NO-TILL ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN

Producer Case Study

Making a Way Through Regenerative Agriculture

The Story of Dawn and James Maples and Make A Way Farm

Caddo Parish, Louisiana



USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NO-TILL OMG! Organically Managed Gardening

CAMPTI Field of DREAMS

Building a Farm with Purpose

For James and Dawn Maples, farming began with a simple but powerful goal: to provide healthy food for their family and community.



Like many Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, James became concerned about food availability and the vulnerability of long supply chains. Empty grocery store shelves prompted an important question: What would happen if families could no longer depend on distant food systems?

Rather than wait for someone else to solve the problem, James and Dawn decided to become part of the solution.

> *"Why would you not do it? It just makes sense." — James Maples*

Together, they established Make A Way Farm in Ida, Louisiana, a diversified farm producing vegetables, turmeric, eggs, lamb, goats, sheep, rabbits, and poultry. The farm's name reflects both faith and perseverance—an acknowledgment that challenges are inevitable, but solutions can often be found through hard work, creativity, and determination.

As a veteran and full-time U.S. Postal Service employee, James was already balancing multiple responsibilities when he joined the No-Till Organic Market Garden project. Yet he saw an opportunity to learn new production methods, improve soil health, and create a more resilient farming system.



The project introduced James and Dawn to a statewide network of farmers exploring regenerative agriculture, cover crops, composting, biochar, and no-till production. Through workshops, field days, technical assistance, and soil health monitoring, they gained access to tools and knowledge that helped accelerate their farming journey.

What attracted them most was the promise of building healthy soil without relying on synthetic fertilizers or excessive tillage.

Learning Through Innovation

When James began farming, the soil at Make A Way Farm presented significant challenges.

The land was compacted, acidic, low in organic matter, and scattered with iron ore gravel. According to James, broom sedge and goat weed were among the few plants that seemed capable of thriving under those conditions. Rather than accepting those limitations, James and Dawn began experimenting with regenerative practices designed to rebuild soil health.

They adopted permanent beds, intensive cover cropping, deep mulch applications, composting, broadforking, occultation tarps, and reduced tillage practices. Livestock manure from rabbits, chickens, sheep, and goats was incorporated into the farm's fertility program. James also began producing biochar and charging it with livestock manure before applying it to growing areas.

Educational programming provided through the No-Till OMG project reinforced many of these practices. Business planning, succession planting, soil health education, and farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities helped the couple refine their production system and avoid common mistakes.

The results became increasingly visible with each growing season. Crops performed better, weed pressure decreased, water retention improved, and the farm expanded both production and enterprise diversity.



Parasite resistant St. Croix sheep are rotationally grazed on pasture without any sysnthetic dewormers to build soil fertility.

Key Findings

- Diversified production of vegetables, turmeric, eggs, lamb, poultry, rabbits, sheep, and goats
- Implemented cover crops, composting, biochar, and reduced tillage
- Improved soil structure, biology, and water infiltration
- Reduced weed pressure through heavy mulch applications
- Increased crop quality and productivity
- Expanded farm fertility using livestock manure and biochar



Healthy Soil, Healthy Harvests

Years of composting, cover cropping, mulching, and reduced tillage improved soil health and soil structure at Make A Way Farm, producing vigorous turmeric plants with healthy root systems and abundant rhizome development.



Building Healthy Soil

Healthy soil became the foundation of every decision made at Make A Way Farm.

James viewed regenerative agriculture as a practical solution to the limitations of his land. Rather than relying on purchased fertilizers, he focused on improving the biological function of the soil itself.

Cover crops and compost became central components of the farm's management strategy. Organic materials were used to protect the soil surface, increase organic matter, suppress weeds, and support soil life. Biochar charged with livestock manure helped recycle nutrients generated on the farm while reducing dependence on outside inputs.

Over time, James observed significant improvements in soil structure, soil biology, compaction, water infiltration, and water-holding capacity. Crops developed better quality and stronger performance, while mulch reduced weed pressure and labor requirements. Soil improvements also increased the farm's ability to retain moisture during hot Louisiana summers. Perhaps most importantly, healthy soils increased confidence. What once seemed like marginal ground became productive farmland capable of supporting a diversified agricultural business.

The experience reinforced a lesson shared by many project participants: soil health improvements may take time, but they create lasting benefits that extend far beyond a single growing season.



As part of the No-Till Organic Market Garden Toolkit, participants learned to use a Ring of Fire biochar kiln to convert woody biomass into biochar. This stable form of carbon can improve soil structure, increase water-holding capacity, support beneficial soil microorganisms, and enhance long-term soil health.



Seeing Soil Biology in Action

The "Soil Your Undies" Challenge uses 100% cotton underwear as a simple indicator of soil biological activity. The underwear buried in the no-till plot (left) showed significantly greater decomposition than the pair buried along the fenceline (right), suggesting higher levels of microbial activity and soil life.



Growing a Farm and a Community

The impact of Make A Way Farm extends beyond crop production and soil health. For James and Dawn, regenerative agriculture is also about building a resilient farm business that serves their community while adapting to changing conditions.

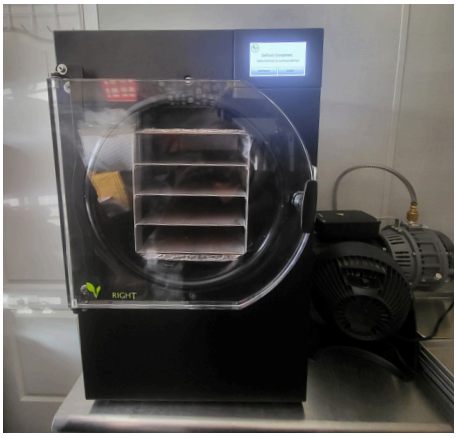
Through direct sales and local food production, the farm helps strengthen food security in northwest Louisiana by providing customers with access to vegetables, eggs, meat, and other products grown using regenerative practices. As the farm expanded, James and Dawn explored ways to increase the value of what they produced while reducing waste.

One of the most significant investments supported through the project's financial incentives was a freeze dryer. This equipment allowed the farm to preserve surplus produce and transform seasonal harvests into shelf-stable, value-added products. Rather than losing crops to weather, market fluctuations, or short shelf life, products could be processed and sold over a longer period, improving profitability while reducing food waste.

By extending the usefulness of crops beyond the harvest season, the freeze dryer created new marketing opportunities and helped the farm capture more value from its production.

Education and knowledge sharing remained central to this growth. Through workshops, field days, and peer-learning opportunities, James and Dawn exchanged ideas with other producers while continuing to refine their own practices.

The farm's diversified approach—integrating livestock, soil health practices, value-added production, and direct marketing—demonstrates how small and mid-sized farms can build both ecological and economic resilience while strengthening local food systems.



Project financial incentives helped Make A Way Farm purchase a freeze dryer, allowing surplus crops to be preserved as value-added products, reducing waste and improving farm viability.



Freeze-dried products created new marketing opportunities while extending the value of seasonal harvests beyond the growing season.

"As a farmer, you are constantly experimenting, and it's okay to fail on occasion and learn from it." — James Maples

Looking Forward

James and Dawn view healthy soil as essential to the long-term future of their farm.

They plan to continue refining regenerative practices, expanding production, and identifying new ways to improve both profitability and ecological resilience. Their commitment to cover crops, mulch, compost, biochar, and livestock integration remains central to that vision.

The couple also intends to continue sharing what they have learned with other farmers interested in regenerative agriculture. By demonstrating practical approaches to soil improvement, they hope to encourage more producers to explore methods that reduce inputs while improving productivity.

Key Lessons Learned

- Healthy soil creates healthy crops and healthier farms.
- Cover crops and mulch are powerful tools for soil improvement.
- Livestock can play an important role in farm fertility.
- Regenerative agriculture requires patience and continuous learning.
- Failure is part of the learning process and should not discourage experimentation.

Key Themes from Dawn and James' Journey

- Veteran Farmers
- Soil Health
- Livestock Integration
- Regenerative Agriculture
- Family Farming
- Entrepreneurship
- Farmer-to-Farmer Learning



What began as an experiment reflects the curiosity and innovation that define Make A Way Farm.

Closing Reflection

The story of Make A Way Farm demonstrates what can happen when determination, stewardship, and curiosity come together. Through regenerative agriculture, James and Dawn Maples transformed challenging soil into productive farmland while creating a diversified farm that nourishes both people and the land. Their journey reminds us that healthy soils, like healthy communities, are built one season at a time.