



## The *New* American Farmer

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Lucien Samuel & Benita Martin

Estate Bordeaux, St. Thomas

### Summary of Operation

■ *Vegetables, tropical fruit and herbs on 2.5 acres*

■ *Direct sales through farmers' cooperative*

■ *Educational center for children*

### Problems Addressed

*Maintaining the farming culture.* Many forces combine to make produce farming on the tiny island of St. Thomas a challenge: a protracted dry season, steep terrain and complicated leasing arrangements operated by the government, which owns most of the tillable land. The difficulties are causing young people to dismiss farming as an option, something Lucien Samuel and Benita Martin try to combat by demonstrating how a small farm can be profitable and provide the base for ecologically friendly living.

*Good stewardship in a fragile environment.* The volcanic island of St. Thomas is tropical, with steep hillsides and lots of rainfall at certain times of the year. Farmers must try to conserve the soil, or see it wash into the Atlantic.

### Background

Lucien Samuel, the youngest of 10 siblings, is one of the only members of his family to stay in St. Thomas, one of the three U.S. Virgin Island protectorates. Samuel says he never seriously considered leaving USVI's second-biggest island, especially after he married Benita Martin, a teacher, and their son, Lukata, was born.

Raised on a farm his parents operated mostly as a means to feed their large family, Samuel grew up helping raise a large garden full of produce as well as chickens and goats. He spent his early adult years working as a handyman in some of the larger communities on the island. But when he decided to farm, he returned to Estate Bordeaux on the northern part of St. Thomas, where he grew up. Benita, a Michigan native, knew nothing about farming, but has come to enjoy it as “one of the best, most basic things a person can do.”

The setting, Samuel knew, wasn't ideal for growing produce. Like the rest of St. Thomas, the plot was steeply sloped. He'd need to terrace it, make contingencies for both pounding rains and long dry spells, and build his own shelter.

He's been at it more than five years now, and in addition to the multiple terraces he's built — four-feet high, five- to 12-foot wide and 40-foot long, with an extensive drainage system — he has constructed a house powered by solar energy and plumbed with gravity-fed rainwater from a tank atop the house.

### Focal Point of Operation — Fresh produce and herbs and cooperative marketing

The list is long and diverse, but it rolls off Samuel's tongue effortlessly, suggesting how often he recites

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it to shoppers at the markets in Estate Bordeaux: “Papaya, pumpkins, peas, okra, sweet peppers, guava, plums, soursap apples, cherries, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, onions, carrots, beets, lemon grass, basil, Spanish needle, sage, peppermint,” and “healing bushes,” the leaves of which are used for medicinal teas and salves.

It’s a lot of product cultivated in a small space, making Samuel’s operation a combination nursery, orchard and garden, and a school as well. The extended, almost year-round, growing season helps. The average annual temperature is in the mid-70s, and the only factor that really stops cultivation, for a period of six weeks or so each year, is the predictable dry spell in mid-to late-summer.

“I’ve put my heart into this place,” Samuel says, referring to many hours removing trees, working the soil, building rock terraces, amending his beds with composted sheep and cow manure, and running drip lines for his irrigation system.

From extensive reading, and consultation with other farmers on the island as well as the mainland U.S., Samuel was inspired to try “companion planting,” which pairs crops that provide symbiotic advantages. Since then, he has become a firm believer, mostly because it allows more plants to be grown in concentrated areas, but also because he’s observed the beneficial relationships. He plants cucumbers among his stands of lemongrass, for example, because the crawling vines take advantage of the substantial grass stalks. He plants basil alongside collard greens because the basil wards off pests, and intersperses marigolds with mint for the same benefit.

To avoid depleting the soil, a constant danger in a climate that allows nearly year-round cultivation, Samuel devised a rota-

tion that includes a rest period after two crops. For example, he’ll follow a tomato crop with a nearly-immediate planting of basil, then harvest the basil and allow the patch a several-month rest. During that fallow phase, he applies dense blankets of leaves along with composted manure and kitchen waste.

Each Saturday during the season, Samuel participates in a farmers market in Estate Bordeaux. The small town is relatively removed from the more intense tourist activity in the island’s center, so he also sells his produce at a monthly market sponsored by a growers’ co-op he and Benita helped form in 1993. Today, 35 members comprise “We Grow Food, Inc.”

Samuel and Martin have worked with other co-op members to attract larger crowds to the markets. Their annual fair has been the most successful. Held in conjunction with the traditional Caribbean Carnival, the fair features petting zoos, displays of farming equipment and practices, and lots of fresh food. The fair attracts as many as 6,000 people in a weekend.

His energy and love for the farm drives him to try to pass on his passion to the children in his community. With Benita, he coordinates field trips, hosting groups of as many as 20 school children, demonstrating his unique handmade, alternative systems of water and energy delivery.

“I try to show them what a joy it is to work with your hands and how much people can do for themselves,” he says. “That’s much easier in a rural setting.”

#### **Economics and Profitability**

Samuel’s farm feeds him and his vegetarian family well throughout the year. The educational aspect — the opportunity it affords to

teach children about agriculture and the environment — is important to him, too. “Farming’s just a part of what I do to make money each year, even if it’s the part that matters most to me,” he says.

His income from the produce he sells via both outlets nets about \$8,000 each year. His off-farm work — carpentry and handyman jobs — and Benita’s teaching salary ensure they “get by all right.” Well enough, he continues, that he does not request payment from the schools and other institutions that bring children to his farm.

#### **Environmental Benefits**

Samuel cleared his land by hand, removing only enough trees and underbrush to provide the sunlight his produce needs. He also terraced the acreage by hand, using large volcanic rocks, and incorporated channels to harvest some rainfall and divert the excess. In typical fashion, he retained all the wood from the trees he felled for use in his house and other outbuildings.

His farm isn’t the only one in his steeply sloped section of St. Thomas, but it is the only one so extensively terraced. The terraces allow him to cultivate a wider range of fruit, vegetables and herbs than his neighbors, in addition to conserving topsoil and water. Samuel mulches heavily to retain moisture as well as suppress weeds, and applies compost during fallow periods. The bulk of the compost he uses is sheep manure, harvested from a friend’s farm four to six times each year.

These soil amendments help establish the kind of tilth and friability that makes his ground less prone to erosion. The other vitally important factor, he said, is the drip irrigation system he and Benita have arranged across each of his tillable patches. From a communal pond above them, made

available through a government grant to their co-op, they have installed gravity-fed lines that lessen the effects of the dry season. The lines also simplify their rainfall collection efforts; they and their neighboring farmers — four of whom are co-op members — divert as much rainwater as possible into the collection pond, and channel the overflow through spillways that skirt the tilled patches.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Samuel's kind of intensive hillside farming calls for "lots of hands," he says, and he often gains those hands from the children and adults who come to learn about the diversity on his farm and the ecology of conserving soil, fertility and water. "I put them to work, and they love it," he said.

There's no better way to teach farming than to encourage people to get their hands into the soil, Samuel says. "They have to understand that's where learning starts," he adds. Samuel uses his farm as a demonstration tool, and encourages visitors to participate in the work of keeping it productive.

Samuel lives in the same village in which he was born, just doors away from his third grade teacher. He sees another former teacher regularly at his market stand, and regularly does chores for his aging mother. He says he loves the rootedness, the regular contact with people who have known him so long, and loves being able to "do for them," whether it means giving them nourishing produce or repairing their cars.

He's interested in making his community a better place, and the produce and educational opportunities for children help him pursue that interest. And while he spends a good deal of time managing both components, the work still affords a flexibility he treasures.

He and his family enjoy dealing directly with customers at the farmers market. Preparation is hectic as they harvest, wash and prepare their goods before it opens, but the market itself is such an energetic gathering of diverse people, Samuel says it feels more like a festive gathering than work. The same is true of the farmers' co-op.



Lucien Samuel holds a cashew nut, one of the products he markets through the "We Grow Food, Inc." cooperative.

### Transition Advice

"Get help," Samuel says, referring not so much to expert advice as to the hands-on hard work of transforming an unlikely plot into a productive farm. Getting volunteers, like his educationally oriented visitors, is one way to get that help. He says the same can be done by almost anyone who has lots of farm work and few resources, especially those with plots small enough to be worked by hand.

"Everyone benefits," he said. "Find people who want to learn about farming and the environment, and show them what they can do."

### The Future

Samuel is concerned about the diminishing number of farmers on the islands. "The

average age is getting older and older," he says, "and I can't see who is going to replace them." That's why he intends to continue investing energy into the educational aspect of his farm. He wants to convince children from all over the islands that farming offers a means for at least some of them to remain there and earn a good living rather than

going off to the States or elsewhere to find careers and start families.

"You have to be flexible and do other things the way I do," he says, "but farming can be a good base for staying here, enjoying life and helping your community." He said the best way to prove that is to keep living as he does and enjoying it.

■ David Mudd

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*Editor's note: New in 2005*