

Organics help farmers

Key Points

- Eastern Carolina Organics, a co-op, sends 80% of sales back to growers.
- ECO began in 2004 with a grant from the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission.
- The co-op has 40 growers and 100-plus customers, and is based in Pittsboro, N.C.

By MICHAEL BRANTLEY

EASTERN Carolina Organics started with a \$48,000 grant from the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, 13 growers and two staff members back in 2004.

In less than half a decade, it now boasts 40 growers and 100 customers, and is a privately owned LLC helping small farmers all across North Carolina expand their markets — and profits.

The co-op was a project of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, with the goal of supporting emerging organic farmers and organic tobacco growers, and to increase the availability of locally grown organic produce.

Not only have the members — who see 80% of the sales go back to them — seen an increase in business, but also they've been rewarded with the goodwill of customers who support the growing niche of "sustainable agriculture."

"It has worked out good, and people seem to really appreciate what we're doing. There's not a day that goes by at the [local] farmers market that someone doesn't thank us," says Charles Church, of Watauga River Farms in Valle Crucis, N.C. "The money is a lot better than conventional, too."

Church, a former burley tobacco grower, turned all his 30 acres over for vegetables this year, growing broccoli, cabbage, potatoes, kohlrabi, spring onions, purslane and green beans.

He may not fit the mold of a stereotypical organic producer, as he has been in farming nearly 60 years, but he likes the niche he's found.

"When we first started, the challenge was finding the market. Now we can't grow enough to meet the demand," Church says.

"It is tough to get new farmers into organic. I don't know if it's because of the fear of the unknown or because of what you have to do to be certified organic, but the market is wide open right now for the products."

Due deliberation

Herbie Cottle of Cottle Organics in Rose Hill, N.C., understands the hesitancy. He maintains two separate farms, one for organic and one for conventionally grown crops.

"I've been certified organic for three years, but I looked into it for 10 years," he laughs. Cottle raises cabbage, squash, strawberries, collards, green beans, sweetpotatoes, salad mix, summer squash and sweet corn on 20 acres. He plans to double that acreage next year.

"It is working very well," he says. "ECO tells you what you need to grow, and then you grow it. There is no doubt the demand is increasing every year as



BUSINESS EXPANSION: Tim Bass of Momeyer, N.C., says that since joining the Eastern Carolina Organics co-op, the Basses' family operation has put an out-of-service greenhouse back into operation. They are looking at adding another to meet demand in 2010.

HAND-PICKED: Tim and Nancy Bass personally touch every SunBurst Tomato before it goes out for shipment or to a local farmers market.

more people try to get away from pesticides and herbicides, and get more naturally grown foods."

Finding markets, filling markets

Most of ECO's growers are in agreement that finding a large enough market to support them has been the biggest challenge in the past.

"There were a limited amount of outlets locally, and finding outlets for organic produce was harder," Cottle says. "It is a lot easier to grow it than sell it, but the ECO has found the markets. It is a lot better to sell something two hours away as opposed to having to ship it."

It works for these growers

One of the biggest beneficiaries so far as growth has been SunBurst Tomatoes, run by Tim and Nancy Bass in the small town of Momeyer, N.C.

"When we started with ECO, they were about one-fourth of our business and they've grown to one-half," Nancy says.

"In that process, we had to put a greenhouse that we had idle back into operation, and we are looking at having to add another one to meet the demand."

The Basses got out of tobacco years ago. They also dropped some of their smaller vegetable production to go full-time with tomatoes and one breeder-chicken house they have on contract with Perdue. They grow all their tomatoes hydroponically in greenhouses.

"The tomatoes don't receive any of their nutrients from soil; all the feed is through the fertilizer," Tim says. "Sunshine is the key. We can heat the

greenhouses all we want, but they won't grow without sunshine."

SunBurst is the lone non-certified organic producer with ECO, as the Basses got involved early.

The tomatoes are pesticide-free, but Tim says some of the fertilizer he uses is not certified organic.

In addition to selling with ECO, SunBurst Tomatoes are sold at the Rocky Mount Farmers Market, Western Wake County Farmers Market and the Mid-Town Farmers Market in Raleigh, as well as on the farm in a self-serve roadside stand.

Tim attributes higher sales not only to the growing methods, but also to good taste.

"It's grown in a protected environment. We control the nutrition, it's pesticide-free and it has a good shelf life. A majority of tomatoes in chain stores come from Florida, California or Mexico, are picked green so they can be shipped and are gassed on the way."

Nancy adds that because of the marketing of the ECO produce as premium, quality control is allowed to be better.

"Tim and I put our hands on every tomato that goes out of here," she says.

"We've learned over the 16 years of doing this when to do the right thing at the right time. You've got to learn to read the plant and know what it needs. [Because of the higher selling price] we don't have to be such a big operation to be successful."

"Locally grown food is a movement," Tim Bass adds. "There is more talk about it, people want it — and if they can get it, it seems they are willing to pay more for it."

Give your soybeans the Syngenta advantage.

Helping you reach your full potential, we provide high-yielding varieties and a portfolio of industry-leading products that guard against insects, weeds and disease through every stage of the growing cycle.

Syngenta
Boundary

CRUISER
Maxx Beans

Syngenta
Flexstar GT

Syngenta
Endigo

Syngenta
Gramoxone
Inteon

Syngenta
Karate
with Zeon Technology

NK
Soybeans

Syngenta
Prefix

Syngenta
Quadris

Syngenta
Touchdown
Total

syngenta

©2009 Syngenta Crop Protection, Inc., P.O. Box 18300, Greensboro, NC 27419. Important: Always read and follow label instructions before buying or using these products. Endigo, Gramoxone Inteon and Karate with Zeon Technology are Restricted Use Pesticides. CruiserMaxx® Beans is one or more separately registered products or combination of products containing the following: CruiserMaxx; CruiserMaxx and Apron XL; Cruiser; Maxin® and Apron XL; or Cruiser and an ApronMaxx® brand fungicide, such as ApronMaxx® RTA® + Moly. Trademarks and logos are registered trademarks of a Syngenta Group Company. TSYN9009-V26-SOY-SFC 7/09