

Book traces the evolution of organic farming on Central Coast



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL PHOTOS

Lakeside Organic Gardens' Dick Peixoto has been farming organically since 1996. He tells his story in a new book from UC Santa Cruz.

Agriculture
 'Cultivating a Movement'

By DONNA JONES
 djones@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — In the past four decades organic farming has grown from left field to mainstream.

"Cultivating a Movement: An Oral History of Organic Farming & Sustainable Agriculture on California's Central Coast," a new book published by UC Santa Cruz Library's Regional History Project, traces that evolution.

Publication of the book will be celebrated with a reading at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Bookshop Santa Cruz.

The book tells 29 stories of pioneers and organic advocates in their own words.

Some of the voices are farmers, others researchers or activists. Some came from the counterculture and back-to-the-land movements

SEE FARMING ON A8



The remnants of a cabbage crop harvested last weekend are chopped up along Lakeview Road at Lakeside Organic Gardens on Monday.

IF YOU GO
 BOOK READING

WHAT: Celebration of new UCSC book on growth of organic farming
WHEN: 7-8:30 p.m. Wednesday
WHERE: Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz
COST: Free

FARMING

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of the 1960s and '70s. Others have deep roots in California agriculture. There's at least one politician.

They founded one of the nation's first organic certification organizations, developed farmers markets, mentored budding growers. They made the transition from farm-worker to farm operator and from conventional to organic methods.

"It's not about one person. It's about a movement with a lot of different threads," said Irene Reti, Regional History Project and the book's co-editor.

Reti said one of her "heroes" is Juan Pablo "J.P." Perez, a young grower who grew up in Las Lomas determined not to follow his parents into

farming. But after trying out majors in business and computers at CSU Monterey Bay, he took up earth science. That led him to an internship with a group that supports aspiring growers and eventually back to farming.

With his father, Perez launched J & P Organics in 2006 on a half-acre. Today, the Perez family works five acres, growing herbs, vegetables, berries and flowers for sale at farmers markets and through direct sales to customers. He told the project's interviewers that though he sought a better paying job through education, he enjoys being his own boss.

"Now that I'm doing it, I like it," he says in the interview. "I'm happy."

Pajaro Valley grower Dick Peixoto, on the other hand, wanted to be a farmer from boyhood. The son of a pesticide salesman, he grew conventionally for 20 years before

shifting 50 acres to organic in 1996 not to "save the world" but to find a niche to turn a profit. Friends thought he had "lost all my marbles," he told interviewers. But he's never looked back. Those 50 acres have grown to 1,200 in the Pajaro Valley and several hundred more in Oxnard and Imperial County.

Lakeside Organic Gardens is the biggest family-owned organic operation in the state, he said.

Peixoto said it took a lot of work and learning but he found a better, more sustainable way to farm.

"A lot of our production numbers in organic are as good or better than conventional," he said. "People say organic farming can't feed the world, but they're wrong there."

Follow Sentinel reporter Donna Jones on Twitter @DonnaJonesSCS