

## ORGANICS IN CRISIS

Just when you thought it was getting easy to go over to the neighborhood supermarket and buy your certified organic vegies, Big Brother did his thing.

And a real mess it is, with organic farmers and consumers organizing frantically to save the movement by the May 1st deadline. (May Day! SOS! Save Organic Standards!) A big problem is that most of the mass media, not known for their sensitivity to Orwellian overtones, have missed the fact that there's a problem.

Here's the gist of what's happened. In 1990 Congress passed a law that certain good-government activists in the organics movement had worked hard to push through. The Organic Foods Production Act, part of the 1990 Farm

Bill, mandated a process. The first stage was the creation of a National Organic Standards Board, made up of industry and consumer representatives, which was charged with drawing up a National List of accepted and prohibited practices. In the second stage, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) was supposed to accept the recommendations of the Board and issue National Organic Program rules, including the National List.

**Please send in your comments by May 1st!**  
*Worksheets available upon request from High Falls Gardens, see contact information below.*

Instead of accepting the Board's recommendations the USDA, currently headed by Clinton appointee Dan Glickman, turned around and made up its own set of rules that, in substance and intent, guts the meaning of the term organic as it is commonly understood these days. A clear example of how the Executive Branch of our federal government has grown accustomed to overstepping its bounds, the USDA's National Organic Program rules seem designed to *prevent* any claim to safer food production and thus counteract the intent of Congress.

### Love is Hate, Organic is Toxic

Lest this analysis be seen as overstatement, consider that the USDA's rules would allow a producer or processor to be certified organic even if they use irradiation, sewage sludge, bioengineered organisms, antibiotics and toxins derived from bioengineered microorganisms (used as pesticides), blood/bone/hoof/horn meals, sodium nitrate, potassium nitrates, piperonyl butoxide, rotenone and strychnine, among many other substances and practices now banned by most certifiers. The USDA's rules also allow livestock confinement operations, the most egregious examples of which are public health hazards as recognized even by the *New York Times*.

Several farmers' first reactions were, "We'll have to find a new word." Indeed, the National Organic Standards Board defined *organic* in a long paragraph that addressed, among other ideas, the concepts of enhancing biodiversity and ecological harmony. The federal Office of Management and Budget requested that these concepts be removed and they were, leaving a limited functional definition of the term. Together with (*continued p. 4*)

### **To Our Friends of High Falls Gardens:**

*This winter has brought HFG a full experience of the cycle of closure and new beginnings.*

*As last year drew to a close, High Falls Gardens co-founders Laura Smith and Jean Giblette amicably decided to end their four-year partnership. Laura will maintain her interest in Chinese medicinal herbs but will be concentrating on marketing herbal products for women, and Jean will continue the HFG programs. You may reach them as follows:*

<i>Laura Smith</i>	<i>Jean Giblette</i>
<i>P.O. Box 778</i>	<i>P.O. Box 125</i>
<i>Philmont, NY 12565</i>	<i>Philmont, NY 12565</i>
<i>518-672-4656</i>	<i>518-672-7365</i>
<i>ltsmith@mhonline.net</i>	<i>hfg@capital.net</i>

*The co-founders have seen a big change in the level of acceptance of Chinese medicine in the U.S. over the last five years, and acknowledge that many opportunities are waiting for people who can take a long-term view and are willing to advocate the responsible use of herbs and other botanicals. Laura and Jean, each in her own way, will be part of the exciting adventure that lies ahead. Each is grateful for your acknowledgement of High Falls Gardens, and welcomes your continued friendship and support.*

## Newman Incommunicado As Network Builds

The ongoing saga of our intrepid plant-finder Robert Newman suddenly lapsed this winter when, immediately after his Internet server changed his email address and sent the notice in Chinese, his computer crashed beyond local powers of repair in Nanjing. Despite repeated pleas from his family to Toshiba, Nanjing seems to be outside their territory. Robert has been email-less for over eight weeks now; his correspondents miss him and eagerly anticipate a flood of news once he's on line again.

Meanwhile, would-be growers of Chinese medicinal botanicals are steadily building connections here in North America. The group of people, including HFG, who have received plants and seeds from Robert have organized themselves (the working title is the "Newman Collaborative," see list below) for a responsible course of action -- that is, to make certain of the identities of the plants before the material gets out to other growers.

To be sure, several species are already available from commercial seed sources such as Elixir Farms, Johnny's, and Richters Herbs (see *HFG Growers Resource Guide* for the list). The material from Robert represents a big potential increase in the number of species available, and Newman Collaborative members are receiving many inquiries from growers who are interested in the Chinese botanicals. High Falls Gardens alone has either met or talked by phone with over sixty experienced growers in 28 states and five Canadian provinces who are ready and waiting for the adventure of growing these plants.

### Escape From Herb Mania?

The key issue underlying these developments is, of course, the responsible use of medicinal herbs. Right now, most, and especially the smaller, commercial herb growers in North America are frustrated by the commodity-based marketplace. Consumers experience it from the other end, where they're subjected to major hype and magic-bullet imagery (last year Echinacea, this year St. Johnswort, next year Kava...) created by irresponsible middlemen who make money off the prevailing naivete.

Eco-agriculturalists are in a position to understand that a balanced diet is the preventive and, in many cases, the cure for disease because they use an analogous approach to maintain the fertility of their soils. Thus the intractability of the markets is all the more perplexing. The ecologically responsible producers have trouble distinguishing their products from others not as well grown, and deriving a fair price. This battle was almost won on the food front until the recent upset (see lead article on page one).

But herb growers have additional problems. For instance, traders use assays of chemical constituents in the material to the disadvantage of the producers, who may not be prepared to argue that such evaluations are often based on bogus science and variable lab work. Moreover, the

basic assumptions are faulty -- one chemical constituent does not make a good medicinal herb just as one herb does not promote health. How many times must these truths be told before people grow up?

Such frustrations propel growers right into the traditional Chinese medicine camp, because that modality is counteractive to the magic bullet. In the Chinese system, diet is the cake and herbs are the icing; the herbs are combined in elaborate formulas, and one formula is never taken for very long. Fortunately, more practitioners are being trained in the traditional ways right here in America. Faith sustains the idea that within the next decade there will be a market for herbs as a specialized form of organic produce and with the same values -- fresh, grown in live soil, correctly harvested and handled by trustworthy people. ■

### The Newman Collaborative:

Cynthia Beale, *Medicinal Plant Conservancy*, Eugene OR  
Harry Campbell, Auburn NY  
Jean Giblette, *High Falls Gardens*, Philmont NY  
Joe Hollis, *Mountain Gardens*, Burnsville NC  
Vinnie McKinney, *Elixir Farm Botanicals*, Brixey MO  
Robert Newman, *Nanjing Institute of Botany*, Nanjing  
Frank Porter, *Riverview Herb Farm*, Racine OH  
Conrad Richter, *Richters Herbs*, Goodwood Ontario  
Cindy Riviere, *Plant It Herbs*, Athens OH

## HELP WANTED

**ORGANIC FARM** seeking two key team members, one to design and manage three 2000-sq-foot greenhouses, and one to manage planting, care and harvesting of thirty acres of medicinal herbs. Please call John Burns at Sunnyside Farms, 540-675-2627, or email [organic777@aol.com](mailto:organic777@aol.com).

**APPRENTICE** wanted for 1998 growing season, to help tend a research garden of botanicals used in traditional Chinese medicine. Full-time work, start and end dates flexible. Excellent verbal and observational skills, precision and detail orientation necessary. Room, board, stipend and stimulating learning environment provided. Reply in writing to Jean Giblette, High Falls Gardens, P.O. Box 125, Philmont, NY 12565 or email [hfg@capital.net](mailto:hfg@capital.net). No phone calls, please.

Friends of HFG are welcome to advertise in *The View From High Falls Gardens* free of charge!

### Attention Herbalist/Surfers! Have you checked these out?

[www.infinite.org/innertraditions](http://www.infinite.org/innertraditions) (L. S. Jarrett articles)  
[www.planetherbs.com/main.html](http://www.planetherbs.com/main.html) (M. Tierra articles)  
[www.ronan.net/~rmhi/index.html](http://www.ronan.net/~rmhi/index.html) (Rocky Mountain Herbal Institute)

## New Film on Asian Medicine Dazzles the Eye and Imagination

As a present-day Tibetan physician living in a Siberian city harvests his herbs, then mixes and grinds them in his mortar and pestle, traditional medicine is brought to life before our eyes in a stunning new documentary film called *The Knowledge Of Healing*.

In one of several spell-binding stories shown, the Tibetan-Siberian physician, Dr. Chimit-Dorzhi Dugarov, treats a patient who has been referred by conventional doctors because his kidney tumors have metastasized and are inoperable. The camera shows the mundane details as the patient boils prescribed herbs on his stove at home and drinks the decoction, day after day, month after month, until finally the tumors recede to the point where he's sent back to the regular doctors who then perform surgery. The Siberians, it seems, are ahead of the U.S. in the smooth integration of complementary modalities.

The film's director, a Swiss named Franz Reichle, lived for five years in Siberia and northern India and was able to pack his film full of treats. Besides the success stories and the hints of scientific validation of ancient practices, there are especially exotic images -- beautiful Mongolian faces, sweeping vistas of tundra. In Dharamsala, the Tibetan capital in exile, the Dalai Lama's personal physician Tenzin Choedrak unwraps an ancient sacred textbook. Centuries ago, artists made illustrations based on the text that resemble a very old version of *Field Guide to Medicinal Herbs*. The small, delicate and brightly-colored paintings of plants and other substances, so accurate as to be readily identifiable to the modern trained observer, are illuminated by flashlight during filming so as to preserve the pigments as much as possible.

Tibetan medicine, dating from the twelfth century, has the same ancient roots and philosophical basis as the Chinese system, which itself developed as a complex array of regional traditions in Asia. The Tibetan pharmacopoeia overlaps with the Chinese -- for example, good old *Rubia cordifolia* (madder root) is used in both systems -- but seems to include a greater proportion of rocks and minerals as befits their mountaintop environment. The Dalai Lama himself is interviewed and gives his personal endorsement of the efficacy of traditional practices. Although most of the physicians in exile are seniors, they are shown teaching in classrooms in Dharamsala. Fortunately for the rest of us, the knowledge is being spread throughout the world.

The Western perspective is added by a series of European talking heads -- German, Austrian and Israeli scientists -- who make clear that the Tibetan traditions, and especially their medicinal formulas, are being taken very seriously. An Austrian photobiophysicist claims to have actually observed changes in light impulses from a white blood cell upon contact with plant cells from a formula. Hello, 21st Century science!

Shown at the Film Forum in New York City last fall and reviewed in the *Times* on November 5th, *The Knowledge of Healing* made it to HFG's local Upstate Films in Rhinebeck at the end of February. Which brings up a key question -- how can the Friends of HFG see this film?

According to its U.S. distributor the film has finished its run in theaters in this country. However, to meet demand they have begun to sell videocassettes (1½ hours long); at present the price is \$100 and they can accept only checks. Contact IN Pictures, 90 West Broadway, Suite 13-B, New York, NY 10007, 212-227-0243, fax 212-227-0226, email [inpix@aol.com](mailto:inpix@aol.com). ■

## Ingham Wows 'Em at Acres Conference

Any of you plant people who still have doubts that elves and fairies really do exist would have been completely won over by Elaine Ingham's presentations at the *Acres U.S.A.* annual conference in St. Louis this past December.

Dr. Ingham, Associate Professor of Soil Ecology at Oregon State University in Corvallis, specializes in elucidating the almost unimaginable diversity of life in the soil. So many billions, so many different shapes and sizes, such fierce competition -- and always, it's either eat or be eaten! No, not Wall Street, it's called the "soil foodweb," in which a vast and intricate hierarchy of creatures live out their lives

*Invisible little creatures live in the neighborhood and the plant attracts them to it with food offerings. Or, if you prefer, "The plant puts out substrates that will select for specific bacteria to colonize its root system."*

in a colorful drama that is only just now becoming apparent to those of us who care to look. Once again science bears out folklore, and the ancients are proven wiser than the literal-minded heirs of the modern age who up until recently assumed that dumping crude, man-made chemicals on the soil is okay.

The number of species of microorganisms is so staggering that Elaine and other researchers now believe there is a one-to-one relationship between a particular cultivar of plant (even more specific than the species level!) and at least one particular species of microorganism that exists in a symbiotic relationship with the plant to protect it against disease. "The levels of complexity are so great," says Elaine, "we're now seeing that, say, a dozen species of microorganisms cooperate with each other to protect a specific species of plant against a particular disease and get it through one season of growth." Those invisible, beneficial little creatures live in the neighborhood and the plant attracts them to itself with food offerings. Sound familiar? Or, if you prefer Elaine's way of saying it, "The plant puts out substrates that will select (*continued p. 4*)

(CRISIS, cont'd. from page 1) the USDA's version of the rules, the definition of *organic* would have "loopholes big enough to drive a chemical fertilizer truck through," to quote Steve Gilman, Saratoga NY farmer, writer, and president of the Northeast Organic Farmer's Association Interstate Council.

### Fast Footwork in the Movement

The USDA set up a public comment period through the end of March 1998, which was recently extended to the end of April. Despite the daunting paperwork involved, organics movement groups were able to do their analysis and publish commentary as early as January. The overall reaction is one of shock and horror, with some controversy over whether to try to reform the USDA's version of the rules or to push for scrapping them all together.

Several guidelines are available to consumers who wish to post comments. The Organic Farmers Marketing Association cooperated with the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides to produce a public comment work sheet, a checklist of points against the USDA rules. (Copies of this work sheet, along with the sheet published by the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, are available upon request from HFG.)

A detailed comparison of the original law with the proposed rules is posted on the Organic Farmers Marketing Association website, [www.iquest.net/ofma](http://www.iquest.net/ofma). The monthly journal *Acres U.S.A.* published the original law in its January issue; their coverage of this crisis has been most comprehensive and, as typical of this journal, a wide range of opinions is represented. An articulate case for no certification at all was made by pastured poultry expert Joel Salatin in the most recent issue of the Vermont-based *Food and Water*, another good periodical for those concerned about environment/agriculture issues. (Contact *Acres U.S.A.* at 800-355-5315 or [info@acresusa.com](mailto:info@acresusa.com); *Food and Water* at 800-328-7233.)

### How to Protest

Unless a colossal stink is made before May 1st and the USDA is forced to upload the law, the entire concept of organic certification in the U.S. will be seriously undermined. Damage has been done already; consumers are confused. Growers who were in the process of certification, including High Falls Gardens, are now stymied; the higher fees proposed by the USDA rules will effectively prevent the little guys from obtaining certification.

Astute observers note this crisis results from the success of the organics movement. Demand for organic food has been growing exponentially in recent years. Clean food costs more because careful production is labor-intensive; eco-farming is more than refraining from dumping chemicals on the soil, it's a whole process of building and maintaining soil fertility. Now the big guys are trying to muscle in on a good game without paying the price. ■

### Send Comments To:

USDA National Organic Standards  
Docket Number TMD-94-00-2  
Attn: Eileen S. Stommes, Deputy Admin.  
USDA/AMS, Room 4007-S  
AgStop 0275, POB 96456  
Washington, DC 20090-6456

or [www.ams.usda.gov/nop](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop)

(INGHAM, cont'd. from page 3) Marvelously skilled at spitting out correctly pronounced multi-syllable Latin names in rapid succession, Elaine presented both a one-hour lecture and a workshop at the conference. In her talk she offered explanations for what ecologically conscious farmers have realized through experience.

For example, woodland plants prefer fungus-dominated, mycorrhizal soils. To encourage that balance, one would mulch with leaves to feed the fungi. Field crops prefer a bacteria-dominated environment, which can be encouraged by scattering sugars on the soil surface -- dilute molasses solutions or carbohydrate meals that break down into sugars. Common ecological practices such as mulching, interplanting with clovers or other covers, and other methods which prevent the soil from drying out or becoming compacted all protect the diversity and structural integrity of the life below.

The soil foodweb is now the focus of intense scientific interest, by Dr. Ingham in the Department of Botany and Plant Pathology and her colleagues Joyce Loper and Walt Mahaffe at the USDA Horticultural Research Lab located on the OSU campus, as well as others at North Carolina State and the Center for Microbial Ecology. Elaine has started a consulting company, Soil Foodweb, that does soil analyses for growers to determine if the foodweb is appropriate for the kinds of plants they want to grow.

And what's a foodweb without a website? More information lies in wait for you at [soilfoodweb.com](http://soilfoodweb.com). ■

## HFG ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Since last October's presentation at the Richters Commercial Herb Growers Conference in Toronto, HFG was on a panel at the CSA of North America conference in November, and made the scene at the *Acres U.S.A.* conference in December. In January, Friend of HFG Mimi Barker helped make our first trade show a success at the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group Conference in Memphis. **And look for us on the program at the NOFA Summer Conference, August 7-9, 1998, where Wendell Berry will be the keynote speaker this year!** (Call 978-355-2853 for more information.) ■