



## The *New* American Farmer

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Martin Miles, M & M Farms

Stickleyville, Virginia

### Summary of Operation

■ *About 190 meat goats on 65 acres of pasture*

■ *Certified organic vegetables on 5 1/2 acres*

■ *2 acres organic tobacco*

### Problems addressed

*Finding profitable alternatives to tobacco.* Tobacco remains the primary profit maker for most farmers growing on small acreages in the mountains of southwestern Virginia, even as price supports, production allotments, and U.S. market share for the crop have dwindled over the past two decades. Continually searching for ways to keep farming profitably, Martin Miles harvested his last significant tobacco crop in 1998.

*Environmental concerns.* Agriculture and coal mining, the two main industries in the region, have caused pervasive erosion, sedimentation and chemical runoff. Worried about the potential cumulative effects of toxic chemicals, Miles decided to eliminate agrichemicals by transitioning his operation to no-till and organic management.

### Background

Miles learned to farm from his parents more than a half century ago on a hillside farm not far from where he now lives. “We didn’t have a lot, and the farming could be rough on you, but we always had enough to eat,” Miles says. Memories from his teenage years include the arrival of electricity in the valley, and learning to plow with horses and oxen.

The family farm produced most of their food. His parents also raised tobacco, like most of their neighbors. “Tobacco was a sure thing, economically. It’s a way of life here,” Miles says.

Never finishing high school, Miles left the area to look for work in Annapolis, Md. Returning to southwestern Virginia in his 20s, he gradually took up farming again, raising tobacco and up to 100 beef cattle yearly, until the early 1990s.

By then, a federal price support program had significantly limited the allotment of acres that Miles could plant in tobacco each year. As the erosive hillside farming system fell from favor, land suitable for pasturing cows also became harder to find. Miles started searching for ways to remain profitable on his small acreage. He also investigated ways that would allow him to farm without chemical inputs, with which he had become disenchanted.

“Other farmers aren’t as stupid or crazy about taking chances as I am,” Miles says of the shift he made in his 50s to organic and no-till production. To mitigate risks imposed by the weather and markets, Miles changes his crop selection yearly and considers implementing new strategies that he thinks have the poten-

tial to add value to his operation.

Now farming with his son and daughter-in-law, Miles hopes he can help preserve the farming heritage of the region and impart to his grandson the practical skills and love of farming that his parents instilled in him.

### Focal Point of Operation—High-Quality Vegetable Production and Marketing

With his business partner, John Mullins, Miles began his transition from cattle and tobacco production by planting four acres of vegetables in limestone-rich bottomland soils in 1994. They started out growing “a little bit of everything,” Miles says, including tomatoes, sweet and hot peppers, cucumbers and squash, which they sold to small local stores and grocery chain distributors through a cooperative of growers. They also ventured into greenhouse growing, raising potted plants for fall sales.

Area workshops on organic production, season extension and no-till farming hosted by Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD), a regional nonprofit organization, focused on developing ecologically sensitive and solid economic opportunities for farmers. The training, in part funded by SARE, provided Miles and Mullins with technical support as they began their transition to organic management in 1999. By 2001, Miles and Mullins had switched over to organic production entirely, while expanding their operation to 17 acres of vegetables.

In 1999, Miles and Mullins joined a four-year-old farmer networking and marketing initiative started by ASD for regional organic vegetable producers. The “Appalachian Harvest” cooperative had just launched a major campaign to generate brand-name recognition for its products, using a new label and logo and displaying profiles of the farmers and other marketing materials at several area grocery stores.

In 2003, when Mullins was called up to serve as a reservist in Iraq, Miles teamed up with his son and daughter-in-law to specialize in garlic, tomatoes and jumbo bell peppers on 5 1/2 acres. They also experimented with growing two acres of tobacco organically.

Miles channels most of his physical and emotional energy into ensuring the success of the cooperative, for which he recruits farmers and raises thousands of certified organic vegetable seedlings. Much of his income, however, is derived from sales independent of Appalachian Harvest. A natural salesman, he markets some of his vegetables to several area small businesses and distributors for regional grocery store chains, and sells seed garlic to seed companies.

Miles’ work in promoting the co-op, including media coverage, brought business propositions. His longevity helps, too. “I know everybody in these counties, and I’ll talk to just about anybody,” he says.

Every variety of tomatoes he has raised has proved to be especially marketable, even in poor growing years. “We can usually sell every tomato we grow,” says Miles, “even the green ones.”

Miles raises about 190 goats each year, selling most at auction but keeping enough nannies to breed for the following season’s herd. He rotates his herd of Boer-mixed breed goats on 65 acres of rolling pasture rising from the valley floor. The goats are born on the farm in April, before vegetable planting outdoors begins, and are bred in November, after the growing season has ended. In the fall, Miles takes the goats to auction houses nearby where they are often purchased by buyers who will process the animals to sell the meat in conjunction with the Muslim holiday, Ramadan.

### Economics and Profitability

Miles does most of the farm work along with his son, daughter-in-law, and his teen-aged grandson, occasionally hiring seasonal help. He transferred much of the labor-intensive production skills, equipment and outbuildings that he used in tobacco farming to his current operation. Converting his greenhouse for certified organic production involved spraying the building down and removing any remaining substances not allowed by organic standards. In return for the hard work, he earns 15 cents a piece for the organic seedlings he sells to the co-op.

Having the option to market extra produce to conventional outlets is a major advantage with growing organically, Miles says. He also appreciates having eliminated several thousand dollars in yearly input costs for pesticides and fertilizers, a factor that he thinks will convince more growers to switch to organic management.

Not all his input costs have decreased, however. Limited availability of organically grown seed sometimes results in higher prices, particularly for specialty crops like jumbo sweet peppers.

He receives premium prices for vegetables sold to wholesale brokers and processors. In 2003, for example, organic grape cherry tomatoes earned \$16 to \$18 per pound compared to \$11 to \$12 for conventionally grown.

Some of his ventures run to the unusual. Miles contracted with an independent buyer to grow 12,500 pounds of tomatoes and garlic for an orange salsa to be sold at tailgate parties for University of Tennessee football games. Miles also joined the co-op’s effort to add value to culled produce and extend sales by sending tomatoes and garlic to a nearby community canning facility to be processed into sauce.

The goats can earn as much as \$300 each at auction. Major costs involved in their management include providing feed in winter and labor involved in keeping the animals healthy. Miles shares the responsibilities involved in tending to the goats with his grandson, who lives with him part time.

### Environmental Benefits

Miles' transition to organic farming was prompted by a desire to leave his land in a healthy condition. He hopes that organic management will prevent further contamination of ground water from nutrient and chemical runoff.

Miles keeps his hillsides in pastures that he uses for rotational grazing of his goats. On the valley floor, he plants various cover crops — red clover, rye, barley or wheat — in between vegetable crops, in a rotation that he alters year to year after considering what he will grow the following season. He adds fertility to his fields with fish emulsion through drip irrigation lines and spreads composted manure from his goats.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

In 2000, with help from a state grant, Miles and a few other farmers transformed one of his tobacco barns into a produce grading and packing facility that provides work for six to eight employees for half the year. With a refrigerator donated by an area grocery store and plenty of storage space for tomato jars, the packing facility eventually should be able to offer nearly year-round employment in an area lacking many job opportunities.

"People are proud of what the cooperative has created," Miles says.

The oldest farmer participating in the cooperative, Miles has assumed a leadership role. He has received several awards for his work in support of sustainable agriculture, and was



Ann Hawthorne

*Martin Miles transformed a tobacco barn into a packing house that stores his co-op's produce.*

recently asked to join the ASD board of directors. Miles' efforts to share information about the production methods and profit potential involved in switching from tobacco and cattle to organic vegetable production has been influential for other growers making similar transitions.

### Transition Advice

For Miles, learning how to time vegetable planting, cultivation and harvest has been the most significant adjustment to make in transitioning to organic production.

"The work [involved in] raising tobacco was constant, lots of labor, but you could always decide to cut tobacco later and go fishing for a day if you wanted to," he says. "Give a zucchini four or five more hours to grow and you've waited too long."

Miles recognizes that it might be challenging for older farmers to change the way he has. "If someone has been farming a certain way for 40 or 50 years, it's going to be hard to get them to change. You have to get growers who

love a challenge, and who will be dedicated to growing superior produce," he says.

### The Future

Miles considers venturing into producing other crops, if he thinks they can yield solid profits and can be produced using organic methods. He and his son have experimented with growing tobacco organically, for example, which can earn premiums twice the value of conventional prices.

He also is contemplating growing sugarcane for molasses, which retails at \$10 per quart. He is seeking farmers who might join him, and is researching grant possibilities that could help provide the \$160,000 in capital needed to create a processing facility.

To boost production of crops in the spring, several growers in the group, including Miles, are planning to prepare fields for spring planting in the fall. ASD has offered workshops on hoop house production, encouraging some co-op growers to use the structures to get an early start on tomato production.

Miles is committed to staying the course. "I'm a guy who loves a challenge," he says. "I knew there would be a lot of difficulty and risk with what we're doing, but diversified organic farming is a better way to go."

■ Amy Kremen

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*Editor's note: New in 2005*