

News Letter Spring 2014

Natural food, local flavor



The problems with “Frankenfoods” go straight to the top

By Janine H. Hunt

For two decades, starting with the controversial introduction of Monsanto’s recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) and Calgene’s Flavr Savr tomato in 1994, polls have consistently shown that U.S. consumers are wary, indeed alarmed, about the new technology of genetic engineering (GE). Surveyed regularly, the overwhelming majority of Americans have repeatedly stated that they either want these “Frankenfoods” banned, or at least clearly labeled. In a March 2012 national poll, conducted by the Mellman Group, 91% of Americans said they wanted GMO foods labeled. When asked whether gene-altered foods were safe, 34% of consumers said they believed that gene-altered foods were definitely unsafe; 41% said they were not sure; while 41% said genetically engineered foods should be banned. Five counties and two cities in California and Washington have banned the growing of GE crops. In addition, given the near total absence of FDA regulation, 19 states have passed laws restricting Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Millions of consumers are purchasing over \$30 billion of organic foods, and \$60 billion worth of so-called “natural” foods, every year, in part because organic standards prohibit the use of gene-altered seeds or ingredients. But many consumers believe mistakenly that “natural” foods are GE-free as well. The biotech industry and Big Food Inc. are acutely aware of the fact that North American consumers, like their European counterparts, are wary and suspicious of GE foods. Even though most consumers don’t fully understand the science of gene-splicing foreign DNA into plants or animals, they instinctively understand that they don’t want to be guinea pigs in a biotech food safety experiment. They don’t want their family’s health or environmental sustainability decisions to be made by notorious chemical companies like Monsanto, Dow, Bayer, BASF, Syngenta or Dupont—the same corporations who have poisoned our communities and our bodies with toxic pesticides, DDT, Agent Orange, dangerous pharmaceuticals and PCBs. GE crops and foods have absolutely



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The fiscal cliff and the little farmer

By John Frodo

At the very end of the year, in the midst of fiscal cliff madness, Congress passed a controversial farm bill extension. Maybe you saw headlines like this one from the Northeast Organic Agriculture Association, “USDA Throws Organics Under the Bus” and the Center for Food Safety, “Congress Passes Damaging Farm Bill Extension in “Fiscal Cliff” Package”. The extension of the farm bill contained many disappointments and has left the sustainable and organic agriculture community with lots of work to do.

Programs that were left out include funding for organic research and organic cost share. While this was a huge blow to activists working to improve the farm bill, it does give us an opportunity to get organized. Since the extension only goes 9 months, groups will get to work immediately to make sure the real 5 year farm bill extension is much better. Personally, I have to admit I was pretty surprised by the news. We know that public opinion is so strongly behind organics and local farms, even our awesome First Lady is advocating for healthy foods and gardens. As a country, I thought



photo by Sandy Walton

we were making clear progress. But until public opinion is reflected in national legislation, progress for organic farmers will slow to a crawl. I think it is time for MOFFA to get serious as advocates for organics nationwide. I know we are all super busy and our organization is volunteer led, but I think we have to figure out how we can do more. There is grant money out there and many other statewide organic organizations manage to have staff. We are closer to Washington DC than most other organic agriculture organization.

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Sourcing local ingredients in extreme weather

David Johnston

For those of us farming in Illinois (and most everywhere else) climate change is hitting home. Whether it’s the release of the new USDA Plant Hardiness Zone map, this summer’s drought, last summer’s flooding, or learning the new word “derecho”, we have all been facing pretty regular weather drama. My children know exactly how to handle a tornado warning now, and it seems we are popping into our hall closet on a regular basis. We have suddenly made the shift from fighting impending climate change to scrambling to adapt and it is pretty overwhelming.

On our farm (Jug Bay Market Garden), we are thinking about extending the growing season both to avoid farming during the hottest part of the year and to spread out our risk over a longer growing season. We recently joined Heron There Farm to start a CSA in what we used to think of as the “off season”.

Heron There Farm to start a CSA in what we used to think of as the “off season”. Other Maryland farmers like Evenstar Farm have been doing this for years, and it might become essential for the rest of us to follow suit.

One way MOFFA farmers can help each other is to share notes about adapting to climate change. I have so many questions. Has anyone found the most bolt resistant lettuce? Which generators work best to run essentials like irrigation during our increasingly common power outages? Do we need to increase our vigilance against new plant diseases and weed varieties and if so, how? How can we be better prepared both for warmer temperatures and extreme weather events? Does everyone else worry about their hoopouses when the winds pick up or has someone figured out the best way to secure them? What about using our proximity to Washington to help effect national policy on farming and climate change? Adapting to climate change while running farm operations is overwhelming but working together could help us protect our farms and build a stronger MOFFA community at the same time. We could use our Facebook page, this newsletter or the winter meeting to share ideas. In the meantime, here are a few resources. There are many more to be found.

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A look into Sizzle’s vegetable garden

Carlos Regadas

Much of the peat that is harvested comes from the eastern area of Canada. The 2011 harvest season was extremely wet. The wet weather reduced the harvest by 70%, which could lead to shortages and price increases in both raw peat and potting soils. Soil mixers are looking at importing peat from Europe to help. Most producers harvest extra so they have inventory to carry over, but those stocks will be drawn down quickly this year. A favorable early harvest season in 2012 could buffer the shortage, however many growers are looking at alternatives. Peat makes a lightweight inexpensive soil mix, but it also has some drawbacks. Peat is acidic and does not assimilate water readily. Many potting soils use wetting agents to help the peat absorb water. These wetting agents are not allowed in certified organic production.

What are the cost effective, readily available alternatives to peat? Soil has been used to start plants since the beginning of time. Soil is a natural choice but has limitations. It needs to be sterilized since it can contain weed seeds and diseases. It is also heavy and dense.

Most plants are started in soil-less mixes due to these issues. Compost has been used in soil mixes to add nutrients and for moisture-holding capacity. Compost is actually a poor nutrient source in soil mixes since the nutrient levels are inconsistent and nutrient density is low. It does add good moisture holding capability. You need to make sure that it is finished compost and is screened for consistency. Compost can cause disease issues in mixes.

Coir is coconut fiber processed for use in soil mixes. OMRI approved coir is available. Coir is slightly more expensive than peat but superior in several ways. Its pH is close to neutral. Coir readily absorbs and holds water, so you will need to adjust your watering schedule to keep from over watering. Coir also has a



photo by Jan Bennett

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