

Farms

Organic farms have changed to meet times

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel Staff Writer

FOR many people, the term "organic" conjures up images of anemic, overpriced broccoli, back-to-the-earth hippie communes, and marijuana plants interspersed with the soybeans on the back forty.

But these images are no longer accurate, if indeed they ever were. Organic farming in the '80s is a scientifically tested agricultural specialty, and local organic farmers are making a healthy living without benefit of pesticides, herbicides or government subsidies.

"Organics is a specialty market, like raspberries or kiwis," said Bruce Dau, who farms a variety of vegetables on 22.5 acres of leased farmland in Santa Cruz and Soquel. "There's a definite market out there, and as a small grower you have to find a niche to specialize in."

"Ten years ago there was a lot of interest in organics, then it kind of died out," said Dau. "But today there is a renaissance of interest."

Dau earned a B.A. in economics from Stanford University, and spent a few years doing economic research before deciding to begin farming full time seven years ago.

"I tried working in an office and found it wasn't for me," said Dau. "The first year I farmed part time and worked a regular job and I figured it cost me 10 cents an hour to farm. The next year I quit my job and farmed full time, and was able to make it."

Dau sells about one third of his produce locally, another third to a regional wholesaler, and the rest is shipped out of state, primarily to Texas. He is considering plans to expand, possibly by leasing more land in Watsonville.

IN CONTRAST to Dau's export operation, David Spiegel's Sunshower Farms produces a variety of produce, including squashes, greens, parsley and onions, for local markets only.

"I think that having locally produced food fosters a sense of community," said Spiegel, who works 1.5 acres in Soquel and Live Oak, mostly by hand. "In Santa Cruz, there are people who are very concerned where their food comes from."

Spiegel and his family also keep an extensive kitchen garden and honeybees on their Soquel property, which his wife inherited from her family. Although he feels the demand for organic produce is far greater than the supply, Spiegel doesn't intend to expand his business beyond a one-man operation.

"Large-scale farming is too impersonal," said Spiegel. "I'm committed to this way of life, though when I look at the hours I put in, it's ridiculous. But it's my livelihood. I admire any farmer, but I have a philosophy that dictates what I do."

THE owners of Molino Creek Farms share Spiegel's commitment to a self-sufficient lifestyle, but on a much larger scale. Molino Creek Farms is located on



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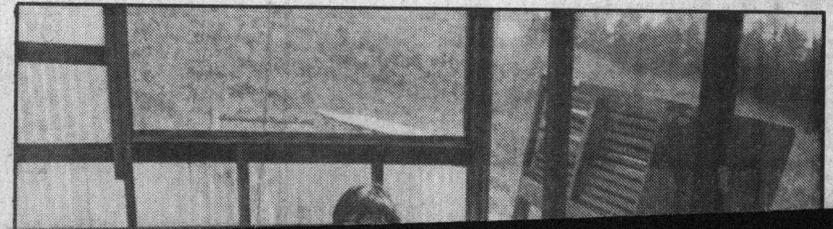
Kay Thornley goes on a gopher hunt on the rolling hills of Molino Creek Farms.

136 acres of the most beautiful land in the county, in the hills north of Davenport bordering on Molino Creek.

The 12 people who bought the former cattle ranch five years ago own and work the land collectively, receiving 80 percent of their sales from their famous dry-farmed tomatoes and winter squash. Although the land

was badly overgrazed when they bought it and is considered very poor for agriculture, the collective grows artichokes, peppers, leeks, summer squash, watermelons and a large kitchen garden in addition to their main retail crops.

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Distribution networks and hard work are the keys to the farm's success.

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About two thirds of Molino Creek's produce is sold through wholesale distributors to outlets on the East Coast, Texas and L.A., as well as to local markets. Farmer's markets in Santa Cruz, San Francisco, Monterey and Palo Alto provide an outlet for the rest of the produce.

"Part of our success is due to the taste of our dry-farmed tomatoes," said collective member Kay Thornley. "They're very flavorful, not watered down like irrigated tomatoes." The tomatoes also ship better because of their firmer texture, according to Thornley.

Five of the collective members have a previous affiliation with the Farm and Garden Project at UCSC. Thornley credits the UCSC program, in part, for the emergence of Santa Cruz as a hub in the organic farming industry.

"There is also a horticultural program at Cabrillo College that emphasizes organics," said Thornley. "And the geography here encourages smaller farms. This is also a very health-conscious community with lots of environmentalists.

"I think the supply (of organic produce) could go way up before it comes close to satisfying the demand," said Thornley. "Produce quality has improved, and the whole distribution network has become better at post-harvest handling. They're more professional about it



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Sheri Sobin sprinkles tomato seedlings.

now.

"Years ago organic farms were so far out of the mainstream that they didn't have the benefit of modern distribution," said Thornley. "Now the produce looks better, and the larger volume of production allows consumers to be more picky."

The Molino Creek collective has plans to expand and a vision for the future; putting more fields into pro-

duction and improving the land for future generations, specifically the eight children living on the farm.

"Part of the vision is leaving the land to the children, and leaving it in better shape than we found it," said Thornley. "But that remains to be seen. The oldest one is only 12 years old now, and at the moment they're not too interested in working, they're more into playing."