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Organic not the same as naturally grown produce

BYLINE: **Bill Church** correspondent

Dedication. A strong, but giving spirit. A shortage of cash. That's the universal job description of the organic farmer.

Those who make the rounds of local green markets often run into Sal and Holly Varri, the young owners of Varri Green Farm, or Brenda and Jim Gibbons, of Gibbons Organic Farm in Fort Pierce. They are all friends and support each others' work. And they are passionate about the federal National Organic Program.

The Gibbons operate a "certified organic" farm on two acres of leased St. Lucie County land on King's Highway. Sal and Holly Varri's farm is a "certified naturally grown" facility on a 20-acre operation close by the shore of Lake Okeechobee.

What's the difference?

The National Organic Program is a Department of Agriculture entity created in 2002 in an attempt to assure consumers that organic products meet consistent, uniform standards. Organic products are certified by an independent third party licensed by the USDA to inspect crops in groves and fields, and meat from packing plant to market.

Growers may not use chemical pesticides harmful to humans because residual amounts remain in the body. Nor can growers use synthetic fertilizers. Fields must be free of such pollutants for three years before organic crops can be planted. Growers must also use organic seeds and practice crop rotation.

Organic meats can come only from animals that have not been fed other animal meat. The program requires regular inspections by government, private or not-for-profit organizations which meet strict USDA certification guidelines.

The Certified Naturally Grown program is a non-profit alternative certification program tailored for small-scale, direct-to-market organic farmers. The CNG Web site says its certification standards include, but are not limited to, USDA organic standards. Inspectors include personnel from county extension services and the University of Florida Institute for Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Brenda Gibbons strongly disapproves of the Certified Naturally Grown program, claiming it "muddies the water" for the consumer. She's dubious about the quality of the inspections.

"Who's keeping the records on the CNG?" she said.

Sal Varri disagrees, claiming he doesn't need a USDA stamp to guarantee his products are truly organic.

"None of our customers care," Varri said. "Our customers can tell from the way we talk that we know what we're doing. We even hold farm tours so our customers can inspect us for themselves."

Varri also feels the government program doesn't guarantee a grower is following the rules. He said anyone can start using pesticides or fertilizers the day after the inspector leaves and no one will be the wiser. He calls for random testing several times a year.

"My personal feelings are when you involve the government you end up with a lot of red tape and paperwork," Varri said.

Despite their differences, the Varris and the Gibbons are advocates for each other's work.

"It's great to have local farming, whatever the designation," Brenda Gibbons said. "I just want consumers to understand the difference."

"I love Brenda and support everything she does," Sal Varri said. "The National Organic Program is just not right for us."

GROWING AN ORGANIC FARM

The Gibbons began their farm in 2000, growing year round by using greenhouses with raised beds on one of their two acres. They produce a variety of produce, including tomatoes, tropical long beans, herbs, lettuce and cucumbers. They sell at the Fort Pierce and Vero Beach green markets and to stores. They've also supplied the Today Show and Food Network.

The nine greenhouses give some control over the weather, but not hurricanes, which hit Gibbons Farm hard. Large trees came down on the greenhouses. The Gibbons are growing in three of the nine houses, and expect to be back at full production by the end of the year. They also raise goats, chickens, rabbits and cats.

Brenda Gibbons adds to the family income by working as a nurse at Longwood Regional Hospital in Fort Pierce.

With no greenhouses, Sal and Holly Varri manage to grow a variety of crops from October through May. They have 15 varieties of lettuce, five kinds of carrots, lots of greens, radishes and herbs. They can't grow in the summer because the Florida bugs and heat kill much of the crops, and, following organic farming principles, the Varris won't spray with pesticides.

They've also planted fruit trees, like apple, peach, pear, plum, nectarine, and fig -- fruits not normally seen on the Treasure Coast. The harvest should be ready in two or three years. Tropical and sub-tropical fruit trees also dot the landscape, but they won't produce for five to six years.

"We want to make money, but money isn't everything," Sal Varri said. "It's just as important that we protect the environment and reduce pollution. We're tree huggers."

Sal Varri's real estate investments help support the couple while they build the organic farm business. Varri bought the property where the farm now stands in 1993. He has had attractive offers to sell, but Varri and his wife say they are dedicated to protecting the small family farm and preserving the natural environment.

The Varris will continue to sell at green markets and they plan a roadside fruit stand across the road in a former cattle weight station. Expected to be ready in October, the stand will operate on the honor system, with available produce listed on the farm's Web site (www.varrigreenfarm.com).

ORGANIC VS. NATURALLY GROWN PRODUCTS

Organic: Farms must meet standards of the Department of Agriculture's national organic program. Growers may not use chemical pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. Fields must be free of those pollutants before organic crops can be grown. Growers must use organic seeds and practice crop rotation. The program requires regular inspections by entities that meet the USDA's certification guidelines.

Naturally grown: The Certified Naturally Grown program is a nonprofit alternative certification method geared towards small-scale, direct-to-market organic farms. Its certification standards include USDA organic standards among other procedures. Inspectors can be anyone from county officials to university agricultural specialists.

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