

Pick Today and Use Today

Al Hooks of Macon County, Alabama,
grows produce by his philosophy
“Pick Today and Use Today.”



Alphonso Hooks of the Milstead Community in Macon County, Alabama, has quite an operation going. He says, “Basically, I’m just a small farm operation.” And that he is. He has a few head of cattle, chickens to supply their own needs, and a few meat goats. What’s putting food on the table, however, is produce. “Pick Today and Use Today” is Mr. Hooks’ philosophy.

“I have been in the produce business full-time since 2002. Currently, I have about 45 acres devoted to vegetable production,” says Hooks. To grow the vegetables, Hooks uses the plasticulture system or raised beds with drip irrigation. Hooks was introduced to the plasticulture system when he participated in a demonstration project coordinated by the Mid-South Resource Conservation and Development Council, a program administered by USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The plasticulture system worked well for him and he has expanded use of the system.

“We use chicken litter and cow manure on some of the organic plantings. The chicken litter is a part of the Litter Distribution Program administered by NRCS. The objective of the program is to

distribute litter to areas of the state that historically have not used litter. According to Hooks, "The litter works well. The land that I have been using in the produce business has been in trees for the last 60 or 70 years, so it needs something to build the soil back. The litter helps provide those needed nutrients." Not only is the litter good for the soil, it's also good for his pocket book. "Use of chicken litter has cut back on the fertilizer and nitrate bills," says Hooks.

"My goal is to provide produce year round," says Hooks. During the winter months, he has turnips and turnip greens, collard greens, two types of mustard greens, rutabagas, broccoli, cabbage, kale, and sweet potatoes. In October, he starts the strawberry beds so they will be ready to pick in the spring. In early spring, he plants onions and lettuce, followed by sweet corn, English peas, and another crop of cabbage and broccoli. Late summer produce includes corn, peas, butterbeans, okra, watermelon, and cantaloupe.

Marketing his product is no problem for Hooks. "I don't have enough produce to meet the needs," says Hooks. He markets his produce in several ways. One of the most innovative ways is his "rolling produce" store. "I supply fresh vegetables to eight nutrition sites in Macon, Lee, Tallapoosa, and Elmore Counties," says Hooks. These are community centers where senior citizens gather to do arts and crafts throughout the year, and also get a nutritious hot meal. "I take the vegetables to the site and save them the expense of having to travel to get produce," says Hooks.

Hooks is also a member of the Tuskegee Farmers Market where he provides produce two days a week during the winter months and three days a week during the summer months. In addition to those markets, he has his own vegetable shed right there on his property. And, Hooks says, "During the cold months, people just call in and order their produce, and then come here and pick it up. I get it fresh from the field for them."

While many of the tasks associated with vegetable production are labor intensive, Hooks does take advantage of technology. "I have a pea sheller," says Hooks, "but even with the use of that equipment, I can't meet the demand in the height of pea season. I have a farmer who grows peas for me, but we just don't have enough peas to meet the demand."

While produce has been his mainstay, he is expanding his cattle operation. With assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Hooks plans to install a grazing management system. "This fall, we put chicken litter on the pasture and planted winter grass in one of the fields," says Hooks. That's a start, but the plan calls for more. "My plan calls for cross fencing to establish a rotational grazing system. The grazing system will enable me to graze more cattle and make the best use of my pastures. I'll be able to control the grazing and get better yield on the grass," says Hooks. Gwen Lewis, NRCS District Conservationist for Macon County, says the plan also calls for the installation of a well to provide water for the grazing

system.

Al Hooks accomplishments have not gone unnoticed. He was selected to receive the 2006 Merit Farm Family Award from Tuskegee University. The Merit Farm Family Award was established by the Tuskegee University Cooperative Extension Program to recognize innovative farm management by outstanding small farmers and their families who practice responsible environmental stewardship and are recognized as community leaders. Mr. Hooks certainly fulfills those requirements. In addition to the improvements he has made in his farming operation, he is also community minded. He is active with the Macon County Farmers Organization and a Board member of the Tuskegee Farmers Market. For 34 years, he has been an active member of the Greater Saint Marks Missionary Baptist Church. In addition, he is a member of the Brotherhood of the Bradford Chapel Church in his community. The Brotherhood is a group of concerned citizens who come together to address and solve problems in the community.

In his small farm operation, Al Hooks has learned that management is the key to success. He uses the land available to him wisely and then markets his product cleverly—Pick Today and Use Today. Al Hooks would be the first to say, “Be sure to eat your vegetables now!”



Gwen Lewis (r), NRCS District Conservationist in Macon County, Alabama, discusses plasticulture or raised beds with drip irrigation, with farmer Al Hooks.