NO-TILL ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN

Producer Case Study

GROWING WITH PURPOSE

The Story of Doris Sims, Jessie Mae Mayfield, and Mama Class' Pantry

Lincoln Parish, Louisiana



USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NO-TILL OMG! Organically Managed Gardening

CAMPTI Field of DREAMS

A Legacy of Service Through Food

For Doris Sims and Jessie Mae Mayfield, gardening has never been simply about growing vegetables.

It has always been about caring for people.

Located in Ruston, Louisiana, Mama Class' Pantry began as an effort to provide fresh food, preserve family traditions, and strengthen connections within the community. Long before joining the No-Till Organic Market Garden project, Doris and Jessie Mae understood the value of homegrown food and the role gardens can play in supporting healthy families.

"Growing food is one way we take care of each other. Every harvest is an opportunity to share something good with someone else." — Doris Sims

What attracted them to the project was the opportunity to learn new techniques for improving soil health while increasing production in a sustainable way. They wanted practical solutions that could help them grow more food, improve the quality of their harvests, and reduce dependence on expensive external inputs.

Like many participants, they faced challenges common to small-scale urban growers. Limited space, aging infrastructure, extreme weather, and rising production costs required creativity and persistence. Yet those challenges never diminished their commitment to serving others. Even in her eighties, Doris continues to demonstrate that stewardship, learning, and community service have no age limit.

Through workshops, field days, technical assistance visits, soil testing, and peer-to-peer learning, Doris and Jessie Mae discovered that healthy soil could become the foundation for healthier gardens, healthier food, and stronger communities.

Over time, Mama Class' Pantry became more than a garden. It became a demonstration of what is possible when experience, determination, and stewardship come together.

Learning Through Innovation

Building Knowledge One Season at a Time

The No-Till Organic Market Garden project introduced Doris and Jessie Mae to a variety of regenerative practices designed to improve soil function while reducing disturbance.



Among the most valuable lessons were the importance of keeping soil covered, minimizing tillage, increasing organic matter, and encouraging biological activity below ground.

Rather than relying on traditional cultivation methods, they began incorporating practices that worked with natural systems.
These included:

- No-till production methods
- Compost applications
- Mulching
- Continuous soil cover
- Biological soil-building practices
- Soil health monitoring

Each season became an opportunity to observe, learn, and adapt.

As organic matter accumulated and soil biology improved, they noticed positive changes in crop performance and overall garden productivity. Beds retained moisture longer during hot weather, plants established more quickly, and production became more consistent.

The project also created opportunities to learn from fellow participants throughout Louisiana. Conversations with other growers reinforced the idea that healthy soil is built gradually through consistent stewardship.

For Doris and Jessie Mae, one of the most important lessons was that conservation practices do not need to be complicated. Small changes, applied consistently over time, can produce meaningful results.

Key Findings

- Adopted no-till growing practices
- Increased use of compost and mulch
- Improved moisture retention
- Enhanced soil biological activity
- Reduced soil disturbance
- Increased understanding of soil health principles
- Strengthened participation in a statewide learning network

Building Healthy Soil

Growing from the Ground Up

At Mama Class' Pantry, soil health became the foundation for everything that followed.

The project encouraged Doris and Jessie Mae to view soil not simply as something plants grow in, but as a living system that requires care and stewardship.

Compost applications became an important tool for rebuilding fertility and feeding soil biology. Mulch protected the soil surface from intense summer heat while helping conserve moisture during periods of drought.

By reducing disturbance and maintaining soil cover, they created conditions that supported earthworms, beneficial microorganisms, and improved root development.

The changes did not happen overnight.

Like many participants, they learned that soil health is built through patience and observation.
Over time, they observed:

- Better moisture retention during dry periods
- Improved soil structure
- Increased biological activity
- More consistent crop growth
- Improved resilience during weather extremes

The improvements also benefited water management. Soils with higher organic matter held moisture longer, reducing plant stress and helping crops remain productive during hot Louisiana summers.

Perhaps most importantly, the project reinforced a simple principle:

Healthy soil creates healthier plants.

And healthier plants create healthier communities.



Doris was so excited to learn that the microbial community in her soil had eaten everything except the elastic in the “Soil Your Undies” challenge.

Growing a Farm and a Community

Food, Fellowship, and Service

The impact of Mama Class' Pantry extends far beyond the garden beds.

For Doris and Jessie Mae, growing food has always been closely connected to serving others. Fresh vegetables became a way to strengthen relationships, share resources, and support community well-being.

Produce grown through the project was shared with family members, friends, neighbors, and community members who appreciated access to fresh, locally grown food.

The garden also became a source of inspiration. Visitors frequently stopped by to ask questions, learn about gardening, and observe the progress being made through regenerative growing practices.

In this way, Mama Class' Pantry became part of a larger effort to strengthen local food systems through education and example.

"The harvest isn't just what comes out of the garden. It's the people you can help along the way." — Doris Sims

Major themes emerging from their participation include:

- Knowledge Sharing - Learning new practices and sharing those lessons with others.
- Resilience - Continuing to grow despite challenges associated with weather, age, and limited resources.
- Community Building - Using food as a tool to bring people together.
- Stewardship - Caring for the land in ways that improve its productivity for future generations.
- Food Access - Demonstrating that small urban gardens can play an important role in increasing access to healthy food.

Their experience demonstrates that community impact is not always measured by acreage.
Sometimes it is measured by relationships.

Looking Forward

Continuing the Work

Today, Doris and Jessie Mae continue building upon the knowledge gained through the No-Till Organic Market Garden project.



The lessons learned about soil health remain central to their approach. Composting, mulching, and biological soil-building practices have become part of an ongoing commitment to responsible stewardship.

Their goals moving forward include maintaining productive growing spaces, continuing to share fresh food with others, and encouraging future generations to appreciate the value of gardening and local food production.

Their participation demonstrates that conservation practices can create benefits far beyond crop yields. They can strengthen communities, preserve knowledge, and inspire others to care for the land.

Key Lessons Learned

- Healthy soil is built through consistent stewardship.
- Small gardens can create meaningful community impact.
- Compost and mulch are powerful soil-building tools.
- Learning never stops, regardless of experience level.
- Sharing knowledge strengthens local food systems.

Key Themes from Doris and Jessie Mae's Journey

- Soil Health
- Community Service
- Food Access
- Urban Agriculture
- Stewardship
- Lifelong Learning
- Regenerative Agriculture
- Community Resilience
- Intergenerational Knowledge

Closing Reflection

The story of Doris Sims, Jessie Mae Mayfield, and Mama Class' Pantry demonstrates that regenerative agriculture is ultimately about people. Through patience, dedication, and a commitment to serving their community, they transformed conservation practices into opportunities for education, food access, and fellowship. Their work reminds us that healthy soil is not only the foundation of productive gardens—it is also the foundation of stronger communities and a more resilient local food system.