

# Organic Backyard

## Local Gardeners Share their Trials of the Trowel

In 2005 the Organic Trade Association asked its research groups to polish up their crystal balls for forecasting the state of organics to come. Based on local feedback from organic farmers, food co-op organizers, amateur organic gardeners and urban homesteaders, it seems that not even Madame Rue, the gypsy with the gold-capped tooth, could have scried a better future. They forecasted that by 2025, “It will no longer be considered fringe to ‘go organic.’”

The Organic Trade Association (OTA) is the leading business association representing the organic industry in the United States, Canada and Mexico. It’s encouraging that their prediction of healthy mainstream organic product sales is already under way. Shoppers can now find organic products in super stores like Walmart and Target, national health food retail chains like Wild Oats and Whole Foods and independent local stores such as SunSplash, Ada’s and For Goodness Sake. Even mainstream restaurant diners have seen organic items appear on menus in the past few years, mostly in the form of tomatoes, herbs and salad greens.

Yet it’s still early days. A grassroots cry to rally more federal budgetary support for farmers in their transition to organic production may have influenced sections and amendments to the U.S. Farm Bill passed by the House of Representatives in July. But the legislation didn’t begin to go far enough. And hard evidence has yet to manifest in support of enforcement of labeling standards to minimize consumer confusion.

Thus Natural Awakenings was eager to talk with several local experts to clarify the availability and state of organic foods in southwest Florida. Here they generously share their experiences of the ins and outs of bringing the good stuff to market.

### **Gardening Guru**

Food & Thought owner Frank Oakes has earned a well won Obi-Wan Kenobi status among local organic gardeners. Like the legendary Star Wars proponent of the unifying Force, Oakes generously doles out organic wisdom over the counter, over the phone and over a table in his restaurant’s courtyard. He regularly teaches a free class on the subject, including the one coming up this month.

This former president of Florida Organic Growers first began dabbling in organic farming in 1989. As a third generation farmer, Oakes nevertheless found himself humbled by nature after repeatedly breaking the first rule for green thumbs looking to plant in the Sunshine State. That is, “Never plant too early.” Raised on conventional farming, Oakes confesses, “Back then it had to do with greed. I wanted to get to market earlier than my competition.”

Yet taking a page from the writings of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), he absorbed the essence of wisdom that has served him well. That is, when man looks to command nature, he first has to learn to obey it.

Playing by nature’s rules in Florida means planting anywhere from mid-October to early November. Oakes explains that “Waiting until later works better to avoid the typical diseases that besiege Florida gardens since organic gardeners can’t use the toxic fungicides that conventional gardeners do and diseases tend to transfer from planting to planting throughout the winter on the same site.”

### **Progressive Role Models**

Brian Housewert, an urban homesteader and resident of Golden Gate City, has been aptly applying Oakes-isms along with the gardening information he picks up at the Collier County Fruit Growers

Association's free monthly meetings. He also serves as a board member.

When Brian asks his wife Beth, "What's for dinner?" the pair frequently looks only as far as their 1.3-acre organic garden plot. There they find ripening peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, salad greens, sweet potatoes, pineapples, bananas, papayas, mangoes, four types of citrus, avocados, mulberries, Atemoya (a hybrid of sugar apple and cherimoya), Jabotacaba, a tropical cherry tree, and chaya (also known as tree spinach), which serves as an edible hedge.

Brian, the information technology director for the City of Marco Island, is also the entrepreneurial force behind Paradise Computer Service. Between urban homesteading, raising their son Dexter and building a community via organic gardening, the couple enjoys a banquet of rewarding experiences.

"I started out wanting to build a fruit forest," says Brian. "I also wanted to build a community." He acknowledges that the possibility of alienating his neighbors, whom he jokingly refers to as "close enough to shake hands across the lot," occurred long before productive bonding began.

Within days of delivery of 10 loads of shredded mulch spread over the Housewert lot to kill grass, several neighbors ambled over to offer advice on the pesticides they assumed were needed for annihilating weeds. After explaining that he was creating gardens and a fruit forest, they walked away perplexed.

Now, three years, a privacy fence and 16 raised beds later, Brian is witnessing a sense of community sprouting in his little neighborhood. "We talk and trade fruits and cuttings," he reports. The garden launched a welcome dialogue and overcame the pervasive hurdle of southwest Florida neighborhood isolation so foreign to Brian and Beth Housewert. They've changed relationship dynamics in their neighborhood and become visible role models. With a smile in his voice, Brian proudly declares, "Now people walk into our yard and talk to me. My neighbors may all hail from different countries—Haiti, Guatemala and America, but we share the commonality of food."

A stay-at-home mom, Beth could easily have counted herself among those surveyed by the OTA in 2002 who indicated that price was a barrier to their purchasing organics. However, what separates her from the norm is that she, like her spouse, thought outside the box and decided to do something about it.

Joining forces with another fulltime mother, Danielle Holiman, the two formed an organic food co-op that operates from Holiman's garage. "We wanted something to do that would involve our children," advises Beth. "It's simply delightful to watch our little boys grab apples out of crates and chomp on pears while we sort the produce from our organic distributor." Now that the Florida growing season has arrived, the two will join forces with local organic farmer Nick Batty, who also sells his produce through For Goodness Sake, Food & Thought and the Naples Farmers Market.

A man formerly at home in Africa, Batty has been farming in Naples now for five years. He began with a 10-by-10-foot plot and is up to four acres on Immokalee Road just off Rock Road near the gated community of Twin Eagles. "I see growing demand for organic produce as people become more aware of the benefits of eating more nutritious food," says Batty.

A graduate of the University of Florida with a degree in horticulture, Batty applies his know-how to the hard work of battling Florida's heat and insects without pesticides, harvesting his crops, and re-nourishing the farmland he leases from a neighbor.

"I like what I do because it keeps me involved in the community," remarks Batty. "Lots of people come out to my farm to have a look around and to seek my advice." Getting acquainted with his regular customers, who are among the 2 percent of the total U.S. population who purchase organic produce, is a perk he enjoys.

Batty extends a wide-open welcome to other organic gardeners. "There is room for growth here," he says,

“because people always enjoy good fresh food.” Envisioning the possibility of even gated communities hosting community gardens, Batty says, “I see big changes happening on a local scale. I think in another four or five years, Naples could be ready for more community supported agriculture.”

### **Shared Stories**

The Housewerts’ vision for community gardening isn’t far from that of Batty’s or Oakes’. “Global warming means we need to reduce our carbon footprint. So living 20 miles from the grocery store isn’t going to be an option for some people,” suggests Brian. Everyone notes that the price of produce is based on cheap energy, and as that cost climbs so will the price of food. The obvious solution is to eat locally grown produce.

Reminiscing about his farming grandparents, Oakes shares a story about how in their mid-30s they finally had to resort to eating a piece of food that originated with someone they didn’t know. He tells how in 1937 when the couple drove from Delaware to Florida they thought they’d packed sufficient food for the trip. But after a bit of car trouble stranded them in Jacksonville for a few days, they were forced to eat at an out-of-town restaurant. Oakes conveys that his grandparents were so concerned about the quality that they asked the waitress who grew the food used in their meal.

“We’ve had a huge shift since then,” says Oakes. “No one today knows their farmer or who is growing their food.”

After 18 years of organic farming, Oakes is confident that anyone can grow some of their own food, including apartment and condominium dwellers, even in Florida. “Living in a condo is not a good enough reason to not grow tomatoes, lettuce, arugula and herbs,” says Oakes.

Local residents, Gerry and Kathryn Segal are leading examples of area residents who have already turned their backyard into an organic garden of raised beds. In the future Gerry, an associate professor of business at Florida Gulf Coast University, will be working on more than his home garden when the university’s Center for Environmental Sustainability and Education completes development of its organic demonstration garden.

Soon those of us who have been daydreaming about doing a spot of organic gardening “one day” will have plenty of resources and no more excuses not to dig in. Food & Thought offers plenty of starter plants for anyone looking to turn a trowel of Florida soil.

*For more information on starter plants and organic gardening and produce, connect with Frank Oakes at Food & Thought, 2132 Tamiami Trail N. in Naples. Or call 239-213-2222.*

*For information on the Collier County Fruit Grower’s Association or urban homesteading, call Brian Housewert at 239-537-1261 or email [BMH@ParadiseProTech.com](mailto:BMH@ParadiseProTech.com) [<https://mail.google.com/a/Paradiseprotech.com/?view=cm&tf=0&ui=1&to=BMH@ParadiseProTech.com>].*

*For information on the local organic food co-op, visit the Housewert Blog at [www.InTheKeyofLife.Typepad.com](http://www.inthekeyoflife.typepad.com) [<http://www.inthekeyoflife.typepad.com/>].*

*For more on the Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education visit [www.FGCU.edu/cese](http://www.fgcu.edu/cese) [<http://www.fgcu.edu/cese>].*

*For a list of Lee and Collier farmers markets visit [www.Florida-Agriculture.com/consumers/farmers\\_markets.htm](http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers_markets.htm) [[http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers\\_markets.htm](http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers_markets.htm)]. The Bonita Springs Lion’s Club also sponsors one on Saturday mornings in season at the middle school on W. Terry St.*

### **Where to Shop for Organic Produce**

**Ada's Natural & Organic  
Food Supermarket**

4650 S. Cleveland Ave.  
Fort Myers 939-9600

1242 S.W. Pine Island Road  
Cape Coral 772-9601

**Food & Thought**

2132 Tamiami Trail N.  
Naples 213-2222

**For Goodness Sake  
Natural Markets**

9118 Bonita Beach Rd.  
Bonita Springs 992-5838

2464 Vanderbilt Beach Rd.  
Naples 597-0120

7211 Radio Rd.  
Naples 353-7778

**Healthy Habits**

11763 S. Cleveland Ave.  
Fort Myers 278-4442

**Nature's Garden Organic  
Café & Market**

2089 9th St., North  
Naples 643-4959

**SunSplash Natural Foods  
Market & Café**

850 Neapolitan Way  
Naples 434-7221

**Wild Oats Natural Marketplace  
6424 Naples Blvd.**

Naples 513-1053

*Lee and Collier Farmers Markets*

*[www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers\\_markets.htm](http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers_markets.htm) [http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers\_markets.htm].*

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**Source:**

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***Additional Information:***

**Date:**

2007/11/01 12:00:00 GMT-7

**Article was published in:**

Naples