

# The Oak Hill Farmer

www.oakhillfarm.net  
*farming in balance with nature* February-March 2010

## Eco-Farm Conference

### Farmers Annual Think Tank in Pacific Grove

by Paul Wirtz

In January I attended the 30th annual Ecological Farming Conference in Pacific Groves' Asilomar. I have attended the conference 6 or 7 times in my 20+ years of farming in Sonoma Valley. The main conference is Thursday through Saturday with more intensive workshop options on Wednesday.

This year I chose to attend a Wednesday workshop entitled "The Business of Sustainability". That's a big title and a big topic these days. Most of the presenters admitted that "sustainable" is a rather difficult word to define in an ever-shifting world of economic and cultural changes. Often I heard farmers express feelings of success if they are able to just stay in the black and make small improvements. The economic downturn has affected us all. It's true we all need to eat every day, but choosing what one eats and where one buys those items is becoming more important than ever for small and family farms.

Sustainability encompasses quite a wide range of topics. From my perspective, I think most organic farms have figured out how to sustain their land in terms of growing their crops. I believe we've made big progress in knowing what it takes to build and maintain soil health without robbing the earth to create profits. This workshop didn't even touch on that issue. Instead it focused on issues of business structure, record keeping and market analysis. Other topics included fair labor practices, and maintaining mission statements and values. Yes, it was quite a day full. But there is no better place to honestly explore these topics than with a group of peers.

The rest of the conference was filled with some 60+ workshops and Plenary sessions. Of course, one is only able to attend 7 individual workshops, but it's still far too much information for most of us there. The Plenary sessions are designed to inspire and challenge the audience. The first night Francis Moore Lappe and Wes Jackson spoke eloquently to a hall full of about 1000 attendees. Both were happy to return to eco-farm, having spoken on previous occasions there. Wes Jackson continues his work to develop perennial grain crops, and Lappe is fighting for global food democracy and awareness through her writing.

Workshops for me included a double workshop with Neil Kinsey who is a world renowned soil scientist. His



practical approach to soil science highlights the major elements necessary to balance the soil, followed by close examination of the micronutrients to really bring the soil into its' highest potential (and ease) for the farm. His breadth of knowledge is invaluable.

Another very important issue on the horizon for all farms is the issue of food safety. After last years'

spinach/ e-coli outbreak, government and industry have been working to regain public trust. I think we all know that it's a gamble to eat foods shipped around the world, going through countless opportunities for compromise in quality, freshness, and safety. Unfortunately big Ag (organic included) is forcing us into a new area of concern surrounding the safety of our food and food-borne illnesses.

Wholesale buyers are putting higher standards on their growers to assure greater food safety. This should be a welcome improvement and in many ways it is. We all want cleaner safer food choices. The problem is that fears of litigation seem to be pushing this one way past a logical solution, back toward the sterile/chemical mindset of the past. Farmers are being required to give either very large setbacks from wild areas, or fence out any possible wildlife, in some cases with sheet plastic to exclude even frogs! What about the birds overhead? Will we soon be forced to grow everything in an environment where no creatures of any sort will ever be allowed access? Unfortunately the rules being established for large growers that might inadvertently cut up and harvest a frog in their mechanical picking machines, could be the same for smaller growers like Oak Hill Farm who are picking by hand. In our system there's little chance of ever picking up a frog, even though some times of the year there are many small frogs in the field. Furthermore, the chance of it being injured and staying in the product is even more remote. Hopefully the powers that be will rethink this one and come to some more reasonable middle ground. But as it stands we're being told to brace for much tighter restrictions, possibly even at the farmers market and direct sales like our Red Barn Store. We'll be watching this one. ✍

Paul's e-mail address is [pjwirtz@vom.com](mailto:pjwirtz@vom.com) if you have further questions or comments about the farm conference, or find it at: [eco-farm.com](http://eco-farm.com)

To begin with good news, Oak Hill Farm has recently become one of the first farm operations in Sonoma County to receive the Bee Friendly Farming Certification. So, the next time you come to the Red Barn, you'll see this logo.



This is of great significance. The program was started by Partners For Sustainable Pollination to recognize farms and other institutions that conduct their activities in a manner that creates or enhances habitat for pollinators, honey bees included (PFSP is a non-profit organization; [www.pfsp-bees.org](http://www.pfsp-bees.org)).

When it comes to producing vegetables and fruit while protecting our environment, Oak Hill Farm is a model and truly deserves to be singled out.

Back to the apiary: Inside the hives, the bee colonies are growing and building up their populations in preparation for the spring honey flow. The soft hum they produce is a comforting sound to the ears of beekeepers. There is life! On nice days, the bees fly out and head for flowers


and catkins to collect pollen and nectar. Pollen is their source of protein. Bees need a wide variety of pollens to obtain a balanced nutrition, and this diversity of pollen sources is abundant at Oak Hill Farm. Nectar is a sweet substance that is most often

produced by flowers. The forager bees collect and bring it back to their hives, where it is processed into honey. This will be the source of energy for the bees.

Spring is also the season of reproduction. Bee colonies reproduce and multiply through a process called swarming. When a colony swarms, a large proportion of its population leaves the hive with the old queen and goes in search of a new nesting site. Meanwhile, the balance of the colony raises a young queen that will permit the colony to stay alive and prosper. In fact, you might say that bee colonies have the potential to live forever, since they can replace their queens as well as all the individuals that comprise the hive. Unfortunately, swarming is a very dangerous procedure for bees in our modern en-

vironment: Nesting sites such as hollow trees have become rare, the exposure to poisons is too frequent, and the young queens have to mate successfully and return to their hives after multi-mile-long flights.

A swarm that is on the move looks like a cloud of bees. It is one of nature's true wonders. But soon the bees land on a branch or any available surface and form a compact mass of ten to thirty thousand bees. There they wait for the scout bees to return and guide them to a cavity that will become their new home.

If you happen to see one of these swarms, don't be afraid of it. And please do not disturb or harm it! Swarming bees are very gentle and are only looking for a home. You can save the bees by calling a beekeeper. He or she will come and collect the swarm, and will provide it with a hive (note: Fire stations, sheriff offices, police stations and many other agencies have lists of beekeepers who collect swarms. This list is also available on the Sonoma County Beekeepers' Association web site at (for the Sonoma Valley area): <http://www.sonomabees.org/swarm/index.html#ZONE2> 

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## What's happening at the Farm Now?


The greenhouses are filling with transplants; lettuce, chard, onions, brassicas, chicories, tomatoes and peppers. All anticipate their day in the sunshine. Planting happens year round in the greenhouses too. May through October the structures are covered with shadecloth to help shade and cool the houses. Many of the plants in the houses now such as onions, leeks, kales and chard were started in October and November. Planting for springtime is of course the most important and exciting time in the greenhouse. In early January we seed the earliest tomato varieties which will be transplanted in mid-late March with some field protection such as row covers or plastic. February we start Heirloom tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and the like.

This year we've added a lettuce and greens program to our greenhouse work with the intention of transplanting our first crops instead of direct sowing which has been the strategy in past years. We hope to have head lettuce like the Lit-

tle Gem, kales, radicchio and other crops even a little earlier.

Meanwhile we can stay out of the wet fields a little longer which is really good when winter weather is so unpredictable. Too often it happens that we get a beautiful dry spell and race to plant in Jan. and Feb. only to get heavy rains that damage young plants. Growing transplants will help ease the pressure of spring planting in this regard.

Speaking of rain, what is the impact of all the weather to the farm? Looking at the positive, the rain is replenishing the ground water, flushing the creeks and filling the water holding ponds on the property. Rain is certainly a long-term plus for the environment. But even with more than 10" that we measured in the past two weeks, the reservoir on the state hospital property is not full.

On the downside of the weather, seeds won't grow well in saturated soil. The crops may be a bit late because of all the rain, though it's really too soon to say. It is certainly no fun to work in raingear and the ground becomes mucky when it's this wet, but we are still grateful for the rain. 

## VEGETABLE OF THE MONTH

# Burdock Root *Articum lappa*

By Tricia O'Brien

I will admit right off the bat that I have never cooked with burdock root. Its uncommon appearance in the produce section or at farmer's markets, is probably one reason. The second reason may be burdock's appearance. It's an ugly, hairy, brown root. Not the first item you would put down on your grocery list for Thanksgiving dinner. However, I have tried other not-so-beautiful-looking roots and tubers, including: lotus root, taro root, Jerusalem artichokes, ginger, turmeric root, and others. So, why not try Burdock Root? It seemed that we had never been properly introduced.

Burdock is a member of the thistle family. Oak Hill has been growing it for two years now. Its seed is planted in the fields mid-summer for a late fall harvest. The leaves are huge, like an green elephant ear. Burdock is biennial, meaning it must grow for two years before flowering and setting seed. We harvest the deep roots in the first year.

The Japanese call it gobo. They traditionally pickle it in brine and use it in sushi, stir-fries or fried with a tempura batter. In China (ngau pong), it is not used in cooking as much as herbal remedies. There it is prized for its health



and medicinal uses with health assisting qualities, such as, detoxifying the kidneys and bladder while strengthening the urinary system. The oil of the plant helps to promote circulation through the skin. As a tea it can also be a strengthener of respiratory conditions. Sounds good to me.

Now that I am properly introduced to burdock, I have quickly become a fan of its crunchy nature. Burdock's taste is somewhat neutral and tends to take on the flavor of ingredients with which it is cooked. It has the texture of ginger and but lacks the zest or heat. Like most root vegetables, the vitamins are in the skin and burdock root is no different. When cooking with it, clean very well, put into water with a little lemon juice to keep it from darkening.

Try burdock in this delicious stew or shred it raw into a marinated salad. You will be inspired to cook with it and find it to be a healthy delicious root to add to your winter menus. Burdock is available at the Oak Hill Farm booth at the Friday Farmers' Market in Sonoma near the Depot, from 9-noon.

*Tricia O'Brien has been a caterer in the Bay Area for over 20 years. She lives in Glen Ellen with her husband and two cats. You can email her directly at [tobcaters@aol.com](mailto:tobcaters@aol.com) or view complete recipes at [www.cafetrix.blogspot.com](http://www.cafetrix.blogspot.com).*

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## Braised Root Vegetables' with Red Wine Sauce\*

### The Red Wine Sauce:

1/3 c. dried porcini mushrooms  
1 T. olive oil  
1 large onion, diced  
1 large carrot, diced  
5 mushrooms or mushroom trimmings, parsnips tips and cores, from veggies below (to add flavor to wine sauce)  
4 garlic cloves mashed  
Aromatics: 2 thyme sprigs and 1 bay leaf  
Salt and pepper to taste  
2 T. flour  
2 c. wine, preferably Merlot  
1 T. butter

### The Vegetables:

About 5" of burdock root  
14 yellow pearl onions, peeled  
2 md. parsnips, quartered lengthwise  
3 md. carrots, quartered lengthwise  
6 small mushrooms, halved  
4 small Jerusalem artichokes, quartered (optional)  
1 T. olive oil  
2 T. butter  
salt and pepper to taste  
Aromatics: thyme and bay

Cover the porcini mushrooms with 2 cups boiling water and let rest while absorbing the liquid, for about 30 minutes. Heat the oil in a wide soup pot. Add the vegetables, garlic and aromatics. Cook over medium-high heat stirring occasionally, until vegetables are well browned, about 20 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Stir in the flour and then pour in the wine plus the dried mushrooms and their liquid. Vigorously scrape the bottom of the pot to work the juices into the sauce, then lower heat and simmer covered for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. Strain the vegetables and return the liquid to the pan and simmer until reduced to 2 1/2 c, about 15-20 minutes. Season to taste, and whisk in the butter. Add a tablespoon of sugar if it is too acidic. Set aside. (Please note: you can make this a day or two in advance)

Cut the burdock, on the diagonal, into 1/4" discs. Cut the carrot and parsnip quarters into 1 inch lengths. Slice the ends off the onions, using a paper towel, wipe off the paper skins. Sauté the whole onions briefly in the olive oil and butter, then add the Jerusalem artichokes (if using), and burdock root and sauté until onions are browned, approximately 15 minutes. Then add the parsnips, carrots and mushrooms and the aromatic herbs. Sauté for another 20 minutes. When the wine sauce is reduced, add the vegetables to the sauce and let simmer for about 40 minutes. Stir occasionally so the vegetables do not stick to the bottom of the pan. When the vegetables are simmered long enough in the wine sauce, they will be easily pierced with a sharp knife. Serve stew on top of potato and celeriac puree alongside green lentils for a beautiful and healthy winter dinner.

\*This recipe is inspired by Deborah Madison's *Local Flavors*. Serves 4-6

# Growing Little Farmers – in School Gardens

by Arden Bucklin-Sporer


The school garden movement has persisted in this country for over a century, providing agricultural education and outdoor learning to thousands of California students. According to the California School Garden Network ([www.csgn.org](http://www.csgn.org)), California presently has over 3,800 public school gardens and happily, that number continues to grow.

Schoolyard gardens are outside classrooms where curriculum quite literally comes alive. Hands-on learning and place-based environmental education is gaining a foothold in California's Education Content Standards, and school gardens are logical places to teach about the ecosystems that we are all a part of. Gardens also help students make connections to food we grow and eat. Simply stated, students will eat what they grow, and students of all ages universally enjoy the process of planting, tending, harvesting and cooking crops. Parents of elementary students are surprised by reports of their children eating vegetables they have had no luck serving at home. Inexpensive to build and maintain, school gardens are the quintessential win-win endeavor.

The Bay Area is rich with school gardens as evidenced by the regional networks springing up to support them.

The School Garden Network ([www.schoolgardens.org](http://www.schoolgardens.org)) in Sonoma supports North Bay projects, and the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance ([www.sfgreenschools.org](http://www.sfgreenschools.org)) works with 70 urban school garden projects in the San Francisco Unified School District. We see parallel evolution of these networks in Texas, Massachusetts, and Oregon.

Oak Hill Farm has begun to explore school visits to the farm, a logical extension from the school garden. The nearby Flowery School has visited several times and a 3rd grade class of urban students from San Francisco made a memorable visit. These students were particularly impressed with horse poop and the remarkable sweetness of freshly dug carrots.

Oak Hill management is looking at ways to integrate an elementary school component, which enrich the students and no doubt the farm as well. 

*Arden Bucklin-Sporer is Executive Director of the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance and co-author of Timber Press's upcoming How to Grow a School Garden: An Essential Guide for Parents and Teachers. She is also Anne Teller's daughter.*



**ROWS OF FAVA BEANS.** The weeds between the rows have been mowed, which keeps them from competing with the beans and allows them to serve as foot traffic aisles.

## What's Available at the Farmer's Market?

**SALAD GREENS** Salad Mix, Dandelion, Escarole, Radicchio, Spinach and Treviso

**VEGETABLES** Red Beets, Broccoli de Ciccio, Brussel Sprouts, Burdock, Red and Green Cabbage, Carrots, Celery Root, Collard, Kale, Kohlrabi, Leeks, Onions, Parsnips, Radish, Rutabaga, Shallots and Winter Squash

**FLOWERS** Daffodils, Tulips, Quince, Peach and Almond Branches (soon)

## The Oak Hill Farmer

P.O. Box 1989 ♦ Glen Ellen, CA 95442  
(707) 996-6643 ♦ Fax: (707) 935-6612  
[www.oakhillfarm.net](http://www.oakhillfarm.net)  
e-mail: [candied@vom.com](mailto:candied@vom.com)

Candi Edmondson, **COORDINATOR**

Anne Teller, **ADVISOR**

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Arden Bucklin-Sporer, Serge Labesque, Tricia O'Brien, and Paul Wirtz

You can find Oak Hill Farm produce on the menu at the following local restaurants:  
Cafe LaHaye ♦ Depot Hotel ♦ El Dorado Kitchen ♦ Epicurean Connection ♦ Estate in Sonoma ♦ fig cafe ♦ girl and the fig ♦ Grindstone Bakery ♦ Harvest Moon Cafe ♦ Kenwood Restaurant ♦ La Salette ♦ The Lodge at Sonoma ♦ Saffron ♦ Westerbeke Ranch ♦ Wild Thyme Catering