

Organic farmers are thriving in Santa Cruz

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Mention "organic farming," and images of neighbors passing that bag of home-grown, non-sprayed tomatoes over the fence arise.

Such an image is still alive for Sam and Joanne Earnshaw, owners of three-acre Neptune Farms; an organic farm in Live Oak. All their produce, which includes 20 varieties of vegetables and 30 types of cut flowers, are direct-marketed to local retailers or even passed over the fence to neighboring mobile-home park residents.

But organic farming in Santa Cruz County also includes farmers like Bruce Dau, who markets his 60

acres of organic produce to distributors across the country.

More than 100 local organic farmers gathered Sunday at Loudon Nelson Center for a "Meet the Growers" event, sponsored by the Santa Cruz Green City Program and Central Coast Pesticide Coalition. Green City is a grassroots community program working for the ecological and economic health of the Santa Cruz community. The pesticide coalition works to identify and eliminate pesticide hazards and the abuse of agricultural chemicals.

The event included slide presentations by six organic farmers, who represented the 35 certified organic growers on the Central Coast. Also

featured was Keith Vandevere, an attorney for the Central Coast Pesticide Coalition.

Vandevere lauded the success of the local organic movement in developing a pesticide-free agricultural environment. Vandevere said, "Santa Cruz probably has more stores carrying organic produce than anywhere in the world, including most of the local Safeways."

Green City spokeswoman Theresa Tarrant called local organic farms "thriving examples of the kind of planning alternatives Green City promotes."

She said such alternatives stress a sustainable economic, ecological

and social fabric in the area. "Small-scale organic farms support the local economy and protect valuable natural resources, while enhancing rather than depleting the soil and delivering wholesome, nutritious food to consumers," she said.

Besides the increasing interest in pesticide-free food, farmers Francis Corr, Jeff Young and Sam Earnshaw emphasized the importance of preserving the last remaining farmlands in Santa Cruz. Some slides depicted lush, multi-colored rows of mixed vegetables and flowers juxtaposed against tall, gray buildings or new housing developments.

Earnshaw's tone was serious

when he noted that organic farming techniques make it possible for small-farm production to exist side by side, even symbiotically, with local residences and businesses without the risk of neighborhood exposure to toxic agricultural chemicals.

Mark Lipson of 140-acre Molino Creek Farm above Davenport said consumers should question retailers about verification of organic food. Just this past year, for example, an incident that became known as the "Carrot Caper" occurred in California where commercially grown produce was repackaged as organic.

"We are all certified growers,

and it is important for consumers to ask for food from farms which have been certified by organizations, such as the California Certified Organic Farmers," said Lipson.

The educational part of the show ended with a video by Jan Vandertuin on community-supported agriculture. It involves a system where a group of consumers assure the financial support of a farm, while farmers are assured a decent return.

Vandertuin worked for several years on such farms in Europe. She plans to start a community-supported farm in Santa Cruz.

The event culminated in, appropriately, an organic food feast.