

Maria Rodale Helps Organic Farmers Succeed

by Randy Kambic

Author, gardener and corporate executive Maria Rodale continues to add luster to an unparalleled family commitment to organic food, sustainability and healthy living covering three-quarters of a century. As CEO and chairman of Rodale Inc., she oversees the publishing of books (*An Inconvenient Truth*; *The South Beach Diet*; *Eat This, Not That!*), magazines (*Women's Health*, *Men's Health*, *Prevention* and *Organic Gardening*) and naturally healthy living websites.

Her grandfather, J. I. Rodale, pioneered the American organic movement in 1942 by launching *Organic Farming and Gardening* magazine. In 1947, he founded the Soil and Health Association, which later became the Rodale Institute, a nonprofit educational and advocacy organization, of which Maria is a board member. The influence of her 2011 book *Organic Manifesto: How Organic Farming Can Heal Our Planet, Feed the World, and Keep Us Safe* remains strong.

What is the status of the organic farming industry?

As a whole, it has seen great growth, in large part due to increasing demand resulting from consumer awareness. In 2015, organic was a \$43 billion industry in the U.S., with Millennial householders leading the way. Still, only 5 percent of all food consumed in the U.S. is organic [produce 13 percent], while less than 1 percent of our farmland is certified organic, which



spurs imports. So the opportunity to help encourage new organic farmers and transition conventional farmers is significant. The Rodale Institute invests as much time on education and outreach as on research to help organic farmers be profitable.

How else does the Institute help the industry?

We conduct cutting-edge research in organic agriculture to study and test natural strategies to combat pests, diseases and weeds. Growing organic isn't solely about what you don't do, such as using pesticides and genetically modified seeds. It also proactively focuses on benefiting soil health by using compost, cover crops, crop rotations and reduced tillage. As we refine these "regenerative agriculture" methods, we share them with farmers so they can increase their productivity and success.

We are expanding our research in nutrient density. The Institute works to understand the difference in nutrient levels, such as proteins, vitamins and minerals, in organic and conventional foods and how farmers can grow nutrient-packed food.

What new programs or initiatives are particularly exciting?

Launched in 1981, our Farming Systems Trial is the longest-running North American research project comparing organic versus conventional grains such as corn and soybeans; it has allowed us to

compare yields, water and energy use, soil organic matter, nutrient density, profitability and other factors. In 2016, we introduced our Vegetable Systems Trial, a side-by-side comparison for organic versus conventional produce. We expect organic management practices that improve soil health can enhance nutrient density in vegetables and so benefit farmers' lives and eating habits worldwide.

In 2016, we launched the Organic Farmers Association (*OrganicFarmersAssociation.org*), creating a valuable information exchange and unified voice for domestic certified organic producers. This national membership organization focuses on policy issues, including the Farm Bill, subsidy programs, animal welfare standards and contamination from conventional farm fields.

Can the public provide input to the 2018 Farm Bill?

President Trump's proposed "skinny" budget seeks to gut many federal programs, including those designed to protect the environment, so we need to urge elected representatives to stand up for organic farmers as the new bill develops. Historically, heavily funded commodity crop interests fight against assistance programs that encourage low-income people to buy healthy foods.

Organic agriculture made strides in the 2014 Farm Bill, which provided increased support for the U.S. Department

of Agriculture's National Organic Program, crop insurance, organic research and organic certification cost-sharing programs. To help meet surging demand for organics, it's important to support initiatives like the Conservation Reserve and Transition Initiatives programs that provide resources for farmers to move from synthetic chemical farming to organic methods.

Besides healthier food, what other benefits of organic farming have convinced late adopters to convert?

Healthy soil, full of billions of beneficial microorganisms, is a major by-product of regenerative organic farming. Organic farming creates diverse, healthy ecosystems that protect wildlife. However, any agricultural model that's fixated on yields at the expense of soil health will incur a steep price as those farms won't remain productive for future generations.

Regenerative organic farming facilitates storage of carbon in the ground, making it integral to addressing the climate crisis. *Organic Manifesto* makes the case plain; to optimize your own and the planet's health—buy, grow and eat organic food.

Randy Kambic is a freelance writer and editor in Estero, FL, and regular contributor to Natural Awakenings.
