

CENTERPIECE TOP STORY

Organic origins

Organic origins: Local woman's farm flourishes

Ava Henrickson Journal staff

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Michelle Grosek at Bear Butte Gardens points out the different kinds of vegetables she grows inside her high tunnel greenhouse.

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A small homestead northeast of Sturgis is the little farm that could, growing and expanding its organic offerings to include vegetables, poultry and eggs.

On a warm but windy fall day, a giant tom turkey struts around near the chicken coop, his tail feathers fanned in full display for an audience of young toms and hens. There's no mistaking who is the ruler of this roost.

"He is really full of himself right now," said his keeper, Michelle Grosek, owner and operator of the gardens.

Aside from the wind and, perhaps, the constant clucking, it's an idyllic day at Bear Butte Gardens, a fitting name for Rick and Michelle Grosek's venture. The six gardens on the 120-acre property are nestled near the well-known hill shaped like a sleeping bear.

Grosek, 48, started the full-time gardening business-turned-small-farm about four years ago, a mid-life career change brought to fruition because of an empty nest.

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In that time, Grosek has become a passionate voice in the local foods movement, a cause that's slowly gaining ground in South Dakota.

In some ways, it's a simpler life.

"Even on my worst day in the garden, how bad can it be?" Grosek wondered. "The worst thing is too many potato bugs or the weeds are taking over the pumpkin patch. I'm like, really? That's not that big of a deal."

But Grosek's gardens are kind of a big deal, because they are different than most in this area. Yes, visitors will find the typical rows of potatoes, greens, corn and bean stalks. But these vegetables are certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Being certified organic means not using "most synthetic materials, such as pesticides and antibiotics" and growing using methods that preserve the environment, according to the USDA's website. The USDA's National Organic Program provides regulations for Grosek to follow, which allow her to label her vegetables as certified organic.

Her eggs can be labeled and sold as certified organic, but her poultry, which is organic, can't be labeled as organic because that requires it to be processed at an inspected plant. There is no such plant in South Dakota, according to Grosek.

The birds' bedding and manure contributes to the organic process; it's added to a large compost pile mounded on the edge of small hill overlooking 40 acres of hay fields.

Being certified organic means tracking the "inputs," everything put on or in the gardens including mulch and fertilizer from compost and manure, to be sure it doesn't contain any chemicals.

An inspector comes out once a year to ensure Grosek is following USDA regulations. And then there's the mound of paperwork and record keeping, but Grosek doesn't mind.

"I kind of like doing that yearly gathering of information, (figuring out) how many pounds I sold of everything compared to the year before and how many inputs we (got) off-farm and how can we make that better," she explained.

Growing organic was a no-brainer for Grosek; it was the way her mother gardened when she was a child. "I grew up in a chemical-free environment, for the most part, and I thought that was normal," Grosek said with a laugh. "And that's just how I've always gardened. You go pick the bugs and you pull the weeds and deal with (problems) that way."

The property is a work in progress; Michelle started with the gardens and later added the poultry, some lambs and livestock guardian dogs and a haying operation.

The ever-expanding business is a testament to the growing popularity of buying fresh, organic food from local producers.

"We sell everything we can grow and we always have demand for more. Organic is kind of a hot topic right now," Grosek said.

She sells most of her crops through a Consumer Supported Agriculture Program, where customers pay up front for a season's worth of fresh vegetables, assuming some of the risk involved in a weather-centric business.

“For a lot of people it's kind of a trendy thing. A lot of people are very, very supportive of the local aspect.”

Rachel Shippee found out about Bear Butte Gardens after she moved to Spearfish from Utah a year and a half ago. The personal trainer and CrossFit coach said there are too few options for healthy organic food in this area, especially compared to where she came from.

“Instead of going to the grocery store where they ship it in, I wanted to buy local and fresh,” she said.

Now, she gets vegetables — and growing advice — from Grosek, as a CSA customer.

Sure, it's a little more expensive, “but when you stop and think about the benefits, it's the only way to ensure it's not genetically modified,” Shippee said. “It's not irradiated, it's more nutritious and it tastes better. It's worth it.”

Grosek also sells to a few local restaurants and does direct sales at the farm. She advertises through Facebook where she can move 14 dozen eggs a week, plus any surplus vegetables.

The ability to buy locally matters more to Colleen Schneider than buying certified organic. And for her, it doesn't get more local than Bear Butte Gardens.

“(The Groseks) live very near my house so I feel like it's in my backyard,” said Schneider. In addition to being a CSA customer from the very beginning, Schneider buys eggs and lamb. She said there is perhaps just one drawback to her weekly CSA cache.

“Sometimes she grows something so unique that I don't really know what to do with it: like mustard greens. It's too many mustard greens for me!” she said, laughing.

Schneider feels very lucky to have people like Grosek so close and in a small town like Sturgis.

In a world where large farming operations and chemically-treated foods are the norm, Grosek is taking steps toward a healthier future.

“It doesn't have to be the way it's always been,” said Grosek. “You can do these little homesteads.”

For more information

Email: Michelle@BearButteGardens.com

Phone: 605-490-2919

Address: 20445 Highway 79, Sturgis

Website: BearButteGardens.com or facebook.com/BearButteGardens