



## NATURAL FARMING SYSTEMS IN THE SOUTH: AU NATUREL FARM

### VIDEO GUIDE

I. NATURAL FARMING - Paul and Alison Wiediger use natural farming practices, but no longer go through the process of having their farm certified organic because they believe their customers now trust they are using organic practices and do not require them to be certified. Because national law now requires annual certification by a USDA accredited certifier for those farms with annual sales over \$5,000 of products labeled as organic, the Wiedigers no longer use “organic” to define their growing practices. To learn more about organic certification, contact National Organic Program- <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm>

II. DIVERSE FARMING SYSTEM – This farm utilizes a diverse farming system. The Wiedigers are quick to point out that diversification is a strength and a weakness. In addition to requiring more knowledge and skill, diversity on a farm calls for more management. Producers are more likely to have conflicting demands on time with highly diverse farms. However, the Wiedigers believe the advantages of diversity far outweigh the disadvantages. The diversity on this farm includes;

1) A diversity of production systems such as

- greenhouse production – 2 heated greenhouse totaling 2,000 sq ft
- high tunnel production – 5 unheated hoopouses totaling 8,000 sq ft
- field production – 2.5 acres

This makes it possible for the Wiedigers to grow a wider variety of crops over a longer season. Selecting the appropriate production system for each crop during each time of the growing season improves crop yields and net profits. Risks are spread also, as a rainy season may hurt outdoor production, while greenhouse and hoopouse production will be less impacted. Most importantly for the Wiedigers, this means they have farm products to sell 12 months out of the year and don't have to reestablish a relationship with customers at the traditional beginning of the growing season. Instead they are continuously building their customer base.

2) A diversity of production practices such as

- Crop Rotation  
Reduces disease and pest risks, helps maintain balance of soil nutrients.

- Cover Cropping  
Builds healthy soil, attracts beneficial insects, reduces soil erosion and compaction, reduces nutrient leaching.
- Contoured Beds  
Makes efficient use of rolling landscape and reduces soil erosion.
- Drip Irrigation  
Makes efficient use of water, reduces soil erosion, reduces risk of plant fungal diseases.
- Mulch  
Reduces soil erosion, soil compaction, nutrient leaching, disease, and organic mulch helps build soil
- Beneficial insects  
Help pollinate crops or help keep pests in check (97% of insects found on farms are beneficial or neutral).
- Crop Variety Selection- Specialty Crops  
Reduces market risks by increasing diversity of buyers, market appeal, and niche market opportunities.
- Succession Planting  
Guarantees continuous harvests throughout a long growing season.

This diversity of production practices all work together to reduce risks by improving plant and soil health, increasing efficiency and yields, and lowering costs.

### 3) Diversity of crops

- Large variety of vegetable
- Large variety of flowers
- Perennial plants
- Potted herbs
- Chicken
- Eggs
- Beef

This allows the Wiedigers to have farm products to sell 12 months out of the year and gives them a number of profit centers, which spreads risk in case of crop failure. Again, by having products year round, they avoid the risk of losing customers “between seasons”.

### 4) Diversity of Markets

- Email distribution list  
Each week they email customers what farm products they have available and customers email back their order. The size and number of orders continue to increase due to the convenience to the customers.
- Farmer’s Market  
Two days a week they sell at local their farmer’s market. Because of their electronic orders, they go to market with 25-45% of their harvests already sold.

Having a diversity of markets makes the farmer less vulnerable if a market declines and it increases the opportunities for selling a greater quantity and variety of products. The email distribution list has the added advantage of allowing the Wiedigers access to customers year round, after the farmer’s market has closed for the winter.

## 5) Diversity of Marketing Strategies to Attract Customers

- Name of Farm is attention getting
- Events at Farm to show customers what they do and have to offer
- Presentations at local functions to show customers what they do and have to offer
- Market display, including on-the-spot bouquet making, to attract customers
- Website, a tool their professional customers will appreciate, to show what they do and what they have to offer
- Brochure is quick and easy to hand to potential customers
- Labels placed on farm products constantly remind customers of their farm
- Farm decisions are made with the customer in mind.
- Relationship building creates customers that care about the farmers and farm and are more loyal to them. This also makes the work more satisfying for the farmers.

Marketing drives this farm, says Paul Wiediger. By keeping marketing foremost in their planning, they reduce their risks of not being able to sell their products once they have produced them. They believe their relationship marketing is key to growing their market.

III. INTEGRATED FARMING SYSTEM - The Wiedigers operate with the assumption that everything on the farm is connected to the whole. This is exemplified in the way that they utilize their land. Steep hills are used for raising animals. Flatter land is used for raising crops. Manure from the animals is used to fertilize the crops.

IV. HOOPHOUSES OR HIGH TUNNELS - This is a key component of the success of this farm. Hoophouses make it possible for the Wiedigers to grow a wider variety of crops over a longer season. For the Wiedigers, this means they have farm products to sell 12 months out of the year and do not have to reestablish a relationship with customers at the traditional beginning of the growing season. It also means risks are minimized, as a rainy season may hurt outdoor production, while hoophouse production will be less impacted. Plus they get earlier yields than their competition, making it possible for them to sell at a higher price before the market is saturated. Tomatoes are 3-4 weeks earlier, for example and by having flowers when the farmer's market opens, they attract more customers to their booth. Also, flowers grown in hoophouses have longer stems, which have greater market value.

Other ways hoophouses help the Wiedigers reduce risks and improve profits are No rain splash on plants to cause disease or on crops to require lots of washing at harvesting time; Less weeds because water is targeted with drip irrigation to crops; and Higher quality crops. For example, the Wiedigers are able to take 95% of tomatoes grown in the high tunnels to market, but only 50% of those grown in the field.

- 1). Five 20 x 96 high tunnels, unheated
- 2). Two layers of plastic. Six mil plastic is used on the outside and IR (infrared) used on the inside to reflect heat back inside tunnel. This prevents winter soil temperature from dropping too low for soil microbial activity and plant growth.
- 3). A \$5 fan is used to keep the air pocket between the two layers of plastic.
- 4). No electric fans are used for ventilation - just vent windows.
- 5). Shade cloth is sometimes used on high tunnels growing salad mix in the heat of summer.
- 6). Drip irrigation is used to prevent fungal disease and to speed planting.

- 7). The 5 growing beds are permanent. With 15 inch walkways, the center bed is 48", the two on each side of it are 36" and the two beds on the edges are about 24".
- 8). More fertilizer applications are need over the year because of the intense crop production. For example, salad mix is seeded, harvest and replaced in 14-16 days.
- 4). The cost to build is \$2,000. The Wiedigers recover this cost in one year of high tunnel crop sales.
- 5). The plastic is replaced every 4 years at a cost of \$500.

To order the Wiediger's book on High Tunnels, contact them at Au Naturel Farm, 3298 Fairview Church Road, Smiths Grove, KY 42171, 270-749-4600, [www.aunaturelfarm.homestead.com](http://www.aunaturelfarm.homestead.com)

*The production of this video was a partnership between Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and the USDA Risk Management Agency. June 2003.*

Videos may be purchased for \$15 each. Please complete the [order form](#) and send check, made payable to Southern SAWG, to Pamela L. Corcoran, Executive Director, 2250 Sewell Lane, SW, Roanoke VA 24015.

end