

Organic food is growing as a popular choice for customers

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NEW CITY — You'd expect to see boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables if you were at the grocery or farmer's market.

But sitting alongside screwdrivers, weed trimmers and bicycles in the middle of a garage?

That's the sight every two weeks at the home of Lisa Mindich, a member of the Purple Dragon Co-op, which specializes in home delivery of organic produce.

Members belong to "pods," which typically consist of 15 families who trade off responsibilities, including hosting a biweekly delivery and dividing the food into equal shares.

It was up to Jenny Pirc and Suzanne Moskovitz to portion out the food on a recent Thursday morning. The sun and the temperature were both high, but the women worked efficiently under cover of the shady garage.

Each unpacked boxes of produce — strawberries, blueberries, peaches and parsley, among other fresh offerings — then separated the contents into brown paper bags lined up on the floor.

"This is how nature intended it completely," Pirc said.

Pirc is a 15-year member of the co-op, which has pods around Rockland and Westchester counties and in northern New Jersey.

The co-op is one of several places in the region where residents can turn to purchase organic food — a commodity that is increasing in popularity annually.

In 1997, consumers spent about \$3.6 billion on organic food, according to a market survey conducted by the Nutrition Business Journal for the Organic Trade Association.

By 2005, consumer spending on organic food had soared to nearly \$14 billion, an increase of nearly 285 percent.

In 1997, organic food purchases accounted for about 0.81 percent of total food sales; in 2005, those purchases accounted for 2.48 percent, according to the survey.

Pirc and Moskovitz both said they turned to organic food after their children were born.

But both appreciated their decision more as they came to understand the wider implications of it, the women said.

Pirc, who lives in Airmont, is a registered nurse who runs her own music promotion company. She left the co-op for a while, only to return.

"I started when my kids were newborns," Pirc said. "It was strictly for that. Then when I realized the quality of the food and the idea of supporting local farmers, it brought me back."

Food that bears the label "organic" has met specific federal standards, said Joan Schaffer, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 and required the USDA to develop national standards for organically produced agricultural products to assure

What does 'organic' mean?

Since 2002, strict federal rules have governed the labeling of organic products, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said.

- Products are labeled depending on the amount of organic ingredients, including "100 percent organic" and "organic," which must consist of at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients. Food falling into these categories can display the "USDA Organic" seal.

- Processed products containing at least 70 percent organic ingredients can use the phrase "made with organic ingredients."

- Processed products that contain less than 70 percent cannot use the term "organic" other than to identify the specific ingredients that are organically produced in the ingredients' statement on the package.

consumers of a uniform standard. Such products originate from farms or handling operations certified by a state or private entity accredited by the USDA.

Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides; without fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewer sludge; without bioengineering; and

without ionizing radiation, the USDA said.

Instead, organic farming systems rely on ecologically based practices, including cultural and biological pest management, the USDA said.

The popularity of organic food is due both to increased consumer demand and to wider availability, experts said.

In fact, by 2000, for the first time, more organic food was bought in conventional grocery stores than in any other venue, the USDA said.

Hungry Hollow Co-op in Chestnut Ridge, formed as a buying club in 1973, is now a store offering a wide variety of organic products, from frozen selections to fresh produce.

But consumers can also opt to purchase organic food at Whole Foods Market in White Plains, Stew Leonard's in Yonkers and from an assortment of farmers markets in the region.

Part of the reason for the growth has been the hard work of organic farmers, said Barbara Haumann, a spokeswoman for the Organic Trade Association. They have spent years honing techniques to improve organic farming methods.

"It's not just growing by neglect," said Barbara Haumann, a spokeswoman for the OTA. "It's really a complex management system."

Some in the industry feel the organic food market may be at a tipping point, and that what was once perceived as the food of hippies has now become all but mainstream, she said.

Nowadays, organic food, including meat, dairy, even wine, is readily available in many areas. Coffee has

gone organic as well, whether you're buying a cup of fresh-brewed at Starbucks or a bag of beans at ShopRite.

"All of a sudden, mainstream people are becoming more aware of it," Haumann said.

Diane Goding hosts a Purple Dragon pod at her home in Yorktown Heights. She got involved in the Glen Ridge, N.J.-based co-op six years ago after her daughters developed an allergy to the pesticides on the fruits and vegetables she was buying at a grocery store.

She searched for organic food co-ops, but none were close to her home, leading her to seek home delivery of such food.

Goding, like other co-op members, said the organic produce tasted better than conventionally grown produce and was healthier.

"Financially, I would rather pay an extra dollar for a piece of fruit in my 30s or 40s than pay \$79 a pill for hypertension in my 60s or 70s," Goding said.

The USDA does not claim that organic food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food, only that organic food differs in the way it is grown, handled and processed.

Maddy Malsa, another Airmont resident who is a registered nurse at Helen Hayes Hospital, has been a co-op member for 12 years. She said her participation with the co-op has opened up a wider window to the fruits and vegetables available to her.

"I probably would have never had Swiss chard," Malsa said. "Now it's a staple in our house."

She's eaten persimmon and many different types of squashes.

"If I was choosing it off the shelf, I'd probably buy broccoli and green beans all the time," Malsa said.

Goding said some of the food is a mystery when it arrives.

"I get it and look at it and think, 'My God, what is this? I don't know what it is, and I don't know how to cook it.' "

Goding's exotics have included rhubarb, star fruit and mangoes.

Malsa also said she felt that she was supporting organic farmers by purchasing the food they grow.

"It feels good to me," Malsa said. "It feels like I'm helping the world by supporting the organic farmers."

More U.S. farmers are also choosing to go organic, according to statistics from the USDA's Economic Research Service.

In 1993, the U.S. had about 465,000 acres of certified organic cropland, but by 2003, that had grown to about 1.4 million acres.

Pirc said living an organic lifestyle was a personal choice.

"I think it's a values kind of thing," Pirc said. "If you have to talk them into it, they're not really the type of people who would do it."

Yet, with so many people turning toward organic — Wal-Mart recently announced it would soon start selling organic food — some wonder about the food's future.

"I think it will drive prices up," Malsa said. "I'm not sure what else could happen, but I am concerned."