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UPCOMING EVENTS

July 22

The Return of the Attack of Killer Tomato Festival Returns

34 chefs and 12 mixologists partner with a local farmer to create a yummy tomato dish or a signature cocktail with tomatoes. Hosted by Ford Fry and JCT. Kitchen & Bar, this is the biggest fundraiser for Georgia Organics each year -- and by far the most fun! P5

Aug. 25

Small-Scale Intensive Farming

Small-scale and urban farmers in Georgia are creating many opportunities for local food production. However, these farmers are often challenged by barriers of production, such as access to land and capital that can limit their ability for commercial success. This workshop will focus on the various steps of starting and managing a sustainable small-scale and urban farm business. P15

There's a New Certification in Town



Bryan Hager punches holes for strawberry transplants in early Spring.

In 2007, the director of the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Bryan Hager, quit his job to become a fulltime farmer in Carrollton. Crager-Hager Farms produces a mix of fruit and vegetables on about 4 acres, specializing in strawberries and greens for farmers markets, CSAs, and restaurants.

Some would have thought that Hager, as the state's former leading environmental watchdog, would have gone straight for country's highest standard of environmentally conscious farming, Organic Certification.

"The more I learned the more it became clear that it just does not make sense to put poisons on the foods we eat and in the environment in which we live," Hager says. "I believe that to grow sustainably one must understand your local ecosystem and learn how it naturally works."

But Hager did not become certified organic. Instead, he became Certified Naturally Grown, a label well-known in sustainable agriculture circles but not among many good food consumers. In fact, while Whole Foods Market buys from many Certified

There's a New Certification in Town Continued from cover

Naturally Grown (CNG) growers, the stores do not allow the Certified Naturally Grown label to be placed on items sold in its stores because, according to Whole Foods' Brent Demarest, it could contribute to consumer confusion.

Yet there is no doubt that that CNG is now a credible alternative to the national Certified Organic program.

There are more CNG farmers and CNG acreage in Georgia than any other state.

That's great for CNG, and even better for Georgia's sustainable agriculture movement.

CNG's production standards are almost identical to organic standards. (But the key word is "almost." And there's a mild controversy brewing over the actual inspection method; more on that later.)

Want some evidence of CNG's popularity among small and mid-sized farmers? There are 1,114 Certified Naturally Grown acres in Georgia, and 100 CNG farms and apiaries (honey producers) in Georgia. As a comparison, there are 67 certified organic farmers in Georgia, and 5,721 certified organic acres.

Want some evidence that CNG has the credibility of the sustainable ag community in Georgia? CNG is the baseline certification for the Athens Farmers Market, Dunwoody Farmers Market and the Peachtree Road Farmers Market in Atlanta. That means that no producer may sell at these markets unless the farm is, at a minimum, CNG.

Here's why Hager chose CNG over Certified Organic: "We looked around at the various certifications and decided we really liked most of the organic program. We could not justify the expense of organic certification in terms of paperwork or money. Certified Naturally Grown follows the organic program very closely with streamlined paperwork and minimal fees. We feel that being CNG helps to explain to our customers how we grow the food."

For Hager, and the other producers interviewed for this article, becoming Certified Natural Grown allows farmers to tell conscientious consumers that they are committed to the highest ideals of sustainable agriculture, without having to jump through the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture's hoops

Why do agricultural enterprises pursue certifications?

- There is a price premium in the market available for products with the certification
- Customers and/or buyers in your market demand production practices meet certain standards
- A certification differentiates your produce to customers and buyers, and those customers and buyers use that as a criteria for their purchasing decisions
- Producers with common standards can be counted, which can lead to an allocation of more private and public resources to that producer community

to attain bona fide Certified Organic status.

In one simple seal, the CNG logo communicates a farm's ecologically-minded production practices and higher quality products. It's a marketing tool that aligns with a farmers values.

And for many reasons, it's spreading in Georgia in a big way.

"We're growing fast nationally, but we're growing even faster in Georgia," says CNG Executive Director Alice Varon. "I think it's great. Part of the reason I think is that we are a program that's well suited for beginning farmers, and maybe there's a movement thanks to you [Georgia Organics] that supports beginning farmers."

But there is a much more important reason that farmers are choosing CNG over a USDA organic certification, and it lies at the core of the controversy around the CNG program: inspections are carried out by peers, typically fellow CNG farmers.

The process to become USDA Certified Organic relies on certifying agents who inspect and oversee a farm's production practices. That's referred to as third-party verification.

CNG farmers inspect other CNG farmers. In theory, this could allow some farmers to cut corners.

"CNG has no trained inspectors, just peers; I am one. So the system is much looser," says Ed Taylor, a Georgia Organics board member and owner of Indian Creek Farms, which is a Certified Organic and a CNG farm in Clarkesville. "Organic inspectors are trained and scientific in their approach."

Mitch Lawson, owner and operator of the Rise 'N Shine Organic Farm outside of Rome, agrees with Taylor.

"Consumers to who want to know the difference between CNG and certified organic need to know that CNG is a far cry from certified organic. I spend countless hours filling out paperwork, and keeping up with which products [such as fertilizers, pesticides and soil amendments] are acceptable for the organic program, and which wants are not," Lawson says. "I chose to do it [become certified organic] more because I am committed to growing that way. From a marketing standpoint, it helps a lot because you are able to get a higher price and the extra work that goes into maintaining the certification, the organic practices in other words, justifies charging more."

"One main benefit is that they [certified organic inspectors] keep you on your toes on organics practices," Lawson says. "That holds your feet to the fire and makes you actually do what you are supposed to do. CNG lacks that oversight."

CNG farmers acknowledge as much.

"The vetting process isn't as rigorous," says Brennan Washington, owner of Phoenix Gardens, a CNG farm in Lawrenceville.

“Most folks are very conscientious but in the back of my mind I question that it really is an honor system,” Washington says. “I haven’t seen any problems but that’s its one weak spot.”

Whole Foods’ Demarest says, “As far as quality, we’ve rejected both [CNG and Certified Organic produce] and accepted both. It has less to do with the certification than it does with the growers.”

Michael Schenk, the owner of The Turnip Truck, a small, independent foodservice distributor based in Atlanta that sources from local, sustainable producers, has actually seen higher quality goods from CNG producers.

“There are lot of situations where, because it’s a smaller [CNG] farm, they are more hands on than larger operations, and oftentimes the produce comes out better,” Schenk says.

Lawson, of Rise N’ Shine farms, puts it this way: “The process to be CNG is far easier, but if I was going to a market I’d rather buy from CNG farmers than from someone who had no certification. A lot of the folks I know who are CNG go beyond the necessary requirements. But that’s just because they are good people, not because there’s an inspector looking over their shoulder.”

CNG’s Varon says it’s possible for CNG farmers, and for certified organic producers, to cut corners “but for the most part, our farmers will hold fellow members to higher standards than they need to. We have a lot of purists, and they care a great deal about going beyond the standards, to increase an operation’s sustainability.” She continues, “CNG farmers want fellow

members to keep high standards, since corner-cutting by others only hurts their own reputation. As inspectors, their approval of a particular farm is public information on the CNG website – something organic doesn’t have.”

“The great thing about Certified Naturally Grown is that it can be a stepping stone for beginning farmers who eventually work towards becoming Certified Organic,” says Georgia Organics President Rashid Nuri, who operates Truly Living Well, a CNG farm, in Atlanta. “And for the farmers like me who’d rather grow food than keep up with all paperwork that the USDA requires, Certified Naturally Grown allows us to demonstrate to our customers the care we take in growing our food.”

Another major plus that Hager and Washington appreciate about CNG is that the peer-to-peer inspections help develop a community of farmers committed to learning new practices.

“I’ve been out at a farm doing a certification inspection, and I’ve learned something. That’s an intangible thing about CNG as opposed to the USDA’s organic program,” says Washington. “CNG actually causes you to interact with a network of farmers. We partner a lot. We trade ideas. We trade problems and we kick around ideas for improvement and that wouldn’t happen if I went straight USDA certified organic.”



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