

Replanting the Gardens of Eagan

BY ELLEN MICHEL

As the first certified-organic retailer in Minnesota, Wedge Co-op has long been known for its commitment to organic crop production and retail handling systems. Driven by a mission that includes the intent to “forge a deepening bond between sustainable local producers and the co-op community,” the Wedge is recognized as a longstanding advocate for organic food standards, practices, and education.

The Wedge also has a history of expanding the goods and services available to its members through the diversification of its business operations. Today, Wedge Co-op is the engine behind several pioneering enterprises:

- a successful retail location, currently planning expansion;
- Co-op Partners Warehouse, a certified-organic food distributor;
- Gardens of Eagan (GOE) farm; and
- Organic Field School, a nonprofit business incubator for farms.

Charged with overseeing the integration of these operations, Josh Resnik has been CEO of the co-op since December 2012. “One of the exciting things about all of this is that we are helping make ‘farm to fork’ a reality for growers and shoppers every step of the way, not just at the Wedge but at other co-ops, too,” Resnik says. “That’s the challenge—and the opportunity.”

Resnik came to the Wedge after an undergraduate education in Northfield, Minn., followed by business school at Harvard. A career in food marketing at General Mills coincided with his becoming a passionate Wedge shopper. Prior to assuming his role at the Wedge, Resnik was CEO of Wild Idea Buffalo, working to restore the biodiversity of native grasslands in South Dakota through a food business featuring free-roaming, humanely harvested bison.

Growing soil, plants, and farmers

Now Resnik is on the road to Northfield again, home of the newest location for Gardens of Eagan. It’s the end of April in Minnesota, and a late spring blizzard hit just the night before. The sun is shining, but the heavy new snow means there will be no plowing of fields today. Tractors, repurposed golf carts, and delivery vans stand idle in a large barn and machine shop. Purchased in early 2012, the new farm



Greenhouse Manager Eric Green and Gardens of Eagan Manager Linda Halley.

Incubator farms receive assistance regarding their farmland, equipment, and facility needs while developing their customer base, product line, and capital resources.

also includes office space, a kitchen, and a manager’s residence.

As we make our way up the last stretch of road, Resnik points out the boundaries of the farm. Efforts are underway to transition these fields—over 120 acres—to certified-organic status, a process that takes 36 months. Some acres have been planted with cover crops, while others will grow transitional produce in compliance with the organic-certification process. Trees have been planted on the perimeter of the farm to serve as a windbreak and buffer zone for the crops, all part of the work of preserving and enhancing the land’s resources.

Our plan on this snowy spring morning is to deliver a Wedge lunch to the farm’s manager, Linda Halley, tour the farm’s buildings, and talk



Gardens of Eagan’s plant starts on sale at Wedge Co-op.

about its future. Linda greets us in cold-weather garb, then introduces Lidia Dunge, a former GOE harvest team member who moved to the United States from Brazil. Dunge explains that she is now the lead grower at Fazenda Boa Terra, an organic farming enterprise she runs with her husband, John Middleton, who is the GOE operations and field manager. Fazenda Boa Terra (“farm of the good earth”) is one of three Organic Field School incubator projects.

Incubator farms are closely supported by GOE. They receive practical advice and assistance regarding their farmland, equipment, and facility needs while they work on developing their customer base, product line, and capital resources. Organic Field School farmers also learn how to broker their own product.

Says Halley, “We are growing soil, plants, and farmers at Gardens of Eagan.”

Extending the season and the product line

Both Halley and the Wedge board of directors recognized that GOE needed to extend its season and expand its offerings. The slightly



PHOTOS BY ELLEN MICHEL



PHOTO BY JESSICA PIERCE

Top: Multicolored seedlings inside a Gardens of Eagan greenhouse in April. Center: Seedlings ready for planting in May. Right: A small sample of the summer harvest.

smaller Farmington location, where the Wedge operated GOE for five years, no longer seemed ideal.

On this particular day, the contrast between a fresh foot of snow and the explosion of spring inside the greenhouses is extraordinary—and a persuasive demonstration of why all Northern farms could use an additional protected environment. Halley explains that she found the Northfield farm when searching for a site that would give Gardens of Eagan more land as well as immediately usable and fully functioning greenhouses.

Many varied seedlings are under cultivation in 11 greenhouse bays, a sign of the ambitious production already underway on the new farm. “Years ago, when I started in this business, baby greens were an unknown and exotic product,” Halley explains. “We’ve come a long way since then, and while customers still want those greens, they also know more about growing their own gardens. There’s a huge market now for organic seedlings.”

“Dirt First” is the GOE motto, indicating the importance of healthy soil, the foundation of organic farming. A wheelbarrow full of compost bears that message in a new potting shed loaded with freshly filled seed trays. Members of the harvest team are working at full pitch: extending the season has clearly created more jobs. Later, the team will gather in the kitchen for a potluck midday meal.

The certified-organic GOE greenhouses exude the rich and humid smells of spring: what’s not present is the toxic mix of chemical smells found in a conventional greenhouse. Seedlings in shades of green and



PHOTO BY JESSICA PIERCE

purple, all of them certified organic, stretch up from their tiny pots. Eventually, they may be transplanted into larger containers, then sold in one of three stages of development, depending on their destination. Once the seedlings are sold, the greenhouses will be converted to vegetable production, offering a protected growing space into early winter.

Halley acknowledges the contradiction between the Gardens of Eagan name and the farm’s current location. “Of course, the most recent GOE farm, owned by Martin and Atina Diffley and leased and managed by the Wedge since 2008, had already relocated to Farmington, 20 miles away from Eagan,” Halley explains. “Sometimes our name is even confused with the organic product lines offered by Eden Organics or Gardens of Eatin’” ▶

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◀ The Wedge purchased the Gardens of Eagan equipment and name, signing a rental contract in 2007, with an option to purchase the property. In 2008, the Diffley land officially became a business venture of Wedge Co-op, managed by Halley. Today, the Diffleys continue to own the Farmington land, and Atina Diffley gives workshops across the country on marketing, post-harvest handling, and food safety for vegetable growers.

Atina Diffley has told the compelling story of successive Diffley farms, including the battle won against a proposed oil pipeline, in her book, *Turn Here Sweet Corn*. “Thanks to the Diffleys and their long partnership with the Wedge,” says Halley, “Gardens of Eagan is recognized by customers for its 35-year history. It’s synonymous with quality organic cultivation.”

Manager and farm transitions

In one greenhouse bay, Halley points out a protected cluster of tomatoes that have undergone a delicate grafting process. These plants need frequent monitoring and attention. Given the sophistication of its operation, the farm is able to graft and cultivate particular organic garden starts with special characteristics for hardiness or flavor.

Some seedlings will soon be shipped to the Co-op Partners Warehouse in St. Paul, and from there to co-ops and other retailers. Other seedlings are custom starts for organic farmers who might not have greenhouse capacity. At the store in Minneapolis, the Wedge will erect a temporary garden center under a tent in a parking lot, with garden starts also for sale in the store’s produce section.

A 20-year veteran of farm management in both Wisconsin and California and the 2003 MOSES Organic Farmer of the Year, Halley has a long history as an organic leader. After a childhood on a farm in Southeastern Wisconsin, she became a teacher, followed by becoming co-owner of Harmony Valley Farm in Viroqua, Wis. At Harmony Valley, she developed a pioneering CSA (community-supported agriculture) program, a model of best practices for other, emerging CSAs. Today, GOE utilizes another of her innovations: a Farmers Market CSA Card that can be used at two farmstands where GOE produce is sold, allowing customers both to support the farm by paying it forward and to select the produce they prefer.

Halley eventually left Harmony Valley to become general manager of the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens, a nonprofit institute in Santa Barbara, the oldest organic farm in California. The educational and administrative dimensions of that position provided a natural segue to her current role as

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manager of Gardens of Eagan, a farm owned by nearly 16,000 members of Wedge Co-op. Now she is charged with running a profitable business operation, whatever the weather or political climate for organics.

Halley is also a mentor to the next generation of farmers, especially through the Wedge's educational nonprofit, the Organic Field School. "The co-op has a role to play in educating shoppers, but also in making sure we continue to grow farmers who understand the importance of organics. People are very concerned right now about GMOs, and they probably know that certified-organic produce is GMO-free. For this and other reasons, I happen to think the organic standard is more important than ever. If the co-op can serve as an example of how to do this—how to own and operate a successful organic farm—we will have a very positive impact."

Both Resnik and Halley recognize that the new farm offers yet another opportunity: to demonstrate exactly what is involved when a farm transitions to organic production.

"Many growers feel they can't afford to make the transition to organic certification, even though they might want to," Halley notes. "Thanks to the greenhouses and our ability to expand our business with starts and seedlings, we have a source of income that gives us time to focus on bringing the rest of the farm into organic cultivation. We can go through that transitional process—composting, rotating crops, creating better soil, planting conservation shelterbelts. We can also educate shoppers about transitional produce, selling most of it directly until it meets the organic standard.

"We're the largest farm in the vicinity that's transitioning to organic. That opens the possibility for others to follow. We see it as another way we can meet our outreach goals while collaborating with the Organic Field School."

Fast forward: height of summer

When I catch up with Halley again, months later, it's near the peak of the harvest season. Despite the very late spring planting, field crops at the farm are bountiful. The sweet, heavy aroma of corn pollen hangs in the air. Bins of watermelon are mounded in the packing shed, and the first tomatoes are turning red. An annual farm open house is planned for mid-August.

"Thanks to the new facility, we met our goal to double our starter plant sales," Halley reports. "Several greenhouses are bursting with aromatic herbs and containers of summer squash. Our transitional produce from the new farm is beautiful, too. While we scaled back on the amount planted, it is selling well."

Still, the primary task for most of the farmland is building up a vital soil ecology under a thick mat of clover cover crop. "Dirt first" takes time.

"In the end, only 30 acres were planted to cash crops this year—15 acres by Gardens of Eagan and 15 by the incubator farmers," Halley says. "We look forward to completing the transition process and increasing that number in the future, to ensure the co-ops and our other customers a continuously reliable source for high quality organic products." ■

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