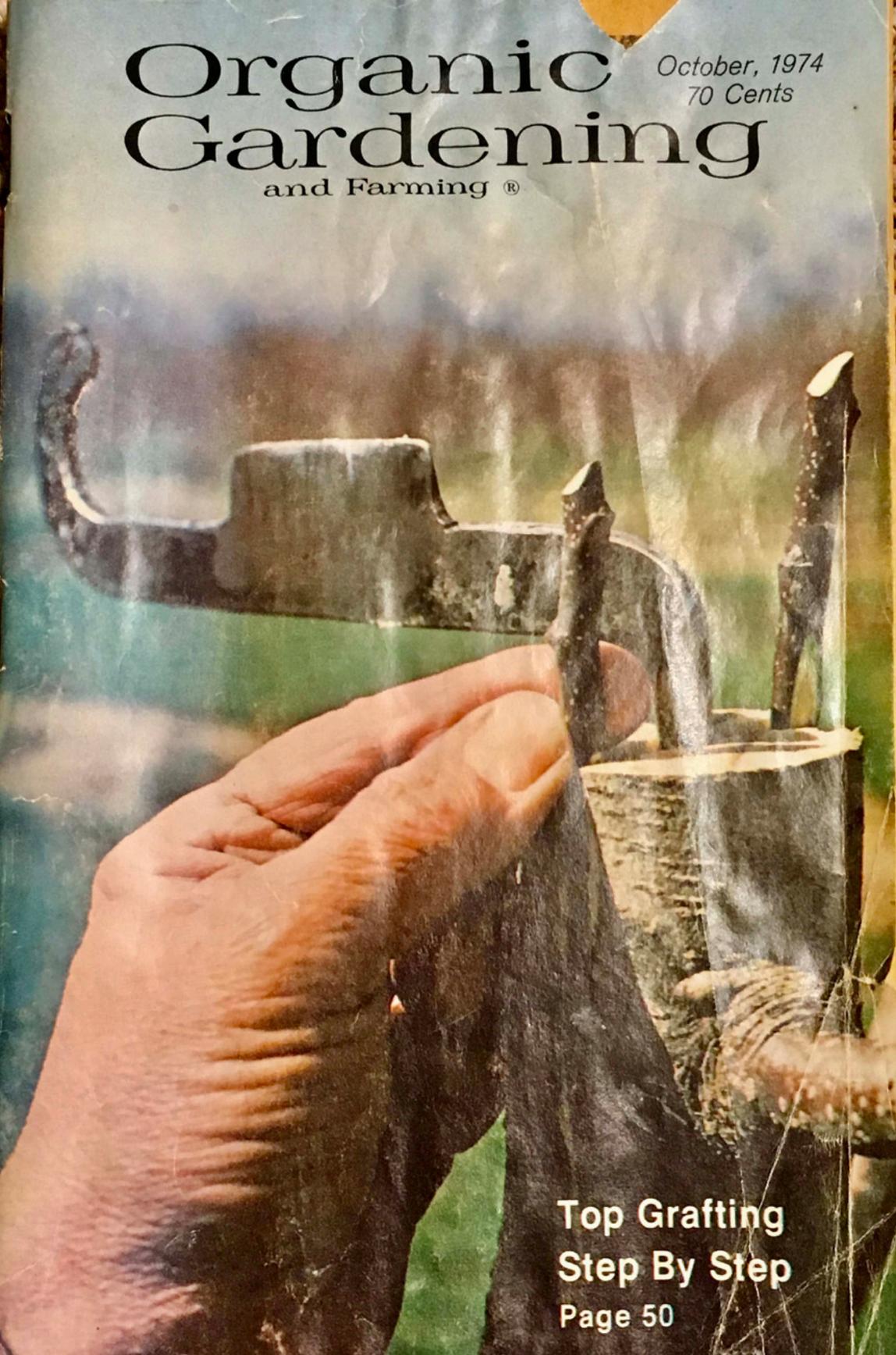


# Organic Gardening

and Farming <sup>®</sup>

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70 Cents



**Top Grafting  
Step By Step**  
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# New England's Organic-Minded Nurseries

What's happening in the old Northeast reflects the sound of garden-center revolution the country over — a new clamor for natural fertilizers, biological pest controls, organic soil-building materials and lots of organic food plants!



*Veteran organic nurseryman Stan Bulpitt and son Bud tend a flock of potted plants ready for clients at Brookside Nurseries in Darien, Conn.*

*Joe Keith spreads bagasse (sugar cane waste) mulch around ornamental and fruit trees at his Horseneck Nursery near Westport, Mass.*

M. C. GOLDMAN

**F**OLKS IN NEW ENGLAND have a reputation for being down-to-earth and practical. Frugal and laconic, too. They're people who don't go in much for wasting anything — be it organic material or words. Perhaps that's why

so many of them have evinced strong preference for organic methods at the local nurseries they patronize. And why more and more of these garden centers are focusing on what their customers want.

Whatever the combination, it's forged a clear image: New England's nurseries reflect a national trend to organic fertilizers and practices. On a mid-July field trip into the concentrated six-state corner of the country, OGF-staffer Ray Wolf and I discovered first-hand how the organic way has mushroomed. We saw a full medley of natural products moving steadily from shops to the yards, orchards and farm sites of knowing buyers. Everything from composted manure, Milorganite, bone meal, fish and seaweed emulsion or meals to ladybugs, praying mantises and milky spore disease or traps for Japanese beetles — they're all part of today's demand, as one nurseryman after another told us.

In Massachusetts, for example, long a hotbed for change both political and otherwise, Timothy Sands gave us a vivid picture of the trend at Littlefield-Wyman, Inc., in Abington. The firm, in business since 1898, is a major N.E. distributor for garden supplies to nurseries, highway departments, markets, as well as a retail outlet on its own. "Astronomical numbers of people are going into gardening," he exclaimed. "This year we've noticed so many spending the money for their two-week vacation in the backyard." Among the season's best-selling fertilizers he notes composted cow manure (Tex-Organic), dehydrated manure (Agri-Science), bone meal (Faesy & Besthoff), dried blood, tobacco dust. "We've seen a lot more in calls for biological insect controls, too," said Tim, "most often from people who indicate they don't want to hurt anything else." Then, reflecting on the steady trend, Sands added: "I think I'd like to see an organic section in all garden centers, with products and information on what to use, how, and so forth."

Upstate, Cal and Charles Laughton have been at the nursery trade since the early 1930's. Their Garden Center in North Chelmsford, Mass., boasts 16,000 square feet under glass, pro-

ducing some 3,000-plus hardy mums a year among other plants. Instruction leaflets given customers who purchase trees, shrubs and perennial vegetables such as asparagus, recommend ample use of organic fertilizer, especially composted cow manure. The Fertlife brand they handle sells well, Charles told us, now reaching 40 to 50 tons a year in sales. ("The way costs are going on fertilizers, I think everybody is going to be looking for more organic stuff!") Along with it they find an increasing market for Milorganite (processed sludge from Milwaukee), liquid seaweed (Sudbury), fish emulsion, kelp, bark mulch and salt marsh hay.

Nearby, at Jim Walmsley's Garden Center in Chelmsford, we found a young enterprise — just over a year in business — feeling the impact of the public's interest. "We had a tremendous season in vegetables," Walmsley boomed. "People used to buy inferior plants at discount houses. Now they buy both organic plants and fertilizers because they want better results and a natural product. The energy crisis has made them aware of returning wastes to the earth. The big thing we've noticed is people's orientation toward organic gardening." As for products, one of the most in demand is the Agrico cow-sheep-manure blend ("We sell a lot of it!"), plus Milorganite (10 tons this year). "We try to sell them the best," said Walmsley. "If it's organic, that might be because it's long-lasting and builds soil."

On the upper shoreline — near such notable points as Salem, Gloucester and Marblehead — we wandered around one of N.E.'s largest and best-known nurseries, Thomson's Garden Center in Danvers, Mass. Here, Bob and Harry Thomson have 23 acres and lots of customers eager for organic products. "I'm a firm believer in getting back to fundamentals," Bob told me. "You've got to introduce organic matter into soil and increase biological life in it to grow plants

best." He has another 250 acres near Rowley which he is developing into a natural enterprise — with wildlife, wetland ponds and streams, timber trails, recreation areas, even a country store and pick-your-own bedding nursery. "When we line out stock, after turning under a cover crop," Thomson exclaimed, "we have tilth that is absolutely beautiful!"

Back at the shop, manager Will Walfield talked about their own compost pile, a long windrowed heap made up of weeds, sod, loam and other plant wastes. "It's as good as any you can buy," he said, indicating that over 200 yards were sold this year, some 900 dollars' worth. "Most organic gardeners do their *own* landscaping work," Walfield continued. "Those who come for custom work now often ask that organic materials and methods be used." Included in the sales upswing, he notes, are fish emulsion (Sea Organics), manure and seaweed products (Fertilife), peat humus ("older and darker than moss — better for setting out shrubs, etc."). There's also been a run on Doom, the milky spore disease, and Japanese beetle traps — both as a result of a heavy beetle infestation this summer. Herbs, mantids and ladybugs also sell well, especially with the spot talks Bob Thomson gives regularly on Boston radio station WEEI as well as Channel 7 TV appearances. Will interest in organics continue? "No question about it," he answered. "More people are planting food crops — and more are concerned about what they put on their plants!"

#### STAN THE ORGANIC MAN

Of course you can't mention nurserymen and New England in the same breath without Stan Bulpitt bursting on the scene. After 50 years in the trade, Stan is really the dean of organic nurserymen. He's a white-maned and bearded maverick who has worked, talked and plugged for decades to get Connecticut and N.Y.

cities to recycle their leaves and other wastes. Together with his wife and sons Bud and Dave, he has built a remarkable, strictly-organic business at Brookside Nurseries in Darien. What's more, daughter Sally is an agronomy graduate, now working on a gypsy moth virus research assignment at Rutgers.

Bulpitt has a compost operation in nearby Norwalk, where several products — potting mix, leaf and manure compost, etc. — are processed and bagged. Automated equipment handles 300 or so 25-pound bags an hour, Stan explained, and greenhouses, garden shops, etc., in a 500-mile radius now use the "Stan the Organic Man" line. In 1973, he produced and sold 3,000 tons of the fertilizers retailing at \$1.98 to \$2.99 a bag, and this year expects to go twice that — over 6,000 tons.

Two more New England old-timers who represent the epitome of organic nurserymen are Lewis Hill and J. Herbert Alexander. Up at Greensboro, Vermont, Lewis and Nancy Hill report a lot of new young homesteaders moving into the area, "practically 100 percent of them organic," and all creating quite a demand for everything their Hillcrest Nursery offers. "It's really quite unbelievable," Hill told me, speaking about the upswing in interest in fruits and vegetables. "Since we're the only nursery around here growing our own stock, a lot of people seek us out because they know the plants are hardy and raised organically." In business for 27 years, Hill — who often writes for OGF — recently taught a Vermont Community College class in organic gardening that was oversubscribed. "The demand for organic fertilizer is also very heavy," he said, "manure, rock phosphate, greensand, granite dust and a huge demand for companion plants."

J. Herbert Alexander, who'll be 81 when you read this, has been one of the country's outstanding blueberry breeders for over 60 years. Besides

hybridizing 271 varieties, many of them bigger, tastier and hardier berries, he's delved into French lilacs, daylilies, Egyptian onions, comfrey, rhubarb and a field full of other perennials. Folks drive to his nursery in Middleboro, Mass., from 40 miles around to "pick-your-own" from his tall blueberry bushes, bulging with ripe fruit. And he consistently sells plants in rising numbers both at the nursery and by mail-order.

Now working with his grandson Jack — also an accomplished nurseryman — Alexander says he's always been convinced you must grow plants properly, with natural, organic materials. "People are buying better quality," he said. "We're getting four times as many requests from gardeners who want to grow things healthfully." Over the past year, Alexander added, sales of edible plants have tripled. "The organic movement people are the backbone of the country's turn to better food production," he reflected. "They formulate the progressive idea for the rest of agriculture."

A number of other upstate N.E. companies are long-time organic boosters. At the Western Maine Forest Nursery in Fryeburg, Me., Steve Eastman reported, "Our response from OGF advertising has certainly increased. Personally, I think there's just generally a greater interest in organic practice — and fewer 'Doubting Thomases.'" At the Organic Nurseries in York, Me. — operating since 1940 — Al Theriault said there's a more positive feeling now. "Lots of folks even look us up because we're organic." He's sold a lot of fertilizer this season — phosphate rock, greensand, granite dust, bone meal, fish meal, cow manure — plus ladybugs and Stark Bros. fruit trees. And at Putney Nursery in Vermont, 23-year veteran Lawrence Bryant enthused, "It's always been an area where more people are already interested in organics." This season, he says, there's been a big jump in vegetables, along

with herbs, which "went simply wild in sales about two years back."

#### A SURPRISE AT HORSENECK

Unquestionably the most intriguing nursery we struck in all New England is that run by Joe and Sally Keith. Its idyllic setting against the jutting shoreline below Westport, Mass. — complete with a towering silo, quaint farm-style garden center, and an old dairy barn converted into a potting shed — are part of Horseneck Nursery's charm. But more than that, it's the people themselves, what they're doing, and what they stand for.

Joe Keith started five years ago on the old farm-turned-nursery. He looks, acts and believes in the role he fills well — a hard-working nurseryman anxious to help keep the area farms from being swallowed up by commercial developments. Toward that goal, Joe's been active with a local group, and both he and Mrs. K. have spearheaded the vicinity's fight against mosquito spraying. Sally's an Ambler (Pa.) College horticulture lass, and a capable garden-shop businesswoman. They've also tried getting neighbors and customers to use the milky-spore Japanese beetle disease to combat a heavy infestation this year. "We've 'Doom-ed' 10 acres of our land, and the beetles stop right at the border — it's unbelievable." In addition they do a lively trade with mantids, ladybugs and trichogramma wasps.

#### BAGASSE A BEST-SELLER

On the organic materials side, one of Keith's best-sellers is bagasse — a sugar cane waste that makes a rich mulch. "We use it for pony bedding, too," Sally said. "It makes great compost — and we sell plenty of that at \$10 a yard." Besides that they gather lots of the plentiful seaweed along the coast, and take all the straw bedding from a neighboring horse stud farm. "Old-timers around here also grind up their oyster and quahog shells," Joe



*Sally Keith waters plants outside Horseneck Nursery's rustic garden center, where New England neighbors in growing numbers now come for natural fertilizers and biological insect controls.*

*Besides keeping a constant eye on progress in his greenhouses, "Stan the Organic Man" Bulpitt has spearheaded city-waste composting in several Connecticut and New York communities.*



*Nurseryman-hybridist J. Herbert Alexander, a blueberry specialist for over 60 years, and grandson Jack check on fruit fly control idea — sticky compound on boards suspended in berry bushes.*

pointed out. "Organic fertilizers are just about all I sell." Included are cottonseed meal, dried blood, liquid seaweed and fish meal ("sells well all year round").

#### A WIDE-RANGING CLIENTELE

The Keiths' clients range all along Westport Harbor to colorful towns like Rehoboth, Little Compton (R.I.), Sakonnet Point, Tiverton — and on up to Fall River, New Bedford and even to Providence. In their own section, many are retired people on large estates, folks for whom they've been supplying a wide variety of shore-hardy ornamental and nut trees, strawberries, shrubs, beach plums. "We never sold vegetables until this year," drawled Joe, "but there's been such a call for it we added as many as possible, along with herbs like comfrey and tansy."

People are developing more health awareness, Joe Keith believes. They want quality in what they buy and grow. On his own 37 acres, this ambitious nurseryman-farmer plans to add another pond for irrigation, more livestock to accompany his sheep, steer and chickens, plus a windmill to provide power and conserve energy. Matter of fact, he's already using an old silage blower to shred mulch.

#### DEMAND INSECT-REPELLING HERBS

On across the bay we went, past landmarks like Newport, Jamestown and Kingston. At Wyoming, Rhode Island, we stopped at the neat Meadowbrook herb gardens operated by Heinz Grotzke. Actually, since he has a retail volume of 20,000 live plants per season right from his own fields, Heinz qualifies as nurseryman-specialist. This year, he reports, the weekend crowds of customers asked increasingly for insect-repelling herbs. An expert Biodynamic grower as well as an herbalist who processes herb teas successfully on a large scale, Grotzke has become active with several organic

and natural food groups. OGF is looking forward to coming articles by him on the Biodynamic concept and on growing herbs for income.

Back in Connecticut, we visited one of the newest and smallest — but decidedly most enthusiastic — nurseries of all. At Cheshire, we found Sunrise Organic Landscaping — along with Ed Moon and his family. After a long haul as a milkman, plus a part-time job with a Hamden nursery, Ed set out on his own last June. With a 10-ton truck, a rotary tiller (he's a Troy-Bilt owner-agent) and a T-shirt advertising his service, Moon has built up a following of homeowners who want organic methods used in planting their grounds, overcoming drainage and hardpan problems, etc. "Word of mouth got us so much business, we've just about kept up with it.

#### "PLUGS ORGANICS"

"Not only do I plug organics," exclaimed Ed, "almost every customer this spring told me that on his own." Moon said he sells quite a lot of Milorganite, peat humus and greensand. "We are just plain, hardworking, humble people," he added, "trying to put across an idea that the earth does not have to be ruined by improper farming and landscaping practices. We can help to show how the homeowner may plant his shrubs, trees, flowers and even his lawn organically, have better results and rest in the knowledge that he has done his part to help stop pollution and the destruction of the soil, from which all life springs."

There were others. In all, Ray and I looked in on nearly two dozen New England nurseries. We came away impressed by the stacks of organic fertilizers moving from them to gardens. By the big jump in vegetable, fruit and herb plant sales. By the concern and eagerness of gardeners coming to these centers. But most of all by the dedication and guidance of so many nurserymen today.