THIS ISSUE IN FOUR SECTIONS | CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY | **FRIDAY, JAN 20, 2006** | VOLUME 34, NUMBER 17

CHICAGO READER

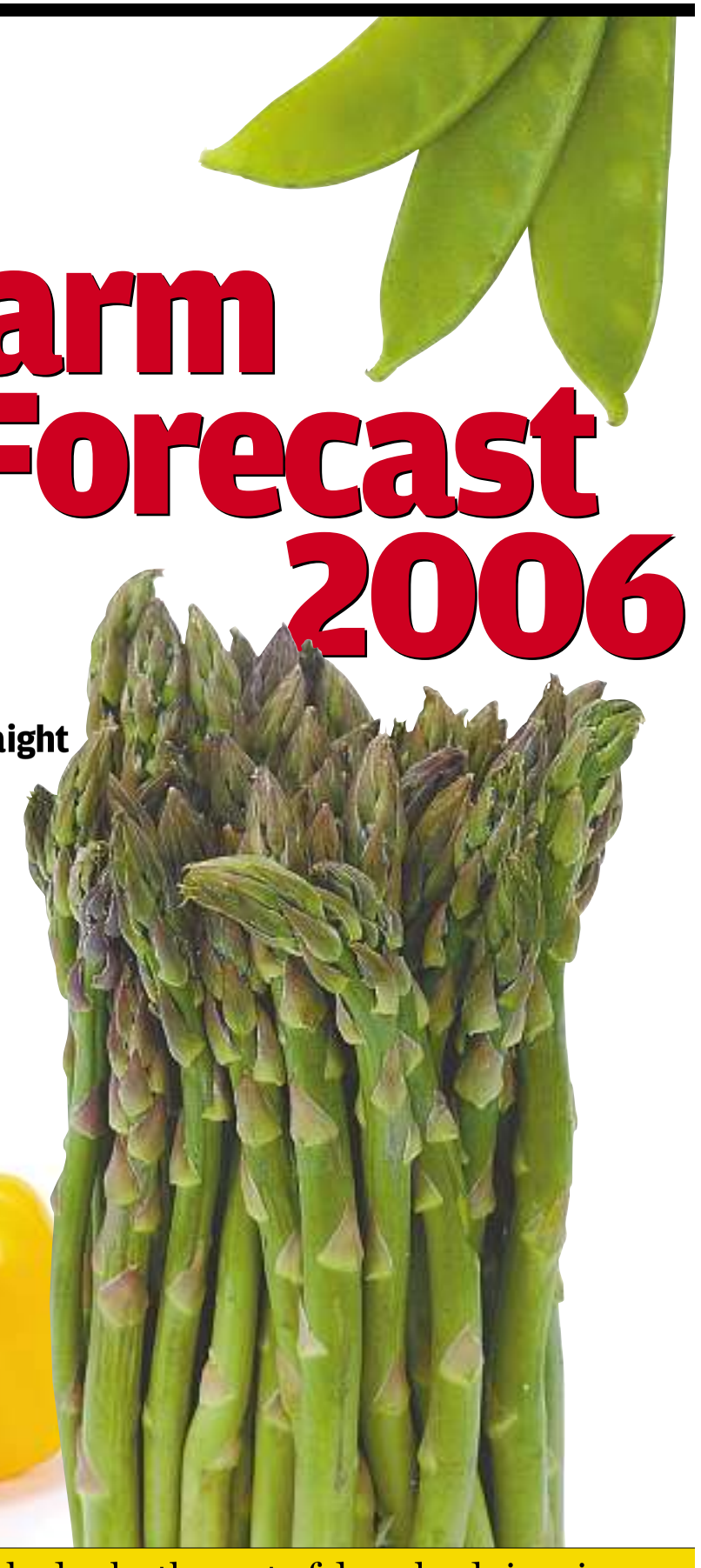
Farm Forecast 2006

Dirt in a box might save the world

The farmer who couldn't plant straight

The city markets' vendor shortage

How to sign up NOW for fresh produce next summer



PLUS How the Citgo deal went bad, why the cost of downloads is going up, what the Metra conductor really said, and much more

Section One

January 20, 2006

The Future in a Box?

A UN project with outposts in Chicago says this plastic container just might solve some of the world's biggest problems. At the very least it'll grow you some killer tomatoes.

By Martha Bayne

Last June thousands of Chicagoans descended on Navy Pier for NextFest, *Wired* magazine's second annual showcase of cutting-edge technology. Exhibits of hydrogen fuel-cell engines, desalinization processes, and cloned kittens claimed the glamour spots in the pavilion. But to a handful of attendees, the neatest thing wasn't the robot lobster or the flying car. It was a squat plastic box wearing a shower cap, the EarthBox.

Touted as the "garden of the future," the EarthBox is an innovative container gardening system invented by a Florida tomato farmer, Blake Whisenant, after a hurricane wiped out his crop in 1992. Two and a half feet long, 15 inches wide, and a foot tall, the EarthBox is self-watering and self-fertilizing, and its fans say that given enough sunlight even the brownest thumb can coax a crop from it. Plants grow in a sterile potting mix of peat moss and vermiculite and are nourished by a strip of fertilizer spread across the top. Water in a 2.2-gallon reservoir at the bottom of the box, which is filled through a tube jutting up from one corner, wicks up through the soil and into the roots, rather than seeping down from above, which means the box uses significantly less water than a conventional garden. A lightweight plastic cover—the shower cap—acts as mulch, keeping the soil moist and discouraging pests and weeds.

A decade ago Whisenant teamed up with Mickey Lynch, a plastics developer, to manufacture and market the EarthBox, which now retails for $37.95 through the company's Web site, earthbox.com. (A complete starter kit including potting mix and fertilizer is $59.95.) Made from recycled plastic, it's compact and portable, a boon for urban gardeners with limited open space. The self-contained design also prevents plants from pulling lead and other contaminants out of city soil. The reservoir doesn't need to be filled every day, and the box can be set at table height by anyone whose back or knees balk at ground-level horticulture. The Web site is stuffed with testimonials from happy gardeners ecstatic about record-breaking cucumber crops, four-foot-tall artichoke plants, and monster tomatoes. Whisenant says one season he harvested 137 pounds of tomatoes from a single box.

The two dozen EarthBoxes at NextFest were full of shiny Japanese eggplant, bright green peppers, towering stalks of corn, and, yes, monster tomatoes that had been cultivated all spring in

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JON RANDOLPH

EarthBox planting at the Garfield Park Conservatory

Farms

Growth Industries

The Reader's Guide to Subscription Farms

January may seem an unlikely time to start thinking about farm-fresh tomatoes, but most community-supported-agriculture shares are sold on a first-come, first-served basis, and they sometimes sell out before the growing season begins. Note too that some CSAs give discounts on early subscriptions. A full share typically gets you a bushel of farm-grown vegetables for weekly pickup; half shares tend to be delivered every other week. On March 10 and 11 an expo at the Chicago Cultural Center will bring together representatives from more than 400 midwestern farms and will feature workshops, movies, cooking demonstrations, and exhibits with the theme "Know Your Food, Know Your Farmer." Call 312-951-8999 or see familyfarmed.org for more info. **—Vera Videnovich**

Angelic Organics
1547 Rockton Rd. | Caledonia, IL 61011 | 815-389-2746
www.angelicorganics.com

Farmer John's 1,200-member CSA offers two basic subscriptions in 14 customized packages that give you a choice of fruits and veggies. There are about 25 drop-off locations in Chicago and Rockford. The farm hosts open houses in July and September, and volunteering there lands you a discount on next year's subscription. A 20-week vegetable share running from mid-June through the end of October is $560; a 12-week vegetable share running from mid-August through the end of October is $370. There's also an optional winter share that gets you vegetable boxes delivered every two weeks in November and December.

Green Earth Institute
10S404 Knoch Knolls Rd. | Naperville, IL 60565 | 630-664-5681
www.greenearthinstitute.org

Green Earth Institute is a nonprofit demonstration and learning center. On May 5 it will host a fair with tours, presentations, exhibits, and children's activities. Shares are limited to 160. Pickup days at the farm are Tuesdays and Fridays; subscribers are encouraged to combine their orders. Twenty-week full shares running from mid-June through late October are $550; half shares with pickup every other week are available for $295.

Growing Home
2539 N. 30th Rd. | Marseilles, IL 61341 | 312-435-8601
www.growinghomeinc.org

Growing Home is a nonprofit that provides job training through organic farming. Vegetable shares are grown on a ten-acre USDA-certified organic farm in downstate Marseilles as well as on a quarter-acre site on the south side. Pickup sites will be at Beth Emet Synagogue, 1224 Dempster in Evanston, and Saint Gertrude's Catholic Church, 1420 W. Granville. Produce will also be available this summer on

The Misfit Farmer

John Peterson didn't get along with his neighbors, but he refused to move even after he practically lost the family farm. Now he runs a successful organic farming operation—and his neighbors still don't like him much.

By Harold Henderson

TAGGART SIEGEL (PETERSON), SLAVA | ANGELIC ORGANICS (BARN), COURTESY ANGELIC ORGANICS (TOMATOES)

John Peterson, Angelic Organics

John Peterson has been known to drive his tractor wearing a close-fitting, sleeveless yellow-and-orange bodysuit with an orange boa around his neck. Filmmaker Taggart Siegel, an old friend of Peterson, thought that would make for some good footage, and early on in his engrossing documentary *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* the camera moves from the tractor's big wheels and dual headlights to Peterson's getup—a sequence that's worth the price of admission. It captures the tension between glitter and grease that propels the film through Peterson's life—from rural idyll to rural nightmare and back again—in a short 83 minutes.

It'd be a different story if Peterson, the 56-year-old head of Angelic Organics, had just dropped into rural Illinois from somewhere else. But he's lived pretty much his whole life on the farm where he was born, in Boone County off the Northwest Tollway near the Wisconsin line. He learned farming from his father and uncle, both of whom died before he graduated from high school, but he also enjoyed art and ideas. Ambitious, thoughtful, eccentric people like Peterson usually get out of places like Boone County as quickly as they can, but he left only briefly. He was a farmer, and even when things got rough, this was his farm.

In 1967 Peterson started at nearby Beloit College while continuing to farm. He tells me he studied writing, performance, and design because of a young woman who dumped him when he was 19. "She came from a very cultured family," he says. "She used to come and sing and dance while I was milking the cows. When she dropped me I was a different person, and I had to do something with those emotions."

At Beloit he made friends unlike anyone he'd grown up with, and in the early 70s he started bringing them home. Calling the farm the Midwest Coast, they mixed agriculture with counterculture. Few of his relatives, neighbors, or high school classmates welcomed the newcomers or got to know them, apparently figuring they knew enough. His two sisters had already left home, but in the documentary one of them recalls his friends as "a bunch of people and none of them worked." Sometimes an image really is worth a thousand words: the film simply juxtaposes her stereotype with 30-year-old footage of the long-hairs wielding shovels and pitchforks.

They didn't just work on the farm, which Peterson bought from his mother in 1975. When locals signed a petition to tear down the century-old schoolhouse across the road from the farm—where his father had gone to school and his mother later taught—Peterson bought the place, and his friends spent seven years helping him restore it and make it his home, using materials they salvaged from dozens of buildings that were being demolished as the area's economy cratered.

Like other farmers, Peterson eventually found it impossible to go on buying seed, feed, and equipment at retail prices while selling grain, milk, and meat wholesale. By 1982 he was half a million dollars in debt, and had to auction off his livestock, his equipment, and 328 of his 350 acres. He was devastated. As he says in the film, "It was like that whole big farm out there somehow just imploded, and what was left was me and the clothes I was wearing." He turned some of the farm buildings into homes and rented them, and each year he would raise a crop of pumpkins on his remaining 22 acres. He did just enough to get by.

The Midwest Coasters had dispersed. For them the farm was a way station. For Peterson it was a calling at which he'd failed. Many of his neighbors blamed him for losing what his parents had worked for. They waited to see if he'd commit suicide as his uncle had.

In the mid-80s Peterson rented the barn loft and other farm buildings to new friends, some of them artists who set up studios. "There was just a lot of traffic from time to time," a neighboring farmer and former high school classmate, John Edwards, says in the film. "Out of nowhere. . . . I didn't know who they were and . . . I just didn't know what to think." Other neighbors didn't know either, and a whispering campaign began.

A couple years later a local TV station broadcast clips from a movie Peterson and a would-be financial partner had made on the farm, in which Peterson played a crazed farmer who traps a loan shark in a grain silo and smothers him in corn. He tells me the role was personal—

The Real Dirt on Farmer John

he'd owed money to a real-life loan shark at one point. But, he says, "Film acting isn't cathartic. It's all bits and pieces, not like stage acting."

In retrospect, he says, he's wondered if some of his neighbors confused the news that a film had been made with the action in it. At any rate, after the TV clips ran, the whispering escalated into rumors of cultism and ritual murder. Some local kids were afraid to go near the "devil farm"; others drove by after dark and tossed firecrackers. A fire of mysterious origin gutted a log cabin he'd built. Peterson says he and Siegel didn't want the film to get too dark, so it doesn't mention the death threat he received. He also says a neighbor took him aside and advised him to quit wearing his cowboy boots, black hat, and sunglasses: "You don't want to stand out." The message was simple and time-honored: conform or leave. He could do neither.

More than once during this period Peterson traveled to Mexico, which is where he encountered Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. He saw that Miller had turned his suffering into a work of art and thought maybe he could do the same. He was also impressed by the bond he saw between Mexican farmers and their fields. "Chemicals hadn't yet become an intermediary between them and their land," he says. "In Mexico I soaked that up. It reinvigorated my own feelings about farming." He started to think seriously about organic agriculture.

The Real Dirt on Farmer John
WHEN Opens Fri 1/20
WHERE Pipers Alley
MORE Peterson will make an appearance at 7 PM on 1/20.

To his neighbors, his trips to Mexico meant only one thing—drugs. Eventually he summoned the strength to confront some of the rumormongers. The sheriff agreed to see that his no-trespassing signs were respected, and some neighbors backed off, though none extended an apology. In an awkward scene in the film, Peterson tells Edwards it was nightmarish having his farm called "a place of Satan worship, drug running, orgies." Edwards interrupts: "I didn't say anything about any orgies. . . . I think if everyone just relaxes a little, everything will work out." Yet Peterson tells me some neighbors still despise him.

In 1990 Peterson's mother, now retired, loaned him enough money to start growing organic vegetables. This kind of farming can work when the acreage is limited, and it suited Peterson's newfound conviction that conventional farming was bad for the land and bad for people. As he says in the film, "Raising crops under the influence of so many chemicals sort of warps or twists the life force." Using the label Angelic Organics, he sold his produce at farmers' markets in Chicago and to some restaurants and stores, and his mother watched over a roadside stand. Later, when he became discouraged with working 90 hours a week for little money, she kept him at it, telling him, "I live for that stand."

In the early 90s two Chicagoans, Bob and Cynthia Scheffler, found the farm's name on an organic onion at a grocery store. They'd been looking for a better source of organic food and called him up to ask if he'd be interested in making his farm part of the community-supported agriculture movement, which brings together people who want to eat food that's free of harmful chemicals and people who want to grow it. At that time CSA was a little-known fringe notion, practiced on barely 200 farms nationwide, most of them in the northeast. Now there are said to be more than 1,000.

Not at all sure he wanted a bunch of Chicagoans involved in his business, Peterson turned them down. But he came around. (My 1994 *Reader* cover story on Angelic Organics and two other area CSA farms gets a cameo in the documentary.) He started with a few dozen subscribers, each of whom paid a set amount up front to cover Peterson's costs, assuming some of the risks of farming. In return, each got a box packed with fresh-picked produce, plus a newsletter, once a week during the growing season; if a crop failed they simply didn't get any of that vegetable. This year the cost will be $560 for 20 weeks or $370 for 12. The farm now has 1,200 subscribers and between 4 and 20 employees, depending on the season—making it one of the largest CSA operations in the country.

The end of the documentary shows Angelic Organics members buying land next to the farm so it can expand, then helping erect a huge barn built in the old mortise-and-tenon style. The barn-raising scenes are intercut with home movies of the old barn being built back in the 50s, when Peterson was a child. The blending of the two events is both heartwarming and misleading. Both were communal efforts, but the community has changed. In the 50s it was a community of place—local friends and neighbors and relatives. Now it's a community of interest—like-minded friends from all over.

"What a beautiful tribute to the future, to the farm," Peterson says in the voice-over, "out of the values and traditions and the beautiful customs of the past." Here he's treading in the footsteps of Thomas Jefferson, whose mythology about American agriculture has been fertilized and watered for two centuries by rural romantics. We want to believe that working hard outdoors producing the stuff of life makes people good.

Though the film suggests that Peterson's persecutors were just isolated bad apples, it hints at a darker view. The "beautiful customs of the past" in rural counties do include the old-time generosity of neighbors swapping work during threshing season. They also include a willingness to expel intruders and oddballs. The truth is, a close-knit community can be a terrible thing.

"The rural community provides a floor and a ceiling," Peterson tells me. "The floor props you up when you need it, and that's great. But when you need to branch out, it stops you very soon." He has to live with the fact that he's rooted in a place where he'll never really belong. There's no unalloyed happy ending to the tale of a divided self.

The Real Dirt on Farmer John has toured festivals and won 15 awards; audiences at the international documentary festival in Amsterdam ranked it third out of the 165 shown. Peterson hopes it will be popular enough to lift community-supported agriculture to a new level of visibility. He says it clearly appeals to one not-very-rural audience. "The gay community has a particular affinity for the

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Wednesdays at the Green City Market, 1750 N. Clark, and on Thursdays at Harper Court, 52nd and Harper in Hyde Park. A 20-week share running from June 14 through October 25 is $460 ($20 discount if purchased before January 31).

Growing Power's Rainbow Farmers Cooperative
773-347-1374
growingpower.org/market_basket.htm

Growing Power, an urban farm-training program, has baskets of sustainable produce available year-round for $14 a week ($7 a week for half baskets); family-size boxes are also available for $26 a week. There are 15 drop-off sites throughout the city, including the Garfield Park Conservatory, where pickups take place on Saturdays (orders must be placed by Monday). Customers are encouraged to prepay.

Home Grown Wisconsin
Suzanne Rubinstein | 313 W. Beltline Hwy., Suite 37 | Madison, WI 53715 | 608-341-8939
www.homegrownwisconsin.com

This cooperative of 25 certified organic farms guarantees a variety of fruits and vegetables in every basket; for an extra fee there's also egg delivery every other week. Subscriber-only events include cooking demonstrations, raspberry picking, and a watermelon festival. A 20-week share running from June 14 to October 25 is $500 (5 percent discount if purchased before March 1); a 10-week half share with biweekly delivery is $275. Drop-off locations are as follows: 2834 N. Halsted; 737 W. Gordon Terr.; 2500 W. Wilson; 1421 Leonard Pl., Evanston; 835 Ridge, Evanston; 1916 Lee, Evanston.

King's Hill Farm
Tom Ulick | 19370 Hwy. G | Mineral Point, WI 53565 | 888-752-2301 or 608-776-3414
www.kingshillfarm.com

King's Hill delivers year-round, growing its own vegetables from July to October and purchasing from other growers and distributors the rest of the year. An annual subscription of $60 entitles you to buy a full share at $33 or a half share at $22 a week for a half bushel. Customers may pay for their shares by the week; home delivery is an extra $6.50. Chicago pickup times and locations are as follows: 10 AM to 7 PM Saturdays at True Nature Health Foods, 6034 N. Broadway; 11 AM to 8 PM Saturdays at Quad's Gym, 3727 N. Broadway; and noon to 7 PM Fridays and Saturdays at Tom Ulick's, 5959 S. Lowe.

Neu Erth Wormfarm
E7904 Briar Bluff Rd. | Reedsburg, WI 63959 | 608-524-8672 or
wormfarm@jvlnet.com
www.wormfarminstitute.org

Neu Erth Wormfarm grows 90 percent of its produce on-site using organic methods; the other 10 percent includes supplements like potatoes. Subscribers are required to pay a one-week visit to the farm, where there are also

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Farms

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exhibits, events, and artists' residencies. Drop-off locations in Chicago, Oak Park, and Skokie have yet to be announced. A full share of 18 to 20 weeks of deliveries costs $475, a half share $275; both include a farm stay. Deadline for subscriptions is April 1.

New Leaf Natural Grocery
1261 W. Loyola | 773-743-0400
New Leaf, a grocery store and wholesaler focused on affordable organics, offers boxes for pickup 360 days a year; providers include Home Grown Wisconsin. Delivery and drop-off is available in a limited area for an additional fee. The cost ranges between $15 and $33 per box depending on size and type; three days' advance notice is required.

Prospera Farms
Leo Sances and Michael Zink | W3566 County Rd. E | Berlin, WI 54923 | 920-361-4747
www.prosperafarm.com
Prospera Farms specializes in heirloom and gourmet vegetables; fresh eggs and flower bouquets are available for an additional fee. A 15-week two-person share running from June to October is $400, a 15-week family share $460; a biweekly half share for two people is $185, a family-size half share $215. Nonsubscribers may purchase boxes for $35 by ordering through Sprout Home, 745 N. Damen, 312-226-5950; pickup is the last Wednesday of the month, June 28 through October 25.

Sandhill Organics
Peg and Matt Sheaffer | 32140 N. Harris Rd. | Grayslake, IL 60030 | 847-642-8927
www.sandhillorganics.com
In addition to shares, Sandhill Organics sells at Green City Market, 1750 N. Clark. On-farm events this summer will include a solstice potluck, a pesto party, and a fall harvest workday and bonfire. Drop-off locations (specifics to be announced) are in Oak Park and the West Loop. A standard subscription runs from June 16 to October 13 and costs $475; there's a larger size available for families.

Sweet Earth Organic Farm
Renee Randall | PO Box 323 | Wauzeka, WI 53826 | 608-875-6026
sweetearthorganicfarm.com
Randall, an organic farmer since 1974, has been running a CSA off her 120-acre farm for five years. Full shares running about 20 weeks cost $485 and will begin in late June or July; a partial share is $385. Pickup times and dates are yet to be announced, but five Chicago spots are targeted: Addison at Austin, Belmont at Ashland, Montrose at Pulaski, Chicago at Damen, and Lincoln Park at North and Clark.

JIM NEWBERRY
Mari Coyne

FARMER JOHN continued from page 15
film," he says. "It's about marginalization and being different. Last January, at a time when we were still wondering if people would sit through it, a gay man came up after a screening. He was sobbing. He'd had to leave Iowa and had to make himself hate Iowa. The film allowed him to let himself feel how much he loved Iowa, and the land, and even the people."

Ironically, though the film derives its central tension from Peterson's ties to Boone County, it's kept him far from home in a way his neighbors' hostility couldn't. It premieres commercially in Chicago and three other cities this weekend and in several more over the coming weeks. He's agreed to give media interviews ahead of time and to attend the first screening in each city. What started small has grown into a full-time commitment and a life spent hopping from one hotel room to the next. "I kept thinking it would die down soon," he says, "because documentary films don't usually go anywhere."

He's also trying to pull together books out of the 1,500 pages of manuscript he's written over the years—stories, autobiography, sketches. Soon to appear is a CSA cookbook that emphasizes how vegetables are grown on the farm. He says it's as much work as anything he's ever done for Angelic Organics, and he's as constrained by deadlines for book copy and personal appearances as he was by the ripening of his cabbage patch.

Holed up in New York City over New Year's, Peterson stole some time to write a short essay, in which he notes, "Suddenly I missed the farming year I had given up for this film: swirling soil; dust; dew; mud; mists; tomato leaves swaying just slightly; wagons of frilly kale bouncing towards the barns . . . the march of vegetables through the seasons." Grease still trumps glitter. "The film is a story about the irrepressibility of life," he goes on. "Farming, however, is not a *story* about the irrepressibility of life; farming *is* the irrepressibility of life."

Bounty Hunter

With the explosion of interest in homegrown produce, finding enough farmers to supply our markets has become a full-time job.

By Nicholas Day

Anyone who's visited the Green City Market in south Lincoln Park knows business is booming. A nonprofit dedicated to promoting sustainable agriculture, the market is packed with shoppers twice a week, and on a good day there are thousands. But its success has become a problem. The market has nearly quadrupled in size since its opening eight years ago, and as the crowds grew, "it wasn't hard to see that we didn't have enough farmers," says founder Abby Mandel. Green City became a sensation—chef and market doyenne Alice Waters has called it the best sustainable market in the country—but demand was outstripping supply.

Ron Salazar, who coordinates the farmers' market program for the mayor's office, was stuck in the same ditch. "The bottom line is we don't have a lot of farms," he says. "Our typical way of seeking out farmers is not effective." There are more than 30 city-sponsored markets in Chicago, and Salazar says the supply shortage was adversely affecting quality and preventing the establishment of additional markets in low-income neighborhoods, where easy access to fresh produce is limited.

So through a public-private initiative Mandel and Salazar created a job that's not on any career test: farm forager. "I knew that there were food foragers for restaurants and so I thought 'farm forager' was perfect," says Mandel. She encouraged Mari Coyne, whose agricultural work she'd been familiar with for several years, to apply for the job and officially hired her last June. If the title conjures the image of someone digging up farms out of the countryside, that's more or less what Coyne does. She travels across the local agricultural region—northern and central Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan—hunting down and enlisting farms. As with mushrooms, the art of farm foraging is all about knowing where to look: farming conferences, tip-offs from assorted contacts, meetings with recent agriculture program graduates or people who've inherited the family farm.

Coyne is tracking a rare species: small or midsize farms growing multiple crops, ideally through sustainable practices (a concept that, briefly defined, means reducing or eliminating chemicals, building up soil health, and maintaining ecological diversity). But these are the operations Coyne knows best, having spent a year building a consumer directory of Illinois farms offering direct sales for a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign program called Farm Direct.

A graduate of the agricultural journalism and marketing department at the University of Wisconsin who grew up in Evanston, Coyne, now 41, worked for many years in the food industry and was one of the three friends who opened the Three Tarts Bakery in Northfield. A few years ago she went to a Buena Vista Social Club concert at Ravinia, and while running across the concrete to get to the front of the stage to dance, she tore the tendons in her foot. "[It] imploded," she says. The injury sidelined her from the bakery for almost a year, and during that time she reevaluated her career. She decided to return to agricultural studies and, hoping to see "what a good local food system looks like," temporarily moved to France in 2003, where short-term apprenticeships are more common than here. Over nine months Coyne worked on a dozen

different farms in Normandy and Brittany, learning everything from beekeeping to millstone grinding to working a stand at a farmers' market. The reality there, she says, is that "small farms are just as much on their way out as they are here."

A few decades ago the economic logic of modern agriculture was "get big or get out." The profits in conventional farming were so small, the thinking went, that the only way to make money was to bulk up. But the craze for farmers' markets in recent years has changed the equation: the higher prices specialty and organic growers attract have made direct sales to consumers profitable. Recognizing this, nonprofits like Farm Beginnings have been developed to assist new and transitioning farmers alike in adopting the niche model. To satisfy urban demand Coyne will need to convince those farmers to make the drive into Chicago. But that's easier said than done.

"We don't just have an explosion of markets in the Chicago area," says Coyne. "You have them in all the outlying suburban areas as well. So to get someone to drive the extra 25 or 30 miles to come into the city, as opposed to stopping in Naperville or one of the outlying areas, you have to have more incentives."

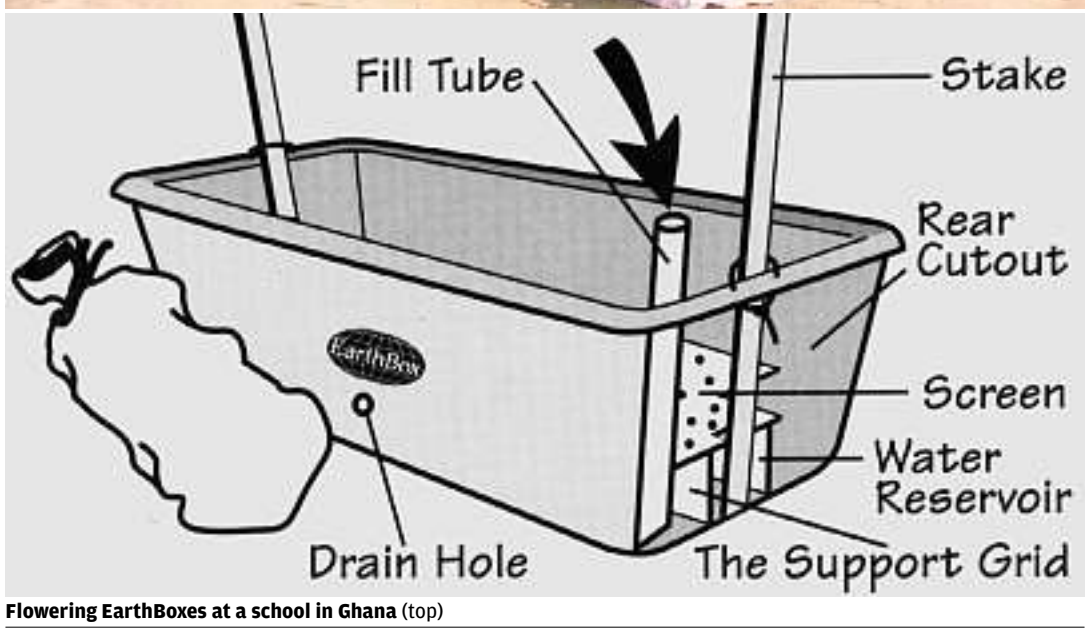
To that end Coyne is conducting a survey of every farm that does business in Chicago, consulting with the farmers on-site and documenting their crops and their ideas. "Some people are growing things that they're not bringing into the market," she says. "There are opportunities that might be there that we're not realizing for them because we don't know their business." With that information Mandel and Salazar hope to create additional Chicago-only business opportunities for old and new farms, such as linking their produce with restaurants or groceries.

"The base of the project is to help strengthen the business coming into the city, to encourage them, so that when they do come in it's worth the drive," says Coyne. "What we're trying to do is not only tap into them to see if we can interest them in market selling but also to get a broader picture of what's available. There are just a multitude of ways these local products can end up on your shelf or in your refrigerator." Coyne recently spoke with someone in Chicago who's starting a pickle company and wanted the names of farmers who sold cucumbers. She's also consulted a local chef who's interested in taking over his brother's farm downstate and creating a farm-restaurant. "If someone calls me and says, what do I do or who do I call or can I do this—I can put people together," she says.

Although the city has earmarked funds to pay Coyne for only a year, Salazar hopes to be able to hire several more foragers soon; Mandel is pursuing grant money toward the same end. It's unclear if or how the information Coyne has collected will be available to other nonprofits or residents who want to connect with local food sources, but Salazar stresses that his office works closely with outside groups. "We're part of that movement," he says, adding that he's asking the same questions as sustainable agriculture advocates. "How do we develop a system where a percentage of school lunches comes directly from farmers? How does it go to the local grocery stores in the area?"

What would help farmers most would be a year-round market, says Jim Slama, president of the environmental advocacy group Sustain. "Something like Pike Place or the Milwaukee Public Market would be an extremely positive addition." It's simple, he says: if you create more venues, you'll have more farmers. He adds that with greenhouses and hoop houses (less-insulated, tentlike greenhouses), the growing season can now be extended the length of the year.

Salazar and Mandel have discussed that idea for several years. "The city, in the near future, would like to have a year-round market," says Salazar. "The desire's there." In fact the city is currently conducting a planning study for a year-round market in the lower-level riverwalk area bounded by Lake Street and Lake Shore Drive. A permanent structure downtown might make buying local food more of a routine, something Coyne believes is essential to the project's long-term success. Shopping at the markets should become "a habitual part of someone's day," she believes. "It's a specialty shopping experience, but that doesn't mean it's an exclusive shopping experience. It shouldn't be viewed that way."



Flowering EarthBoxes at a school in Ghana (top)

EARTHBOXES continued from page 1

a demonstration garden at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences. After the expo the boxes were destined for the Cook County Jail, where a dozen detainees were already tending several of their own. Another EarthBox demonstration garden had been set up at the Garfield Park Conservatory. And there are now EarthBoxes at ten schools in Chicago and Evanston, part of an international project called the Growing Connection, a joint initiative of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the American Horticultural Society.

Fueled by no small ambition, the Growing Connection aims to help end world hunger, stimulate economic self-sufficiency, and foster cross-cultural understanding by marrying EarthBox horticulture and wireless communications technology. It kicked off in 2003 with a few pilot sites in Ghana. In 2004 it added sites in Guadalajara and the U.S., including Chicago—the flagship city for the project in the States. Schools and community gardens were given a supply of EarthBoxes and vegetable and sunflower seeds. Most U.S. participants also use the EarthBox potting mix and fertilizer, but some experiment with local or organic options. In other parts of the world they use whatever's cheap and readily available—ground-up coconut husks in Ghana, for instance.

In Chicago the project's primary partners are the Garfield Park Conservatory and the University of Illinois Extension's master gardener program, which pairs graduates of its 12-week certification program with Growing Connection schools to provide hands-on advice.

The "connection" part of the equation is a work in progress, but the utopian potential of digital technology is an article of faith at Growing Connection, whose advisory board includes Internet infrastructure guru Fred Baker and de facto father of the Internet Vint Cerf. Students in the third world can already share stories about their EarthBox gardens with partner schools in the U.S. via e-mail and bulletin board postings, but new software combining live chat, e-mail, and forums is slated to launch at the end of the month. Ken Waagner, perhaps best known as the guy responsible for making Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* available on the band's Web site in 2001, is in charge of the IT end of the project. Ultimately, he says, the idea is to have kids around the world contributing information about their crops to a centralized database, which will also provide them with info about weather, water, and market conditions to help them decide what to plant and how to grow it and sell it—but that's about a year away.

The project was developed by Robert Patterson, an FAO officer who calls it "the most powerful people-driven project in the world." He and his colleagues were looking for a practical way for people around the world to engage with the problem of hunger and malnutrition when a friend of his, the CEO of the American Horticultural Society, introduced him to the EarthBox. "We knew we wanted to work in school and community gardens," he says, "but the boxes were the tool whereby we could truly say these kids are all doing the same thing, whether they're rich or poor."

Some people might argue that shipping a bunch of plastic to the third world can't be the most economically sustainable or ecologically sound plan, but proponents of the Growing Connection say EarthBox gardening could provide fresh fruits and vegetables to people in some of the poorest parts of the globe, where at least 800 million are malnourished. (The shower cap reverses from heat-retentive black for temperate regions to reflective white for desert and tropical ones.) They say the boxes could be the key to financial security for many in Africa and Latin America, especially women, helping them break cycles of abuse, prostitution, and disease. Patterson says that in the U.S. the boxes provide, among other things, a hands-on lesson in nutrition for urban kids weaned on fast food.

Whisenant and Lynch, now CEO of the EarthBox company, have become enthusiastic foot soldiers for the Growing Connection cause, hitting the road with Patterson to train new users and demonstrate the product at venues ranging from NextFest to the Future Farmers of America convention. "It's a nice way that the UN and the private sector can collaborate," says Patterson. "They have a tool, we show how the tool works, and they get exposed to new markets."

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Farms

EARTHBOXES continued from page 17

The Growing Connection now has 45 sites in the U.S., several more sites in Mexico, and new programs in Nicaragua, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Kenya. Haiti starts up next month. Overseas program costs are covered by a variety of sources, including foundation grants and private and corporate donations. In the U.S. the schools are responsible for the $1,000 start-up fee, which so far has proved a deterrent to some otherwise interested classrooms. But Patterson says he's talking to 60 or so Rotary clubs interested in sponsoring a classroom, and in Chicago the Growing Connection was just adopted as part of the After School Matters job-training program, the nonprofit behind Gallery 37, which will bring a few more schools into the fold this spring.

On January 13 ten volunteers convened at a Garfield Park greenhouse to assemble and plant 60 donated EarthBoxes that in March will be the centerpiece of the Growing Connection's latest big outreach effort, an exhibit at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show. Under the direction of Nancy Kreith, the master gardener program coordinator, they filled the boxes with potting mix, dampened the mix with a hose, and spread fertilizer down the middle of each one.

EarthBoxes allow gardeners to extend the local growing season a little, but Kreith was still a bit worried. "It's going to be tough to get them yielding fruit by March," she said. "I tried to get stuff with just a 60-day germination." But, she added, once the plants are flowering they'll be very low maintenance.

A friendly tortoiseshell cat roamed the damp workbenches, hopping up occasionally to snag some kibble from a battered glass dish, as the volunteers stretched the plastic caps over the boxes and sliced holes through which they'd sow the seeds and out of which, in a couple weeks, the plants would poke their heads.

"You just want to make a hole with your hand and push the seeds down in the soil," said Kreith. "Here—who wants to do corn?" Peas, mustard, spinach, Swiss chard, Italian long-leaf basil, Intimidator and Wellington cucumbers, and three kinds of lettuce all went into the boxes.

Some of the gardeners hadn't worked with EarthBoxes before, but others were old hands. Nancy Block, a master gardener who volunteers at the Cook County Jail garden, is a convert. She's demo'd EarthBoxes at schools, garden clubs, civic associations, and "just about anyplace anyone will listen." She's the coauthor of an article on EarthBoxes in this month's edition of *Chicagoland Gardening* magazine, and she's currently organizing an effort to send a slew of the planters to the gulf coast to help out Katrina victims. "The soil there is poisoned," she says. "We just need to do *something,* and I really believe that this little box can help."

On Saturday, April 22, there'll be EarthBox demonstrations at the Garden Faire, a daylong event sponsored by the University of Illinois Extension, the Chicago Master Gardener Program, and the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences. Call 773-233-0476 for more. They'll also be demo'd the following weekend at the Garfield Park Conservatory's annual Green and Growing Fair; see garfieldparkconservatory.org.

Reviews

Movies

CAFE LUMIERE ★★★★
DIRECTED BY HOU HSIAO-HSIEN
WRITTEN BY HOU AND CHU T'IEN-WEN
WITH YO HITOTO, TADANOBU ASANO, MASATO HAGIWARA, KIMIKO YO, AND NENJI KOBAYASHI

LOOKING FOR COMEDY IN THE MUSLIM WORLD ★★★
DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY ALBERT BROOKS
WITH BROOKS, SHEETAL SHETH, JOHN CARROLL LYNCH, JON TENNEY, AND FRED DALTON THOMPSON

RATINGS
★★★★ MASTERPIECE
★★★ A MUST SEE
★★ WORTH SEEING
★ HAS REDEEMING FACET
● WORTHLESS

Outsider Artists

Filmmakers Hou Hsiao-hsien and Albert Brooks go abroad to look around and within.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

"It's very difficult to cross national borders and shoot a film about a different culture. How many films have you seen that do that successfully? There are very few. The reason is very simple. When we look at films [about our own country] made by foreign companies, they're not accurate. . . . But it's an interesting challenge."

This could be Albert Brooks talking about the making of his funny new feature, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, most of it filmed in New Delhi. But it's actually Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-hsien speaking about *Cafe Lumiere*, which was shot in Japan. Both filmmakers are pushing 60, and both prefer filming in long shot and extended takes. And both their movies are acute, measured observations of contemporary life and thought, whether we happen to be based in LA or Tokyo.

Cafe Lumiere
WHEN Multiple screeenings daily
WHERE Music Box, 3733 N. Southport
PRICE $8.25-$9.25
INFO 773-871-6604

Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World
WHERE Multiple venues

Cafe Lumiere (2003) was commissioned by the Japanese studio Shochiku, which asked Hou to create an homage to its most famous house director, Yasujiro Ozu, in celebration of the centennial of his birth. It's a return to form for Hou, after the formalism of *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) and the emptiness of *Millennium Mambo* (2001)—and his best film since *The Puppetmaster* (1993). It's also his most minimalist effort to date, slow to reveal its depths and beauties, and it marks a rejuvenation of his art, confirmed by his subsequent film, the far from minimalist *Three Times* (2005), shot in Taiwan.

Cafe Lumiere is a look at everyday Japanese life and how it's changed since Ozu's heyday. It uses some of Ozu's visual motifs—trains, clotheslines—and it beautifully reflects what English critic Tony Rayns has called the "persuasive" unassertiveness that characterizes much of Ozu's late work. It's an outsider's view of Japan that's really a two-way mirror, because the obsessive preoccupation of its 23-year-old Japanese heroine, Yoko (Yo Hitoto), a freelance writer based in Tokyo, is investigating the life of Taiwanese classical composer Jiang Wenye. Roughly a contemporary of Ozu, Jiang was born in Taiwan and educated in Japan, then spent most of the remainder of his life in mainland China. The only music heard in the film, besides a pop song over the final credits, is a selection of piano pieces he composed in Japan during the 1920s and '30s; they provide a historical and cultural filter through which we perceive the present. Yoko has just returned from Taiwan, where she's been researching Jiang's roots while teaching Japanese. She's pregnant with the child of one of her students, and she tells her elderly parents that she intends to raise the child alone—a clear sign of the differences between Japanese life today and the life chronicled by Ozu.

Cafe Lumiere

Taiwan was a Japanese colony for 50 years, until 1945, only two years before Hou was born, and Japanese culture undoubtedly had a lingering effect on many aspects of Taiwanese life. Hou, who's long had an interest in Ozu, shares the older director's fascination with trains, and in *Cafe Lumiere* one of Yoko's friends, Hajime (Tadanobu Asano), who runs a used-book store, is obsessed with recording the sounds of trains.

Like Ozu, Hou is mainly nonjudgmental about his characters, though he does manage to suggest over the course of his almost plotless narrative that Yoko and Hajime are somewhat indiscriminate collectors whose preoccupation with music and trains shows more compulsiveness than passion. This may be a critique of contemporary life—something also hinted at in the film's Japanese title, *Coffee Jikou*, which means "coffee, time, light"—but if so, it's a judicious one that only adds to the sense of serene clarity.

The clarity of Albert Brooks is far from serene, and Sony backed away from distributing *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* last year after Brooks refused to change its title. His film is especially welcome now because it frankly admits that most Americans are ignorant about Muslims and have a lot to learn, in contrast with the few other Hollywood movies dealing with Muslims—*Syriana*, *Munich*—which seem to suggest that non-Muslim viewers can emerge knowing the score.

Brooks plays a blundering fool heading up a State Department study of what gets people to laugh in India and Pakistan, and he makes a lot of the mistakes Americans have in the third world, however noble their

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