

# PSU organics research on the upswing

by Suzan Erem

With Pennsylvania now ranking third in the nation in organic farm sales, more small farmers than ever are looking to Penn State to provide the research and expertise needed to grow food chemical-free.

And the university, which has for decades pumped out industry-supported research centered on chemically-grown large-scale agriculture, appears to be responding.

“Individual faculty members who have research programs can move much more quickly than the institution can,” explained Charlie White, an extension associate who said his job was created by the effective lobbying of the group to the university’s administration. White’s position is supported one-third by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and two-thirds by Penn State. “So you see a lot of faculty working on organic production but they’ve maxed out the existing facilities. Now the institution has to get up to speed with providing more acreage to do their research.”

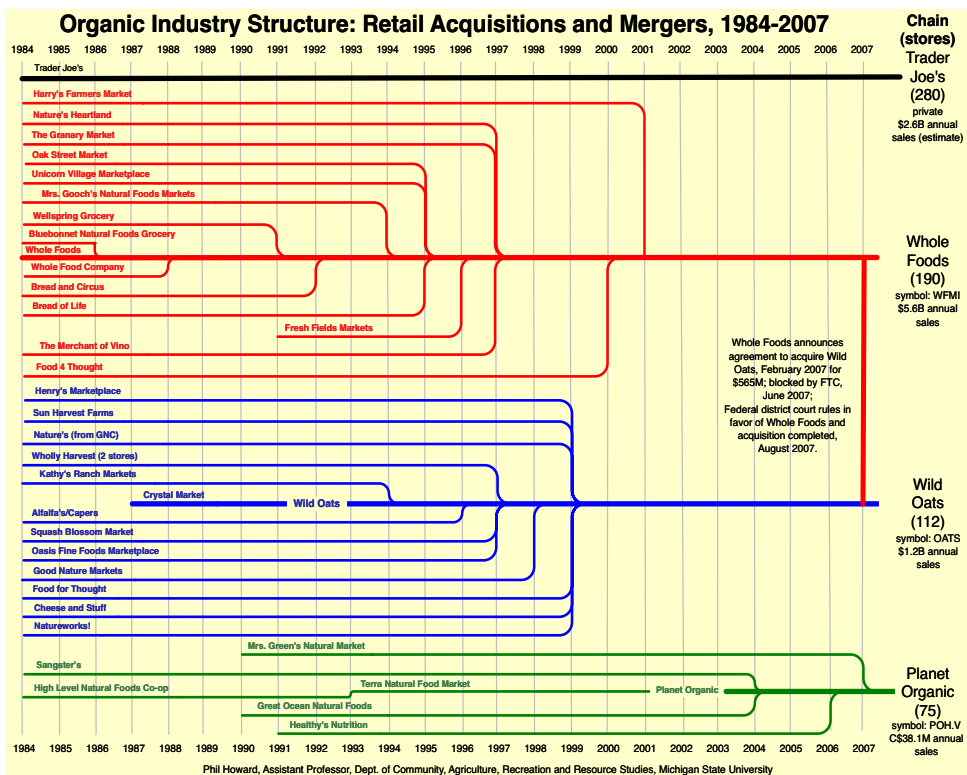
White said that an estimated 50 faculty and graduate students participate in the

Sustainable Ag Working Group, working to promote sustainable agriculture in the university. He said the group is now working to develop an Organic Agriculture minor and dedicate a research station solely to sustainable agriculture.

Even with new attention paid to it by the U.S.D.A., organic farming still comes to less than 4 percent of total farming in Pennsylvania and the United States. Still, national sales of organic foods have increased more than 20 percent since 1990, according to Prof. Phil Howard of Michigan State University. The industry represented an estimated \$17 billion in sales in 2006 and nearly \$20 billion a year later. And according to the most recent U.S.D.A. report, organic farms make on average \$20,000 more than non-organic farms. It’s a growing trend not lost on ag schools and the food industry.

Howard has also documented the consolidation of organic food retail distribution and published his findings showing that the

see **Organics**, pg. 22



Graphic provided by Prof. Phil Howard, Michigan State University. The multitude of lines to the left indicate the 32 natural food companies that existed in 1984. The three organizations on the right (Whole Foods bought Wild Oats) indicate the three organic food retailers in the country that have bought them up in the last 24 years.

# Purple ribbons: a safe place for the abused

by Emily Dabney

This September, purple ribbons will appear on the doors of Penn State faculty and staff all over campus.

The ribbons mean people being abused by their spouses and partners at home will have a safe place at work to find help.

The program is the result of the Centre County Women’s Resource Center teaming up with Penn State University Police to conduct a training called, “A day in the life. The Penn State Community at work. Work place responses to domestic violence.”

“Sometimes people may not want to go to Human Resources or the Women’s Resource Center. Here’s a safe atmosphere, another option,” said Dawn McKee, spokesperson for the Women’s Resource Center.

The faculty and staff participants will

have already taken part in a three-hour training session conducted periodically over the past two years, learning about what constitutes domestic violence, and how to be a safe resource contact for those who may be in an abusive relationship. The Verizon Foundation underwrites the cost of the training.

“Domestic violence doesn’t have to mean bruises,” said McKee. “It can also mean not feeling safe, someone controlling where you go, who you see and getting you to comply.”

One in four women have or will be a victim of domestic violence in her lifetime, according to the All State Foundation. An estimated 74 percent of Americans know someone who is or has been in an abusive relationship.

“Every time Penn State has hosted a training session, someone has a story,” said

Sue Cromwell, senior director for Planning, Human Resources and Diversity. “Either someone knows someone, or she herself has been in such a situation. The stories are very moving.” Cromwell said she believes this program will help.

During the session, participants will receive additional information and tools to be a safe, supportive person to talk to, explained McKee. They are not trained to be counselors, but they will have information regarding safety planning and the resources available to someone in need. They also receive a deeper understanding of what steps victims can take and what will happen if they are taken for a number of different situations.

The newly-trained volunteers will then place purple ribbons on their office doors. Those ribbons will be a sign to students, faculty and staff that it is a safe place to go

in and ask for help. The university will be promoting the meaning of the ribbons through campus-wide advertisements and through human resources.

“People spend so much of their time at work; we want to make sure they have a place to go,” said Cromwell. “We want to do whatever we can to help people in the workplace. We are trying to provide a really safe place.”

Resource center staff said that since Penn State is the largest employer in Centre County, the program is beginning there. The center has also conducted training for county employees since the county is another large employer in the region. They are looking to expand to other businesses as well.

“We are taking the next step to create a network,” said Cromwell. “The workplace is a comfortable environment. Maybe there we have a chance to save another victim.”

# Life lessons from one man's summer vacation

by Jamie Campbell

What I learned on my summer vacation...but since I don't get a real summer vacation here is what I've learned so far.

Never admit a mistake or sound reason for inaction – just blame someone else.

Recently the president admitted that he made some mistakes about the oil spill in gulf. For this admission, he has been roasted over the proverbial barbeque pit by his own party, the opposing party and talk show pundits, similar to the treatment that NBC has received for cancelling Law & Order.

However, I distinctly remember another crisis in the Gulf in which another president flew by the situation, had one photo op and that was that. While the opposing party was outraged (along with most of the country), his party backed him and his decisions.

The company responsible has been trying to "fix" the problem, but it cannot seem to get a firm handle on the situation. It has used "junk shots," caps, even robots that put the Transformers to shame. All have been tried and tried again from different angles, and all have failed. The oil spill was not the company's fault, well at

The bulk of these shows are tributes to ego and group think. There is no conversation, just yelling and an amen corner. That does not help anything or even help to give rise to any type of helpful thoughts; it is just damn boring noise.

and everybody is doing it. I've come to the conclusion that the majority of talk radio is useless, and I have gone back to listening to music.

I love music (yep, just like the O'Jay's song), and it's a good thing I have a lot of songs on my MP3 player.

When I'm not frustrated by my radio options, I watch TV. Not just ESPN mind you; I know there are more channels. But here is the problem, on just about every channel there is a show dedicated to somebody complaining about something. Here is the catch; the majority of these folks have nothing to complain about. I guess things are rough all over, having the ability to do what you want when you want. I mean if I could go to the tropics on a whim, live in big homes and give my kids overindulgent parties I guess I would have a lot to complain about as well.

It just goes to show that no matter how much you have you can still find something absolutely mundane to complain about. I am sure that I would trade worrying about buying a tank of gas, paying my kids' college tuition or just getting a decent Arnold Palmer with tanning, trading in a new car to get a newer car, or buying a \$1,200 cell phone.

See? I just did a bunch of complaining about something I should not care about much less pay any attention to. Here's my advice: Worry and complain about your own problems. By doing that I can almost guarantee that you will be able to solve your problems and have less to complain about the world and maybe take a few steps toward making it a better place.

At some point you know you will get tired of hearing complaints even when they are coming from you. Remember, nobody is listening to you complain anyway, especially if you are not on reality TV.

...and that's what I am learning on my "summer vacation."



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32 natural foods companies that existed in 1984 have all been bought up by the three chain stores that exist today, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Planet Organic.

"They must see that it's a profitable area," Prof. Mary Barberchek, an entomologist who came to Penn State in 2002 with a research appointment focused on organics, said of the food industry. "It's definitely one that the food companies see as something worth having since they're buying up all these companies."

"There's definitely growth and it's really exciting that it is a growing area," she said, adding that there is also an organics initiative in the College of Agriculture meeting to develop an organics minor. "It's not a major focus of the college, it's only like 3 percent of ag production and the college has to serve everyone," she said.

The college has offered two different pilot classes in organics, co-taught by Barberchek and Heather Karsten and one by Elsa Sanchez. White said that creating

classes moves more quickly than creating a major.

"It's a starting point and they're leading toward more institutional programming," he said.

Funding for Barberchek's organic research comes largely from the federal government, she said. Meanwhile, federal programs for farmers planting "commodity crops" such as corn and soybeans still far outstrips any programs for "specialty crops" that organic farmers are more likely to grow.

In 2009, specialty crops—all fruits and vegetables—received the most support ever, a total of \$825 million in federal support through farm programs, according to Environmental Working Group which tracks farm programs. By comparison, commodity crops, five crops including corn, soybeans and rice, received \$15.4 billion.

In 2008, the Organic Farming Research Foundation issued a policy brief recommending the new administration support organics research that reflected organic produce's share of the market, about 4 percent.

That alone would more than double the total research funds available to \$36 million from \$15 million, according to the report.

At Penn State, researchers from a number of departments including economics, rural sociology, horticulture and plant pathology, are teaming up with Pennsylvania Certified Organic and Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, to help farmers develop the more traditional commodity crops organically, for example, organic grains to feed organic herds for dairy or meat, White said.

And Barberchek's work focuses on weed control and using natural enemies of certain pests to get weeds to an acceptable level, but she also named commodity crops. She and her colleagues are just launching a project to study how to reduce tillage in organic systems.

"We're really looking at how different methods of managing the soil in organic crop production systems, alfalfa, corn, soybeans, how we can make these systems perform better," Barberchek said.

Still, there's a long row to hoe for organic research and teaching.

"My feeling is that at this point there is a huge industrial complex of ag and I don't see that about to go away for a number of reasons," White said. "I think you can't turn your back on that system and just forget about it because it's going to be running out there, destroying the environment and destroying communities. So you have to engage it to some extent. That's just a personal feeling."

Barbechek's work seems to take her in the same direction. When asked about organic food that isn't locally grown, she had this to say:

"I still think there's a great benefit to organic food production even if it's getting shipped all over the world. There's less pounds of pesticides going into the environment, you have less workers being exposed to pesticides. Are we going to hold up organic that it has to solve all the problems of the world? It's still better on many measures than conventional food."

## USAS wins award for courage



Photo by Julia Watkins

In June, Penn State United Students Against Sweatshops members including Chris Stevens (right) received the Susan Eaton Award from Robin Greene (left), president of the Keystone Research Center. The Eaton Award recognizes those whose contribution to working people exemplifies the moral constancy and practical idealism that Eaton brought to her work as a Harvard professor and advocate for working women.

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