

# Enriching Soil While Producing Eggs, Pork and Beef

By Becky Gillette

COUSHATTA, Louisiana: Scott Sample was a self-professed “soil geek” in college.

He has a B.S. in soil science and feels he was fortunate to have a few progressive minded professors in college and was able to take courses on soil health, nutrient cycling, range-land ecology, and holistic thought and management.

After he graduated from college, he enjoyed working as a fly-fishing guide in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Colorado. When he and his wife, Emily, started talking about starting a family, they decided to move home to Shreveport, Louisiana. Scott had no intention of becoming a farmer.

“I took a soil remediation job in the oil field, but always in the back of my mind was the model of farming I learned about in college,” Scott said.

He started reading Joel Salatin, Greg Judy and Jim Gerrish books and *The Stockman Grass Farmer*. A proud graduate of SGF’s Joel Salatin Pastured Pork Production School, Scott raises about 60 to 90 hogs a year for direct-to-consumer sales. In mid-1900, the farm produced a healthy pecan crop. The pecan groves got overgrown, and the pigs have done a good job cleaning them up. “It’s been great,” Scott said. “And in the fall, they’ll mop up the pecans.”

They also have an eggmobile and host anywhere from 300 to 500 chickens at a given time. Layers are rotated around the farm. As their customer base grows, this is an area of the farm that they will be increasing as they plan to add an additional eggmobile.

They believe in a grass-based model. “Our farm, like many others, followed the mechanical/chemical post-industrial revolution model. Of the 200 acres we graze, 180 were pulled from row crop production. These fields had been farmed for cotton and soybeans for as long as I can remember. So, in 2017, our farming journey started with biologically dead soils with very little organic matter. Heavy tillage had left the soils barren with no residual cover for far too long.”

Based on the lack of forage quality, they could only finish animals on grass during a three-month window during spring green-up. The soil was too depleted initially to support a grassfed and grass-finished model,

nor was there much local consumer knowledge about the health benefits of grassfed beef. One lesson he learned was that he had to be willing to adjust his grass-finishing model to a hybrid grass/grain-finishing model for the sake of being a viable business with products in the freezer year-round.

“The answer for us was grain, which we started in July of 2021,” Scott said. “Choosing to feed out on grain was very difficult, so we came up with a model that would fit our goals. We carved out a centrally located, 20 acres pasture and designated it our “finish pasture.” Animals in the finish pasture are rotated; the only difference is a grain wagon accompanies them. We also raise anywhere from 60-80 growers. The grower herd is rotated heavily across the whole farm. And we have 25 cows in our cow-calf herd. These calves graduate to our grower herd, and are accompanied by purchased calves.”

They do currently offer a grass-finished product in mid-summer after spring green up. While they have plans to be 100 percent grass based, after the first two years, they couldn’t produce a quality product outside of spring and early summer. “Sure, it was grassfed, grass finished, but it ate like shoe leather,” Scott said. “And that’s exactly the feedback we received. We were slowly transitioning into a business that was holding animals over through an additional winter just to get them on spring green up. That’s just not a viable business model. We needed some consistent cash flow.

“I’ve thought long and hard about other alternatives to grain, like running seasonal stocker cattle or maybe another species of livestock but, truth be told, I’ve got my hands full with what I have. Ultimately, we just decided on the grain model I described earlier. And it was the best thing I did because I quit stressing about it and started putting all my focus on improving soil quality, fine tuning our fencing/water lines to support the daily moves, and other farm projects.”

They have two MiG (Management-intensive Grazing) herds, 25 in a cow-calf herd with its own isolated pasture, and 60 in their grower herd. Both herds are moved daily Monday through Friday and, when they can, on weekends.

They unroll quality hay across the farm that helps improve soil quality and they are increasing their egg production. Adding another egg mobile will help with soil fertility.

They started with Devon cattle, a good grass breed suitable to their mid-South climate. Since that time,

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they added an Angus/Hereford cross that is well-mannered and fit well into their system once trained on an electric fence.

In hindsight, he would not have purchased cows. "I did not grow up a cattleman and the learning curve has been steep when learning the nuts and bolts of a cow-calf operation," Scott said. "I believe all my SGF mentors told me through articles to start with grower cattle, but I ignored them

and bought the damn cows anyways."

Social media is their best advertising tool. Scott said while it is something he would never do in his personal life, a small-scale farm cannot operate without it. "And it turns out, I really enjoy it," he said. "We believe in a local food community 100 percent and interacting with customers has turned out to be very enjoyable. And customers love to hear me rant about our farm."

One of his favorite chores is rotating cattle. He finds the daily moves are meditative. "I'm pretty sure I could string temporary hot wire for days," he said. "I love the walking. I love sitting under a shade tree while a water trough fills. I love flipping cow patties. I love seeing the little micro-climates we're creating across the farm. Moving the cattle daily really allows me to walk the entirety of our farm and witness its seasonal pulse."

One thing he's learned is how difficult it is to nail down a carry capacity for their farm. "Our farm's carry capacity is a moving target," Scott said. "Due to our poor soil quality, we are very susceptible to dry conditions. We have too much forage and not enough cattle during spring green up. In mid-summer our soils become dry and cracked, and we shift to a situa-

tion of having too little forage and too many cattle. So, our drought plan is simple: increase organic matter."

They buy yearlings in the fall, which seems counterproductive to add additional winter feeding costs. However, they justify it by having eliminated the mechanical and chemical input costs on their farm. They purchase barn kept, high-quality hay. They unroll it and flake it using pitch forks, all the while keeping animals in a winter rotation. They look at the hay expense as a long-term solution for a better soil, and a driving force to help them one day become 100 percent grass-based.

One of the things he is most proud of is not putting out any permanent cross fences for their first two years of operation. Within the confines of their perimeter fence, they moved cattle 100 percent with temporary reels. That was a lot of work. But when they did put in permanent cross fences, they knew exactly where to put them.

As far as favorite products, if it is on the Jim Gerrish American Grazing Lands website, it is a product they will use.

Scott advocates farmers thinking about the carbon cycle and what it takes to become carbon neutral. Having an understanding of how soils evolved is also important, and they evolved by having biodiversity and ruminants on the landscape. "If every farmer would have an underlying goal of promoting healthy soils through holistic management practices, our soils would fill up with carbon," he said.

How can you farm with college debt, and no money to buy infrastructure? Scott doesn't shy away from the fact that supplemental income in whatever form may be necessary. "I'm not sure I would be here if it weren't for falling into some family money," he said. "We decided to take that and invest in the infrastructure necessary to farm the way we wanted. I'm not a cattleman, but rather someone who believes our soils are important and should be viewed as a natural resource for the sake of the planet and human health."

The Samples have a farm stand and farm store in Shreveport that is open by appointment. For more information, see the website <https://www.samplefarmla.com/>, send an email to [samplefarmla@gmail.com](mailto:samplefarmla@gmail.com), or call (318) 423-5122. ■

Becky Gillette is a staff writer based in Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

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