



The *New* American Farmer

Lynn Steward

Arcadia, Florida

- *Citrus fruit and organic vegetables on 18 acres*
- *Cover crops*
- *On-farm sales*

Problem Addressed

Discontent with agri-chemicals. When Lynn Steward was in college, he shared a garden with his roommate. One day, he discovered him using chlordane — the pesticide later banned because of its proven carcinogenic effect on humans — to combat an infestation of ants. He was appalled.

“I didn’t know a lot about gardening at the time, and surely not a lot about organics,” he says, “but even to me it seemed way over the top to be killing a few ants with chemicals like that without a thought about what it might do to us, the vegetables and the soil.”

Background

Though he had grown up on a dairy farm in Michigan, that incident was the true start of Steward’s interest in sustainable agriculture — an interest he’s been pursuing for nearly 30 years. He used his degree in agricultural economics to land jobs as foreman and manager in large commercial citrus groves. At the same time, he has planted his own smaller groves, some of which are organic.

He has used his long experience and expanding knowledge of sustainable practices to lessen his employer’s dependence on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, as well as to build an increasingly stable farming system at home.

Steward was raised on a 160-acre conventional dairy farm in Michigan, then moved to Florida to attend college. After years of living in homes supplied amid the groves of commercial citrus growers for whom he worked, he bought his own farm in 1990.

Living in the groves, Steward and his wife and son often had space for a family garden but rarely room enough to satisfy his desire to experiment and produce enough vegetables and fruits to sell. He now lives about 15 miles from his employer’s 15,000 acres of orange, lemon and lime trees on a plot adjacent to several small farms very much like his own.

The seven acres he purchased easily certified organic after Steward bought it, having been used solely for cattle grazing for many years. He grows a combination of citrus and organic vegetables on that land, and leases 11 acres of nearby fields for crops such as green beans, back-eyed peas and strawberries. Those fields, too, are organically certified.

Focal Point of Operation — Marketing

Steward grows a variety of vegetable crops, including rutabagas, carrots, turnips, potatoes, mustard and collard greens, lettuce and green beans. Added to his citrus — red grapefruit, Valencia oranges and tangerines — Steward’s operation is horticulturally diverse. “I try to do a little bit of everything,” he



Lynn Steward sells grapefruit, oranges, tangerines and assorted vegetables in weekly boxes to a loyal group of customers.

says.

Steward has established a dependable method for marketing his produce that lies somewhere between running a community supported agriculture (CSA) operation and displaying at a farmers market. He has 17 “loyal customers” who get a CSA box every week. But he also packages a mix of fruit and vegetables, whatever is fresh that week, into boxes, then sells them off the farm to other eager produce-buyers.

“Arcadia is a real small town, and everybody knows I’m ‘that organic farmer,’ so a lot of my customers just sought me out,” he says. With the regular customers, “I can pretty much count on selling a box of whatever I’ve got growing to each of them once a week” during the November-to-April growing season.

He’ll also solicit orders from nearby groceries and from customers not on his list of regulars for special-occasion crops such as green beans and black-eyed peas.

“It’s tradition here to have fresh green beans for Easter dinner, so I’ll plant a lot of them in late winter,” he says. “The black-eyed peas are popular for New Year’s, so I’ll have

them coming in about that time. I can always sell every bit.”

By matching harvest time of specific crops to associated holidays — something easily done in central Florida’s year-round warmth and sunshine — and by establishing a private customer base as well as contacts at local markets, Steward is

positioning himself to achieve his dream: life as a full-time organic farmer on his own acreage. He’d like, he admits, to leave the commercial citrus groves before reaching traditional retirement age and earn enough from his small plot to live comfortably as he tends to his fields and his own small groves.

In 2004, Hurricane Charley ripped through Steward’s farm, destroying his barn, damaging his farmhouse and wiping out the year’s citrus crop. The 140-mph winds ripped out 3 percent of his citrus trees, but also knocked all of his green citrus fruit to the ground. With typical sunny optimism, Steward plans to use insurance money to rebuild the barn and fix the farmhouse. That year, at least, he relied on his vegetables.

Economics and Profitability

“I’m a ‘home body,’” Steward declares. “As long as I can make enough to keep me here I can be happy.”

Steward enjoys planting a variety of vegetables and adding value to his crops, such as offering cut flowers. His goal is to maintain a solid base of repeat customers to ensure he can pay the bills.

“Then I can expand and experiment, and end up — I hope — making more than enough to pay the bills,” he says.

Steward is giving himself seven years, perhaps even less, to reach that goal. His farm will be paid for in four years, and he already has 18 clients — individuals who buy a certain amount of produce from him each week. He figures he can be self-sustaining with a list of 30 clients.

These factors make it possible then, that Steward could leave his full-time job in the commercial citrus groves before age 55. Complicating the equation, however, is a fungal disease that has killed many of his citrus trees in the past year.

“I couldn’t treat them with the only chemical I knew of that would stop the disease because it’s synthetic,” he says, “so I’m having to replant most of my personal grove, and that’s going to set back my citrus income for a couple or three years.”

Steward remains philosophical, however, about the setback, and says it just allows him more time to plan.

“I’d like to be out there on my own right now, of course,” he says, “but at least I know now how it’s possible, and I have the time to work toward the goal. When I have the right number of regular buyers, my citrus is selling, and I can sell my overruns to local groceries, I’ll be able to make a great living doing what I love to do.”

Environmental Benefits

Steward collaborated with scientists at USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service to try to grow a new strain of hemp known as Sunnhemp for seed. Steward test-planted a variety called “Tropic Sun” to harvest seed from a cover crop that seems ideal for farmers in tropical areas, such as

Hawaii and Florida. Steward and other organic farmers in Florida have been impressed with the hemp's ability to add nitrogen to the soil, among other benefits.

However, its biomass proved difficult to manage, requiring a lot of mowing and disking. Steward mowed every two weeks and enjoyed the extra fertility, but decided to eliminate it when the seed got too expensive. Now he relies on his black-eyed peas for fertility.

His new research experiment involves collaborating with a University of Florida scientist to test the use of greens to control soil-borne diseases and nematodes. It's a natural for Steward, who already raises collards, mustard, kale and other brassicas.

His willingness to experiment has been a constant in Steward's efforts not only to establish his own organic enterprise, but also to influence his employers' practices in large commercial citrus groves. For example, his current employer granted him 10 acres several years ago to try producing fruit under organic conditions that mirrored conventional standards for yield, appearance of the fruit and flavor. After a number of seasons, his trees are starting to get close to the mark.

"It's awfully hard to convince a citrus grower with 15,000 acres that hand-hoeing is worthwhile, but there are a lot of other things I've done that commercial growers can adopt without a lot of expense," Steward says. "They're paying attention, too, because the new federal regulations on food safety are going to force them to find alternatives to a lot of synthetics."

Steward's current employer is particularly interested in the use of fish emulsions, composted manure, hardier varieties of rootstock and the introduction of refugia strips

and other attractions for beneficial insects — all suggestions made by Steward and tested in recent years. On his farm, he makes use of those materials, as well as seaweed.

"I don't know if we'll ever get rid of Roundup in commercial citrus groves, but I do believe some of these sustainable practices are going to be adopted by even the biggest growers," he says. "That can only help."

To control pests and disease, he arms himself with garlic, pepper spray and soap. And the Sunnhemp isn't his only cover crop. Although black-eyed peas are a cash crop for him, he grows them for their ability to fix nitrogen, too. Each year, before flowering, Steward tills most of them into the soil as a green manure. However, given that he gets \$2.50 a pound for shelled black-eyed peas, he lets some grow to maturity.

Transition Advice

"Education is the most important thing if you want to go organic," Steward says. "I know I was constantly on the phone to the extension service at the University of California in Davis when I started growing organically 25 years ago, because they were the only people who seemed to have any answers back then."

Computers and the Internet have made accessing information much easier since then. The number of organic growers has grown, and most of them are willing to share experiences.

"Back then there were only a handful of organic growers in Florida," Steward says. "None of them wanted to show a new guy anything because they worried I was trying to steal their limited markets."

Steward, past president of the state organic growers' association, says he made sure it

isn't that way now, that there are many more growers who are more interested in passing on advice.

"But you've still got to make the time for it, to talk with people, to get on the Internet, to find the alternatives that are right for your particular place and situation. You've got to do the research."

The Future

Steward intends to eventually retire from his foreman's position in a large-scale conventional citrus grove and grow his own organic citrus and vegetables for direct sale to Florida consumers full time. He believes he's gaining the necessary experience each year, and that he'll know enough about both the growing and the marketing ends of organic farming by then to make it a sustainable effort.

He also hopes by then to have proven to his citrus-growing employers that sustainable methods can save them money and regulatory headaches in addition to protecting the soil, air and water.

After the rebuilding that will follow Hurricane Charley, Steward hopes to rent his farmhouse to a beginning farmer who also can work for him. He regards it as a mutually beneficial arrangement that will train the new farmer while providing him with an extra pair of hands.

■ *David Mudd*

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