

WASHINGTON COUNTY **SPOTLIGHT 2011**

Mighty Grow is putting the 'fruit' back in Fruitdale

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A few years ago, Michael and Anne LaBelle made some life-changing decisions. Realizing that the construction industry was declining, and anticipating the coming housing bust, they closed their construction business in Dallas and devoted themselves to a new business fueled by passion for growing nutritious and delicious food. Michael, a native of Meridian, MS, wanted to get out of the big D and return to the fresh air and fertile ground of home. His happiest childhood memories are of long, summer days tending the crops and cattle with his Paw on the family farm north of Meridian.

Finding Fruitdale - In fall of 2008, the LaBelles left Dallas, formed MightyGrow, Inc., and began seeking investors to fund a company that would convert chicken litter (an abundant bi-product of the local poultry industry) to an organic fertilizer that could be used by certified organic growers. In late 2009, Michael met Mitchell Coaker of Fruitdale. Mitchell brokers large quantities of poultry litter, and had been thinking for some time that it would be good to somehow make chicken litter more easy to handle and less offensive to neighbors. Once Michael and Mitchell got together, things just started to fall into place.

The LaBelles had spent 2009 in central Mississippi unsuccessfully trying to find an appropriate site for their business. Mitchell told Michael about the former Price Logging property off County Road 1. It was everything the LaBelles had been looking for, and they soon became the newest residents of Fruitdale. The warm welcome and support of the Washington County Commissioners confirmed their decision to locate their business in Alabama, and they loved the fact that their products would say, "Made in Fruitdale, Alabama."

Putting the "fruit" in Fruitdale - There is nothing better than fruit production to exemplify growth and fertility. Fate had brought the LaBelles to the perfect place with the perfect name! The forty-acre property was ideal because it allowed ample space for fertilizer manufacturing, plus land for raised-bed vegetable gardens and an organic pick-your-own fruit orchard. A common misconception is that you cannot grow fruit this far south using purely organic methods. Michael is challenging this conventional wisdom, so stay tuned! MightyGrow is planting strawberries and blueberries that should be ready for market in 2012. They are applying to have fruit and vegetable production acreage certified organic, and have already obtained their "Certified Naturally Grown" credentials.

MightyGrow fertilizer - Their signature product is poultry litter based MightyGrow Living Organic Fertilizer. Using a proprietary microbial process, raw poultry litter is converted to a safe, low-odor, slow-release, all-purpose fertilizer. Two important benefits set MightyGrow apart from similar products. First, the beneficial microbes used to process the litter make MightyGrow a living fertilizer, ideal for jump-starting soil that has



Michael and Anne LaBelle

been sterilized by synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Second, MightyGrow is fortified with locally-mined trace minerals, essential elements for both plant and human health. MightyGrow Living Organic Fertilizer has been reviewed for compliance with the National Organic Program and is a registered product approved for use in certified organic farming.

Hay Honey liquid cattle feed - Always on the lookout for new opportunities, and seeking additional products that could be offered locally, Michael formulated Hay Honey, a highly nutritious liquid cattle feed. Hay Honey is being gobbled up by area cows, horses, pigs and sheep. There are even reports of local chickens getting in on the action! Mitchell Coaker's cattle happily volunteered to test the new product and you can see them in action on a video at www.mightygrow.net. Hay Honey is a corn distiller's syrup that has been improved with the addition of trace minerals, molasses and pro-biotics. A primary benefit is the fact that Hay Honey can be applied to old hay, keeping

it from going to waste.

Sustainable gardening workshops - True "food safety" comes from developing the skills and resources to feed your family. MightyGrow will be offering low-cost workshops to assist folks who are interested in learning to grow their own food using the sustainable methods that our great-grandparents used. The goal is to uproot

the misconception that it is easier to grow with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. The MightyGrow philosophy is that you can try to fight mother nature, but she will eventually give you a spankin'! Growing food naturally is simpler, costs less and takes less time because it works with nature. Food Safety Workshops will include:

Raised bed gardening - seasoned gardeners and newbies alike will learn simple step-by-step methods for establishing a new garden with an emphasis on low to no maintenance. With several examples already built and planted, folks will see how easy it is to have fresh, nutritious veggies right out their own back doors.

Seasonal bed prep - We are blessed to live in an area where we can grow wonderful food year-round! Seasonal workshops will provide simple methods for preparing the garden for year-round produce. Learn what to plant in various seasons, with tips for getting through the winter cold and summer heat.

Seed keeping - Stop paying for seeds and sets! Folks will learn: how to process their own seeds for storage; methods for maximum germination; which types save well; seed-keeping methods and shelf-life.

If you would like to be notified of upcoming workshops, send an email to workshops@mightygrow.net.

Coming full circle - On a recent visit with family in Meridian, Michael's mother brought back a memory that he had long forgotten. As a child working with Paw in the fields, Michael became familiar with the practice of using cow manure for fertilizer. His mother recalls that one fall, Michael got the notion to gather up manure where the cows were bedding. He built a bin and composted the manure over the winter. Next spring, Michael ran an ad in the paper and sold his entire inventory, one pickup load of compost, for \$20. The family got a big laugh out of the story, realizing that Michael's first entrepreneurial enterprise was not too far removed in practice or location from his present one.

The LaBelles welcome the public, so stop by their facility on Edward Loper Road in Fruitdale to say "hello" and take a tour of the raised bed gardens. Both Michael and Anne are passionate about what they do, and it shows in their conversation, their workshops and their gardens. Don't be surprised if they send you home with a bag of turnips, or whatever might be in season!

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