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What's News in Organic

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Photo: Chuck King

Food Pantries serve organic to people in need

By Jennifer Rose

Food pantries have long played an important role in society, feeding those who, for whatever reason, cannot afford enough food to feed themselves. These institutions have only gained in importance in recent years, as economic growth has slowed and unemployment has risen.

In the face of widespread budget cuts and growing demand for services from food banks, it may come as a surprise, then, to learn that fresh, organic produce is making its way into several food banks, and into the hands of populations in need. At the Oregon Food Bank (OFB) in Portland, OR, this is due in part to OFB's two Learning Gardens as well as the generosity of Organically Grown Company (OGC), the largest wholesaler of organic produce in the Pacific Northwest and an OTA member. Since 2001, the company has donated 2,608,997 pounds of produce to OFB and Food for Lane County, a regional division of the OFB network. And in the past year alone, OGC has donated 250,000 pounds of organic produce to OFB.

In the words of OGC's CEO Josh Hinerfeld, the decision to donate is "a no-brainer." As he explains, "Consumers and retailers want the freshest and most attractive produce, which is understandable, but that results in a lot of unsalable product. As a distributor, we're left with a choice of either composting or donating this food. If we have perfectly good apples that have superficial blemishes, ripe bananas or other short shelf-life produce items, donating to the food bank, for us, is the better option. It gives us a home for produce that we cannot sell, and it enables people in need to have access to fresh, healthy, organic food. "

Volunteers from the Vernon, NJ, United Methodist Church break ground on a small organic garden (photo top right). The resulting produce (above) is channeled to the church's food pantry.

Thanks to the work of Bob Reffelt and a group of fellow parishioners at the United Methodist Church (UMC) in Vernon, NJ, food pantry patrons in northern New Jersey are benefitting from the introduction of organic foods as well. As a retiree, Reffelt found himself with "some extra time on his hands," so he set out to create a small, organic garden that could be used to help feed the 60-100 families who visit the church's food pantry each month.

"We've had a food pantry [at the church] for a long time, but we've relied mostly on canned, non-perishable food. I thought it would be great if we could go one step

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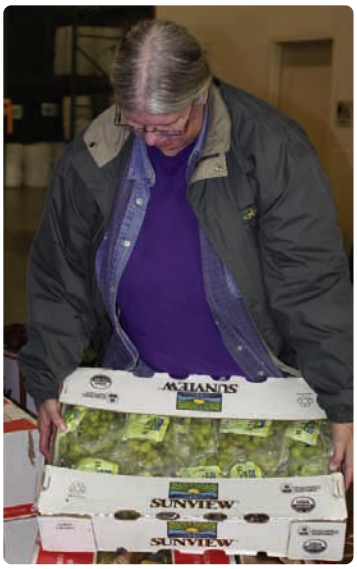
further, and serve our families with fresh, locally grown organic food," he explains.

Turning his thoughts into actions, Reffelt reached out to Jamie Rickey, owner of Rickey & Sons Organic Farm in Vernon, in hopes of using some of Rickey's land for the organic garden. Rickey agreed, and in March 2011, Reffelt and several UMC congregation members got to work establishing a small, 40' by 60' plot a mile and a half from the church. Together, the group tilled the soil, brought in mulch and compost, built an 8-foot fence to protect the garden from deer, and began planting crops, including string beans, tomatoes, lettuce, squash, Swiss chard, and beets.

Maintaining the garden has been challenging, both due to heavy rain and an inconsistent supply of volunteers. Nonetheless, Reffelt feels that it is a definite asset to the church's food pantry. "The people who come [to the food pantry] really appreciate having fresh food. The fact that it is organic is an added bonus."



A volunteer picks beans at Saddleback Church's organic farm, while a worker at the Oregon Food Bank looks at produce donated by Organically Grown Company.

Fresh, organic food is also making its way into the hand of patrons of the Saddleback Church food pantry in San Juan Capistrano, CA, due in large measure to the vision and hard work of congregation member Gene Archibek. A descendant of four generations of farmers, Archibek was well -versed in agriculture. But as an executive in a construction firm, he didn't spend much time on the farm. In the spring of 2010, things changed, and he began volunteering on ranch land acquired by the church. While heading to a storage area on the property, Archibek came across a piece of farm equipment that mirrored one owned by his grandfather. At that moment, Archibek says, he knew what he had to do. "Crazy as it may sound, everything became clear to me. I needed to help the church build a farm."

Shortly thereafter, Archibek applied for a federal seed grant, which he immediately received. He then put together a plan to develop a 24,000-square-foot farm on Saddleback Church's Rancho Capistrano campus. Top on the list of Archibek's priorities: making the farm an organic one. "Ever since our pastor Rick Warren came out with The Daniel Plan (a year-long fitness plan) last year, organic has been a huge priority for Saddleback Church. We have all committed to eating healthier, and organic is a big part of that process. "

What has evolved from Archibek's organic farm plan, in his words, "is nothing short of amazing."

"People have come out of the woodwork to help with this project," he notes, adding that he's received donations of everything from tools, organic compost, and a large walk-in refrigerator to store harvested produce to an irrigation system valued at over $10,000. "And the offers to help just keep coming" from Saddleback Church goers as well as the surrounding community.

Such contributions have enabled the Saddleback organic farm to produce over 10,000 pounds of organic produce and help feed 3,500 visitors (775 families) per month at the Saddleback Church food pantry. They have also set the stage for a 36,000-foot expansion and a doubling of the farm's production next year.

"It's been a fantastic accomplishment," Archibek observes. "Like many food pantries, we historically served a lot of processed foods. But we always wanted to be able to offer something fresh and healthy. Now, we're doing just that."

Given the success that OFB, UMC, and Saddleback Church have had in integrating organic food into their food pantry offerings, it is easy to wonder whether we are likely to see fresh, organic food on more food pantry shelves in the months to come. According to Hinerfeld, the answer to that question is not clear-cut.

"Right now, food pantries, and the people who use them, are scrambling for any food they can get. They are not discriminating between organic and conventional." Also, there is not always clear recognition about the origin of the food that is being served. "People at food pantries may be unaware that the food they are eating is organic," Hinerfeld notes. "And if they are unaware, they are unlikely to demand more of it."

At the same time, various structural barriers exist to making fresh food –either organic or conventional—more widely available at food pantries. As Hinerfeld observes, growers have limited motivation to

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Photo: Chuck King

pay for labor to pick and transport produce that cannot readily be sold. Additionally, when growers do dedicate resources for the production and distribution of produce for food pantries, the lack of refrigeration at the food pantries often presents a problem.

"Many food pantries lack the refrigeration facilities necessary to handle perishable items. So, even if fresh food is available, they [food pantries] don't always have an effective means of storing it," Hinerfeld says.

Nonetheless, stories like the ones shared here provide hope that organic may, one day, be standard food pantry fare.

Trend: Research verifies the profitability and benefits of organic agriculture.

- Rodale Institute's *The Farming Systems Trial: Celebrating 30 years* (http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/files/FSTbookletFINAL.pdf) report highlights six major findings from its long-term side-by-side field trial comparisons of organic and conventional systems. These findings, which prove the benefits of organic agriculture, show: 1) Organic yields match conventional yields; 2) Organic outperforms conventional in years of drought; 3) Organic farming systems build rather than deplete soil organic matter, making it a more sustainable system; 4) Organic farming uses 45 percent less energy and is more efficient; 5) Conventional systems produce 40 percent more greenhouse gases; and 6) Organic farming systems are more profitable than conventional.
- The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) has released a report documenting how organic farming is good for people, the environment, and the economy. The report, *Organic Farming for Health and Prosperity*, shows findings on how organic farming is good for human health, job creation, the economy, soil and water, for birds and bees, and for slowing climate change. The report also makes five recommendations directed at agricultural policy makers: expand organic research funding, ensure fair and appropriate risk management tools, meet market demand, create a robust organic transition assistance program, and reward environmental benefits.
- An analysis of 18 years of crop yield and farm management data from a long-term University of Minnesota trial has shown that an organic crop rotation was consistently more profitable and carried less risk of low returns than conventional corn and soybean production, according to research published in the September-October issue of the *Agronomy Journal* (https://www.agronomy.org/story/2011/sep/thu/organic-farming-profitable-long-term). Study leader Timothy Delbridge, a University of Minnesota doctoral student in agricultural economics, said the research didn't take into consideration the difficulties and cost of transitioning to organic. However, the results offer convincing new evidence that going organic will be lucrative over the long haul. A pdf of the research article is available for download (https://www.agronomy.org/publications/aj/view/103-5/aj10-0371-pub.pdf).
- Organic crop systems can provide similar yields and higher economic returns than a conventional corn-soybean rotation, according to 13 years of data from a side-by-side comparison at Iowa State University's Neely-Kinyon Research and Demonstration Farm (http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs-and-papers/2011-11-ltar-experiment). The Long-Term Agroecological Research Experiment, which began in 1998, shows that organic crops can remain competitive with conventional crops even during the three-year transition. In addition to profitability, the trials have shown organic agriculture helps build healthy soils.
- An interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Minnesota, McGill University, University of California at Santa Barbara, University of Wisconsin, Arizona State University, Stockholm University and the University of Bonn have published an analysis in the Oct. 20, 2011, edition of *Nature* outlining solutions for a cultivated planet to meet growing food needs. They wrote, "To meet the world's future food security and sustainability needs, food production must grow substantially while, at the same time, agriculture's environmental footprint must shrink dramatically." Among their findings: "Conventional approaches to intensive agriculture, especially the unbridled use of irrigation and fertilizers, have been major causes of environmental degradation. Closing yield gaps without environmental degradation will require new approaches, including reforming conventional agriculture and adopting lessons from organic systems and precision agriculture."
- Researchers from Spain, analyzing archived samples from conventional and organic production systems, have found statistically higher levels of phenolic compounds (antioxidants) in organic tomato juice versus conventionally produced tomato juice. Their conclusion: "There appear to be genuine differences in the bioactive components of organic and conventional tomato juices not previously reported." The findings are published in *Food Chemistry*, Vol. 130, Issue 1.

Trend: Despite a troubled economy, consumers continue to seek organic foods.

- Seventy-eight percent – more U.S. families than ever before – are choosing organic foods, according to the *2011 U.S. Families' Organic Attitudes and Beliefs Study* published by the Organic Trade Association in October. According to the study, four in ten families indicate they are buying more organic products than they were a year ago. Nearly half – 48 percent – of parents surveyed revealed that their strongest motivator for buying organic is their belief that organic products "are healthier for me and my children." Other motivators for purchasing organic included concern over the effects of pesticides, hormones and antibiotics on children, and the desire to avoid highly processed or artificial ingredients. For the study, OTA, in partnership with *KIWI Magazine*, polled nearly 1,300 U.S. families about their attitudes and behaviors relating to organic foods.
- Findings from the *Annual Food Shopping Trends Tracker Survey*

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Photo: Chuck King

conducted online in August 2011 by Harris Interactive® on behalf of Whole Foods Market Inc. showed that 74 percent of the 2,112 adults surveyed won't compromise on the quality of the food they buy. In the survey, 72 percent of respondents indicated they would continue to buy the same amount of natural and/or organic foods as they always have, while 24 percent said these choices would make up more than a quarter of their total household food purchases in 2011. Seventy percent of shoppers said they would like to find ways to buy natural and organic foods within their budget, and 71 percent said they would buy natural and/or organic over conventional foods if prices are comparable.

Trend: Consumers want to know how their food is produced.

➢ The State of Ohio will no longer pursue regulations limiting labeling on organic dairy products. Ohio had attempted to prohibit statements on labels which informed consumers that organic dairy products are produced without antibiotics, pesticides or synthetic hormones. After the Organic Trade Association (OTA) sued Ohio, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals sided with consumers' right to know and gutted the Ohio rule, finding that it was unconstitutional. Ohio has now agreed to abandon the rule rather than trying to revive it, recognizing that the First Amendment allows organic dairy products to proudly state that they are produced in accordance with the organic standards, without the use of synthetic growth hormones, pesticides, or antibiotics. The Sixth Circuit opinion made it clear that states cannot unduly restrict organic labels or consumers' right to know how their food is produced.

➢ Between Oct. 1 and Oct. 16, members of the organic industry and organic supporters joined the 313-mile GMO Right2Know March from New York City to Washington, D.C., to raise awareness and pressure the U.S. government on the lack of labeling of foods made with genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

➢ OTA has partnered with the "Just Label It: We Have A Right to Know" campaign and has signed a petition to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) calling for labels on products that use genetically engineered (GE) ingredients. The Just Label It (http://justlabelit.org/) campaign provides a simple way to submit comments to FDA in support of the petition and stay up to date on the labeling initiative. The site also offers education tools to get informed about GE foods, the benefits of labeling foods, and ways to stay engaged through blogs and social media. As of Nov. 11, approximately 335,000 comments had been submitted to FDA, thanks to the work of more than 450 partner businesses and organizations.

Trend: Research continues to show negative effects of industrial agriculture practices.

➢ The Government Accounting Office (GAO) has released a report on the overuse of non-therapeutic antibiotics in livestock that concluded federal agencies have not taken necessary actions to combat antibiotic resistance. The report, entitled *Agencies Have Made Limited Progress Addressing Antibiotic Use in Animals*, found that the Food and Drug Administration, which is the agency primarily responsible for overseeing livestock, lacked essential data and has a limited understanding of the problem.

➢ A growing body of research suggests that exposure to toxic and persistent pesticides is linked to a range of health problems, including developmental disorders, ADHD, lower IQs, and even cancer. A study published in the online Oct. 7, 2011, edition of *Environmental Health Perspectives* found that pesticides may also negatively impact human growth. The study, which took blood samples from 50 Russian elementary-school-aged boys, found that those who had the highest concentrations of pesticides in their blood were more likely to grow less than those with lower concentrations.

➢ Iowa State University entomologists have discovered that western corn rootworms in four Iowa fields have evolved and can resist a natural pesticide made by plants grown from Monsanto's GE corn seeds. The discovery was reported Aug. 29 in *The Wall Street Journal*.

➢ Scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) have found significant levels of glyphosate (Roundup) in air and water samples in Mississippi and Iowa. According to USGS research, glyphosate is commonly found in rain and rivers in agricultural areas in the Mississippi River watershed. Overall, agricultural use of glyphosate has increased from less than 11,000 tons in 1992 to more than 88,000 tons in 2007. Detailed results of the research are published in Volume 30 of *Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry* and online in *Pest Management Science*. Copies of the reports are available from the journals or from Paul Capel (capel@usgs.gov).

➢ As a result of growing weed resistance to glyphosate due to overuse of GE crops, conventional growers may have to revert to using old herbicide compounds such as 2,4-D and other auxins, according to Dean Riechers, University of Illinois associate professor of weed physiology. In an article in the October-December 2011 edition of *Weed Science*, Riechers and his research team suggested that tank-mixing auxinic herbicides with glyphosate may be the best short-term option available to conventional farmers interested in broad-spectrum post-emergence weed control.

➢ *The Global Citizens' Report on the State of GMOs*, coordinated by Navdanya International of India, notes that GE crops have failed to deliver higher food yields while creating dangerous superweeds. In fact, in China, where insect-resistant *Bt* cotton is widely planted, populations of pests have increased twelve-fold since 1997, while in India, pesticide use has increased 13-fold since *Bt* cotton was introduced. "Choice is being undermined as food systems are increasingly controlled by giant corporations and as chemical and genetic pollution spread," according to Vandana Shiva, director of Naydanya International, adding, "GM companies have put a noose round the necks of farmers. They are destroying alternatives in the pursuit of profit."