

21 May 1987

*What's*  
**HAPPENING**  
 Guide to Local Arts, Entertainment & Events



free

Silk accessories by Betsy Conlin are at Opus 5 Gallery See page 2

Tasty artichokes are grown at River's Turn Farm near Coburg

# Saving the Small Farmer

Three Groups Serve Local Farm Economy



ALL PHOTOS BY ELISABETH LYMAN

John Sundquist of River's Turn Farm grows only organically. He works with both Organically Grown, Inc., and ARABLE.

by Jim Stiak

From sea to shining sea, the small farm is in trouble. Modern agriculture is no longer a matter of growing crops and getting them to market—it's government subsidies that keep most farmers in business today. Silos bulge from stored grain while banks foreclose on farms in records numbers. Thirty-four square miles of U.S. topsoil are washed away daily, the underground aquifers are running dry, and there are fertilizers in the tap water.

Enter a trio of local groups to buck the trend. Organically Grown, Inc. (OGI), is a marketing co-op that co-ordinates the distribution of fresh produce; ARABLE, the Association for Regional Agriculture Building the Local Economy, provides loans to farmers unable to obtain conventional bank financing; and the Agricultural and Community Trust (ACT) is working to acquire land for farmers who couldn't otherwise afford their own place.

OGI has become almost a million dollar business since its humble beginnings in 1978. Originally formed to purchase seeds and fertilizers in bulk, the members soon saw a need for something more. "There was a lot of trouble with peo-

ple competing in the local marketplace," says OGI manager Joe Gabriel. "Three farmers would have zucchini and beat their heads against the wall trying to sell it. The public would get low price vegetables but the growers would go out of business."

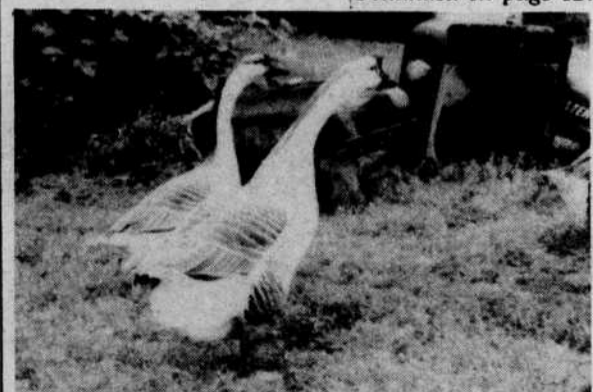
With the help of a VISTA grant, the group organized into a marketing co-op, distributing their produce to Portland, California, and Seattle. As the markets grew, so did the need for co-ordination, which led to annual planning meetings. "People now grow pretty much what we say we're able to sell," says Gabriel. "They're specializing more so they can pinpoint their crops and do a better job."

Today the produce from OGI's 13 local member farms is shipped up and down the West Coast, to Hawaii, Montana, and Maryland. Twice a week it makes the trip to Portland in the OGI fleet—a refrigerated bobtail truck purchased after the Starflower truckers went out of business last year. Since a large Westside warehouse was rented two years ago, the staff has expanded from two to nine workers. Over the past year some \$900,000 worth of lettuce, carrots, celery, cabbage, and tomatoes has passed through their green thumbs. "Everything you can imagine is grown," says Gabriel, "ex-

cept tropical fruits." Recently, OGI has also begun co-ordinating some 25 farms in California, which provide produce during the months Oregon farms are uncharted swamps.

One of OGI's current goals is to move beyond the natural food store marketplace, into the mainstream of commercial supermarkets. To help lure these bastions of pesticide-laced fruits and vegetables, the co-op has become something other than strictly organic. "We've started selling a little non-organic produce," says Gabriel.

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River's Turn Farm, Coburg, Oregon