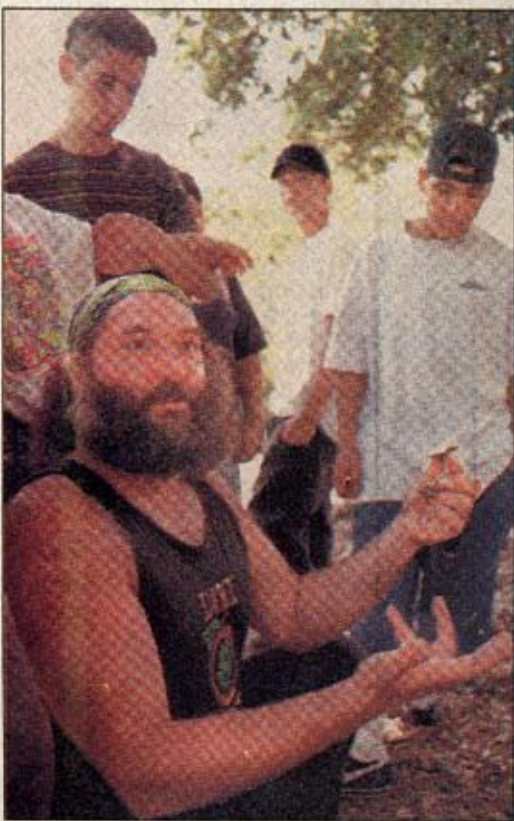


FOR THE LONG HAUL

Rotten leaves, bugs and manual labor part of return to the land



Leon Glover, 13, returns a just-emptied compost-carrying wheelbarrow up the hill while getting a taste of organic farming in Woodside. GARY REYES — MERCURY NEWS



Organic farmer David Blume, foreground, tells students from San Jose's Foundry School how mushrooms grow.

Crops raise social awareness

BY KATHERINE CONRAD
Mercury News Staff Writer

Crops with a social conscience are sprouting across the Bay Area as the green revolution battles for a spot on your dinner plate.

Organizers of Earth Day 1996 have chosen the theme "The Planet on Your Plate" to focus on how food is grown and how consumers can affect agricultural policies by choosing organically grown produce.

"People aren't educated about their food," said Laura Stec, a chef-in-training who works for Palo Alto-based Bay Area Action. "One of the most positive effects you can have on today's environment begins on your plate because food affects the environment in so many ways."

Focusing on food and the environment is a concept that has taken off in this culinary-conscious region — somewhat to the surprise of activists, who are finding people eager to learn how to eat lower on the food chain — more veggies — and to eat organically grown produce.

More than 40 organizations are participating in Earth Day events scheduled from

April 15 to 22, and hundreds of restaurants will serve meals from food groups that are low on the food chain to raise awareness about the source of food.

"We've created a system that produces incredible amounts of food, but at the expense of the future," said Peter Drekmeier, director of Bay Area Action. "We're depleting the soil of nutrients and contaminating the air, water and soil with pesticides."

The buzz word is "sustainable agriculture," a way of producing food that it is profitable for those who grow it, yet healthy for those who eat it. Sustainable agriculture involves a method of farming that treats the soil as a living ecosystem through various methods such as composting, planting cover crops to retain topsoil and planting beans to add nitrogen to the soil.

Nowhere is the concept more amply illustrated than on Our Farm in Woodside, one of a string of 15 community-supported agricultural (CSA) enterprises in the Bay area.

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"We grow all our own food ecologically — no pesticides, no fertilizers," said Reynie Lave. "One reason is the health of people eating. Residues from chemicals cause health problems. The other reason is for the health of the ecosystem."

In community-supported agriculture, farmers grow produce for consumers who buy shares in the farm. Every week, shareholders get a box of whatever foods are in season. If it's an especially good year for lettuce, shareholders are awash in green leaves, but if a hailstorm destroys one-third of the Brussels sprouts and kale, everybody's bounty will decline.

"When you own a piece of the farm, you go with the fortunes of the farm," said David Blume, Lave's partner in the 2-year-old operation.

Blume, who has toured the country touting the virtues of organic farming, is concerned about farming as an institution and how it affects the Earth.

"Agriculture is the most destructive element to the environment," he said. "In the United States, more than 1 billion pounds of pesticides a year are sprayed into the environment. People's choices about food have a greater effect on environmental quality than any other consumer choices they can make."

Concern for food and the environment is a concept that has taken off.

How disconnected consumers have become from their food can be seen by the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau no longer considers farming an occupation because less than 2 percent of the population makes a living in agriculture, Blume said.

"The people who provide your food are statistically insignificant," Blume said. "But I am changing the way farmers are treated. I'm making a living at this."

With purple juice staining his chin, 14-year-old Nick Viglizzo chomps on a member of the nutritious beet family as his mother sings the virtues of buying organic food during a visit to Our Farm.

"I'm interested in the community, the Earth and the environment," said Barbara Viglizzo, a student in transpersonal psychology. "The idea of eating organic food fits in with the whole spectrum of the way the Earth is treated on this farm."

Every method Blume and Lave use is an effort to maximize the use of their sloping hillside while giving the soil every opportunity to produce food packed with nutrients. According to a 1994 study from the National Science

Foundation, organic food has three times the nutrients of conventionally grown food.

The interest in organically grown foods has spread beyond households and farms into businesses such as the restaurant Flea Street Cafe in Menlo Park and Terravera, a fresh-food company in Redwood City.

"We're a values-based organization with a real commitment to community and environment," said Diane Gabianelli, sales and marketing manager for Terravera. "We strive to be environmentally healing to colleagues, customers and community."

Currently 35 percent of Terravera's produce is organically grown, but Gabianelli said the company is determined to reach 100 percent. Apparently the company's philosophy is attractive because Terravera has grown 60 percent in the past year.

Spec is pleased that for-profit businesses are participating in Earth Day activities.

"This makes Earth Day more real, more sustainable, more effective," she said. "We're trying to make environmentally conscious decisions a workable concept in today's world."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

More information is available by calling Bay Area Action at (415) 321-1994. A voicemail hot line about Earth Day '96 events can be reached by calling (415) 321-1996.