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[Organic Growers School](#)



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in the Southern Appalachians through
Educational Programs and Outreach



...e-news

February 2011 Growers Notebook:

News, Tips, & Advice on Things Organic

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CRAFT 2011

CRAFT is enrolling for the 2011 season, and soon member and associate farmers will meet to define this season's curriculum. The benefits of joining are greater than ever before, and we already have heightened farmer and student interest for 2011. For

See You at the Conference!



The 18th Annual Organic Growers School Spring Conference is just a over a week away. We're expecting our best year ever with close to 1500 participants and all

new class topics like Fruit Production, All About Poultry, and Primitive Skills. Learn to make fire by friction, how to determine nitrogen delivery from cover crops, discover the potential for wind energy in NC, and more! The conference covers all aspects of sustainable living, and there's something for everyone with over 100 classes and workshops, a trade show, seed and plant exchange, silent auction, and [MORE](#).

In this year's childrens program, kids aged 7-12 will meet the goats, feed the rabbits, and even learn the art of falconry. Crafts, music, and kids yoga top it all off for a day of learning about the environment.

If you haven't already registered, you can [sign up online](#) until March 2nd at 5pm. Rates are \$55 per day (kids get in for \$30 per day).

Also, this year for the first time, OGS is offering the ultimate social event on Saturday night March 5th at the Orange Peel in downtown Asheville, NC. We're calling this shindig FarmSoiree;

more information about CRAFT, or to join, visit our website. You can also contact Andrea via email.



Apprentice Link

Farmers are having success with our Apprentice Link database! One farmer recently reported that three quarters of his 2011 crew was hired through OGS.

Apprentice Link can help you, too! If you are still seeking farm workers for the 2011 season, PLEASE take 10-15 minutes to [create your FREE profile online](#). We have apprentice applications in our office waiting to be matched to your farm. What have you got to lose?

If you are someone interested in farm work, you can also fill out an application to be matched with a farmer through our system. [Try it today](#).



News Bits

News Bits are reader-submitted news,

It's a rollicking, singing, dancing, talking, feeling, learning, inspiring event that is all about food. First, we'll challenge you, and make you think with eight quick-fire Ignite (TM) Agriculture presentations.

Presenters include Camille Kingsolver (co-author of acclaimed book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*), Asheville City Councilman Cecil Bothwell, plus a farmer, an 11-year-old activist, a composting specialist, and MORE. Each of these folks will share with you a short but sweet 5 minute perspective on our theme: "FOOD." After that, we'll clear the dance floor for a mardi gras weekend celebration with the Firecracker Jazz Band. Gather up your friends and don't miss this fun community event.

[Tickets are on sale online at organicgrowersschool.org](#) until March 2nd. Cost is \$15/adult and \$7/child. If you purchase your ticket with a conference registration, you get in for \$12. You can also purchase tickets at the conference on Saturday.

AND...when you purchase a ticket to the FarmSoiree, you're automatically entered into a raffle that gives you the chance to win lifetime FREE admission to the Organic Growers School Conference. The winner will be announced at the FarmSoiree event, so put on your dancing shoes and get ready for a chance to win.

See you there, green thumbs.



Gardener's Corner: Ask Ruth



Dear Ruth,

Are there any planting guides/books specifically for western North Carolina or the Southern Appalachian region that you know of? Most of the books I have found only pertain to North Carolina as a whole, and not specifically the mountain region. As this will be my first real season gardening in the Asheville

events, or opinion. Submit your bit via email:

enews@organicgrowersschool.org

NEW ONLINE RECORD KEEPING SYSTEM FOR CERTIFIED ORGANIC PRODUCERS.

Eugene, Oregon

Certified Organic Business Solutions, LLC is pleased to announce the launch of COG-Pro.com a unique new web-based record keeping service for producers of Certified Organically Grown crops:

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CHECK OUT THIS DOWNLOADABLE COVER CROP CHART

<http://www.ars.usda.gov/Services/docs.htm?docid=20323>

and

<http://www.ars.usda.gov/Services/docs.htm?docid=10791>

WNC BEE SCHOOL IS COMING UP

Buncombe County Beekeeping Chapter has just posted information about the annual bee school (often held in January / February, but this year in March). It is Saturday and Sunday, March 12 and 13 at the Folk Art Center. This is a beginner's bee school (some years are geared towards intermediate / some experience folks). Pre-registration is required and you can register by going to wncbees.org - the information is right on the home page.

area, I am not familiar with when it is ideal to begin seeding and planting certain vegetable crops. I know that there are variations with microclimates, but I am looking for a good general guide that will tell me approximately when to begin planting certain things. I also have a cold frame that I plan to use this spring, so any information about how early I can plant under that as well would be helpful. Thank you very much.

~ Allison

Dear Allison,

Thanks for writing! There is a wonderful guide published by Buncombe County Cooperative Extension called **"Gardeners' Almanac, A Guide to Environmentally Friendly Gardening in Buncombe County"**. This publication has a month-by-month format that includes to-do lists for each month ~ under the headings of Lawns, Ornamentals, Fruits, Vegetables, and Other ~ and is specific to Buncombe County. There are useful articles throughout AND a **super-helpful WNC vegetable planting guide**. The veggie-planting guide lists the recommended planting dates for seeds and transplants, spacing between plants, planting depth, and days to maturity. I refer to it all the time.

This guide is a real bargain since the "The Gardeners' Almanac" is only \$5. It is available at the Buncombe County Cooperative Extension office, at 94 Cox Avenue in downtown Asheville, 828-255-5522. According to Linda Blue, one of our fabulous Extension agents... *"Gardeners' Almanacs are [also] available...wherever you find an "Ask A Gardener" information table. We're at the City Tailgate on the first Saturdays of the month, and at the Herb Festival, Days in the Garden, special events at the Nature Center, and Mountain State Fair, etc."* Additionally, the Asheville City Market table has great handouts on composting, soil-test boxes, and other cool stuff.

A note about NC Cooperative Extension: Extension is an incredible, mostly free, resource for gardeners and farmers alike. The state of North Carolina is considering huge budget cuts for Extension of at least 10% (or more) across the board ~ which might mean that your favorite Extension agent loses their job. Some counties in other states have lost their agents completely. Be vocal in letting your Representatives and Senators know how important NC Cooperative Extension is to farmers, gardeners, kids (4-H), and consumers ~ so that all of us can continue to utilize their expertise.

If you live in WNC and use either of the guides (links) in this paragraph, you will need to adapt the planting times to WNC by *delaying planting 10 to 20 days in spring, and by planting 10 to 20 days earlier in fall*. Scroll down into this Extension article to see NC planting times and how much seed to plant per person in your household, <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html>. Here is another guide from the Growing Small Farms website that includes crop-planting times when you are using season

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use this site:

<http://davesgarden.com/guides/freeze-frost-dates/>

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extension methods like cold frames.

<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/plantingguide.html>.

If you are growing your own transplants, it is time to start your cool season transplants now. By the end of February you can direct sow peas, kale, collards, spinach, carrots, turnips, onions, & radishes, and transplant cabbage into your garden. By mid-March you can safely plant Irish potatoes, cabbage, mustard, lettuce, and broccoli, etc. By April 1 ~ start your tomatoes and peppers inside, and transplant or sow any remaining cool season crops. The frost date for most of Western North Carolina is Mother's Day (around May 10); is May 15 for Madison and Yancey County, and possibly a week later for Mitchell, Avery, and northern mountain counties. Some say to beware of a frost occurring near the full moon in May. Wait to plant all heat-loving crops ~ like tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, basil & okra ~ in your garden until after the frost date.

As far as your cold frame is concerned, next year try planting lettuce and spinach in your cold frame in late August/early September so you can enjoy salads greens all winter long. You can sow a spring crop of cool season veggies or start transplants in your cold frame right now. Remember to keep an eye on the daily projected temperatures. The air inside your coldframe can heat up dramatically when the sun peeps out, so be prepared to ventilate your coldframe during the day to keep your seedlings from getting fried. They would rather be a little cold than burnt to a crisp.

If you are interested in constructing a cold frame or a hoop house, go to the Organic Growers School – Spring Conference Library:

<http://www.organicgrowersschool.org/content/1522> and click on [Practical Solutions in the Garden](#) (2008), Jeff Ashton, (scroll down for directions on building a cold frame), or [Off-season Vegetable Production: Discovering your Winter Niche](#) (2008), Gred Gross, (directions for building a hoop house).

Just a reminder: the **OGS Spring Conference is coming up on March 5 & 6**, Saturday and Sunday, at UNC-Asheville. You may register for one or both days. This is a wonderful opportunity to attend fantastic classes, and get inspired with new ideas for this year's garden. Even if you are not attending the conference, you can attend FARM SOIREE on Saturday night, **March 5**, from **8pm – 12am** (doors open at 7:30).

What's FARM Soiree? It's a benefit party that features **Ignite-Agriculture** presentations (8 very quick-fire talks) and music by Asheville's own...**Firecracker Jazz Band**. Ignite's slogan is " Enlighten Us. But Make It Quick." so each [presenter](#) is allowed 20 slides that will flash on the Orange Peel's giant screens with each slide. Every 15 seconds the speakers slides are automatically advancing ~ ready or not!. Each speaker's **entire talk time is 5 minutes**, and the talks are Bam-Bam-Bam...one right after the other. Within this powerful format, the topic of "Food" will be interpreted via [each of the speaker's unique perspectives](#).

You have probably seen the Firecracker Jazz Band and already know how fabulous they are, but here is a link to watch them playing: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsvJJT-AYTA&feature=related>. Some of the band members also play with the Squirrel Nut Zippers.

Hope to see you there!
Ruth

Gardeners: Got a question for Ruth? Email it to us
enews@organicgrowersschool.org

Ruth Gonzalez is a former market farmer, avid gardener, local food advocate, and founder of the Tailgate Market Fan Club where she blogs at www.tailgatemarketfanclub.wordpress.com. In her job at Reems Creek Nursery, Ruth offers advice on all sorts of gardening questions, and benefits daily from the wisdom of local gardeners.

Farmer's Corner: Ask Tom



Dear Tom:

How do you find and hire a good farm help?

Thanks

-- Overworked in Grapevine

Dear Overworked,

We are spending a substantial amount of time putting our crew together this year. We normally need five people for two days a week. One worker is continuing on our crew from last year. Applications are up this year, largely because of the Organic Growers School Apprentice Link service through their CRAFT program. <http://www.organicgrowersschool.org/content/1876>. Each participating farm prepares a profile and prospective workers fill out a profile as well. OGS provides a matching service for workers interested in our farm. We also connect with workers through the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project local food guide, farm tours, and word-of-mouth from tailgate markets. We have not advertised for workers in the past but I suspect Mountain Xpress would also be a good way to solicit interest.

Most of our workers are college educated and some have had specialized graduate work. One year "stump the entomologist" was an entertaining diversion as crew members brought in bugs to be identified from various parts of the farm by one of our crew with specialized training in bug ID. Many crew members have worked on other farms and most have some sort of outdoor work experience if not farm work. We seek workers who want to be farmers. We find they pay attention well and are willing to accept education as part of their compensation package. In contrast to those applicants that want to experience nature or "hang out on a farm for awhile", future farmers seem to make the best workers, in our experience.

For ten years or so we have used a formal hiring process in contrast to friends of friends showing up when a vacancy occurs. That process is:

- Application
- Reference Check
- Interview and Farm Tour
- Offer and Acceptance
- Employment Agreement
- Retention Program
- Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Our **Application** is very simple but we find that the existence of an application reduces the number of frivolous inquiries and saves our time. We ask four questions

What is your education and experience?

What will you do with what you learn on our farm?

Who are your references?

How did you hear about our farm?

Some applicants also include a resume which is helpful. Referrals from OGS come with an applicant profile.

We **check references** for promising applications with very open-ended questions on email or by phone. By letting the reference person talk, we often find other information beyond our questions. We say we are looking for an amiable, hard-working person who wants to be a farmer.. We ask if they would hire the applicant again. It takes a few minutes for each applicant but is worth the effort in our experience.

Our **Interviews** are very informal. We ask about farms where the applicant has worked and what they learned at each. We ask for more detail on the dream farm that they want someday. We describe our expectations and ask about their interests in working on our farm. We emphasize that the pay is low compared to their qualifications but that we try to make up for that with education and seconds produce to take home. We wrap up the interview with a farm tour. The questions asked during the tour also provide insight. Probably our answers do as well. We try to imagine this person working with our existing crew members and our family. Even with a part-time crew we see a lot of each other so compatibility is important. Doug Jones with NOFA offers more possible questions in his book for NOFA entitled "Internships in Sustainable Farming: A Handbook for Farmers" at www.nofanj.org .

We do not make an **Offer of Employment** at the interview but call back in the next few days. That period allows us to consult with each other about impressions from the interview and it also allows the prospective crew member to ponder what they have seen and heard. Can they actually pay the rent with our pay plus other work? Will they like working with these people that they just met for the first time? If all parties are still interested a few days later, we make an offer and they accept.

We have not used a written **employment agreement** in the past but intend to develop one. Richard Wiswall offers a good model agreement about a page long in his book The Organic

Farmer's Business Handbook (Chelsea Green 2009). ATTRA also offers several elements to consider at http://attra.ncat.org/intern_handbook/pdf/DRAFT_contract_template.pdf (source: Western SARE). Examples of some possible elements of an employment agreement include:

- Nature of the work
- Who will be the trainer
- Working while you talk
- Come dressed for the weather
- Record your hours
- Housing
- Grievances

While it is unlikely that either party would take legal action based on this agreement, it clearly states the understandings and ensures that all workers have a similar awareness of farm policies.

A **Retention Program** sounds fairly official and bureaucratic but on our farm that's just another way of describing ways to keeping employees happy with their work and working productively. Farm economics are such that we cannot pay very much compared to the qualifications of our typical worker but we can make our workplace pleasant in other ways. CRAFT (www.organicgrowersschool.org/content/1874) is very popular with our crew and we pay their fees to participate in monthly farm tours and pot lucks. We do not pay their time at CRAFT meetings but we often organize carpools to help make it a social event. We celebrate birthdays and departures with a few snacks and beverages. We answer questions thoroughly and provide access to the farm library and record keeping system. We share information on other workshops and agricultural training. We try not to work on any one task for more than two hours at a time to avoid tedium. We share decision making (who wants to harvest what today?) We share food of course – often seconds but that's what we eat – which can exceed the value of their paycheck. Many low cost or free methods exist to help make the work enjoyable. When a grower takes the time to train a worker it's worth a little more time to help avoid a mid-season departure.

Evaluation and Improvement also sounds fairly formal but we just check in with staff from time to time to be sure their needs are being met and that they are learning what they came to our farm to learn. This conversation often happens when we are working away from the rest of the crew with one of our staff. We keep communications open and often ask for suggestions on how to improve our farm operation and relationship with staff. We always do an exit interview when someone leaves to take advantage of their thoughts after a season or more on our farm. We rarely need to dismiss an employee but we always make clear what the issue is before we take action and provide time for improvement.

I hope this process is helpful. Taking the step to hire crew does have a fair amount of overhead in time and expense, but it allows us to be more productive as a farm. Comments are welcome. I'm sure there are many more ideas out there in the WNC organic community.

Thanks.

-- Tom

Farmers: Got a Question for Tom? Email it to us:
enews@organicgrowersschool.org

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