

Organic Farm Products Becoming More Popular With Families

West Virginia University
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As concerns about food safety grow because of various diseases, consumers increasingly want to know where their food comes from and how it is raised.

Organic farming is one way that people can know both of those things and a lot more. Some organic farmers provide consumers "food with a story to tell" and give those who use their products a way to watch how their vegetables are grown without chemical fertilizers. This national trend is an unmet need in West Virginia.

Helping to meet that need is Susan Sauter, co-owner of Flying Ewe Farm in Bruceton Mills (Preston County), W. Va., who operates her business through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) approach. She sells shares or "subscriptions" based on her anticipated end product each year. The shareholders commit to support the organic farm throughout the season and assume some of the risks and costs of growing the food.

Seven of Sauter's 118 acres are arable or cultivable. Growing her vegetables and herbs on only one-half acre, she serves 20 families each year during a 23-week period. Each shareholder currently pays \$400 a year.

To understand the CSA model better, Susan and her husband, Don, received a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to attend the Northeast Community Supported Agriculture Conference in New York State two years ago. The West Virginia University Extension Service helped them obtain that U.S. Department of Agriculture grant.

"The CSA model lets me concentrate on growing food, not marketing it. It establishes a link between the consumer, food, farmer, and the land," Sauter said. "That is the heart of what consumers are looking for."

To her knowledge, she is the only person in the state operating a CSA. Sauter believes that West Virginia's proximity to many of the nation's population centers makes it a prime area to start such a business.

"The people in those population centers want the organically raised food. They want food with a story to tell, which is connected to a place; and are willing to pay for it. West Virginia farmers can make that connection for this large consumer group," said Sauter, who is president of the Mountain State Organic Growers and Buyers Association.

Although the organic food industry has experienced more than 20 percent growth for the past nine years, the demand for organic food is largely going unmet. Sauter has a two-year waiting list of families who want to purchase a share of her farm's yearly harvest, which shows the demand for organically grown food.

"Everyone needs to know where their food comes from. I really believe in growing in-season food locally so that people understand the whole food cycle and what it means to be on the land," she said.

Sauter grows between 50 and 70 different crops. Last year, she harvested salad greens for 20 consecutive weeks. She also grows hard-to-find heirloom varieties of vegetables.

"The WVU Extension Service has historically supported the traditional methods of food production, which utilize chemical fertilizers and pesticides. More recently, WVU Extension has moved to a philosophy of recognizing and supporting food production using organic methods and recommending alternative production systems to those still using traditional production methods," said Dr. Richard Zimmerman, director of Extension's Agricultural and Natural Resources Development Center.

Sauter's farm is a Certified Organic Farm. This type of farming requires the producer to raise everything under a definitive plan for soil health that precludes using pesticides, herbicides, or synthetic fertilizers. Organic farmers manage that by using a mix of cover crops, compost, and mined soil ingredients with the goal of increasing life in the soil.

Certified organic farmers must be able to document that they are growing their products using official organic standards. The farm is inspected to make sure that it is operating by the rules and following the steps.

Sauter said that the state averages about 20 certified organic farms. Some become certified once but don't renew the next year. Nine new growers were certified last year.

Other farmers growing and processing organic food include: Spring Creek Natural Foods, Spencer (Roane County), which specializes in making tofu; Rolling Thunder Farm, Montrose (Tucker County); New Vrindaban Organic Gardens, Moundsville (Marshall County); Lightstone Foundation Farm Center, Moyers (Pendleton County); and Healing Hills Herb Farm, Ellenboro (Ritchie County).

Sauter recently received a \$2,707 grant from the Northeast SARE Farmer/Grower program for a research project titled "Two Approaches to Farm-Grown Nitrogen."

Since starting her organic farming business virtually from scratch, Sauter has worked to find the most effective ways to grow new products and improve soil fertility on her land. In addition to reading books and searching the Internet, she has made many contacts with knowledgeable Extension professionals like Tom McConnell, a WVU Extension specialist in farm management.

"McConnell is someone we have turned to for help in figuring out how to manage our farm resources to support this CSA model. Everyone knows that he is a gold mine of information," Sauter said. "He's marketed and grown acres of vegetables, sunflowers, grain, and forage crops, and raised every kind of livestock imaginable. Tom helps us understand the big picture of everything we do on the farm," she said.

Sauter invites others to join her as organic CSA farmers. They must have an intense desire to work hard, the ability to learn how to grow vegetables, herbs, fruits or other food products using organic methods,

and own some farmable land.

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