

Field of Greens

Posted: 4/22/2009 - 9:52:02 PM

Organic Farming takes Root on L.I.</< p>

By Adam Goebel

Just off Spagnoli Road in Old Bethpage is an unmarked fence, and on a frigid Saturday in early April that is where I sat, in my car, bracing myself for the physical labor ahead. The gate is the entrance to the Restoration Farm, the only certified organic farm in Nassau County. Those who know me would scoff at the idea of me doing farm work. But despite this, the word “organic” convinced me that this would be special. So after putting on a ski jacket and winter gloves, I hopped out of my car and pushed my body through the wind a quarter-mile to the farmhouse. For my first assignment, I was handed a machete and pointed to a distant field where I was to clear brush. “Swing low,” I was instructed, so that the brush wouldn’t hit my face. Needless to say, this was the least of my concerns.

Two days later, on the other side of the Island, in Riverhead, I again readied myself for more farm work in the same frigid temperatures—this time at Garden of Eve, one of 18 organic farms in Suffolk County. After a walk down a dirt path past a petting zoo and a chicken coop, I found myself before several greenhouses. Once inside one of the sauna-like dwellings, I was greeted with dirt, seeds and flats, which are trays used to germinate those seeds. This time, instead of struggling to keep warm or keep from tiring, I was struggling to keep cool and enthused.

At Restoration Farm, when I grew leery of the tool I was using, I moved to digging holes for trestles with a posthole digger. But at Garden of Eve the only option was another packet of seeds. Still, both were strangely fulfilling.

Down on the Farm

Restoration Farm, a 7-acre plot at Old Bethpage Village Restoration, and Garden of Eve, spread across 100 acres, couldn’t be more distinct from one another if they were in separate countries. Restoration Farm borrows many components of the family farms from the Pre-Industrial Era, while Garden of Eve uses mass-production farming techniques in its aims for higher output and cheaper prices with the help of modern machinery. Both have visitors rethinking any preconceived ideas they may have about organic farming.

Visiting the two, the disparity is evident. Restoration Farm was established as a part of the Healthy Nassau Campaign, a government initiative intended to make county residents healthier. At Restoration, Caroline Fanning and Dan Holmes are the head growers, and are involved in every aspect that goes into growing crops as they work side by side with the volunteers. They blend in with their casual attire of jeans and sweatshirts, only exercising their know-how when asked a question.

At Garden of Eve, each task is individualized so the team can work together like a well-oiled machine. Melissa Rebholz, a farm stand manager apprentice, is tasked with seeding flowers in the greenhouse, while Dan Machin, another farm manager apprentice, builds a deer fence to protect the germinated plants once they are moved outdoors from the greenhouses into the fields. Across the property, the hum of the tractor, driven by the farm's owner, Chris Kaplan-Walbrecht, can be heard as he breaks up and smoothes the fields with a roller in tow.

He looks like the storybook farmer in his blue overalls, yellow North Face jacket, gray ski cap with a tortoise on it, and brown boots—an Old MacDonald for a new era, he's a man who has spent most of his life on farms. The land itself belongs to the family of Chris' wife, Eve-Kaplan Walbrecht, who had purchased the land from a developer more than three decades ago. The family rented it to several farmers until 2001, when Chris and Eve decided to lease the land.

Although they come in a range of sizes, and techniques may vary, organic farms are working to overcome misconceptions. Both the Organic Trade Association (OTA), a national organization, and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) indicate that a significant segment of consumers are increasingly opting for organic foods. Sales of organic fruits and vegetables in 2006, the last year the OTA has statistics for, were \$6.6 billion, a 24 percent growth from the previous year.

Those who eat organically want food free of chemical pesticides and rely on organic farmers who are certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program, which ensures organic farmers meet legal standards. But because there are many small farms that want to avoid paying the fee to be certified organic, some simply sign the "farmer's pledge" on NOFA-NY's website.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to organic farms. The cost and scale can be minimal, like when First Lady Michelle Obama recently planted an organic garden in the White House lawn, or as large as Garden of Eve, which lies in Long Island's farm region on the East End. For some, it just might be fun to try something different, or for others, it might be a job, or even a calling. But chief among the reasons to go organic is to avoid eating food that has been contaminated with pesticides and any unforeseen side effects that result from

having such chemicals in the human body.

Aside from avoiding synthetic pesticides, the USDA requires that certified organic farms refrain from using fertilizer made from sewage sludge or chemicals. It also requires organic farmers avoid plant seeds that are genetically modified and would not be possible naturally.

“Why would you use poison to grow plants?” asks Jordon Colom, a volunteer at Garden of Eve who works at Eat Records, a record store and organic café in Brooklyn. “Why would you give children hormones and chemicals?”

The farmers’ dedicated customer base is intent on sticking with the organic movement and makes it clear that the demand is not drying up with the economy.

“The signs are that it will definitely be a double-digit growth, and that is phenomenal,” says OTA spokeswoman Barbara Haumann. “And the reason is price, since many organic companies offer coupons online, making their products extremely competitive, and increased convenience, since they are now found more frequently at mainstream stores.”

Local organic retailers also say their patrons are devoted, even if they may not eat a 100-percent organic diet. “It doesn’t have to be an all-or-nothing thing,” says Kathy Gerdes, a partner at Feel Goods Healthy Family Café in St. James. Educated shoppers often check out which fruits and veggies are known to absorb the most chemicals on the Environmental Working Group’s website, www.ewg.com, so they know what fruits and vegetables may be harmful, and from there decide on the specific organic produce they need.

Then there’s the taste. “I do taste the difference in organic spinach,” Gerdes says, adding that organic carrots are often crisper and sweeter. The OTA attributes the fresher taste to better-balanced soils.

Health benefits are plentiful as well. Organic ketchup, for example, has five times as much lycopene—an anti-oxidant that is beneficial to prostate health—as regular ketchup, according to Gerdes. Organic honey has been said to immunize allergy sufferers, according to one local organic farmer.

However, Gerdes notes that budget concerns have caused some families to find it difficult to maintain an organic diet. Some say the cost can also be balanced out when factoring in the cost of eating out versus cooking meals at home. “People are willing to spend more when cooking on their own, because instead of going out they can buy a lot of organic produce,” says Kaplan-Walbrecht.

Back on the farm, a few other misconceptions were put out to pasture. Tom Farre, a Restoration Farm volunteer, admits, as he walks to an adjoining field to clear brush, that he misunderstood what organic farming was before he started visiting. “I always figured that you wouldn’t get such big yields if you didn’t use

chemical fertilizers,” he says. Now he is a regular, pointing out the different fields and what will be grown on them.

Kaplan-Walbrecht says that some conventional farmers have told him that after rainfall, they must reapply fertilizer to their crops, because the original application washes away. Organic fertilizers are not water soluble, and only need to be put down once every six months to a year, regardless of the weather, as organic fertilizer breaks down slowly when in contact with other organic materials, says the Garden of Eve owner.

Holmes at Restoration Farms believes that the hard work required for organic farming is part of the appeal. “Why do I choose this versus conventional farming?” he asks rhetorically. “Because it’s more of a challenge.” Holmes doesn’t believe that he would enjoy conventional farming at all, since using chemicals and other manmade stimulants to ease the process makes it “less real,” he says, although he admits that he never worked a conventional farm. It was because of his work on an organic farm—a career he started 10 years ago—that he began to believe in the organic movement, and not the other way around, as is typical for many people working in organics.

It also makes sense, politically speaking. “[Nassau] County is loving us right now,” Holmes says. “We’re sending them a check rather than drawing one.”

“Agricultural people say ‘organic,’ but everything was organic before World War II,” says Kaplan-Walbrecht. It was the redeployment of manual labor to factories that caused a shift at the time, but now the trend seems to be slowly reversing. The one catch is that to get an official organic label, if the land was previously farmed conventionally, three years must pass to let the chemicals work their way out of the soil. Produce can be sold, but it can’t be called organic during this time.

Till It Like It Is

Kaplan-Walbrecht from Garden of Eve grew up on his parents’ conventional dairy farm in upstate Norwich, and believes he is suffering the side effects of living near those toxic substances as a child. In adulthood, he was diagnosed with Crohn’s Disease, an incurable inflammatory disease that affects the gastrointestinal tract. His body can’t afford to be exposed anymore, he says. But he admits his prior job as a program director for Citizens Campaign for the Environment, where he studied water contamination resulting from runoff, also contributed to his decision to go organic. After seeing the amount of chloramine and dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane, commonly known as DDT, absorbed in both groundwater and lakes, he could no longer contribute to the problem as a farmer, he says.

The chemicals used on conventional farms can be broken down into three categories, Kaplan-Walbrecht says. There are water-soluble fertilizers, chemical herbicides and fungicides, and broad-spectrum killers. After the harvest, but before the produce is brought to market, it is often sprayed with another chemical known as a “sticker” to prevent some of these chemicals from washing off. This is for aesthetic reasons as the farmers want their produce to maintain their shine. However, the result more often than not is the absorption of the foreign substances in the food itself.

Misconceptions are as much of a problem as the pesticides. “People should try to understand more than just a label,” says Caroline Fanning from Restoration Farms. She suggests that people talk to those whom they buy their produce from, or better yet, they should speak directly with the grower, to find out exactly how their produce is grown. Within the organic movement there is an assumption that standard practices ensure that everything is equally healthy, she says. But, despite government standards, there are no procedural rules for how organic food must be grown, aside from avoiding the use of chemicals.

Additionally, an apple from Argentina is never going to be as fresh as an apple grown less than five miles from one’s home. That’s why “local is more important than the organic label,” Fanning explains. But just because it’s locally grown doesn’t mean consumers can’t find the fruits and vegetables they want.

Both Garden of Eve and Restoration Farm offer a wide variety of organic produce: tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, peas, kale, garlic, raspberries and blackberries, among many others, were available at Restoration. Garden of Eve also offers flowers, herbs, garlic, broccoli, cabbage, Swiss chard, lettuce and carrots, to name a few.

Homegrown Bale-Outs

The organic movement is growing by leaps and bounds, and not just on the farms. “When I host some workshops based on organic production, the turnout is really great,” says Sandra Menasha, vegetable/potato specialist at the Cornell Cooperative Extension-Suffolk County, based in Riverhead. “So there are obviously people interested in learning more and having these workshops and research available to them that is done on Long Island.” Although there are more conventional farms, the numbers continue to shift. “The organic community is growing and with its growth comes more opportunity for research and education,” says Menasha.

A big draw for the organic movement is the opportunity to participate in the process. At both Garden of Eve and Restoration Farm, produce is distributed through a program known as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), in which

consumers buy a crop share and pick up their food weekly or bi-weekly. Both farms also sell their harvests at local farmers markets, which have been making a comeback of late.

“Our goal is to supply CSA members with diverse vegetables, and if we are not doing it this way, I don’t think that would be possible,” says Kaplan-Walbrecht. There are more than 30 varieties of fruits and vegetables at Restoration and another 80 at Eve.

With the advent of CSAs and farmers’ markets, the organic movement isn’t just about the food grown or those who eat it, but also the people who grow it. And that doesn’t just include the growers and researchers, but anyone who wants to get involved. Simply reading about organic farms cannot replicate the experience of working on a farm. Most farms in the area use the CSA model. And, unlike becoming a member of a public radio or television station, where shareholders can make donations and never be invited on the air, CSAs encourage members to volunteer as well, and sometimes work in exchange for the price of produce. Many apprentices and volunteers at these two farms moved from shareholders to devotees themselves.

Melissa Rebholz, for instance, was a chef for 13 years, most recently at Roberta’s in New York City, before leaving for the farm. She had also worked at Greenmarket, an NYC non-profit farmers’ market promoter, for two years. Between the two she received a crash course in organic and local meats and produce.

“Just to be out in the field and harvest something and make something so fresh I thought would be really cool,” Rebholz says as she moves trays of seeds she has just sewn on to a table at the back of the greenhouse. She hasn’t put away her cooking utensils, though. As a farm stand manager, she prepares many of the sandwiches, soups and pastries sold, as she plans to one day market her own organic food.

Dan Machin of Garden of Eve worked in Manhattan restaurants as well, with each place gearing him more toward the organic movement. Prior to his organic awakening, he used to visit his grandmother on her 200-acre conventional farm in southern Indiana. “I wouldn’t want to farm on that,” he says. This year, he is renting a parcel of land to grow his own produce to sell.

Organics also drew in Tom Farre and Glen Aldridge, both customers at Restoration, who decided they wanted to get more involved. “It feels like a little bit of country on Long Island,” says Aldridge, a Melville resident, who was working the fields with his daughter, Emily, a law student at Fordham University.

For Emily, who was helping clear raspberry canes while her father was clearing brush to make way for a new field, it’s the second time at Restoration Farm. She

said that getting to spend some time with her father is one of the appeals of volunteering. “It’s just nice to be outside and do something productive,” says Emily. But there were larger benefits as well, she says. “I’m interested in it from a health perspective, and it’s better for the planet.”

Aside from this father-daughter bonding experience, looking around both Garden of Eve and Restoration Farm, the family theme is everywhere.

Six-year-old Tyler Burzenski was visiting Restoration Farm with his father Jay, who says that he first got involved with organics because he “wanted [his family] to be as close to natural feeding as possible” and he wanted them to eat food with the “least amount of processing.” From there he began to volunteer and bring his son along as well. Taking a break from his post-hole-digging duties, Jay says he would have brought his 3-year-old daughter Sarah along too, but “she’s not really into digging.” Jay stopped frequently to explain the processes on the farm to Tyler, and asked him for his opinion on why he likes organic produce, to which he responded, “I like strawberries and bananas.”

Garden of Eve also hosts activities in season to encourage the familial bonding. One of these is an annual Garlic Festival, which brings producers of garlic products from all over the Island together with families to sample these products, and participate in garlic-related events, such as garlic braiding, garlic crafts and puppet theater, in addition to a petting zoo and labyrinth.

Against the Grain

Another advantage of joining the organic movement is experimenting with different growing practices. That’s what Machin is planning to do with the acre he began renting this year from Chris and his wife Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht at Garden of Eve. Two of the major principles he will be incorporating are biodynamic farming and companion planting.

Biodynamic farming approaches farming from a spiritual worldview. That is to say, the farm is a living, breathing thing that is impacted by the forces of the universe, so planting is done according to best times as indicated in the lunar calendar. “When the moon is in front of Orion, there’s supposed to be a cosmic energy absorbed by the seed,” explains Machin.

Machin learned companion planting from the book *Carrots Love Tomatoes* by Louise Riotte, which suggests protecting plants from insects and other animals without tainting them with pesticides. The theory is that there are pairs of plants that keep predators away from their partner plants. The Cornell Extension is doing statewide testing to determine the practice’s effectiveness.

He is also interested in studying the success of places like Half Pint Farm, which

has managed to wield revenues of about \$90,000 per parcel where \$10,000 would be typical, by growing baby vegetables. So why experiment with organic, rather than conventional? Machin used to work at a farmers' market in Brooklyn, and recalls how his arms would burn when carrying crates of apples because of all the chemicals used, he says.

"It makes sense for the world," says Machin. "For me, organic was just morally right."

There's more than meets the eye in that Long Island potato.

Organic Farm Stands Across L.I.

Biophilia Organic Farm

211 Manor Lane, Jamesport. Saturday, Sunday and most weekdays, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., May to October.

Golden Earthworm Organic Farm

652 Peconic Bay Blvd., Jamesport. Wednesday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., June 1 to Oct. 30.

Halsey's Green Thumb Organic Farm

829 Montauk Hwy., Water Mill. Thursday to Sunday, 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., May to November.

Restoration Farm

1303 Round Swamp Rd., Old Bethpage. Saturdays, 12 p.m. to 2 p.m., June 20 to September.

Garden of Eve

4558 Sound Ave., Riverhead. Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., April 17 to May 24. Open every day May 31 to Oct. 31.

Islip Farmer's Market

655 Main St., Islip. Saturday, 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. starting in mid-June.

Organics Today Farms

160 Washington Street, East Islip. Every day, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. May 1 to Nov. 28.

Friendly Farms

832 Merrick Ave., East Meadow. Monday to Saturday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.,
Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., May 31 to Dec. 24.