

SANTA CRUZ STYLE

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2003



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Instructor Jim Leap oversees the organic farming program at the UCSC Farm and Garden.

Future Farmers

Jim Leap puts students at the forefront of organic farming

By STEPHANIE CHASTEEN

Sentinel correspondent

Several times a week, you may have the opportunity to buy fresh organic produce from a small farm stand at the base of the UC Santa Cruz campus. These are, quite literally, the fruits of decades of research and training.

The UCSC Farm and Garden, managed by experienced farmer Jim Leap, is the fertile research ground for The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems — one of just a handful of programs dedicated to training the next generation of organic farmers and to research on improving organic systems. Although organic is the fastest growing sector of agriculture, there is precious little information on how to farm organic.

"It's one of the oases, nationwide, as far as hands-on organic farming experience is concerned," said Bob Scowcroft of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, based in Santa Cruz. "People do not know the jewel of a program that they have there."

The farm is considered by many to be the birthplace of organic farming. Using then-revolutionary techniques such as raised beds, close spacing and double digging — the charismatic actor Alan Chadwick sparked the interest of a generation of students in the late 1960s. With the help of mesmerized apprentices, he transformed a rocky hillside into the 2-acre Chadwick Garden. To test his ideas on a larger scale, his students later created the 25-acre farm complete with row crops, orchards and research plots.

"This is really unique because we're doing organically based research, we're doing practical training, we're running a farm, selling product and teaching," said Leap, farm manager.

Leap is the man in the middle of it all, juggling the practicalities of running a farm, train-

ing apprentices and managing research trials. He is a lucky man whose soil-worn hands are grappling with a variety of challenging jobs.

"I have two passions: One is being actively engaged in the farming system and the other is teaching and instructing," said Leap. "I really have the best job, for someone of my inclinations."

Leap is particularly well-suited to the job. He was an independent farmer near Fresno for 15 years prior to coming to Santa Cruz.

"He's definitely one of the more experienced organic farmers in the Central Coast," said Eric Brennan, the first USDA researcher to focus on organic farming.

Leap is actively involved in training the next generation of farmers. He lectures at universities and conferences, and devotes much of his time to hands-on teaching of farm apprentices. Apprentices spend six months living and working at the farm, learning aspects of soil science, botany, compost production, irrigation, weed and pest management, and farm equipment as well as marketing and social issues.

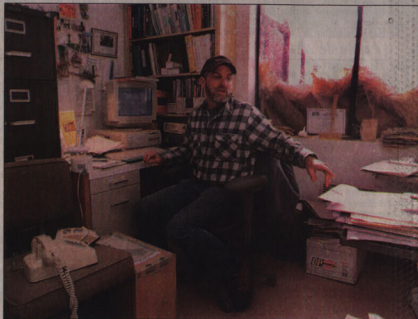
"You can take soil classes, but god, you gotta go out and get sweaty, you gotta dig the dirt," said Scowcroft in praise of the program.

The apprenticeship is unique, he said, because of the freedom to be creative, the lack of pure academic boundaries, and opportunities to interact with local farmers and organizations such as his own.

Tom Broz, owner of Live Earth Farm in Watsonville, said the apprenticeship, and Leap's experience, were instrumental in launching him in his career in organic farming.

Graduates of the program have spread their experience around the globe. You can find UCSC progeny at their farms from Sebastopol to North Carolina, from Mexico to Kenya. Several others teach agriculture through colleges, high school or the Peace Corps.

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Jim Leap, in his office at UCSC, stresses the need to know more about organic farming methods when it comes to managing weeds and pests.

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ERIC BRENNAN, FIRST USDA RESEARCHER TO FOCUS ON ORGANIC FARMING



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Jim Leap greets a group of Japanese farmers touring the UCSC Farm.

Organic

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Leap's expertise is also valuable to researchers who are working to understand organic farming systems.

"Just because a system is organic doesn't mean it's necessarily sustainable," said Brennan.

Instead of focusing on comparisons between organic and conventional agriculture, he said, we need to know more about how to improve organic farming methods. Organic farmers are floundering when it comes to finding tried-and-true methods to manage weeds and pests and to increase their crop yield.

When a researcher proposes a field trial, Leap tells them if, how and when it can be done. He is the one who figures out how to work the trial in with the crop rotation sequence, how to irrigate it and how to apply the fertilizers, as well as managing much of the practical work such as ground preparation.

USDA researcher Carollee Bull has collaborated with Leap to help find out what varieties of strawberries are best suited to organic farming.

"Working with Jim as a farmer is so much different than working with some other farmers because his bottom line isn't making money," said Bull.

Leap's main product is research, not food, so researchers know their plot

won't fall victim to neglect or replanting and that the data will be collected right.

For Bull's research, Leap harvested berries twice a week from 80 plots, counting the pounds of berries harvested from each plot.

"It was a lot of work," he said.

It's work he probably wouldn't have been able to do as an independent farmer.

"Farmers often don't have the time to set up trials," acknowledged Leap. "When I was running my own small farm I rarely had time to interact with farm advisors, researchers or even other farmers to discuss observations."

The work at the farm is important for the public as well as for farmers.

"We aren't just thinking about how to grow something," said professor Steve Gleissman, the founder of The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. "Organic's not just a way to produce, it's a whole aspect of how a community relates to its land."

Scowcroft agrees, and argues that the cost of organic produce reflects its value. Consumers take for granted cheap food without understanding the implications.

"Look at our groundwater, look at our air, look at our youth," he said. "Hey consumer, you get what you pay for."

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