

GROWERTALKS

Features

3/1/2008

The Market for Organics

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Based on the enthusiasm and investment by Mark Elzinga ([CLICK HERE](#) to read the full story) and other growers who are pursuing certification for their greenhouses, organic production seems to be a burgeoning niche.

"It's huge," Lois Christie says of the potential for organic vegetable and herb production. "I'm getting calls all the time now." Lois is a certification representative for California Certified Organic Farmer (CCOF), the agency that oversaw Elzinga and Plug Connection's certification.

Lois bases her statement on the growth of organic food sales in the U.S. Between 1973, when CCOF was founded, until 2002, the organic food industry grew to about 2.5 % of the total U.S. food market. Between 2002 and today, organic food sales have more than doubled, to between 6 and 7% of the food market, she says.

"Obviously [organic vegetables and herb plants] are new, but I think it's going to be huge. I think it's going to grow just like organic food has."

Joe Messer, president of Organiks, Plug Connection's finished organic plant division, talks to retailers and consumers across the country, gauging their interest in organics. Like Lois, he's optimistic.

"Interest is increasing, sales are increasing, conversations are increasing ... and it's moving from hippies like myself," he jokes, "to real mainline people who are interested in organics."

But lest you think this trend is low-hanging organic fruit ripe for the plucking, consider the experiences of Rockwell Farms in North Carolina. Certified just two years ago, Rockwell tried organic herb production in 2 ½ acres of certified greenhouse but gave it up after 18 months.

"The problem we encountered in doing a finished crop of herbs proved that it was more difficult than we had anticipated," says owner Tom Abramowski. "It could be that we didn't sell it strongly enough, or didn't sell it properly. Also, we didn't see a huge push within the stores themselves for the organics."

It wasn't just marketing, it was production, too. Tom says they had challenges producing finished plants at the quality they wanted. And they didn't hold up as well in stores, either. After evaluating the program, they decided they were better off putting that production space back into traditional products.

Although the experience cost Rockwell "a bunch of money," Tom hasn't given up on organics. He just thinks they were a little ahead of the curve.

"We might explore it again," he says. "It's going to require a little bit more on the marketing side, to make sure that the market is, one, going to pay for what we're doing, and two, that we can bring a product to market that will be purchased."