

Value-added Agricultural Success Story



Rollins Farms

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture



Ed and Teresa Rollins developed a value-added agricultural product called R-GROW by composting farm waste.

Ed and Teresa Rollins began raising beef cattle in Giles County in the 1970s. When their children Debbie and Robert expressed interest in remaining on the farm, the family began exploring new enterprises to add income.

The family considered many options, including a greenhouse, dairy and swine, but eventually decided to produce eggs under contract. In 1993, they began with one layer house with 10,000 chickens, then added a second house the following year. Ed retired from his career as an electrician in 1995 to devote more time to the farming enterprise.

The poultry enterprise produced a considerable amount of waste. Coincidentally, the topic came up at a meeting between Giles County Extension Agent James Dennis Taylor (now retired) and the local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) agent. The NRCS proposed a 90 percent cost-share project to construct a dry-stack shed for composting poultry wastes. Their first try at composting was nasty, dirty and smelly. Another drawback was that the compost could not be removed easily.

Ed began researching and testing other composting methods. Eventually, he contacted UT Extension and Tennessee Department of Agriculture specialists who assisted in perfecting the five-phase system of composting to create a high-quality, low-odor compost product called R-GROW. They also trained the Rollins how to properly monitor and test their product to verify stability and nutrient content.

Packaging and marketing R-GROW have evolved along the way. Ed and Teresa originally sold the compost in bulk but began receiving requests to sell in bags. The first bags were clear, 50-pound bags. Sales increased, but not at the rate they had hoped. Ed began visiting the stores to check the product. In many cases he discovered that retailers were complaining of broken bags, and the bags just didn't stand out among the multitude of other bagged products.



R-GROW organic soil conditioner exemplifies the ultimate example of a value-added product, taking farm waste and turning it into a \$300 per ton revenue-generating enterprise.

For additional information, contact:

**Center for Profitable Agriculture
University of Tennessee Extension
P.O. Box 1819
Spring Hill, TN 37174-1819
Phone: 931-486-2777
Fax: 931-486-0141
cpa@utk.edu
<http://cpa.utk.edu>**

"Specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture really helped us," says Ed. "First, Rob Holland recommended we survey our target market." Afterwards, Ed and Teresa met with Rob again and incorporated the survey results to redesign the new package. Sales increased rapidly, so they soon had to change their production practices to keep up with demand. "We invested in the conveyors and an automatic bagger. Automating has made life easier," says Ed.

R-GROW is marketed directly to consumers as well as through independent retailers such as garden centers and co-ops. The market took years to build. Though it is time-consuming, Ed has discovered that one-on-one contact with store managers and personally delivering *R-GROW* are the most effective ways to gain market access, monitor quality of displays and educate wholesale and retail customers. "I have a personal rapport with each and every client. I educate the managers, so they can recommend our product to customers. I do what it takes to make sure our product is selling and keep people happy. When they have a concern, they know they can come straight to me."

Customer trust and word-of-mouth advertising have been by far the most effective advertising for *R-GROW*." In addition, we've relied on brochures, and use the *Pick Tennessee Products* logo. We recently added a Web site and we do a lot of giveaways," Ed points out.

Despite the obvious success of *R-GROW*, it comprises only 20 percent of their total farm income. "It gives us a buffer for when poultry prices are down," Ed says. "Every little thing helps." In addition to the poultry and *R-GROW*, the Rollins family continues to raise cattle, maintain a hunt-lease agreement, harvest select timber on their property and sell honey.

The family operates their business without outside labor, but things could change. When Ed and Teresa decide to step back from the business and into retirement, they will hand over the reins to their children. Robert will concentrate on production, while Debbie will take over the marketing responsibilities. Besides having an excellent product, it is the good relationships the Rollins family has cultivated that have them poised for continued success in their future business ventures.

The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

Visit the UT Extension Web site at
<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/>

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