



Pedersen Farms

A Recipe for Healthy Soils on a Wholesale Scale

Rick Pedersen has always liked growing stuff, which might explain how he came to own a 1,500 acre vegetable farm and hop yard in New York's Finger Lakes region. He had a garden since the age of seven and brought his vegetables to the county fair with blue ribbons and photographic proof hanging in his office, a young Rick beside a cabbage nearly as big as he was.

Rick studied forestry at SUNY ESF, and went to work in that field for a few years, moving state to state with his wife Laura until they decided to return home to the Northeast so they could both attend Cornell University. Rick studied vegetable crops for four years and went on to work for Laura's father, a large vegetable grower. Two years later, Rick decided to strike out on his own, leasing land until he bought his current farm.

Pedersen Farms' produce has been carried by Wegmans, Whole Foods and Fresh Direct, among other wholesale avenues. He started out as a conventional grower, but he's been slowly and methodically transitioning his farm to organic practices since

2004, with almost half of his farm now certified organic for wholesale buyers. "A lot of people will go all organic right away," Rick says. "But I've got things like cauliflower, and I've tried for many years to figure out how to grow organic cauliflower, and it's just really, really hard," he says with a laugh. Being in a glacial area, Rick's soils have a little bit of everything and he tests every field at least every third year, paying close attention to his pH levels and balancing his minerals.

Rick even blends his own organic fertilizer and maintains a 'recipe book' full of the customized formulas he's created for his different fields. "I hope I'm doing a better job in fine-tuning the micronutrients so instead of getting one generic blend, I'm adding only what the soil and the crop needs, and it varies per crop," Rick says. He keeps 20 components on the farm, allowing him to adjust his mixes with ease, and saving the markup from the limited organic fertilizer suppliers. "The balance is super important with organics," Rick tells us. "Organics force you to be a better farmer. If you aren't a

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"So you get the soil balanced, and now you've made the investment in all of these inputs," he continues. "Now let's keep that investment. A cover crop is one way of doing that." Rick has used cover crops from the beginning of his farming career. "I've tried them all—I've used them all," he says. "It just depends on what I have on hand, what's cheapest, and what I'm trying to accomplish." He's currently using a rotation of small grains, Austrian winter peas, red clover and even weeds. "Multiple species cover crops—well what's a weed?" Rick challenges. "As long as you don't let it go to seed."

Rick draws the line at no-till, though. “No-till vegetables are tough—and organically it’s even tougher.” With the cold northeastern climate, it wasn’t going to work for Rick’s operation. Plus, he realized that when you don’t incorporate your nutrients into the soil, they oxidize back into the atmosphere. Instead, he tills shallow and zones deep with his zone builder. “I’m getting the best of both worlds without killing my worms and without bringing up subsoil,” he says. “I like worms. It’s just incredible how much they improve the soil, and also indicate that it’s a good soil to begin with. If you don’t see worms, your soil is dead.”



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Rick has already noticed a difference in how his crops withstand severe weather. “It used to be, if it got really sloppy-wet in the fall, you’d be out there just paddling from one end of the field to the other,” he recalls. “You’d no more than plowed it, and it was soup. Now you don’t have that when you till shallow. You’ve got all of that support structure under there, plus all of the drainage holes from the worms and the decaying root systems that port the water out of there faster.” When growing vegetables, hours make a difference Rick explains. “In things like peas or pickles, from morning to afternoon it changes the grade. It goes from profitable to unprofitable within hours.”

Originally, Rick began exploring soil health practices to help control erosion and sequester the nutrients he had purchased, but it’s evolved into so much more. Soil health is vital to his organic and conventional crops alike. As an organic producer, it’s all about getting the nutrients from the soil and

recycling those nutrients into humus. Rick is also recognized as lake-friendly farmer due to his cover cropping practices and use of stream buffers. “I wanted to have buffers around my streams for a bunch of reasons,” he says. “Erosion, to keep the soil out of the water, to keep the water clean. But also with the vegetables there’s a lot of turning, especially with organic. There’s a lot of headland traffic, so the buffer zone duals as my headland.”

Throughout his journey, Rick has discovered that other organic growers are eager to share their knowledge and what has worked well on their farms. He’s learned a lot from attending various meetings and conferences with fellow growers, but he also takes time to research on his own. “Read, read, read and read some stuff that you wouldn’t normally read,” is his advice to other farmers. His conservation practices tend to resonate with his customers, especially his organic buyers who put a strong emphasis on telling the story of where their food came from. Rick happily obliges when they do, and laughs about the time when his son, who lives in Manhattan, was taking the elevator to Whole Foods and looked up

to see a giant photo of his dad standing in front of a cucumber wagon.

Over the years, Rick has looked at his soil health tests since transitioning to organic, and has continued to see his soil health improve with his vegetables, which he attributes to getting more small grains into his rotation, along with cover cropping, soil balancing and tile drainage. “I’m trying to—as much as I can afford it—to accelerate that because of this climate change we’re having right now,” he explains. “It’s going to be all about water management—the excess and lack thereof—because that’s what it’s going to be, wild swings. Tile drainage to get rid of the excess, then cover crops and soil tilth to hold it. That’s the goal. You’re never perfect, but you aim in that direction.”



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