

ORGANIC: Weed control relies on mowers, strong backs

Continued from E1

Tehachapi farm for 24 years. Organic produce, they discovered, is more expensive to grow than conventionally farmed produce, but is ideal for small farms struggling to compete with large conventional producers. The organic market is small but growing steadily and appeals to those who don't mind paying higher prices for chemical-free food.

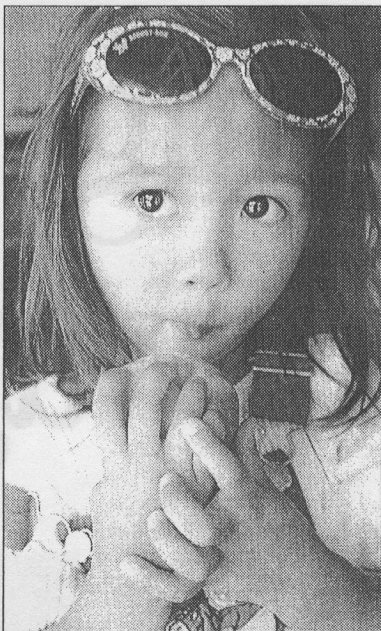
"There's a huge market for organic fruit in places like Beverly Hills and Hollywood where they're a bit more health-conscious," David Chung said.

The Chungs grow about eight varieties of apples, including Fuji, Gala, Granny Smith and Red and Golden Delicious. What isn't shipped is sold fresh by the pound — or as apple butter, apple cider and applesauce — at their orchard store on Highline Road.

Kern's organic growers must register with the California Department of Food and Agriculture through the local agricultural commissioner's office. There are two classifications of organic farms — registered and certified. Registered producers are considered entry level until the commissioner's office completes a record search for prohibited chemicals. If no chemicals are found, the grower may then apply for certification. Once the grower passes one or more in-depth on-site investigations and is subsequently certified organic, he may market his produce as such.

Growing produce without the aide of chemical pesticides or herbicides is an ongoing challenge for organic producers, but it can be done. Larry Davis, a Kern County grower for 42 years, began producing organic stone fruit on his McFarland farm in the mid-'80s and was co-founder of the Kern County chapter of California Certified Organic Farmers. Davis said pests and weeds can be controlled naturally, but it isn't quick, easy or cheap.

"I plant a fast-growing cover crop of clover for fertilizer," Davis said. "We



Abbey Williams, 3, eats one of the organic apples on her grandfather's apple orchard in Tehachapi.

mow it a couple of times and the rotting clover produces its own nitrogen and other organic nutrients. I don't even use compost."

Some growers, he said, prefer to fertilize crops with composted chick-

When pest-control applications are necessary, growers sometimes cook up their own natural concoctions or buy state-approved commercial brands, depending on the pest. The codling moth was a problem in Chung's orchard until he applied the commercially produced pheromone of a female codling moth to his trees.

"We put it on the trees and it distracts the male moths," David Chung said. "They don't mate with the females. They just sit on the tree where the pheromone is until they die."

Weed control is one of the most costly aspects of organic farming. Without herbicides, growers must rely on border mowers, weed whippers, hoes and strong backs.

"Weed control is high labor," Davis said. "Anything to do that's high labor is expensive."

Davis, who grows almond trees using conventional farming methods, said there is little danger in eating any fruits or vegetables produced locally because Kern County farmers who use chemical fertilizers and pesticides do so sparingly and responsibly. That may be one reason, he said, why local folks aren't as interested in organically produced food.

"People who live around farming areas know farmers are responsible, but big city folks may not think that," Davis said. "I was a conventional grower originally, but lost money because I wasn't big enough or early enough. I'm in organic because there really isn't a place for the small grower in fruit production."

For those who are allergic or sensitive to chemicals or, like Campbell, simply find naturally grown foods

healthier and better-tasting, organic is the only way to go. Campbell hopes to see the organic trend catch on in Kern County.

"We tend to approach mealtime without any consideration with what brought that food to our table," she said. "I want to support growers who are supporting healthier lifestyles."



A customer at Johna's Orchard in Tehachapi shows her support for organic farmers on her vehicle's bumper sticker.

en or cow manure.

Pest control is another issue. The best way to beat the bugs, Davis said, is by planting early — before rising temperatures entice heat-loving pests to the crops.

"I grow very early crops," he said. "I start harvesting peaches and cherries about the first of May and I'm done by June 1."