

Good Earth: Known Near & Far for Organics

Rhode Island's only certified organic garden center draws with quality naturals - and now produce.

by
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THE GOOD EARTH Organic Gardening Center in Hope, RI, has the distinction of being the state's only certified organic garden center. The certification is a big deal to customers of this small garden center, which counts two to five employees on its staff.

"People come here for the certification," says Owner John Holscher. "It starts when they realize they've got kids running around on the grass, they've got pets, and they don't want to put chemicals down anymore."

Holscher grew up in horticulture. His grandfather came from Holland to work for an uncle, growing cut flowers like sweet peas, snapdragons and mums. His father took over the family business, and when Holscher was ready to go to work, he



pitched in as well. "By then, the imported flowers had come in vogue, and we had shifted to more of a retail business, selling geraniums and potted plants," Holscher says. He took time away from the family business to pursue other interests, but he always came back. "I guess I decided that maybe the plant busi-

Room for Expansion

Even with 10,000 square feet of greenhouses, about 3,000 square feet of outdoor plant display space and an indoor gift shop, there is still plenty of room for Good Earth to keep growing. It is now expanding from its venture into produce to speciality food sales, including honey, maple syrup, olive oil, roasted peppers and olives.

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ness isn't so bad after all," he laughs.

When his parents retired and sold the property, Holscher and his wife decided to find a place of their own. They bought an old 20-acre dairy farm that had never used chemicals. "We were able to get certified organic without

any transitional phase," he says. As an added benefit, years of dairy farming had made for excellent soil.

The Holschers have been at this property for 10 years. Even with 10,000 square feet of greenhouses, about 3,000 square feet of outdoor

Holscher says. "Our older folks are really serious gardeners - they're more the old-world gardener type."

To educate customers of all ages about organics, the staff spends time talking to them. "We give people a lot of personal attention," Holscher says. "We do talks at garden clubs and libraries, and we give them a coupon as a teaser to get them through our doors."

Finding good employees has not been easy for Good Earth, but, because the staff is so small, John and his wife are able to offer one-on-one training. "Everybody does everything around here," he says. "We go through our products, one by one, and impart the knowledge we have to our employees."

Organic fertilizers leave Good Earth in 50-pound bags. The most popular products are North Country Organics fertilizers, Neptune's Harvest fish fertilizers, Coast of Maine, Fafard, Pro-Mix and, most recently, Dr. Earth. A 50-pound bag of all-purpose vegetable fertilizer goes for \$30.

Although Good Earth does sell some bulk compost from a local company, the most commonly purchased soil products are Dr. Earth's potting soil and planting mix, which retail for \$12 to \$13 per 1.5-cubic-foot bag. "The older generation cringes when they hear those numbers," Holscher says, "but our customers are generally happy to pay it."

Produce: A Natural Extension

For years, Holscher rented out an acre of land to local farmers. Now, he has started growing on it himself,



plant display space and an indoor gift shop, there is still plenty of room to keep growing.

Holscher describes the location as "somewhat out in the country," but the nearest dense neighborhood is only 5 miles away, giving Good Earth a strong base of local customers, along with its broad regional pull as an organic retail nursery.

Most customers are young to middle-aged women. "Their kids like to come along, and sometimes they drag their husbands, too,"

‘We sometimes supplement organic fertilizers with synthetics because they are in the pot for a long time, and it’s hard to keep them screaming along the way people want to see them,’ Holscher says.



Chemical-Free Once On Site

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planting an acre of organic vegetables to sell at Good Earth’s produce stand on-site.

Holscher has plenty of experience growing organically. “My grandpa was organic without really trying to be, because that’s all there was back in those days,” he says. “When my father started, there were lots of pet-rochemicals in the garden business, so that’s what he did. But I never really bought into it. From pretty early on, I felt it was better to keep the plants with what nature wants to give them than what some chemist wants to give them. We’d be happier and healthier; they’d be healthier and more productive.”

Good Earth’s greenhouse not only supplies starts for its small growing

operation, Holscher also grows all of the edible starts sold in the garden center. He starts them mostly from seed, choosing varieties best suited to the climate.

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synthetics because they are in the pot for a long time, and it’s hard to keep them screaming along the way people want to see them,” Holscher says. Using these synthetics does not jeopardize the business’ organic certification, however, because it is considered a “split operation” - only part of it is certified.

Before launching the produce stand, Holscher took time last winter to develop the greenhouse and learn what would grow. “Mostly, we ate everything we grew at first because we were still experimenting,” Holscher says. “We ate very well.”

Customers are embracing the addition of produce. “At first, people were coming in for plants, and they’d pick up some food as an afterthought,” Holscher says. “But as we got later in the season, it switched. During what would normally have been a slow time for us, we had people coming primarily for the produce, then

they’d pick up a plant.”

Good Earth is expanding into natural food products, including honey, maple syrup, olive oil, roasted peppers and olives. Some of the products are sourced locally, and others come from Associated Buyers, a specialty food distributor in New Hampshire that focuses on natural and organic products.

The garden center has started advertising in *Edible Rhody*, a magazine for foodies with crossover appeal to gardeners. “We get people who are interested in food, and that’s a good way for us to reach out,” Holscher says. “We’re small, but that’s to our advantage. These people want personalized service, and everything we do is personal.” ■

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