

MARCH 2010 GROWERS NOTEBOOK News, Tips & Advice on Things Organic

2010 OGS Spring Conference a Success!



Close to 1500 farmers, gardeners, food activists, chefs and conscious consumers converged for the 17th annual Organic Growers School Spring Conference, held March 6-7, 2010 at the University of North Carolina Asheville. After a snowy, gray winter the clouds parted, the sun shone brightly, and temperatures rose for the event, during which a

hoophouse was built and auctioned to enthusiastic attendees, baby goats grazed on the UNCA University Quadrangle, and people from 16 different states absorbed a weekend's worth of learning and networking. "I've been coming to the OGS Conference for 9 years and I look at it as the peeling off of winter. It's a great kick-off for the growing season," says Laura Ladendorf of Asheville, NC. Indeed, the energy and buzz at the event was inspiring, and you could feel in the air the hope that true green thumbs know when the first soil warms and the days begin to lengthen. Read "10 Things Learned at the Organic Growers School", written by attendee and local blogger Alisa Hixson (<http://www.thefrenchbroad.com/10-things-learned-at-the-organic-growers-school-2144>) and mark your calendars for 2011, when on March 5-6, the 18th annual event will slough off winter's spell. Thanks to all the amazing speakers, sponsors, volunteers, and staff who worked together to make this year's event a success! To access handouts from classes at this year's and past years' events, visit the Spring Conference Library.

(<http://www.organicgrowersschool.org/content/1522>) For more information about the mission and history of the Conference, visit our website at www.organicgrowersschool.org.



Genetically Modified Foods: Are they in Your Pantry?

By Meredith McKissick



Chances are if you are reading this newsletter you've already made certain decisions about the food you eat. Decisions that require education, effort, and conviction to absorb into habits, and that you are hopefully fortunate enough to be able to follow. As organic and local foods become more popular, many households around the US are stocking refrigerators and pantries with nearly everything they can from nearby farms, produced with respect for land, community, and quality that one can taste in every bite. And it is good, this growing consciousness, this movement that seems to only grow stronger by the day.

But what of the other items in the pantry? Few communities eat only what can be supplied locally, and families must of course supplement locally grown foods with goods from the supermarket, sometimes foods that have been in our lives since we were children. As a farmer myself, people are often surprised at how much food from my farm I don't eat, and I, too, have to make decisions and work hard to eat healthfully and consciously every single day. One of my resolutions this year was to become more educated about genetically modified foods; I wanted to learn not only where they come from and their impact, but also where they were in my cabinet. What I have learned has been astounding. In the past three months, I have had to change my buying habits when it comes to several products found most often in my house. Tortillas, bread, pasta, rice, beans, oils, and sweeteners are just a handful of items that I have been using without knowledge of their GMO content. In Europe, products with GMO content are often labeled as such, and you can almost always be ensured that a product coming from the EU without GMOs will be labeled as GMO free. The US has no requirements for labeling of GMO products, and as a result many people are unaware. In general, products that are not certified organic that contain corn, soybeans, cotton, canola, or rice are candidates for GMOs, and it can often require some work to find out.

According to the Human Genome Project (genomics.energy.gov), a genetically modified organism is one whose genetic makeup has been altered through a special series of technologies to produce a certain desired result. GMOs can be plants, animals, and even bacteria. Current and upcoming GM products are not limited to food, but also include fiber, feedstock, medicines, and vaccines. Most of the GMO food crops that are planted today are engineered to resist herbicides or insects. You have probably heard of Roundup Ready crops. These crops are engineered to resist the effects of Roundup, a broadleaf herbicide, allowing farmers to spray an entire field, killing only the weeds and leaving the crop unharmed. GM products currently in development include bananas containing a

vaccine against Hepatitis B, cows resistant to mad cow disease, and plants that produce useful materials, like new-age plastics.

The benefits of GMOs offered frequently by proponents of their research and implementation, include increased crop quality and yield, more efficient processing, faster growth and maturation, and a solution to hunger issues. Controversies surrounding GM products include many issues of safety (most effects, if any, are unknown, although a study released early this year linked GM Maize to organ damage in lab rats), increasing dependence on more advanced nations by Third World Countries, domination of seed genetics, ethics concerns, labeling debates, and much more. This is a vast subject, and with health motivations being the largest reason why people choose to eat organic foods, many people close to me have asked “Why the trouble? If the health effects of GMOs are unknown, why spend more money and effort to find foods without them, especially when it takes so much investigating?” While it would take a book to dive into all of the issues motivating me, I choose to present just one—and that is the case for farmers.

Today, the US leads the world in production of transgenic crops, and the effects have been deleterious for farmers. The discovery of specialized genes used for genetic modification, as well as the process and successful production of seed with altered genetic makeup is considered proprietary. Therefore, the companies that perform the modification technologies hold a patent on the resulting seed. If a farmer plants the patented product, he or she cannot save seed from his or her crops, and must purchase a new generation of patented seed each time he replants. Many farmers in our country have a long family history of saving seed—indeed, seed saving used to be the way of farming—selecting the offspring of your best crops to plant next season. This practice not only ensures the long-term viability of the farm, but also leads to regionally adapted and genetically diverse seed varieties that have been carefully stewarded through the years to perform well in the unique environments of a specific farm. Now, if the seed of a transgenic canola plant rises with the breeze and establishes itself in a neighboring field of non-GMO canola, that unknowing farmer with the transgenic intruder in his or her field can be sued by the company holding the patent on that transgenic seed if he or she tries to save the seed from the tainted canola crop, thus obliterating years upon years of a seed legacy that has provided the foundation of his or her farming operation. Similarly, if a farmer interested in the benefits of Roundup Ready corn, for example, decides to forego the seed saving process and invest in GMO crops, he or she has then forfeited the ownership of seed stock, and will eventually be at the mercy of Monsanto.



In 2010, Monsanto’s patent on the original Roundup Ready gene will run out, and farmers across the US are wishing upon a star that they could find seed

containing ONLY that expiring trait. See, once that patent runs out, they can save the seed again, and their investment in and control over their farm can begin again. The problem is, Monsanto has licensed the trait to other companies, who have then injected their own patented traits into seeds. Running across seed containing only that original and expiring trait is difficult, and Monsanto is right on the heels of this threshold with a new Roundup Ready II trait, thereby continuing the cycle. It has been estimated that Monsanto now owns 90% of seed genetics.

As a farmer here in WNC, I know the importance of seed genetics. In the small mountain pockets where you'll find most local farms, the effects of microclimate are ever present. I know that I can't grow a certain variety of tomato, or even hydrangea in the field by my greenhouse, because the frost pockets are abundant and wetness reigns. My neighbor John feeds my family with the best tasting cornmeal and grits around, ground from the heirloom white field corn that has been grown on his farm for 150 years. If you've ever tried to grow garlic around here, you probably have certain varieties that you'd stand by until death.



I'll also add what we all already know—that the diversity and the uniqueness of farms is half of what make us want to support them, in addition to the healthy food they provide. If you do not choose organics because of the social and environmental impacts it values, as well as the health benefits, now would be the time to start. With the advent of food safety legislation that threatens to put small farmers in a vice, the inherent pressures of owning a small business

with limited production capacity, and the looming controls of large agribusiness, the freedoms experienced by farmers as they manage their land are directly linked to the freedoms you experience when you manage your diet. It is super-important to look at food as a philosophy, an opera of cause and effect in which you are a player.

The reality is—you can't get everything you eat at a local tailgate market. And as the tailgate markets open this season, think about GMOs in your diet, and how you can plan meals using more whole foods, or supplementing your tailgate market loot with GMO free products. The Non-GMO Sourcebook (http://www.non-gmoreport.com/books_newsletters/non_gmo_sourcebook.php) is an especially useful tool that will lead you to suppliers and creators of GMO free foods, supplements, and seeds.

Farmer's Corner: Ask Tom



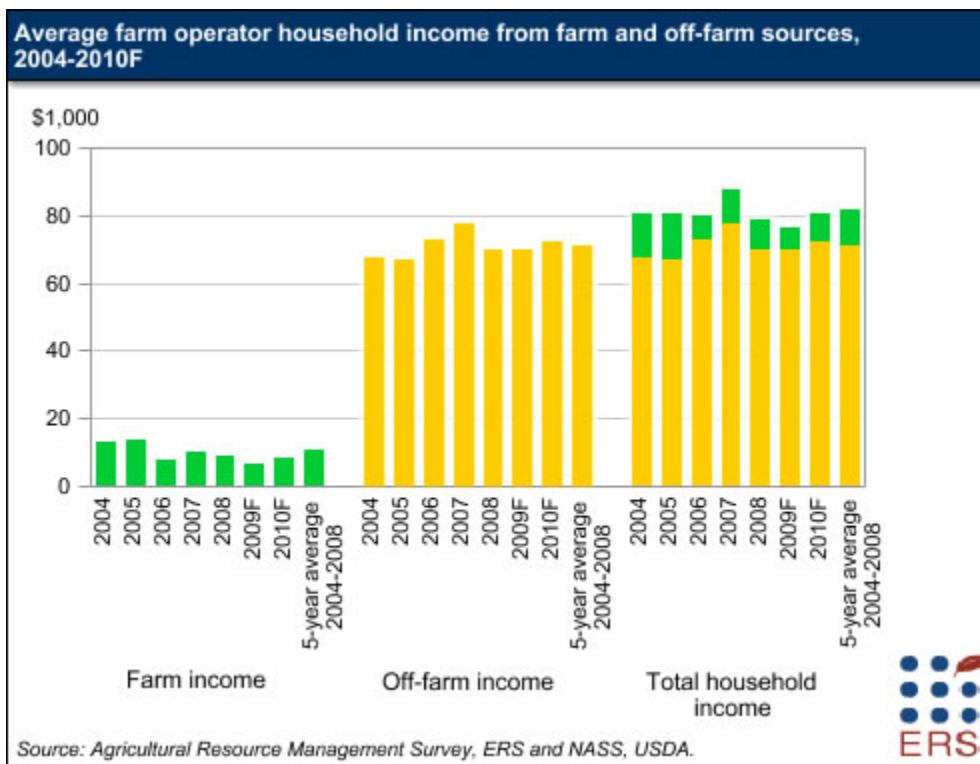
Dear Tom

I want to make the switch to full-time farming but we can't seem to make the numbers work for our family finances. What do you recommend?

-- Perplexed in West Jefferson

Dear Perplexed –

The classic vision of the family farm is both parents working full time on the farm and the kids helping out when the yellow school bus brings them home in the afternoon. The reality is that full-time farmers are rare and they typically rely heavily on off-farm income as indicated in the chart below for the US.



This situation is understandable given the low prices that farmers receive for their products and, by implication, the low wages that they receive for their time invested. The appeal of some off-farm employment stems from clear benefits such as:

- Steady pay in contrast to seasonal income,
- Higher rates of pay per hour than typical for farming, and

- Benefits packages including sick leave, paid holidays, health insurance, and pension programs.

While farming may not compete well with other lines of work on an hourly wage basis, the farm lifestyle makes a very appealing package for people drawn to outside work and living in a rural setting. Positive features include:

- A chance to work outside in a beautiful area,
- A great place to raise a family in a rural setting,
- Opportunities for some degree of food self-sufficiency,
- A chance to be part of a rural community,
- A chance to work for yourself,
- More family control over decisions like work hours, and
- Good “lay-off protection” in economic hard times.

Farming full time also improves the chances that weeding, irrigating or spraying happens exactly when it is needed – improving the chances for farm success.

Farming is a second career for me. I started in my late thirties and still enjoy it but both Karen and I held off-farm jobs since we began. Those jobs were mostly part-time but the steady cash flow allowed us to direct much of our farm income into building farm infrastructure and to paying off the farm mortgage early. My original plan was to farm full-time but it has not happened yet. I enjoy my desk job work for the most part and the hourly wage was much better, allowing us to do things that would not have been possible otherwise. I also found the inside, people-oriented desk job complements the outside, more solitary work of a farmer.

Particularly for new farmers, my advice is “don’t quit your day job” until you have demonstrated that you can make a net income through hail storms, droughts, and late freezes. Most small businesses fail, but even the ones that succeed typically do not show a profit for three years. Farming is not just about profit but if you intend to live solely on your farm income, there needs to be substantial and reliable net income. Reducing income needs with a frugal lifestyle will help get to full-time farming earlier but people vary in their interest in pursuing the needed lifestyle changes to reduce the need for high-paying jobs. .

Farming does make a great second career or retirement career in my view. Some city folks get fed up with the commute and demanding bosses and they cash out early to be farmers. Cash from retirement programs and the sale of suburban houses can help own a substantial part of the farm and the infrastructure needed to run it. Pensions and social security payments also make more likely the possibility that farm income can make ends meet financially.

I understand the appeal of full-time farming but it is tough to do unless you are taking over an established farm operation. I believe it is a great goal and with long term commitment most folks can get there eventually.

Good luck with it.

- Tom

Commercial Farmers: Got a question for Tom? Email it to us.

enews@organicgrowersschool.org

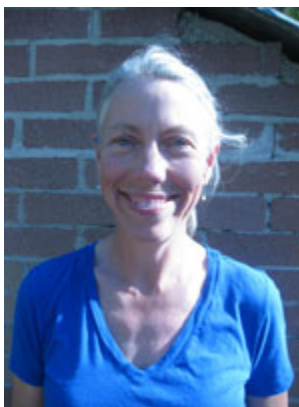
2010 CRAFT Schedule is UP!



The 2010 schedule of CRAFT Farm Tours is up on our website! Take a look at our line up of farms this year and the great classes we plan to offer. The program will also feature guest speakers from area farm-support agencies. In addition, we are teaming up with some fellow non-profits to add more value to the program. Stay tuned and Join today for hands-on technical training, social gatherings, work exchanges, and more!

<http://www.organicgrowersschool.org/content/1874>

Gardener's Corner: Ask Ruth



Dear Ruth,
When is it OK to plant my garden? When can I plant what?

Thanks,

Bill V.
Mars Hill, NC

Dear Bill,

Well that all depends. If you believe the old-timers, when it thunders in March you will have a snow in two weeks. Around March 12 we heard thunder in Weaverville; which

would predict snow around March 26th. Ugg. *Are you ready for spring yet?* But really and truly, **right now it is safe to plant** peas and potatoes, greens of all kinds, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, arugula, spinach, carrots, onions, asparagus crowns, lettuce, kohlrabi, and others in these families. Any of these plants will enjoy the protection of floating-row-covers over bows, but they don't require it. Start your tomato and pepper seedlings indoors now, so they will be a nice size by the last frost. It is also an ideal time to plant fruit trees, blueberries and most small fruits.

In April, add radishes, beets, and chard to that list. *Start your heat-loving vegetables* as transplants indoors. You should treat your transplants nicely while they are indoors. Keep them warm, give them plenty of light, and fertilize them on a regular basis. Products like Neptune's Harvest Fish/Seaweed Blend are excellent for foliar feeding, unless you find the smell distasteful. (I have salt in my blood, so I like the smell). Planting transplants does give you a jump on the season. You will be able to enjoy eating transplanted crops sooner than that same crop seeded directly into your garden soil.

Wait until the frost date has past to plant any **heat-loving vegetables**, *unless you are OK with loosing them to a late frost*. Risk takers have losses, but they often get an earlier harvest too. My neighbor, Elva, always put her tomatoes out early-*with milk-jug cloches to protect them*-and she was mostly lucky. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, squash, okra and such can be planted around the frost date. Wait until the temperature of the soil warms to 65 degrees before planting your corn, beans, and melons.

Mother's Day is often considered the frost date in the *Asheville* area. Wait until **May 15th** to plant frost-sensitive crops if you live in *Madison County, Yancey County, or Mitchell County*, and later yet in the higher elevations.

Three more thoughts...(1) Don't work the soil when it's mucky. It can be moist, but should not be super-sticky. Working sticky soil will compromise soil quality. *In wet years*, it is wise to take advantage of the few windows of opportunity you may have to plant. (2) It's more satisfying to have a smaller garden that is well cared for, than a big weedy, out-of-control garden. (3) Children love to help in the garden. Cultivate their affinity for dirt and growing things at an early age.

All my best and happy gardening,
Ruth

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

Ruth Gonzalez is a former market farmer, avid gardener, local food advocate, and founder of the Tailgate Market Fan Club, www.tailgatemarketfanclub.wordpress.com. 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.

NewsBits

News Bits are reader-submitted happenings or opinion. Submit to enews@organicgrowersschool.org

Red Wing Farm Presents Organic Gardening Classes

Join Christopher and Beth at Red Wing Farm in Swannanoa, NC for a series of organic gardening classes that will help you cultivate an abundant, beautiful, and pleasing home garden that will feed your family well. Choose to attend classes individually (\$40 per class), or the series of four (\$140 total). Attend the whole series, and take home organic vegetable transplants for your garden! Topics to include seed starting, bed preparation and planting, perennial planting, companion planting, season extension, crop rotation, pest management, tools, tricks, and more! For more info, or to register, contact 828.298.0957 or redwingfarmer@gmail.com.

Create Living Soil Seminar at Reems Creek Nursery & Landscaping

On March 27th at 10am, join expert Brett Gustafson for a class on the fundamentals of stewarding your soil, hosted by Reems Creek Nursery & Landscaping. Learn essential techniques for building amazing, organic garden soil teeming with beneficial microbial activity. *Seen through the lens of the soil* as a living organism, this talk will address essentials like tilth, structure, nutrients, soil amendments, composting and microbiology. Improving your soil in the short-term and over the long-term will be discussed. About 1 ½ hours. Free, but please pre-register. Call 828-645-3937 to pre-register, or for more information.