

The Name Says It All:

Organic Gardens Hosts Workshop September 9th

-Wylie Harris

“My entire knowledge of gardening is word-of-mouth or from gardening books,” John Leonard grins.

That was in the beginning. Today, Leonard has years of experience in the garden under his belt and an interesting story to tell.

Continuing the tradition of spreading the word, Leonard will share his unconventional but time-tested thoughts on organic gardening at a workshop at his aptly-named farm, Organic Gardens, near El Reno on September 9.

While working as a landscaper and then a feed-store hand, Leonard picked up enough tricks of the trade to launch a successful certified organic market gardening operation on 5 acres at the edge of El Reno.

Six years later, Organic Gardens is going strong, selling certified organic produce from roughly two and a half cultivated acres at two farmers’ markets (OSU-OKC and Edmond), as well as to several Oklahoma City restaurants, including the new Wedge Pizzeria.

The farm gets calls from restaurants every day, according to Organic Gardens partner Jonathan Stranger. “They say, ‘Give me what you have.’ Everything we grow is taken.”

Tomatoes and melons are the mainstays of the produce operation. Other crops include edamame, okra, cauliflower, and a variety of herbs and salad greens.

In addition, Organic Gardens features a greenhouse where Leonard grows bedding plants and herbs, a lucrative component of the overall business. The farm also sports several rows of blackberries, with a new planting of blueberries this year.



John Leonard in his garden

Tricks of the Organic Trade

The thought of struggling with stubborn clay soils deters many would-be Oklahoma gardeners. “We are so fortunate,” Leonard says of the soil at Organic Gardens. “We have very sandy loam.”

Truth is, fortune only played a small part. Leonard carefully chose the farm’s site, less than a mile from the Canadian River, testing the soil and water before purchasing the property.

Leonard’s self-taught approach to organic growing manifests itself in many unique practices.

For one, his vegetable beds are covered with weed fabric. “Everybody uses poly,” he explains, “but weed fabric is reusable and lets the rain run through.”

“We roll it to the ends of the beds at the end of the year, do very light tillage, put down drip tape, and unroll it. It sure saves on weeding.”

The weed fabric also allows Leonard to leave tomato plants unstaked, keeping the plants from coming into contact with the soil, and the diseases that lurk there, when they sprawl over the fabric.

While most people would plant okra in closely spaced rows, Leonard has individual plants separated by three or four feet in weed fabric. “They get 3 to 4 feet wide, yield just as much, and you don’t have to mess with weeds,” he explains.

Handling pests can also complicate the lives of organic growers. “The squash bugs have already found the squash this year,” Leonard says. “There’s not a whole lot you can do about that, organic or otherwise.”

“We rarely get aphids, whiteflies, or spider mites,” says Leonard. “We have high populations of lacewings and ladybugs,” beneficial insects that prey on pest species.



Jonathan Stranger and his lemon cucumbers

“Our biggest threat is caterpillars on the tomatoes – we spray Bt for that,” he says, referring to a natural pesticide approved for organic use.

The Spice of Life

Even the most flawless approach to production wouldn't keep a direct market farming operation going for long without a sound marketing plan. Leonard has a few tricks up his sleeve in that department, too, centered on a variety of crops and close communication with his customers.

“We generally grow the same stuff, but add new stuff every year,” he says. “We try stuff all the time. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't – but we just give them a shot.”

“Cherokee Purple,” an heirloom tomato that's now a mainstay at Organic Gardens, started out as one such experiment. The tomato's color seemed to scare a few customers.

“We had to give those away the first year we grew them – we couldn't sell them,” says Leonard. “It went from, ‘My God, I'm not going to eat that!’ to, ‘Give me more!’ We almost made addicts out of people.”

Lemon cucumber, a more recent experiment, is currently at the give-away stage. At the farmers' markets, says Stranger, “Someone will take one, eat it, and come back and buy two or three pounds.”

“The cucumber beetles don't mess with them as much as regular cucumbers. It doesn't hold up well in the store, but

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we don't care,” says Leonard, whose direct marketing operation lets him sell perishable heirloom varieties within a day of harvest.

In addition to drawing new customers to his stand with unusual vegetable varieties at the farmers' markets, Leonard stays in touch during the week to keep them coming back.

“I keep an email list of about 80 people,” he says. “I send out a weekly email to give customers a heads-up on what's coming.”

One of this season's coming attractions is Tuscan melons. “They're like a cantaloupe on steroids,” says Stranger. “Once you eat one, you'll never want a normal cantaloupe again.”

Spreading the Word

The Kerr Center is sponsoring the workshop on September 9th, in partnership with the USDA Risk Management Agency, an equal opportunity provider.

According to Doug Walton of the Kerr Center, the workshop will cater to people interested in very small-scale organic production for farmers' markets and other direct-marketing channels.

“Leonard will address practical considerations for folks just starting out, and also looks forward to conversing with other experienced growers,” said Walton.

The workshop runs from 2 to 6 and will be held rain or shine; bring a lawn chair.

Contact Information/Directions

Organic Gardens
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From Interstate 40, take Highway 81 north through El Reno and across the Canadian River. Take the first right after crossing the river (Britton Rd.), and go east 4.5 miles. Look for a large greenhouse on the north (left) side of Britton Road.