

GROWING ORGANICALLY

BY HONEY JUDITH RUBIN

Nowadays, specialty markets in even modestly-sized towns and all national grocery chains carry organic dairy products, produce, meat, and a myriad of boxed and frozen organic items. Nearly 30 years ago, my friends and I either had to drive 50 miles round trip to get what we wanted, or — for a while, had a neighborhood food buying co-op and ordered large quantities of organic food directly from a national vendor. Each month, a tractor-trailer would deliver hundreds of pounds of bulk food to be distributed. Both choices were a lot of work and trouble and our gardens were the only local source for seasonal, fresh food.

It just rankled me that Georgia was importing most of its organic food from Florida or California. We have a variety of soils and all but tropical weather zones — surely we could grow our own produce! My research showed that we weren't growing what we could because there was no evidence of a broad-based market for these products within the state. There didn't seem to be enough interest. Yet, I knew from what the other co-op groups told me, that we had a beginning upon which we could build. I started playing with ideas on how to help it happen.

A year before the formation of the Georgia Organic Growers Association (GOGA), I began a postcard campaign in the Georgia Farmers and Consumers Market Bulletin. This free newspaper prints ads for people wanting to buy or sell agricultural products and related items.

In addition to being able to buy locally grown organic food, I wanted to network...to communicate and learn with others with similar interests. Every week or so, I'd send a card, which in addition to my contact information said: "want to buy steady supply of organically raised food; no synthetics, chemicals, or pesticides. Must be nearby and reasonable."

After months, the first ad got in. The whole process should have/could have taken about 10 days! Lisa Ray, who later became Georgia Department of Agriculture

Commissioner Tommy Irvin's press secretary said that the arrival of those cards would create quite a stir in the department, as would my phone calls. After looking to find my ad in each week's edition, I would call to inquire about how to get the ad in. I maintained patience and respect, as though this were my first phone call about it and as though unaware that the repeated omission was intentional.

Oh the stories I heard! "...lack of room, missed the deadline, maybe next time." Finally I asked point blank, "What will it take to get this notice in the Bulletin?"

The then editor said, "No one is interested and there's no proof that there's any value in it, etc., etc."

As though I had been given a prize I said, "Well, you may be right, maybe no one will answer, but the card has to go in so that we can find out. If after a reasonable effort — at least three straight weeks, we find that I get NO response, I'll withdraw the request, for a while. And, since this is a public bulletin, whether anyone else agrees with me, surely I have the right to ask. The easiest thing for both of us would be to give it a try."

Lisa says that after we hung up, the editor bellowed in frustration to "put the #@&* card in already!" The rest, as they say, is history. From ALL over the state, people began to call and write. Many just said how glad they were to know that someone else in Georgia was even interested. Some actually had food to sell! Several people began coming to Country Bound meetings — a back-to-the-land club formed at the height of the apocalypse paranoia of the 1970s.

With this influx of new energy and attention, interest in organic methods grew within the club and eventually within the state. After several months of steadily increasing interest and attendance, Country Bound members received an invitation to take part in a meeting about creating a statewide club. There were just a couple of dozen people at that first meeting. About half had come from Country Bound

GOGA, now named Georgia Organics, was created from that meeting. People such as Bob Rodale, UGA extension agents, nationally known organic farmers, other

experts, the owner of a large, upscale specialty market who encouraged local production, and people from other states' clubs spoke at the early meetings and conferences. People came from all over the Southeast to share ideas and learn together. They still do.

One thing that worked well and served to build energy of the group and people's interest was staying focused on learning, using and promoting organic methods. Positive people are drawn to positive energy.

One thing that consistently drained the energy of the group and people's interest in the club was an unfortunately persistent negative attitude. The Georgia Department of Agriculture, Commissioner Irvin, and chemical companies were referred to with scorn, sarcasm, anger, denigration, etc. — a need to play good guys and bad guys.

As a co-founder and 10-year board member (in charge of PR), I tried for 10 years to get a meeting between GOGA and Commissioner Irvin; finally, there was a first beginning of a discussion toward that end. At board meetings, while trying to ready myself for discussions with his people, I would focus on what we could talk about, work on, or ask for. But, with a preponderance of nervous chatter about how bad IT-he-everything was, I felt so frustrated.

Now I am far more compassionate about the anxiety under that sort of chatter and therefore far more effective at soothing and redirecting energy and attention. But then, I was just unable to face their fire while trying to get ready for a meeting.

At what was to be my last club meeting, things seemed really deteriorate. I gave an impassioned speech about our needing to be “organic” in our relationships because how we treat others, think about them, talk about them determines our outcomes. Really venting my upset, I declared that their current and chronic attitude was as toxic as any poison put on the earth. I did not win friends and influence people! After I left the meeting, I was ‘relieved’ of my position by the other members.

I called Lisa Ray, with whom I am still pals, to tell her I had been relieved of my post but hoped they would still continue to move toward a meeting and could I help

in any way. Laughing, she told me that they'd been informed that I had retired and her whole office had celebrated my being able to move on to other things. But they also had already backed away from a meeting. Of the entire group, I was the one person they had trusted. They always knew and felt that what I said and how I behaved to their face, with genuine respect, was exactly who I was at all times — even behind closed doors.

People KNOW how you feel about them even if it is never verbalized. I made it my business to be kind but I wasn't a pushover. I was then and am now a vocal and vigorous supporter of organic and IPM methods for agriculture, forestry, and gardening. At one point, there was an article in the Market Bulletin that contained an unfortunate slight, an insult toward organic beliefs and methods. I respectfully but tenaciously stood my ground and won a printed retraction. It took weeks!

It's hard enough for people to open their minds to change, to new ideas, values, and ethics about the environment, etc. We need to make our attitude of respect, love, and caring be SO strong and attractive that we encourage people to re-examine their current beliefs and values.

When the "welcome mat" to change is swept clean of blame, name calling, wrongdoing, and other "less than" labels, we promote our own cause far more than any external action we could take. People with passion, drive, and conviction must hold true to their vision on the inner and outer levels no matter how loud dissenting cacophony becomes. Anger, blame, and self-righteousness about an issue just attracts more people who find value in anger, blame, and self-righteousness!

In order to be a more effective agent for change, I have had to allow the grandeur of what I can envision carry me forward. I have had to examine and re-examine my own less than organic ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. As a result, I am becoming even better at being organic in my approach to life and my relationships. My own commitment to value people more than issues is repeatedly put to the test, and I get to grow.

Relationships are especially blessed when I put into them only the seeds of those ideas and attitudes that would form a welcomed harvest. I find that it is far more effective to be strongly for something rather than against anything. I aim to speak my mind and heart as a gift and be unattached to the outcome. It is the example of countless others combined with my own moments of yearning to be who I dream of being, which has helped me grow and guided my focus and discipline.

That postcard campaign from decades ago was started to meet my own needs in a way that was as graceful and ecologically sound as I could manage. Today, the interest in and support of organically grown food has created one of the most rapidly expanding markets in the food industry. Family owned and operated farms are on the increase for the first time in several decades. As this market segment expands, more and more people and industries will want to take part.

My persistence and courage in being and becoming more organic in my inner and outer choices, has helped pave the way for this vast social change. It is true that one person — or a small group of people — with courage and conviction can help change an entire society. Each person counts in the journey toward a critical mass. Each person's energy and intention becomes part of the exponential expansion.

Now that organic food is widely available, a new fire has taken hold of my heart. I am pouring my passion into letting people know how to easily create a wildlife habitat so their backyard can be part of a vast network to feed and nurture our native and migratory wildlife.

I speak toward what people can most easily ADD to their yards, what is the most helpful to the most creatures. Of course I have information available on the most important things to avoid. But I offer it as though I were serving a feast to a cherished friend.

The skills, attitudes and ideas I learned while being a pioneer in the organic movement serve me over and over. The more helpful and harmless I become in what I think, say and do — the more effective I become. Plants, people, ideas, and

causes all thrive in ecologically sound environments. I delight in being a perpetual pioneer on the eternally expanding, ever present frontier of personal consciousness.

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