

Business Is Booming At Organic Tree Farm

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Tree farmers can make more money by going organic, says Ron Heard, the first certified organic tree farmer in the U.S. He was already a certified organic hay producer, selling to horse owners at a premium. He also sold certified organic beef direct to consumers, so he knew the market for all things organic was growing fast.

"The market was strong for landscape trees so we decided to expand our operation and go organic," recalls Heard. "The University of Kentucky was the certifying agency, and they had to develop standards for us because we were the first tree farm to go organic."

The effort paid off. Today, he annually clears as much as \$3,000 per acre from the several intensive tree farms he operates in Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. Two decisions have helped earn him that kind of return. First, he doesn't compete with big box stores like Wal-Mart and large nursery operations selling small, low cost seedlings. Instead he has large field grown trees available up to 20 ft. tall in more than 100 native species, as well as above ground trees and shrubs. Second, by going organic he has a specialized market largely to himself.

"The typical tree we sell for landscaping is 6 to 7 ft. tall," says Heard. "However, we recently shipped ginkgos that were 35 ft. tall with a trunk caliper of 10 inches to Atlanta. We charged about \$5,000 per tree."

For example, the government is a poten-

tially large market. When a new tank operating school opened at Ft. Knox recently, the U.S. Army wanted to use organic trees on the training courses. Other government entities might also become organic buyers once they know the possibility exists.

Going organic while growing such large trees was not easy. Heard says tree farms like his traditionally use lots of fertilizer and pesticide to grow trees fast and keep them healthy. Insect and fungal pests can destroy profits practically overnight, while weeds and grasses compete for water and nutrients.

"We started to set the farm up in 2001 and spent three years studying our practices and finding approved inputs," recalls Heard. "We are still learning, like when we got hit by the drought this year."

Heard concentrates largely on native plants that can handle pests. He also works with University researchers on organic alternatives such as spraying his plum trees with a mix of cayenne and garlic.

To fertilize trees, Heard worked with a large hog operation in Virginia that makes compost out of liquid hog manure. Together, they developed a compost mix from hog manure, peanut hulls and waste from bakeries and other food processors.

"We add 5 percent sand for flow through and use this compost for a growing medium in our above ground nurseries," says Heard. "We also use the material to fill holes left when we dig trees to sell. Instead of plowing



Ron Heard of Burkesville, Ky., says he's the first certified organic tree farmer in the U.S.

the clay back in, the ground keeps getting richer and easier to work and the newly planted trees are healthier."

He has also developed a method of growing trees in netting used in fish farming instead of pots. The net grown trees can be transplanted throughout the year, yet don't develop the root circling that is seen with pots.

Heard has adapted strip till practices for starting young trees. He plants them in a narrow band and mulches with wood chips. The chips eliminate approximately 90 percent of competitive weeds, leaving a few for hand weeding. Where possible, Heard is trying to reduce his fuel needs. "We do a lot of grass mowing and are working with a company in Ohio on developing an electric powered zero-turn lawn mower," he says.

To reduce water needs after the recent drought, he has installed drip irrigation. He

is also developing 1,500,000-gal. reservoirs he can fill using windmills during the off-season. He plans to use solar-powered pumps when supplemental watering is needed. To reduce water and nutrient runoff in his propagation nurseries, which require nearly 100 percent humidity, Heard developed special misters.

"We mount tips like they use to mist the vegetables in supermarkets on the ends of sections of square pvc pipe inside the nurseries," he explains. "Each one covers about 5 to 6 sq. ft. and uses less than 3 percent of the water our old spray heads delivered over the same period of time."

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Corn Cob 'Jelly' Made The Old-Fashioned Way

Three decades after he won first prize at a high school competition, an Atlantic, Iowa, man started marketing his corn cob sweetened spread - made the old-fashioned way.

"It's 100 percent natural," says Randall Krogh, about his product. "It's really a spread as opposed to a jelly, with a lower sugar content (10 grams compared to 13 grams)."

Customers like what they read on the label - no sodium or cholesterol, 4 percent carbohydrates and 42 calories per 1 Tbsp. serving - and many are surprised at the good flavor. It's the same reaction fellow students had when Krogh first made corn cob jelly for a high school project.

"When I told everyone what I made, they laughed me right out of the classroom. They had a taste contest the next day, and the faculty chose it for first prize. I sold four jars."

Krogh forgot about the incident until a few years ago when he read an article about how the University of Nebraska's Food Entrepreneur Assistance Program helped a woman develop and market her own spaghetti sauce. Krogh applied for the program and in 2006 started selling his revised recipe - a corn cob spread - through his website and local grocery stores.

"If it wasn't for the university, I'd still be at my stove," Krogh says.

He buys the cobs from four local farmers who harvest corn on the ear. After the corn is shelled, Krogh buys a load of cobs. He stores them in perforated plastic bags to keep them dry until needed.

A local processing plant makes the spread. They boil the cobs, strain the chaff and debris with a fine mesh, add sugar and pectin, following Krogh's directions.



Photo courtesy www.fischerphotography.com

It takes about 15 lbs. of cobs to make 150 8-oz. jars of jelly, says Randall Krogh.

It takes about 15 lbs. of cobs to make 150 8-oz. jars of spread, he says. He separates white and red cobs.

"White tastes like apples and honey," Krogh says. "Red tastes like apples and honey with a dash of cinnamon. It's got a little bolder flavor."

Baby Boomers and older people remember their mothers making it, while younger customers are usually amazed how good it tastes, Krogh says. He has been surprised how customers use the spread - on pancakes and biscuits, meat marinades and glazes, dipping sauces, and as a baked bean and barbecue ingredient.

At \$6/jar, Krogh says his spread is more expensive than other jelly products, which are higher in sugar.

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Horse Spa Business Growing Fast

People are spending more money than ever on their horses and a rural business, Nature's Rehab in Eaton Rapids, Mich., is capitalizing on that trend. At the "spa for horses", animals can get a massage, photonic therapy, pulsed magnetic therapy, vibrational hoof therapy and sequential compression therapy.

Anke Lendeckel-Ackley, owner and founder of Nature's Rehab, says seeing a horse react to the therapy will make a believer out of anybody.

"I've seen really baffling results," she says. "Horses that are sour and unwilling to cooperate will show improvement almost immediately. Sometimes even before the massage is done they become more relaxed and calm. The tension leaves them."

Lendeckel-Ackley says a relaxed and happy horse performs better, whether on the trail or in the performance arena.

Before she opened Nature's Rehab in 2003, Lendeckel-Ackley traveled the state giving therapy and presenting workshops. Today, she holds workshops at the spa. Workshops cost \$95 a day and cover a variety of therapies.

One thing she stresses in workshops and one-on-one therapies is that the longer a condition has existed, the longer it takes to remove the trauma from the body. Traumas, she says, get stuck in the body, causing it to get rigid and less fluid.

"Our goal is to increase energy and remove blockages in the system," she says. "We know the therapy is having an effect when the animal yawns, itches itself (which suggests increased blood flow to the area being itched) or even passes gas. All of these are visible signs along with overall relaxation."

Some animals are too stressed or in too much pain to allow massage in the first place. In those cases, Lendeckel-Ackley will turn to photonic therapy, which she describes as acupuncture with light. Once the horse has begun to respond, she can often move on to traditional massage therapy.

Pulsed magnetic therapy uses electronic magnets that can be activated by a computer and send a pulse of different intensity or duration through the nearby muscles. Lendeckel-Ackley uses a special blanket with pockets for the magnets and a portable battery to power them. It also provides motorized vibration massage.

Sequential compression therapy is basically a mechanical up and down leg massage. The lack of muscle tissue in the leg makes it hard to do by hand. Similar to a blood pressure cuff, the therapy boots have chambers that inflate and deflate in order.

Individual treatments vary by therapy. The full body massage, including a written and oral evaluation, is priced at \$75 per hour while the photonic therapy is \$35, but takes much less time. The magnetic blanket is charged at \$1 per minute, and the sequential compression runs \$65 for 30 to 35 minutes.

"I offer a spring special that includes three therapy sessions in a week for \$250 and includes full board," says Lendeckel-Ackley. "It's a good tune-up for a horse before training starts or just trail riding."

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