

CERTIFIED ORGANIC GROWERS



Chemical-free vegetables are grown in the certified organic garden at the Truck Crops Experiment Station in Crystal Springs. (Photo by Bob Ratliff)

By Emily Cole

Several Mississippi growers are responding to consumer demand for food grown without the use of any chemicals, and organic fruits and vegetables are cropping up across the state.

Rick Snyder, a vegetable specialist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service, said interest in organic food is slowly gaining momentum in Mississippi, and the demand stems from health awareness in America.

"Organic growers are filling a niche in the demand for produce," Snyder said. "People are more health conscious and are eating more and more fruits and vegetables, especially those without any chemicals on them."

The growing consumer demand has led to increased interest from growers and the government. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently enacted regulations defining what is and is not considered organic. To be considered organic, produce must be grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers, said Snyder.

Mississippi's Department of Agriculture and Commerce started an organic certification program in 2005 to regulate this agricultural niche.

"Growers can't grow produce and claim it's organic unless it's certified," Snyder said.

Guy Feltenstein, director of the Division of Fruits and Vegetables within the Department of Agriculture and Commerce, said growers with land that has been chemical-free for the past three years can apply to become a certified organic grower.

"We have had a tremendous number of inquiries lately, primarily about vegetables," Feltenstein said.

As part of the certification process, a team from MDAC takes soil samples, interviews the grower and checks the area for

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possible chemicals. The Organic Certification Board then reviews the application, and the applicant can be certified if the soil tests show no chemicals. Snyder is one of the six members of this board and said that six applicants had been granted organic grower certifications by early March.

Those six certified growers and many home growers are successfully producing organic blueberries, watermelons, squash, tomatoes and pecans. Concentrated in the southern half of Mississippi, organic growers' crops are usually sold in their local areas, Snyder said.

Organic grower Amy Phelps of Pearl River Blues Berry Farm in Lumberton has grown blueberries since 2000 without using any chemicals. This year, she plans to branch out into other crops, including sweet corn and tomatoes.

Phelps, a former environmental journalist with The Washington Post, said the hardest part of growing organically is confirming the source of every product she uses on her crops.

"There are a lot of questions you have to ask," Phelps said. "You're always looking for the source. For example, there is free mulch available from Katrina debris, but I can't use it because I can't guarantee the source. I really want to know where my supplies come from."

Despite the challenges, Phelps and her husband Alan love helping people make better food choices.

"I can tell people to pick anything out of the field and eat it – don't even worry about washing it," she said. "By not putting chemicals on it, people can pick and eat and say 'Wow! I've done something good for myself today.'"

Organic growing is a challenge. Proving that it can be done in Mississippi is one of the greatest rewards, said Phelps, who is president of the Gulf South Blueberry Growers Association.

Mississippi's soils, pests and plant diseases do not make an organic farmer's job easy. The hot and humid climate allows weeds to grow quickly and diseases to thrive, Snyder said.

"Growers have to come up with alternative methods for controlling insects, weeds and diseases in the field," he said. "They have to be observant so they can get them under control quickly. There are some biological controls for insects, and elements like copper can be used to control bacteria."

The higher prices consumers are willing to pay for certified organic goods can offset the higher cost of production.

Snyder said the profit potential of satisfying the organic market niche is one reason some growers get into organics, while others choose to grow their crops without chemicals because they believe it is how crops should be grown.

Organic growers interested in becoming certified should contact Kevin Riggan, state organic coordinator, at (601) 359-1138 or kevin@mdac.state.ms.us.