

Growing nature's way

Going organic, chemical-free boon for competitive small farms

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Cherie Campbell would drive 50 miles just for the taste of a sweet, juicy orange.

As long as it's organically grown.

The 31-year-old Pine Mountain Club resident is always on the lookout for fruits and vegetables grown without chemical pesticides and herbicides. Campbell discovered organic produce about six years ago when she lived in Los Angeles, where organic foods are commonplace. But going organic in Kern County, she said, takes some doing.

"You can find some in a few grocery stores and we have a new farmers' market in Frazier Park that sells some organic produce," she said. "If that doesn't last I will drive to farmers' markets in Bakersfield or Santa Clarita."

Campbell is willing to go the extra mile for organic fruits and veggies, foods she believes are healthier and better-tasting alternatives to those

produced by conventional farming methods. But organic farming is struggling to find a foothold in Kern County, where a mere 27 organic growers are registered with the agricultural commissioner's office.

A few growers do sell their produce

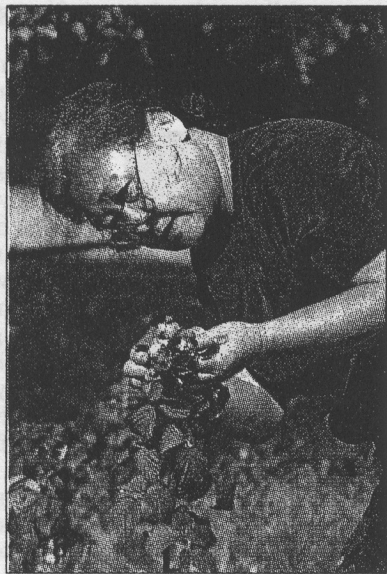
at local grocery stores and farmers' markets, but most ship to niche markets throughout the United States.

Johna Chung, patriarch of the family-run Johna's Orchard in Tehachapi, made the leap from conventional to organic farming in 1996. The family now grows about 80 acres of organic apples. David Chung, Johna's son and company sales director, said it took three years for the farm to complete the transition.

"It takes that long to clean the whole system," the 39-year-old Chung said. "Once a year our soil is tested. If investigators find even a trace of chemicals, we would lose our certification for three years."

The Chungs have worked their

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Soonjo Chung picks raspberries on the property in Tehachapi where they organically grow several varieties of apples.

Organic farm classifications

Registered

Local growers planning to market any products as organic must submit application with the California Department of Food and Agriculture through office of the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner.

Local ag officials conduct a pesticide use record search going back three years. If no prohibited chemicals are found, a report to that effect is included with the grower's final state application.

Certified

As of Oct. 21, organic growers must be certified if their gross sales exceed \$5,000. Growers interested in certification must contact an accredited certifying organization.

Agents of the certifying organization conduct in-depth investigations of applicant's farm and farming practices. Once a grower is found chemical-free and certified, he may market his produce as such.

A list of certifying organizations can be found on the State Organic Program Web site at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/>

