

# Historic peanut crop goes to market

Georgia's first crop of certified organic peanuts went to market in 2007 with help from a SARE Research and Education Grant. The historic harvest came from Walker Farms of Screven County. Grower Relinda Walker tested varieties and management practices that could bring southeast peanut farmers closer to realizing a profitable market that has eluded them.

"Right now you're looking at a price difference of about 20 cents a pound for conventional peanuts compared to \$1 to \$1.20 a pound for certified organic," says Mark Boudreau of Hebert Green Agroecology of Asheville, NC.

Boudreau leads the three-state research team that is developing the system for organic peanuts in the Southeast. Arid western states like Texas and New Mexico produce most of the country's organic peanuts because humidity in the South increases pressure from weeds, insects and disease.

During the three-year study, disease resistant varieties, crop rotation and frequent cultivation have proved to be the most effective tools, according to Boudreau. The trials also show that approved pesticides Spinosad and neem oil provide significant reduction in direct thrips injury and tomato spotted wilt virus. Copper sprays and sulfur, in conjunction with planting resistant varieties provided sufficient control of leaf spot. Weed control remains the most limiting factor,



After three years of on-farm trials, Relinda Walker of Walker Farms had the satisfaction of marketing her certified organic peanuts to Whole Foods, Earth Fare and Fresh Market. Since there are no organic shellers in Georgia, Walker had to find buyers who would purchase unshelled nuts.

with cultivation being the only economically effective control so far.

"The first year I planted 10 acres and harrowed in most of it for lack of stand and weed pressure," says Relinda Walker. "Year two, I planted two acres and got a fair stand that was instantly taken over by nutsedge. The third year was a success, thanks to a total team effort. I planted a little more than two acres, and we harvested 3000 pounds per acre of beautiful healthy peanuts."

When it comes to marketing, lack of infrastructure is the challenge.

"We need certified organic shellers," says Boudreau. "These are the people who buy from the

farmers and then sell graded, shelled nuts to food manufacturers. Currently there aren't enough organic peanuts in Georgia to make it profitable for organic shellers, and farmers are reluctant to grow a crop without the assurance of a sheller who will pay a premium for certified peanuts."

Relinda Walker now serves as one of seven producer members on the Southern SARE Administrative Council.

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