

Local gardens and grocers are going green

Neighbor News frontpage article (by Lisa Kintish - August 20, 2008)

The Mountain Lakes Organic Co-op

The Mountain Lakes Organic Co-op has been in existence for 25 years and has been run for the past six years by Marnie Vyff. On Wednesdays the members go to Vyff's garage to pick up their baskets of organic produce from the supplier, Four Seasons Produce Co., of Pennsylvania. On any given week, Vyff estimates that there are 36 baskets collected.

Whatever can be grown locally is, while other items, such as kiwis, mangoes, and pineapples, are shipped in, and of course, are organic. This time of year, the produce is at its best, with peaches, plums, apricots, lettuce, tomatoes, beans, and peas.

"It is a wonderful time of year for produce because there is so much," said Vyff. The co-op operates year-round. In the fall, zucchini and gourds are available.

"I try to keep it as local and seasonal as I can," she said, noting this means no tomatoes in winter. Additionally, Vyff has told the supplier that she is not interested in produce grown outside of the country. She explained, "We have better standards."

Many of the members have young families, with babies or children in elementary school, although there are also a number of older families who joined the co-op 20 years ago, and as Vyff said, "stuck with it." Most are from Mountain Lakes, but there are a growing number of members from outside the town as people are willing to travel farther and farther.

Some are from as far north as Mahwah. However, Vyff knows that regularly traveling a distance can take its toll. She has turned down people from Pennsylvania for this very reason. Comparing the price for produce through the co-op versus the supermarket, Vyff said, "Our prices are lower. You get more for the money. You lose a little of the ability to choose exactly what you want, but you can say no lettuce and I will try to substitute it with something else you like more."

Vyff's interest in organic foods started while she was living in Denmark, where "practically everything is organic." She added, "Denmark is way ahead of us in the whole green thing. Practically all buildings built in

Denmark are environmentally friendly. It would be good for us to study what the Danish are doing.”

This said, Vyff finds that more Americans are becoming aware of the value of organic food and she hopes this continues. “As one gets to know how food is produced and why it is produced, education would change the way people eat, dramatically. The meat and milk industries are scary. I’m scared enough to be vegetarian,” she said.

A bumper crop of habenero peppers kicked off a new career for Anne Giller. The owner of a small eco organic market farm offering an array of environmentally friendly products, she truly lives a life that is in touch with the planet. And she is not alone – it seems that green is catching on in Morris County.

Degage Gardens

Since starting Degage Gardens in 2000, thanks to those peppers and an opportunity to participate in a state-run entrepreneur program, Giller’s farm on Green Pond Road in Rockaway Township is a source for sachets (including organic rose and lavender), organic catnip, organic potpourri, potted plants, and honey. Then there is the produce. With her motto: “The day it’s picked is the day it’s delivered,” Giller offers more than 100 varieties of herbs, flowers, and vegetables, many of which are Heirloom varieties.

Heirloom explained that Giller is “any variety which has been passed down over the years for its beneficial characteristics: flavor, texture, storage life, and/or resistance to insects, drought, and extreme weather.”

(Unfortunately, due to illness, Giller is unable to grow the Heirlooms this season.) Beyond the obvious greenness of a farm, Degage’s office is operated in a very eco-minded manner. This means using a solar calculator to total receipts which are printed with soy ink; purchasing supplies from sources as local as possible; purchasing herbs and spices from reputable wholesalers who sample, screen, and analyze each lot to assure they are free of irradiation, ozone, sulfur, gas, and chemical treatment; tags are made from recycled paper; and brochures are done by e-mail so as to be paperless.

Additionally, Giller does much of the farm work without the use of electricity and by making the most of available sunlight.

“I am a self-certified grower who’ll never use any GMO products, pesticides, or herbicides,” she said.

Degage Gardens, which is French for carefree and without bounds, is one of several places in Morris County where organic items can be purchased. Said Giller, "I do believe that organic items are more prevalent and more available and it's wonderful! I would think that the increased awareness in organic and eco is due to more media attention. Each Earth Day grows – so many more events every year."

According to the Organic Trade Association, organic "refers to the way agricultural products are grown and processed. It includes a system of production, processing, distribution, and sales that assures consumers that the products maintain the organic integrity that begins on the farm."

The OTA noted, "Organic production is based on a system of farming that maintains and replenishes soil fertility without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers. Organically produced foods also must be produced without the use of antibiotics, synthetic hormones, genetic engineering, and other excluded practices, sewage sludge, or irradiation."

The United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, gives products that contain only organically produced ingredients and processing aids (excluding water and salt) a label declaring it "100 percent organic." Whereas products that consist of at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients (except water and salt) are labeled as "organic."

Grassroots Natural Market

Organic produce is available at Grassroots Natural Market in Denville. Store manager Cindy Matthews said, "We carry a large variety of natural food items, including an extensive Gluten-Free Zone for people with gluten intolerance. Our produce is 100 percent organic, which is hard to find in conventional stores."

The most popular items at Grassroots are produce, milk, cereal, and deli. "We believe that people are becoming more aware of what they eat as food allergies are very prevalent, in adults and children, along with autism in children increasing at an alarming rate," said Matthews. "Perhaps eating organically is more expensive, but not much more, and the benefits to your health is well worth the cost. We are very competitively priced."

Green Elements

Living a healthier, greener life is not limited to food. There are many ways to transform one's home into a green house. Suzie Blodgett, the principal

of Green Elements, LLC Healthy Design and Building Center, located on Main Street in Boonton, offers numerous suggestions. “I believe the most important space in the home to go green is the bedroom, where we can spend up to one-third of our lives. Petrochemical-based mattresses are treated with fire retardants and can contain over 100 neurotoxic and carcinogenic chemicals, which are breathed in and absorbed through the skin. An organic mattress is an extremely important investment for you and your children, and although they may cost more than traditional mattresses, you are eliminating a large source of exposure that could greatly affect your health down the road. Organic bedding should be chosen to further eliminate chemicals from your abode, while also protecting the environment. Traditionally grown cotton accounts for roughly 25 percent of all pesticide use in the U.S., harming farm workers while polluting the ground and waterways. Choose organic cotton which is dyed using environmentally friendly dyes that are free of heavy metals.”

Blodgett’s business sells environmentally friendly, non-toxic green design materials, organic home goods, sustainable lifestyle items, and fair trade gifts. Design materials carried at Green Elements include sustainably harvested and reclaimed woods, bamboo, cork, and linoleum flooring, recycled content countertops, cabinetry hardware, tiles, non-toxic petrochemical-free paints and wood finishes, and natural wall coverings. The retail area has organic mattresses, bedding and linens, home accessories, non-toxic cleaning supplies, and green living books.

Explaining how she became interested in environmental issues, Blodgett said, “I have been an environmentalist all of my adult life, beginning with a love for the ocean and the marine mammals that live there. Everything we do affects the ocean and I realized that to protect the ocean we must protect the planet as a whole.”

She continued, “Green Elements came to be as I was studying interior design and realized there was no place in our area to find non-toxic, environmentally friendly design materials and organic home goods. My vision of opening a green design studio grew to include a space that offered one-stop shopping for green living.”

Blodgett said that people can “tread a little lighter” by doing “simple changes that make a big difference.”

She recommended, “Look for items that do not harm the environment when they are made or when the raw ingredients are obtained, and those which are free of animal products whenever possible. One thing that often goes

overlooked is the damaging affects factory farming has on the environment, from resource use, to pollution, to its contribution to global warming. According to a United Nations report, animal farming generates more greenhouse gas emissions than transportation. This means that becoming a vegan or vegetarian, or even cutting down on your consumption of animal products and products which contain animal ingredients, will make a difference.”

Continuing, she said, “We can all reduce waste by composting, recycling, and buying items which are minimally packaged. I carry reusable bags with me and tell the sales clerk I don’t need a bag when making a purchase that I can carry out without one. Imagine how many bags would be saved if we all did that! Storeowners should have their employees ask customers if they need a bag. We do that at Green Elements, and it’s great to see how many people say ‘No thanks!’ This cuts down on resource use and as a bonus, saves business owners in supply costs.”

To this end, Degage’s Giller offered, “Instead of rewarding people for bringing back and reusing their bags at the grocery store, why not reverse that policy and charge the people who are taking the bags out of the grocery stores!”

Giller also noted that educating people needs to start at the school level. She said, “There’s a school in Morristown called Unity. They are completely aware of our impact on the earth and weave this into their entire program – they even provide their school children with organic lunches!”

As Degage Gardens, Grassroots Natural Market, the Mountain Lakes Organic Co-op, and Green Elements Design all show, living the green and organic life is not impossible and that there are numerous resources right here in Morris County. Interestingly, many of the above post the same Mahatma Gandhi quote on their Web sites: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

For more information, go to: www.degagegardens.com; www.grassrootsnaturalmarket.com; www.MountainLakesOrganic.com; and www.greenelementsdesign.com. Lisa Kintish can be contacted at kintish@northjersey.com.