NO-TILL ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN

Producer Case Study

Growing Resilience from the Ground Up

The Story of Sierra Torres, Becks Hilliard, and Cicada Calling Farm & Market

Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana



USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NO-TILL OMG!
Organically Managed Gardening

CAMP TI Field of DREAMS

Building a Farm Without Inheriting One



For Sierra Torres and Becks Hilliard, farming began not with inherited land, equipment, or family acreage, but with a vision of creating a resilient local food system rooted in ecological stewardship and community connection.

As first-generation farmers, they launched Cicada Calling Farm & Market in Independence, Louisiana, with a commitment to growing healthy food while caring for the land. From the beginning, they embraced regenerative principles, recognizing that healthy soil would be essential to the long-term success of their farm.

Their journey was not without obstacles. The property they leased had previously been used as a horse pasture and suffered from years of overgrazing. Soil health was poor, weed pressure was intense, and pest management posed constant challenges. Like many beginning farmers, they faced the additional realities of limited capital, no inherited equipment, and the steep learning curve that accompanies building a farm business from scratch.

> *"Getting the toolkit felt like Christmas" — Sierra Torres*

Participation in the No-Till Organic Market Garden project provided both technical support and a network of peers facing similar challenges. Through workshops, field days, soil health monitoring, and farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities, Sierra and Becks gained access to tools and knowledge that helped accelerate their transition toward a more resilient production system.



What attracted them most to regenerative agriculture was its emphasis on working with natural systems rather than against them. The project reinforced their belief that healthy soil, biodiversity, and careful stewardship create the foundation for productive farms and thriving communities.

Learning Through Innovation

As Cicada Calling Farm evolved, Sierra and Becks continually experimented with new approaches to improve efficiency, soil health, and profitability.

Among the most important innovations was their commitment to no-till production. Rather than relying on repeated cultivation, they focused on protecting the soil through intensive cover cropping, mulching, compost applications, and minimal soil disturbance. They also invested in infrastructure designed to improve productivity and extend the growing season.

With support from NRCS programs, the farm installed four 16-foot by 100-foot high tunnels and developed movable trellis systems that allowed them to intensively manage high-value vegetable crops. Their focus on specialty crops such as Suyo Long cucumbers helped create premium market opportunities while maximizing production from limited acreage.

The No-Till OMG project provided educational opportunities that helped refine their production system. Soil testing, workshops, field demonstrations, and conversations with fellow producers contributed to a deeper understanding of how regenerative practices influence both soil function and farm profitability.

The results were substantial. What began as a small quarter-acre operation expanded into a thriving four-acre vegetable and cut-flower farm in just three years. By 2023, the farm was projected to generate approximately $160,000 in flower and vegetable sales from only two acres of production.



Four high tunnels installed through NRCS EQIP cost-share assistance helped extend the growing season and increase production.

Key Findings

- Expanded from ¼ acre to 4 acres in three years
- Generated $160,000 in flower and vegetable sales on 2 acres
- Installed four NRCS-supported high tunnels
- Adopted intensive cover cropping and no-till management
- Improved soil biological activity and soil structure
- Increased production of high-value specialty crops



Becks Hilliard creating floral bouquets.

Building Healthy Soil

Soil health became the organizing principle behind nearly every management decision at Cicada Calling Farm.

Years of overgrazing had left the site compacted, biologically depleted, and vulnerable to weed pressure. Rather than attempting to solve these challenges with increased tillage, Sierra and Becks focused on rebuilding soil function through regenerative practices.



NRCS Soil Scientist Matthew Denton discussing soil health with Sierra Torres.

Cover crops became one of their most important tools. Fields were routinely planted with species that protected the soil surface, added organic matter, suppressed weeds, and supported biological activity. Cowpeas proved especially effective, providing dense biomass while creating favorable conditions for earthworms and other beneficial organisms.

Mulching and compost applications helped conserve moisture and reduce weed pressure, while no-till management minimized soil disturbance and protected developing soil structure. Over time, these practices improved water infiltration, moisture retention, and biological activity throughout the farm.

One of the most visible indicators of success was the dramatic increase in earthworm populations. Areas previously characterized by poor soil health became biologically active and easier to manage. As Sierra observed during a project farm tour, earthworms had become abundant in areas where cover crops and organic matter were consistently applied.

The farm's experience demonstrated that meaningful soil improvements can occur relatively quickly when regenerative practices are applied consistently. While soil building remains a long-term process, the results provided encouraging evidence that no-till management can improve both soil function and farm productivity.

Growing a Farm and a Community

Although production and soil health were central goals, Sierra and Becks viewed farming as something larger than crop yields alone.

Their work contributes to a growing movement of producers who are rebuilding local food systems by creating direct connections between farmers and consumers. Through farmers markets, direct sales, and community engagement, Cicada Calling Farm helps increase access to locally produced food while strengthening regional food security.

The farm also serves as a demonstration of what is possible for beginning farmers. Without inherited land, equipment, or generational farming experience, Sierra and Becks have built a successful farm business through persistence, innovation, and a willingness to learn. Their journey provides encouragement to other aspiring producers who may wonder whether farming is still accessible to newcomers.

"Every market day is an opportunity to connect people with the farmers who grow their food and the land that sustains it."
— Cicada Calling Farm & Market



Farmer-to-farmer learning emerged as another important theme. Participation in the No-Till OMG network connected them with producers across Louisiana who shared ideas, experiences, and practical solutions. These relationships helped accelerate learning while creating a broader community of practice centered on soil health and regenerative agriculture.

The farm's growth has contributed to both local economic activity and increased access to locally produced food. By focusing on high-value crops, specialty products, and direct marketing, Sierra and Becks have demonstrated how small-scale farms can generate meaningful income while serving their communities.

Looking Forward

The future of Cicada Calling Farm & Market is rooted in continued growth, experimentation, and stewardship.

Sierra and Becks plan to expand perennial plantings, including an orchard, while continuing to explore specialty crops and value-added products. Among the opportunities they are considering is the production of Roselle hibiscus and other crops that can support diversified marketing strategies.

Equally important is their commitment to continuing the soil-building work that has transformed the farm over the past several years. Healthy soils remain central to their vision for long-term productivity, resilience, and ecological sustainability.



Sierra checks on specialty crops like roselle which are thriving at Cicada Calling.

Key Lessons Learned

- Healthy soil is the foundation of a successful farm.
- Cover crops are among the most effective tools for building soil health.
- No-till systems require patience but produce lasting benefits.
- Infrastructure investments can significantly improve farm productivity.
- Beginning farmers can succeed through persistence, learning, and innovation.

Key Themes from Sierra and Becks' Journey

- Beginning Farmers
- Soil Health
- Ecological Stewardship
- Climate Resilience
- Regenerative Agriculture
- Entrepreneurship
- Community Building
- Peer Learning

Closing Reflection

Sierra Torres and Becks Hilliard demonstrate what is possible when beginning farmers combine hard work, curiosity, and a commitment to stewardship. Through regenerative agriculture, they transformed a degraded pasture into a thriving farm while building healthier soil, strengthening local food systems, and creating a model of resilience for the next generation of producers. Their story illustrates that conservation and entrepreneurship can grow side by side, creating benefits for both the land and the communities it supports.