

MISSOURI NEWS SCENE

Organic farming attracts women

By MINDY WARD

It was a brief visit to a small farm near downtown St. Louis at the age of 15 that stirred Molly Rockamann's inner desire to be involved in agriculture.

Her father took her to Mueller Organic Farm, one of the oldest organic farms in Missouri, nestled in the city of Ferguson. The small 14-acre parcel had been farmed organically since 1883. At the time of her visit, the farm was the home of a pioneer in organic agriculture production: Al Mueller.

The meeting left quite an impression on Rockamann. An avid nature and vegetable lover, she recalls leaving the farm hoping one day to return to work the same land.

And in 2008, she did.

After college and studying abroad, Rockamann returned to St. Louis. She learned that Mueller had passed away years earlier and that his widow, Caroline, was renting the acreage to fellow organic farmers. So, she jumped at the chance to rent just 2 acres at the farm.

"There has been an increase in demand for locally grown foods," she says. "It is a growing market."

Key Points

- Mueller Organic Farm has been organic since 1883.
- Demand for locally grown foods drew Rockamann to agriculture.
- EarthDance trains the next generation of organic farmers.

Within the same year, Rockamann started EarthDance, a nonprofit organization that serves as a means of preserving the historic Mueller farm while connecting more people to the land through community food production.

Then just last month, EarthDance purchased the entire 14-acre Mueller farm. "It has always been a dream of mine to own this land," Rockamann says. "I actually thought it would happen sooner — but it is worth the wait."

Today, she works alongside two other women; April Shelton serves as farm manager and Rachel Levi organizes the farm's unique apprenticeship program.

Small-scale production

While the farm does not seem large in terms of acres, the bulk of the work is done by hand. The

farm produces more than 75 varieties of produce — from arugula to winter squash and everything in between.

Shelton and Rockamann employ organic methods, and do not use synthetic fertilizers or chemical pesticides. The women practice integrated pest management, crop rotation and a host of other techniques, keeping true to their values. However, the farm is not currently certified organic.

The women sell produce at area farmers markets. They also market to local grocery stores and restaurants. However, one of their biggest markets is directly from the farm to the consumer via a Community Supported Agriculture program, or CSA.

EarthDance's CSA provides members with shares of the harvest from May through October. Members pick up their produce either at the farm or at a farmers market. The cost of the CSA membership is \$600 per season, with a one-time \$25 sign-up fee.

Rockamann says the group is already selling more shares than its capacity. However, she hopes that with the additional acres, the women can continue to build this market.

"More and more individuals are interested in where and how their food is grown," she adds. "This allows them to get closer to the land and farmer."

Passing on trade

The three women admit they were never attracted to the corporate lifestyle. Rather, they were looking for a career where they could make a difference in the lives of others, to build a community and provide for it.

When Shelton first arrived at the farm, she was enamored of the soil. As farm manager, she says, it is the best gift Mueller could have left future generations.



FAMILY FARM: April Shelton (from left), Molly Rockamann and Rachel Levi say that their small community farm has brought neighbors together — complete with potluck dinners.



MINIMALIST: EarthDance harvests all produce in a cart, and farmworkers deliver it back to the wash station in the cart as well.



GOING GREEN: Herbs are already up at EarthDance.



NURTURERS: The three women — Molly Rockamann, April Shelton and Rachel Levi (front to back) — take time to pick green beans on their small organic farm in Ferguson.



INDOOR LAUNCH: Plants get an early start in the greenhouse before coming to the farm for planting.

"He felt so strongly that the health of the plant lies in the soil, that he kept his soil healthy," she says. "That is my favorite thing about the farm."

Rockamann says women, by nature, are nurturers. She takes that same approach when farming. "I think our generation wants to know what our families are eating. We want to trace the steps back to make sure healthy food is on the table. That is why we are involved in agriculture."

For Levi, it is the opportunity to pass on their knowledge and love of the land to future farmers.

She runs the education side of the farm. EarthDance offers an Organic Farming Apprenticeship program, where individuals ages 16 to 67 sign up for a nine-month course on organic production. Apprentices work 10 hours each week on the farm, and attend one night class a week.

"We want to give them exposure to all aspects of the farm," Levi says. "By working in the field and at the farmers markets, they can see how the food moves from the field to the consumer."

Levi also manages Camp EarthDance every summer for middle-school students. In addition, she facilitates farm tours and meetings.

She finds that her role in agriculture provides "meaningful work." "When you are out here, you are truly doing something that matters. In our own way, we have built our own family farm through the connection with people and the land."

Rockamann wants to inspire others to be a part of agriculture. She hopes that by opening the doors of her operation, maybe another young girl will visit and come away with a dream to farm one day.