#FridaysOnTheFarm: Life is a Peach

Each Friday meet farmers, producers, and landowners through our #FridaysOnTheFarm stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone.*

This Friday meet Russ Studebaker who owns Studebaker Farms in Fredericksburg, Texas. Russ' peaches have grown even sweeter with the help of conservation practices he has implemented in his orchard.

Peaches in Fredericksburg are not your garden variety peaches, nor will you find them in the produce department at your local grocery store. Instead, you must take a drive to the hilly areas west of Austin and stop at one of the peach stands intertwined with the vineyards along U.S. Highway 290.

Russ began Studebaker Farms in 2002 with his wife Lori and three sons. People come for the unique, old downtown shopping district, locally grown grapes and wine, and their famous peaches. From May to August, you can stop and get ripe, flavorful peaches that keep you coming back for more.

"I bought an old cotton farm that had been foreclosed on, while I was in the merchant marines, and continued going to sea for another 10 years," said Russ. "When my wife and I began our family, I knew we could grow our family while turning this farm, that was in pretty bad shape, into a peach orchard. It would be like the farms I grew up working on for my dad in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, where my father coached."

Raising the Tunnel

Studebaker was innovative and took a chance by installing high tunnels when they were first being developed. High tunnels protect plants from severe weather and allow farmers to extend their growing season much like a greenhouse, without the heating system, and the plants are grown in the ground.

"I was able to get the right high tunnels for the Texas Hill Country through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program," said Russ. "The high tunnel allows me to get peaches earlier in the season, irrigate using surface emitters that reduce root rot, apply pesticides more efficiently, and reduce the risk of nutrient runoff into the nearby creeks."

The high tunnels have proven to be a success after installing a few. Now he has more than 2,000 peach trees protected during the winters from freeze damage, which in the past had wiped out entire seasons.

"In 2013, we had a late freeze and I had burned 40 bales of hay, ran wind machines, and had helicopters running all night to keep the temperature about 2 degrees above freezing, and they still froze," he said. "I walked into my high tunnel and witnessed no damage, and we have had peaches every year on the protected trees ever since they were installed."

Value-added Conservation

Studebaker Farms implements multiple conservation practices to continue to be an innovator and a steward of the land. He no longer tills anything on the farm to reduce erosion and non-point source pollution.

"I decided to plant cover crops to improve my soil health, and I also added pollinator plants to the cover crop mix to enhance productivity, especially on my blackberry orchard," he said. "This helps multiple pollinator species like the monarch butterfly, which we see every year during the migration, and they add life buzzing around the farm."

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States weather ups and downs in the market and recover from natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations. Learn about additional programs.

For more information about USDA programs and services, contact your local USDA service center.

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