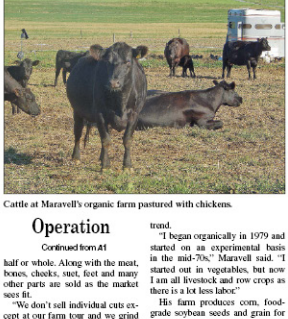


Cattle at Maravell's organic farm pastured with chickens.

Nick Maravell with his Angus cattle and pastured chicken layers in converted horse trailers.

Operation

Continued from A1

half or whole. Along with the meat, bones, cheeks, suet, feet and many other parts are sold as the market sees fit.

"We don't sell individual cuts except at our farm tour and we grind our poultry feed monthly so people can place an order, put down a deposit and pick up their feed, " he added.

Maravell started his operation before the current back-to-the-farm trend.

"I began organically in 1979 and started on an experimental basis in the mid-70s," Maravell said. "I started out in vegetables, but now I am all livestock and row crops as there is a lot less labor."

His farm produces corn, food-grade soybean seeds and grain for his birds.

Maravell found that it took three years to become organically certified, but it took five years for the rotations to improve the soil.

"You are dealing with a very diverse five system and it is interesting to see how the pieces fit together and improve on one another," he said. "The farm system becomes self-regulating. We raise a variety of crops that fix nitrogen and add organic matter to the soil."

Weeds are a challenge when it comes to row crops, so he cultivates them instead of sprays. A pre- and postemergent cultivation is performed on corn and soybeans with a rotary hoe or tine weeder depending on the soil conditions. Soybeans are cultivated three times and there is a eight- to 12-year rotation to help combat weed growth.

The rotation begins with corn.

"We will follow corn with a cover crop of rye and hairy vetch," Maravell explained. "Then we plant soybeans and we will follow that with barley cover crop. We will take the barley nurse crop as grain in June and we will no-till corn, cowpeas and buckwheat into the field for hay or baleage, and the hay will grow up through that straw we leave on the field. In August, we follow with an alfalfa/orchard grass/mixed hay we will keep for five years."

He also can drill cereal grains such as barley or rye into the hay directly after fourth cutting to provide additional forage or additional hay. Fields are grazed for two or three years.

Maravell plants for system stability rather than maximum yields. His farm fairs better during dry years than wet years, he has discovered. During dry years, he averages about 80 bushels of corn per acre; a good year might bring 125 to 150. Corn planting is delayed to reduce the chance of weeds and to promote quick growth.

"I have been fortunate in that my farms have had average to above-average soils here in Frederick County," Maravell said. "These soils are relatively easy to work and you can put most anything on them. I have arrived at what I do by building biodiversity into my operation in order to gain a certain amount of stability and resilience in my farming system."

Building up his diversity has not only helped his farm, it's grown his customer base.

"We direct-market so I don't have just one product or just one customer," he said. "I have hundreds and hundreds of customers and I have been lucky. The model that I have here in Buckeystown won't work if you are not near a metropolitan area, but I believe in multiple models and there are many ways to have a prosperous and productive farm."

As a way to draw more customers to his business, Maravell held an open house Oct. 17-18. Several hundred people showed up as part of the Frederick County Family Fun at the Farm Weekend. Activities included a hayride, a barbecue, seed sampling and asking questions about organic operations.

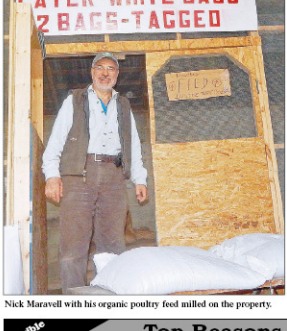
Organic farming has come a long way since he began his career. Maravell has advocated for organic policies during the past 30 to 40 years at the federal and state level.

"When I started you weren't allowed to use the 'o' word, but now it is accepted and we got a lot of support from the university and Extension," he said.

Maravell currently serves on the National Organic Standards board.

"I am looking to educate my customers and my policymakers to make it clear that organic farming has many things to offer that conventional farmers can take advantage of and now they see a lot of benefits to it, " Maravell said.

Rick Hemphill is a Freelance writer covering western Maryland and Northern Virginia.



Nick Maravell with his organic poultry feed milled on the property.

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