

LOCALLY GROWN  
& OPERATED

# Fresh, Tasty and Georgia-Grown

Hydro grower supplies locals  
with top tomatoes in off-season

**Who:** Billy Blanks Jr.

**What:** Rocking B Farms

**Where:** Macon County, Georgia

I didn't start out as a tomato farmer. I grew up in Macon County, Ga., and decided to come back here to live. Previously I had worked in law enforcement for 19 years, and after that I ran a bail-bond company for another five.

I knew I had to find a way to make a living. This is a small rural county, and most everyone around here farms. So I did a lot of research for about a year or so. I went online and did research about hydroponics. There was a lot of information about different types of greenhouses, nutrient systems, lighting, the many different aspects of doing hydroponics successfully. I was interested in learning all I could to do this thing right. I take a lot of farm publications, including Growing Edge, and I was reading a lot of articles about people who were doing hydroponics and making a living at it.

I decided to drive to CropKing in Ohio to get a good look at how these things work. I learned a lot about people who have done this on many levels, but I thought that if I was going to try this I had a lot to learn before I invested in what it would take to make this work for me.

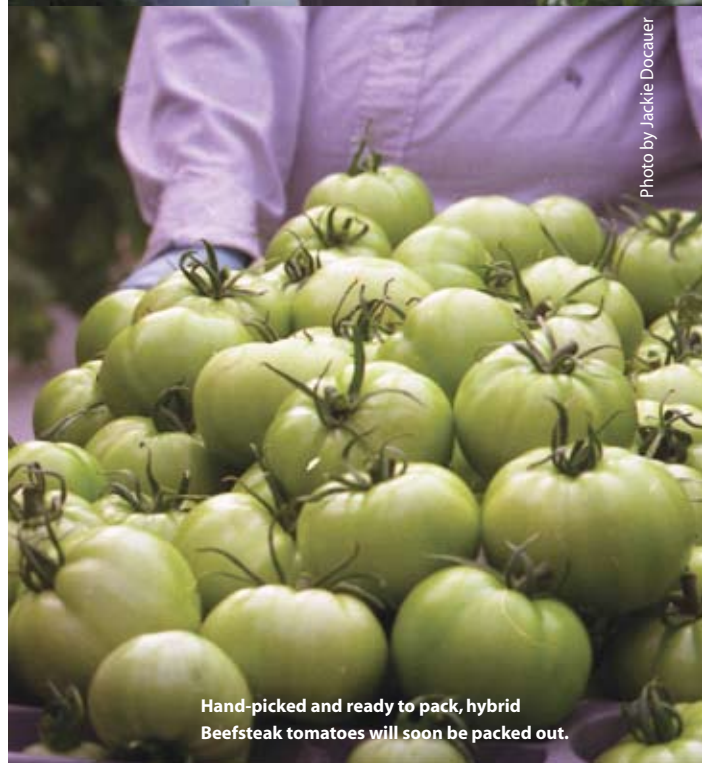
As I read about people here and there starting with one greenhouse and expanding to more I could tell that it is a viable way to make a living. But it's new to this area, so there is no way to figure out whether you can do it or not. So I said to myself that I just have to make up my mind and get in there and do it!

I have about 250 acres here. Six acres are in pecan trees and that's it. I work full time tending to my greenhouses and farm stand. Hydroponics is like regular farming in some ways except that I didn't have to have a whole lot of land or machinery. I use my cattle brand Rocking B as the name of my business.

I began growing in February last year, and this year is my first full year of production. I have five full-time employees who help me grow in two



Billy Blanks and his farm manager Emily Lozano admire hydroponic greenhouse tomatoes ready for harvest at Blanks' Rocking B Farms.



Hand-picked and ready to pack, hybrid Beefsteak tomatoes will soon be packed out.

greenhouses.

My first two crops of tomatoes were grown in CropKing's two-bay gutter-connect 44-by-128-foot greenhouse. It has an 8-foot entrance with an insect dispersal fan used to blow off any dust or pollen which might get carried in on a person's clothes or feet. Employees or visitors are required to put on disposable booties and gloves before entering the greenhouse. The greenhouse is kept practically lab-clean.

We have boxes of bees for pollination. So far we have not had any problems with any pests, mildew or fungus. We have a NFT system with no supplemental lighting. At the time I was learning about this system I attended a class at CropKing and learned that Georgia is one of the few states that has more than enough sunlight during winter months to grow without artificial lighting, so I didn't invest in grow lights. So far, that's working.

The entire operation is computerized including the fans, CO2 generator and the nutrient-injector system. I use the micro-mix nutrient from CropKing and several minerals are added to the solution. At the back of the greenhouse there is an evaporative cooling pad which, along with the air moving through the vent tubes, helps adjust the temperatures and humidity inside.

I use propane gas as a supplement in the winter for both heat and humidity control, and I also have electric heat in the floor. Because I contract for a specific amount of gas in the fall, increases in gas prices so far have not affected my costs. And a milder-than-usual winter helped as well.

### To Market, to Market

What people want is a good tasting tomato in the winter that is locally grown. We grow F1 Trust hybrid Beefsteak tomatoes. I bought the seeds from CropKing. Last year, the yield was an average of 2,100 pounds per week. I got rid of all of those with the exception of a few I kept for myself or gave away as samples. That's my marketing strategy. There are a whole lot of field-grown tomatoes around here, and I can't compete with them on price. That's why I went with the hydroponic system—to achieve an out-of-season crop with the absolute best taste and highest quality.

These are large, firm and sweet tomatoes. I used to take boxes of the tomatoes out to different stores and say if these are not the best tasting tomatoes you ever had, then just throw them away and you don't owe me a thing. Or, put them out and if they sell, pay me, if not, don't. I gave away a lot to people I know who would give them to people they know. People would end up calling me and buying them after they tried them. The stores would come and get more.

Sale price varies depends on what part of the season it is. For instance, earlier this



Photo by Jackie Docauer

Above: Pickers at Rocking B Farms wear gloves to avoid bruising and contamination of fruit. Below: Employees fill a shipping box with freshly picked tomatoes at Rocking B Farms in Macon County, Ga.



Photo by Jackie Docauer

year Florida tomatoes hit the market at less than \$1 per pound, so I dropped my price. In the winter, my 20-pound box sells for between \$27-\$29—that's \$1.35-\$1.45 a pound. After more tomatoes hit the market locally, my box price might drop to \$20 or less.

In time word spread about how good these tomatoes were, and other than that I haven't had to do much to sell them. I guess you could call it hand-to-mouth marketing! All of my customers from last year have been calling to get their tomatoes. I just put up another greenhouse that is twice the size of my first one. That will triple my total yield to more than 6,000 pounds a week. I have some large customers lined up for those, people who were looking to buy from me last year, but I couldn't grow enough to meet their demand. This year I can.

I tell people if they get a bad tomato or box, let me know and I will replace it with a good one. That's what I am going for—a guaranteed good product. I plan to still be doing this 20-25 years from now and will likely expand into other crops. So what I am establishing now is my reputation for quality produce. If I do that, I should be able to make a go of it. 🍅

### Resources

Crop King  
[www.cropking.com](http://www.cropking.com)

With picking about to begin, Billy Blanks inspects his tomato crop.

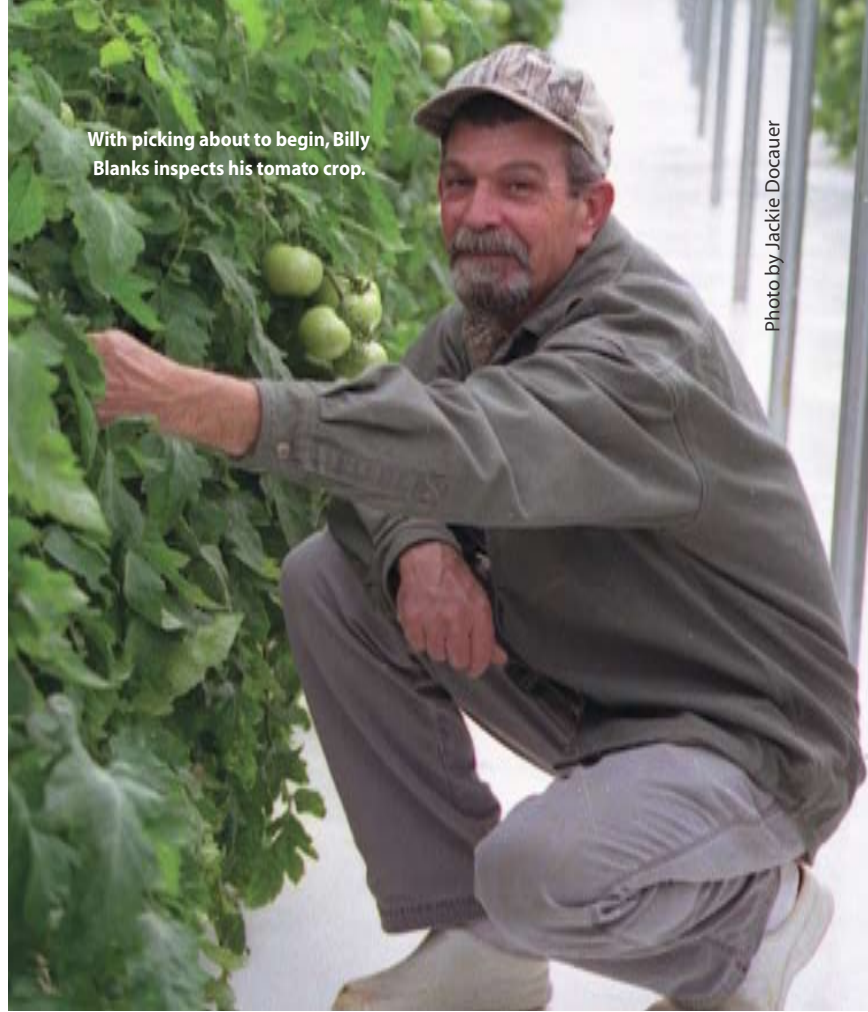


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