

Community



Easy with Growing the Instant Organic Gardener

Learn to be a locavore

by Don Rosenberg

The Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year for 2007 was locavore — a local resident who tries to eat only food grown or produced within a 100-mile radius. Local food is at the epicenter of a host of recent issues, including healthy living, sustainable agriculture, supporting small, local businesses and even global warming.

Until quite recently in American history, all food was local. But with the advent of industrial farming and chemical fertilizers, the entire food industry went global. Now food's produced all over the world, shipped to the United States in giant containers and processed at central locations.

The result is increased contamination, lack of pesticide controls used in food production and a tremendous amount of energy spent transporting food from place to place. A head of broccoli travels 1,500 miles to your table, even though it is grown within 20 miles of the average household.

Travel also means the produce is older before it reaches your table. Beans lose 50 percent of their vitamins by three days after harvest. And as nutritional content drops, the flavor and texture decline as well. Moms who want their kids to eat healthy vegetables find it more difficult to convince them to eat tasteless produce.

As interest in ecology continues to grow, there's a greater interest in sustainable agriculture, reducing carbon footprints, and eliminating pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Feasible local farming

At a recent seminar hosted by WFAB radio, area leaders involved in organic farming met to discuss the process of getting local produce to the public through farmers markets, organic food stores and local restaurants. Demand for locally grown produce is increasing exponentially. Local restaurants want to feature area produce and their patrons want to eat it, but a steady supply is hard to find. Farmers markets are becoming more and more popular, but the Matthews market sells out most of its produce in just a few hours and other markets can't fill demand either.

Sammy Koenigsberg from New Town Farms was a featured seminar speaker. He made the point that organic farming is very labor intensive and it's difficult to turn a profit — the property taxes alone on most land in Mecklenburg County will eat up profits.

There are, at most, 10 organic farms in

this region and, although interest is high, few new farms are being started. One hope is more traditional farmers in the area will see the high interest in local organic foods and will convert part of their operations to organic produce and consider selling locally.

The good news is there's plenty of land in Mecklenburg County for organic farming. Area population is more than 800,000 and there are more than 150,000 homes and condos, meaning there are more than 100,000 backyards available for home gardens. All you need is a few square feet with six hours of sunlight a day.

Start at home

In 1945, at the height of Victory Gardens' popularity, 40 percent of local produce was grown at home. There's no telling how low that figure had dropped by 2008. Gas prices are through the roof and food prices have risen 5.5 percent in the last year. Organic produce is usually 10 percent to 50 percent more expensive.

The result is a resurgence in home-gardening interest. Seed companies report sales have doubled from last year's levels as homeowners start new gardens. The problem has been home gardening using existing soil and chemical fertilizers is not organic and it takes a lot of tools and effort to prepare and maintain. Native soil contains weed seeds that will remain viable for 20 to 50 years, so you end up with a weed patch instead of a productive garden.

If you've read my column before you know I have a new approach to home gardening — use raised beds, organic fertilizer and weedless soil and end up with an organic garden that just needs planting and watering. If you haven't started a fall/winter garden, there's still time.

And what could make you a better locavore than to have a garden in your backyard? Your carbon footprints are the footprints in your backyard! You'll know how safe your food is because you've controlled every aspect of what went into your garden, and there's nothing tastier than produce picked five minutes before it's eaten.

So, take the plunge and start a garden. For an archive of past Charlotte Weekly gardening columns, visit www.instant-organicgarden.com and click the "Charlotte Weekly" link. You'll learn the philosophy behind "Easy Growing" and see step-by-step methods to plan, build and plant your own organic garden. □

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