



FEBRUARY 2010 GROWERS NOTEBOOK

News, Tips, and Advice on Things Organic

Will YOU Be There?



When 1300+ farmers, gardeners, chefs, homesteaders, conscious consumers, and food activists converge for the largest sustainable living conference in the Southeastern US, will **you** be there? The 17th Annual Organic Growers School Spring Conference is **TWO WEEKS AWAY!** March 6-7 2010 at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, movers and shakers in the food world will enjoy over 65 classes and hands on workshops each day on topics ranging from cooking to sustainable forestry. Also featured at the conference is a kids program, where children will paint with natural pigments, learn to identify local wild plants, and learn the origins of everyday foods. Our trade show and seed & plant exchange is open to all attendees, filled with local and national businesses and organizations offering everything from books to food and medicines. A two-day silent auction benefits agricultural education, and offers an opportunity for attendees to get great deals on tools, clothing, books, and more.

We're particularly excited to offer a class on "Raising Heritage Poultry" with well-known poultry expert Jim Adkins with the International Center for Poultry. Rare and heirloom breeds of chickens, ducks, turkeys, and other poultry are not only fun for backyard poultry enthusiasts, but also vitally important to preserving genetic diversity within agriculture. Many people do not realize that the chicken they are eating, and the eggs they are buying are coming from animals whose genetics have been so altered by humans to meet production needs that they cannot lead healthy or comfortable lives, do not exhibit many natural traits of their species, and are at risk for early death and disease. Farmers may not realize that using heritage breeds can also increase production, and boost the overall health of their flocks. At this year's conference, Jim will cover all the benefits and challenges of raising heritage poultry, and make the case that we need a sea change in what we consider acceptable in animal breeding and production. His workshop will also include a live bird demonstration, so that attendees can learn to accurately identify the characteristics of true heritage birds.



We'll also be offering classes in landscaping, soil science, gardening, and farming. Another half-day workshop, offered on Saturday only, will focus on do-it-yourself seed and germination equipment. Instructors Patryk Battle and Gred Gross will demonstrate how to build a compost-heated greenhouse, a thermostatically controlled germination chamber, and more. Later, the greenhouse built in the workshop will be donated to the silent auction, and one lucky attendee will take it home!

Additional classes in food preservation, alternative energy, cut flower production, new and alternative crops, and much more make for a packed schedule full of learning opportunities. If you haven't already signed up, or if you know people who aren't coming, the class schedule can be accessed online and our website is a great starting place for info about the kids program, roomshares and rideshares, and other conference activities. See why over 1300 people from 17 states and Canada kick off their season with OGS! Register now!
www.organicgrowersschool.org

Farmer's Corner: Ask Tom



Hey Tom –

Another season is beginning and we are considering hiring some help for our market garden. How can we find good workers?

-- Overworked in Burnsville

Dear Overworked –

We have used a crew for about 20 years, starting with one person occasionally to a five person crew now. When we started out we used just family labor and that worked fine for a few years until our production got to the point that we had no free time at all. (Please note there is a session on this topic at the Organic Growers School on March 6-7 at UNCA (www.organicgrowersschool.org).)

The key deciding factor for us is: “Can this staff person generate more income doing what we assign them than we are paying in salary?” At three dollars a pound for tomatoes we can stay ahead of salary costs fairly easily while our crew is harvesting tomatoes. But we also need to factor in all the weeding, sowing, transplanting and other possible crew jobs when deciding when to use outside labor. Other crops are so time-consuming that they can’t cover crew costs so we tend not to grow those crops unless they are a real draw for our stand.

Another reason to use farm help is the importance of getting things done at the right time. We grow a lot of greens so before sun hits the field and after sun sets behind the tree line are prime times for harvest. With a crew, we can harvest in the few hours before sunset. Without crew we would need to either harvest early or in the heat of the day when the produce quality would not meet our standards.

Farm workers also help with repetitive tasks and aging backs. Back in my thirties, I could transplant for a full day without much trouble but in my fifties, that task seems to go better with some help. Six sets of hands can do a day’s worth of transplanting in an hour or so. Even my aging back can still go full tilt for an hour and a half. Having company and conversation helps repetitive tasks go faster for everyone.

We have worked with great crews over the years. Many workers have gone on to launch their own farm operations which is a source of great pride for us. We like nothing better than “graduating” organic farmers. Early on we used an informal word-of-mouth hiring process. Friends of friends would bring their friends, boyfriends, etc. Some of those arrangements did not work out so well for us or for the employees. Since we switched to a more formal hiring process, our workers have been exceptional people and great workers also.

Workers generally find us because of our history of hiring a crew or through the Local Food Guide. So a first step in finding crew is to be listed there. The Organic Growers School has an apprentice/farmer matching service that is helpful. Many growers send a notice out on the ASAP classifieds or through CFSA. Prospective workers also advertise that way. ATTRA and WWOOF are other national or worldwide sources of referrals.

When someone expresses interest in farm work, we send an employment application. Less serious applicants often do not respond. The next step is a farm tour and interview with both Karen and me. We point out that working for us is a “real job” in contrast to “hanging out” on an organic farm. We explain our low pay in the context of the economic realities of farming, but point out the chance to learn farming and to take home organic produce for their table. Most of our staff are mainly interested in education. Even our simple hiring process helps select for attentive folks that can work independently and who will contribute to the community some day by growing organic food on their own.

Pay structures vary from farm to farm. We pay an hourly wage with withholdings according to state and federal rules. That paperwork does add some overhead to our operation but we build that cost into the cost of labor when we decide which tasks are suitable for our crew. Other farms pay a monthly stipend plus room and board. Others use volunteers or worker shares with their CSA.

I hope this gets you started. More detail will be available at the Organic Growers School including perspectives from a variety of farmers on this topic (Session 2F on Sunday, March 7.) Thanks for your inquiry.

-- Tom

Commercial Farmers: Got a question for Tom? Email it to enews@organicgrowersschool.org

This Month's Picks

Each month we feature a recipe or website submitted by a reader. If you'd like to submit, just email us enews@organicgrowersschool.org



this pic features a mason jar full of carrots, beets, and green beans marinating in fresh garlic, extra virgin olive oil, and balsamic vinegar. After a few hours, they are ready to dress a salad (mixed lettuces from the same garden). I also add walnuts, toasted and lightly salted, sliced tart apples, and freshly shaved best quality parmesan cheese. Add more olive oil, lime juice or vinegar, sea salt and cracked black pepper to taste.

-Lynn Byrd
Badin, NC

Gardener's Corner: Ask Ruth



Dear Ruth,

In 2009, the Master Gardeners in Henderson County started a community garden on land donated by the parks department. Last year we used soil amendments such as Nature's Helper and topsoil purchased from Lowe's or Home Depot. It is very difficult to determine where this material is sourced. Do you have any recommendations or cautions regarding these generally available, cheap amendments, including mushroom compost. We are a very low budget operation and are working hard to get our composting and other organic procedures in place. We do have a source of composted goat manure.

Looking forward to the Grower's school this spring.
Thank you for your help,

Connie Smith

Dear Connie,

Improving your community garden on a tight budget could take a few years, but every year you will be making steady progress toward better soil. Assuming you are growing vegetables, I would recommend skipping the topsoil and the Nature's Helper, and **heading straight for the best compost you can afford.** Compost of varying quality is available from local garden centers and from big box stores. Some local farmers also sell their homemade compost. It sounds like you already have a source of composted goat manure. I would obtain as much free compost and manure as I possibly could. You can always store any extra you may have (covered) in the corner of your community garden for use next season.

Don't spend money on topsoil, because you already have lots of free soil right in your garden. Our North Carolina clay has many beneficial nutrients. Because clay is composed of such tiny particles, improving its tilth with additions of compost will benefit your plants by allowing more room for air & water, providing slow-release nutrients, and increasing the soils ability to drain well. I equate some of the "topsoil" available at big box stores with "Louisiana mud", and cheap topsoil can actually detract from your garden. Last year my friend Sara asked me to take a look at her newly constructed garden. The plants looked sickly, and the final diagnosis was to *remove* most of the cheap topsoil she had purchased from a box store, and *mix in* some quality compost.

Nature's Helper doesn't really add any usable nutrients ~ so for growing vegetables, I would favor compost ~ but Nature's Helper does lighten the soil, improves drainage & airflow to the plants, and eventually

improves the soil structure as it decomposes. Nature's Helper is often recommended for planting blueberries (they demand good drainage & their roots are sensitive to manure), and is a useful soil amendment for trees, shrubs, and roses.

Bagged or bulk compost can be used to make your soil more workable and to add slow-release nutrients. I am not that familiar with compost brands available at box stores, but like everything, you get what you pay for. Some, *but not all*, brands of Mushroom Compost contain urea, a high-nitrogen input that is not allowable for Certified Organic Growers. Most bagged compost will have the fertilizer numbers (the N-P-K ratios) printed on the bag. At the garden center where I work, the Composted Cow Manure is rated 0.5-0.5-0.5, and the Composted Chicken Manure is rated 1.5-1.5-1.5. The Composted Chicken Manure is more expensive, but it has more kick per bag. Compost is a beneficial addition to any type of garden soil - sandy, loam, or clay. You could also incorporate **raw manure** into your garden in the fall, allowing it time to decompose over the winter.

Homemade compost is probably the best, most cost efficient option, but it will also be more labor intensive. Really well-made compost can be spread very thinly across your garden (only the thickness of a dime) and can produce dramatic results since you are inoculating your garden with the good guys (the microbes). In my opinion, you will have to do a few years of work on your soil with additions of manure, compost, and cover-cropping before a thin layer of compost will be able to do the whole trick. Initially, you could reserve your best compost/vermicompost as an addition to the planting holes.

So Connie, here's what I would do: Keep your ears open for likely sources of manure or a large-scale source of kitchen scraps, so you can start composting in your community garden; have a party and raise some money for compost (if 20 people give you \$5 each, that's about 20 bags of compost); start a worm bin and make your own "black gold"...worms are cool and kids like them; compost fall leaves (another free resource); and plant cover crops in the fall – it's a cost-effective way to speed soil improvement.

Pertinent classes at this year's Organic Growers School include: "Growing Communities Through Gardens" (2A), "Vermicomposting" (2C), "Growing Your Soil Fertility with Cover Crops" (3C), and "Soil Enhancement Strategies" (3J).

One last note on manure ~ uncomposted manure can contain weed seeds that might germinate in your garden. The heat generated by active composting will usually kill the weed seeds. Last summer, Dr. Jeanine Davis, OGS board member and Extension Horticultural Specialist, alerted farmers about the potential of carryover of certain herbicides into manure. See that document at <http://orange.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/68/Herbicide%20Carryover.pdf>.

See you at the Growers School!

Ruth Gonzalez

Ruth Gonzalez is a former market farmer, avid gardener, local food advocate, and founder of the Tailgate Market Fan Club. In her job at Reems Creek Nursery, Ruth offers advice on all sorts of gardening questions, and benefits daily from the wisdom of local gardeners.

Gardeners: Got a question for Ruth? Email it to
enews@organicgrowersschool.org

CRAFT-WNC: Join for 2010!



CRAFT-WNC is a coordinated effort to bring established farmers together with students of farming for a season-long training in sustainable farming. Farmers are the teachers and farms are the classrooms. To join CRAFT as a farmer, intern, or interested supporter, visit the [CRAFT homepage on our website.](#)

We're Hiring!

Job Announcement

Farmer Programs Outreach & Development Assistant
for
The Organic Growers School
based in Asheville and western NC
organicgrowersschool.org

Application Deadline: March 24th, 2010

The Organic Growers School invites applicants for a Farmer Programs Outreach and Development Assistant who will report to the organization's Farmer Education Committee. Specific responsibilities include

1. fundraising and development for Organic Growers School programming, specifically farmer-driven initiatives including [CRAFT-WNC](#) and [NC Apprentice Link.](#)
2. Outreach and publicity for farmer programming
3. Administrative support pertaining to all organizational initiatives

We are particularly eager to find organized, hard-working candidates who possess

1. strong written and oral communication skills
2. knowledge pertaining to organic and/or sustainable agriculture businesses and education
3. fundraising and event experience
4. ability to work both independently and in teams

Work will be six to eight months, from home, part time, and compensated at an hourly rate from \$12-\$15 based on candidate's experience. There exists the potential for longer term employment.

Interested candidates should submit a letter of interest, resume, and 3 references to jobs@organicgrowersschool.org.

We will not accept phone calls regarding this position.

The Organic Growers School is a 501c3 non profit organization that does not discriminate with respect to race, sexual orientation, religion, or other personal factors.

Need Farm Workers? Looking for Farm Work? NCAL Can Help!

If you haven't already found workers for your farm in 2010, now is the time to start looking. NC Apprentice Link is a new, web-based initiative that seeks to match farmers with prospective interns. It is FREE to use this service, and we are already matching farmers with workers for this season. The database NEEDS MORE FARMS, so you are encouraged to log in and create your free profile. Here are some advantages

-

We ask the questions for you: Our apprentice application covers everything from past work experience to smoking and eating habits. When we send interns to you, you'll have a ton of information about the individual at your fingertips, before you even make contact.

-

We pre-screen, ensuring the closest match: Spend less time calling and interviewing prospective workers, only to find that they are not a good match for your farm. Our service covers that initial screening process for you. We will ONLY send you interns that are matched to the desires you've listed in your profile.

-

It's FREE: Why not? If you can find a good worker with little work on your end, that's a win-win situation!

[Start now! Create your free profile online.](#)

Salon

Revival

The Organic Growers School, local green businesses, and area non-profits join together for a **Salon Revival**- a gathering of intellectual, social, political and cultural activists under one roof to entertain and to increase knowledge through conversation.

FREE!! send an email to meredith@organicgrowersschool.org to reserve a seat at the Salon of your choice.

Saturday • March 6th • 6-8

FREE EVENT: Reserve your seat by emailing meredith@organicgrowersschool.org

Topics to be discussed:

Making Organic Accessible: Healthy Food for ALL Citizens

Location: The Dripolator Coffee Bar • 190 Broadway in Pioneer Bldg.
Facilitated by OGS and The Bountiful Cities Project.

Food Safety & Agricultural Policy: How To Be an Effective Advocate for Change.

Location: Firestorm Coffeehouse • 48 Commerce St. next to Thirsty Monk
Facilitated by OGS and The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association

Nourishing Tomorrow's Leaders: Addressing Childhood Obesity through Farm to School Programs.

Location: Nest Organics • 51 North Lexington Ave.
Facilitated by OGS and ASAP's Growing Minds.

