

Producer

Sarahlee Lawrence

Operation

Rainshadow Organics

NRCS Programs

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Organic Initiative
- Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP)



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— Sarahlee Lawrence

Sarahlee Lawrence deftly peels back the white drape of row cover from an interplanted row of organically-grown produce and flowers, inspecting for damage from the prior night's frigid temperatures. "Oh look, a melon!" she says with triumph in her voice. The small green-striped orb is partially hidden by leafy chard and yellow calendulas and it appears unscathed by the early frost. The 28-year-old farmer is pioneering organic production in the high desert of Central Oregon, where the growing season is short but the potential for market success is long.

A key component of Sarahlee's success in developing the organic food and flower growing operation of Rainshadow Organics has been her partnership with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The agency's field staff members have been providing Sarahlee with technical advice and cost-share funding. "I have to say that I couldn't do what I do without NRCS," says Sarahlee. "I approached NRCS a couple of years ago and started the process of making my farm organic." Working with NRCS District Conservationist Tom Bennett, Sarahlee has planned and implemented a nutrient management program and addressed the irrigation needs on her two-acre vegetable plot as well as the 25-acre field she is transitioning to organic. Future NRCS projects will enhance surrounding rangeland by the seeding of bunchgrass, forbs and native pollinators.



Tom has been able to help Sarahlee help her land through the application of two NRCS programs: The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative signup—a nationwide special initiative to provide financial assistance to National Organic Program (NOP) certified organic producers, as well as producers in the process of transitioning to organic production—and the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), a cooperative program to improve irrigation water efficiency and reduce energy consumption in the McKenzie Canyon project area.

Sarahlee grows more than 100 different varieties of produce on her two-acre parcel, from beets and beans to cabbages and strawberries. Long lines of drip tubing stretch the length of each raised wide row. Funding for the drip system came from NRCS' AWEP Program. "I could not have afforded nor done that by myself," says Sarahlee. "If I had to do this with a solid set hand line irrigation system, it wouldn't be the same. My plants wouldn't get the water they need, when they need it, without the drip irrigation system and the AWEP program. So, I'm very grateful to NRCS for what they have made possible for me here." The market for her produce includes the Redmond-area hospital, schools, restaurants and a thriving CSA program.

Next to the organic vegetable and flower operation, a 25-acre field stands gold with a conservation cover crop of ripening wheat. Closer inspection of the field reveals more than just wheat growing there. "I've been trying to find the best mix for cover cropping. This year I planted clover with the wheat," says Sarah. She is encouraged that her wheat has grown well without any external Nitrogen input. With the proper soil bacteria, legumes such as clover convert Nitrogen from the air to an available plant form, reducing or eliminating the need to add Nitrogen fertilizer to the soil. The field is an ideal illustration of land being made

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Over 100 different types of produce are grown on this two-acre parcel, ranging from beets and beans to cabbage and strawberries.



A drip irrigation system made possible by NRCS Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP)

ready to support certified organic production. "There is a practical reason for the three-year transition to organic," says Sarahlee. "It didn't happen overnight. I spent two years growing cover crops, composting, building the soil and preparing myself to grow organically." Sarahlee is planning to expand her produce operation onto some of this land with additional drip irrigation as the land is ready for certification.

"Sarahlee Lawrence is a perfect example of the hard work and innovative spirit of the Oregon farmers, ranchers, private and tribal landowners who have relied on NRCS' technically-trained conservationists to help them protect and improve natural resources on their property for the past 75 years," says Tom. "She is eager to learn and willing to work hard to do the right things both for the land and for her business." In the past ten years alone, NRCS has helped landowners like Sarahlee develop customized strategies to protect natural resources on more than 6.3 million acres. That's approximately 22 percent of the state's private and tribal lands.

"I think that organic gardening in Central Oregon is not a new thing, but I think our community here is ready to eat locally-grown, organically-grown food," says Sarahlee. "Getting it to a wider population is my goal and my life's work...at 28 I'm just at the beginning of it, but I think I will be doing it for a long, long time."

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(NRCS District Conservationist)

