

Pizza Farm Gives Kids a Taste of Sustainable Ag

Louis and Isabel Reuschel, Golden, Illinois

Reuschel's Sustainable Demonstration Farm

Coordinator: Louis Reuschel

Location: Golden, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$3,800

Grant Year: 1999

Project Number: FNC99-283

Louis and Isabel Reuschel developed a sustainable demonstration farm so the public could view the production and processing of grain, as well as many conservation practices. They also created a "pizza farm" to show kids where food ingredients come from.

“Sustainable agriculture” isn't in most kids' vocabulary. But pizza is.

So Louis Reuschel and his wife Isabel decided to bring a fun, educational component to the 154-acre farm they converted to sustainable ag several years ago, with the addition of the "R Pizza Farm" in 2004.

"Young children aren't knowledgeable about sustainable ag," says Reuschel, the former owner of Ocean Farm in Golden, Illinois. "So we invested in the pizza farm, and that program brings a lot of youngsters out to visit. Once they're here, they view the whole program, and I think they get a really good feel as to why we do sustainable ag."

The "pizza" is a circle about 200 feet in diameter, with sections containing the different foods that go into pizza, such as wheat, tomatoes, peppers, onions, herbs, chickens, goats, calves, and pigs. A walkway around the pizza farm allows visitors to feed and pet the animals, as well as touch, taste, and smell the different ingredients.

"It lets them know where their food comes from and what it looked like before it got to their plates," says Reuschel. "I know they come away with a much better understanding of what goes into a pizza."



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Reuschel received his first SARE grant in 1999 to develop a sustainable demonstration farm. He converted his farm, near the restored, historic Golden Windmill grain mill, to allow the public to view the production and processing of grain.

"We've always been good stewards of soil and water," explains Reuschel. "We've done a lot of soil conservation work with NRCS and Extension over the years. So sustainable ag seemed like a natural thing to do, just another step forward from where we were at."

Some of the conservation practices on Ocean Farm include a native grass stand, a tree program, a pond constructed for fishing and personal enjoyment, as well as several different soil conservation practices.

In 2004, Reuschel received a second SARE grant to determine which of six different tomato varieties would produce the best quality tomatoes grown under organic conditions.

Another goal for the project was to determine the advantages of different growing conditions, so Reuschel planted five of the varieties in three different locations—a traditional garden setting, a hoop house, and a greenhouse. He also surveyed customers to determine their

favorite varieties. His project produced interesting, if not profitable, results.

"We used organic fish fertilizer on outside tomatoes and the traditional garden setting had a fairly good yield, although gophers, worms, and drought were a problem," says Reuschel. "Overall, the inside tomatoes yielded the best because they took about 75-percent less labor. We didn't have to water them as often, there were less weeds and bugs, and the season lasted about a month longer."

Reuschel also learned there is no single variety that can meet all customers' needs.

"Different customers prefer different varieties for their uses," he says. "One variety might have the best taste, but not be easy to use. Another might be easy to slice, but doesn't necessarily taste the best."

Reuschel was pleased to find out that there is a lot of interest in locally grown organic tomatoes.

"I live in a small rural town, and people appreciate high-quality food. We were able to sell all of the tomatoes we had to the restaurant, to the grocery store, and to the nursing home," he says. "The market is there. We could have even added several customers if we had more tomatoes."

Reuschel sold Ocean Farm to Bill York in the fall of 2006.

By Leanne Lucas