

A World Gone Organic

Serendipitously, the week of Spring's onset, was filled with activities and even headline news that centered on gardening and organic gardening in particular. Here is a brief diary:

- **On Saturday, March 14th we attended the Production Basics Workshop sponsored by the impressive Center for Environmental Farming Systems near Goldsboro. The program and demonstration farm is a joint venture between NC State and NC A&T State Universities. The farm is managed by Steve Moore, who has over thirty years of experience owning his own organic farm in Pennsylvania. Steve conducted the workshop with NC State Reserach Specialist, Ken Fager. The workshop was held on a cold, wet Saturday but drew over three dozen participants. The morning started off warm and dry within the heated propagation greenhouse where hundreds of new vegetable seedlings were emerging, but the less hardy participants were soon weeded out as the hands-on demo moved to the farm where wind, rain and 40 degrees kept us alert. The workshop included the ABCs of starting vegetables from seed including selecting the right container, soil mix, and nutrients. The presenters demonstrated how to remove small seedlings to transplant into a larger container by pricking out -- separating a seedling bareroot with both tool and bare hand picking the plant by the foliage rather than the stem so as to not break the stem. years of organic farming experience as an owner of a Pennsylvania farm.**

A lot of attention was given to soil fertility, and the proper way of taking a soil sample. Now, we must have given out thousands of soil sample boxes at our garden centers over the years, but Ken showed us the exact way to take a sample by digging a hole in the earth and then shaving off 8" to place in the box. Take 10 to 15 samples from a plot and mix together and then put it directly into the box not into a plastic bag and then the box. They then explained step by step the analysis that the State Agriculture Department will send back for free. Most soils in NC have a plentiful supply of potassium, but are lacking in nitrogen and potassium. The analysis also detects nutritional needs for micronutrients, soil alkalinity, and salts. Your compost can also be tested, but this should be collected in a plastic bag so it does not dry out, and it will cost \$6.00 to process.

As big fans of compost in our garden, we were interested to learn that you can overdo adding compost each year in terms of building up the carbon content of the soil and potentially too much salts especially if animal manure is also incorporated. As newcomers to the use of cover crops in our kitchen garden, we learned that the annual ryegrass we use helps to lock up nitrogen in the soil in the winter but is not as effective as legume covers for adding nitrogen to the soil. Ken and Steve are also big on crop

rotation as best outlined in Eliot Coleman's *New Organic Grower*.

Shivering outside (we weren't wimps enough to leave, but we did pull out the football blanket) we watched as Steve and Ken showed us some techniques for improving the fertility and texture of the soil by ensuring that soil has the proper composition to stimulate biological activity -- a blend of air, water, organic matter, and minerals.

As an alternative to killing turf with a broad spectrum herbicide like Roundup, Steve demonstrated a small plot where he had laid cardboard down last fall followed by a heavy layer of straw. He lifted up the smothering cover to show bare ground virtually free of turf and weeds. Another method for ridding new ground of turf and weeds was demonstrated by Ken using a walk behind tiller to till a plot that had been turned over a few weeks earlier. The idea is to expose the roots of grass and weeds to the air to allow them to dry out and die – that residue can either be raked out or tilled under as organic matter.

Weeds are the bane of most gardeners -- organic or not. The presenters demonstrated several cultivation tools including a razor sharp collinear hoe which was the most impressive. They stressed that getting to weeds early before they set seed and while they are easy to hoe is the best way to cut down on your weed population so that ultimately, weeds are a diminishing problem. They are also advocates of minimal tilling once a garden soil structure is at equilibrium so as to not disturb and distribute weed seeds that might be lying dormant.

CEFS offers a number of terrific workshops and educational resources useful for backyard gardeners who want to garden organically or increase their use of organic practices. Go to their website for more information, <http://www.cefs.ncsu.edu/>

- On Monday, March 16 an AP wire story appeared in local papers entitled, "More Americans dig dirt to save dollars," by Gillian Flacus. There is a double digit growth in the number of Americans gardening. These gardens have been dubbed "recession gardens" -- a throwback to the Victory Gardens of World War II. George Ball, CEO of Burpee Seeds, is quoted, "People's home grocery budgets got absolutely shredded and now we've seen this just dramatic increase in the demand for vegetable seeds. We're selling out. I've never seen anything like it." Roger Doiron, founding director of Kitchen Gardens International, is reported to have weighed every vegetable he pulled from his 1,600 square foot outside Portland, Maine. His grocery savings for his family of four was \$2,150.

Doiron and his gardening colleagues collected 75,000 petitions for an Eleanor Roosevelt - style vegetable garden to be planted at the White House. To read the article go to http://www.newsobserver.com/nation_world/story/1444599.html

- **On Friday, March 20 two dozen local elementary school students joined First Lady Michele Obama and White House horticulturist, Dale Haney (1972 graduate of the Sandhills Landscape Gardening Program) to prepare an 1,100 square foot vegetable garden. The garden will grow 55 different vegetables with input from the White House kitchen staff on what to grow and plants started in the White House Greenhouse. The palette includes lettuces, sweet and hot peppers, squash, fennel, rhubarb, and cucumbers. The culinary staff will use the the harvested produce to prepare dishes for family and guests. Some of the harvest will go to Miriam's House, a soup kitchen near the White House.**
- **Also on Friday, it was announced that Dr. Mary Peet, 29-year veteran at NC State, will lead the USDA's Cooperative Extension Service renewed emphasis on organic horticulture and agriculture. Peet remarked with an academic's subdued enthusiasm, "I think it's a good time for organics."**
- **On Sunday, March 22, we enjoyed brunch at Goat Lady Dairy Farm. Steve and Lee Tate's organic farm is located in Randolph County, NC about 45 minutes from Greensboro. Steve oversees the award-winning cheese making, and Lee tends the goats as well as the organic vegetables used for their group meals. Upon welcoming us, Steve stated that they came to NC from Minnesota to follow their calling -- "If you want to change the world, get people to change their relationship to their food." He also noted how rewarding it has been as one promoting slow foods for more the 40 years to witness the recent surge in interest in healthy eating and sustainable agriculture. There are some openings remaining for their summer dinners, visit:
<http://www.goatladydairy.com/>**

That was the week that was -- great news stories for a change and a lot of activities to inspire organic gardening enthusiasts.