy. She also grows dozens of different types of fruits and vegetables.

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McGee is an active member of the South Rankin Farmers Association. She has spoken at the Mississippi Federation of Southern Cooperatives Meeting, telling them about how the NRCS has helped her improve her land.

Fulton said he recognized her enthusiasm for agriculture and has enjoyed working with her. "Ms. McGee is an asset to the people of Rankin County," Fulton said. "She is extremely knowledgeable, and she is skilled in getting people interested in farming."

McGee recently hosted a workshop at her home for Women in Agriculture sponsored by Alcorn State University and Mississippi Association of Cooperatives. More than 20 women from around the state attended. McGee said it was so successful that all the women wanted to start planting everything she had.

She credits her knowledge to her father, who farmed since he was young, working as a sharecropper on a large farm in Rankin County. When the planter died in 1957, her father purchased five acres – the same land McGee farms today. Although it was not a large amount of land, she said her dad was able to use it effectively.

He took pride in growing the cleanest cotton, which he sold for top dollar. His cotton once even won an award, she said. Her family had the fattest cows and pigs around. Her father loved raising animals and even used a mule for disking and plowing, rather than a tractor. He also never wasted anything, both recycling leftover peanuts and grains using them for cow feed or returning what he grew back to the soil to enrich it. Her father could have been the inventor of recycling, she said.

McGee grows corn, peanuts, butterbeans, string beans, peas, squash, bell peppers, hot peppers, turnip greens, mustard greens, collard greens, rutabagas, carrots, potatoes, onions and tomatoes. She also raises peaches, plums, figs, strawberries, blueberries, watermelons, muscadines and dewberries.

She also grows a variety of herbs, including garlic, basil, rosemary, sage and lemon mint as well as sugarcane for molasses.

While she sells some of her produce, mostly she uses it to feed her family.

Her sister, Mable Sims, and her brother-in-law, Lynn Sims, help her tend the farm. Her experience in bookkeeping has been quite an asset when it comes to completing all the paperwork that goes into applying for assistance and keeping the books on her farm.

She takes after her father. She uses creative ways to keep pests away from her plants – placing herbs throughout her garden and using a lemon detergent-water mixture to reduce bug infestations.

She also hangs a plastic bag of water above her door to scare off flies. She is not sure why it works, but it does, she said.

An open saucer of water with lemon detergent will kill mosquitoes, and a Borateen and water mixture will kill ant mounds, she said.

McGee has always preferred softer alternatives to farming – relying on compost for fertilizers and natural methods to manage pests. It's about being closer to the earth, she said.

"The earth is where we come from," she said. "We put what we grow from the earth back into our bodies, and later we return to the earth. I feel closer to God when I can feel the earth under my feet."

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Photos by Judi Craddock

Top: Mary McGee explains to neighbors how her high tunnel is helping her extend her growing seasons.

Left: Mary McGee shows how she composts at her Florence, Miss. farm.

Right: Mary McGee has worked with her local NRCS conservationists, including Soil Conservationist Murray Fulton (right) and Mark Scott (not pictured).

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