

FRESH AIR



February Meeting on Organic Gardening

Gardening in the Comfort Zone: Low Maintenance Landscapes with Native Oklahoma Plants. Join us on Thursday, February 27, to hear Steve Hill, renowned Norman landscape architect, educator and lecturer, discuss the positive, healing aspects of organic gardening with "made in Oklahoma" plants. Steve will also provide valuable tips and suggestions on how to use native plants in an environment free of pesticides and herbicides.

The meeting will be held at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (1309 West Boyd in Norman). Refreshments will be served at 7:00 with the program beginning at 7:30.

South Canadian River Corridor

Recently the Journey Church of Norman dropped its plan for development of pristine South Canadian river environment in southwest Norman. The neighbors of the project and many others concerned with the project's environmental impact were greatly relieved by the news. Due to the high value the church was willing to pay for the land, however, it is likely that additional proposals for development of this land will arise in the future. Now is the time to develop a plan to protect and preserve the area for the benefit of all citizens of Norman. The Red Earth Group of the Sierra Club would like hear any ideas on how to protect the South Canadian river corridor in southwest Norman. If you have ideas or suggestions on how to meet this challenge, please contact Lee Fithian at icarus692@aol.com.

Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer

If you've ever been to the Blue River Wildlife Management Area north of Tishomingo or the Chickasaw National Recreation Area near Sulphur, you have experienced the unique beauty of the many spring-fed streams and rivers in the area such as Byrd's Mill Spring, Pennington Creek, Mill Creek and the Blue River. The source of water in those springs, rivers and streams is the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer. The viability of those streams and rivers may be threatened by a proposal to remove the water from the aquifer and pipe it to Yukon, El Reno and other central Oklahoma communities. PESA, LLC, a private company in Oklahoma City is arranging the sale of the water to central Oklahoma communities by a few owners of land above the aquifer. The project will require the construction of an 88 mile pipeline and the estimated cost of the project is as high as \$200,000,000.

In addition to providing habitat for innumerable species of plants, fish and wildlife (including the Oklahoma Seaside Alder, a species identified only on Pennington Creek and the Blue River), the aquifer has been designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as the sole water source for Ada, Durant, Tishomingo and Sulphur. The ranchers in the area also rely on springs and creeks as the source of water for their families and livestock.

The Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery, which raises several threatened species, including paddlefish, alligator snapping turtle and the Arkansas River shiner, is located on Pennington Creek. In an article in The Daily Oklahoma, the manager of the hatchery states that if pumping of the aquifer diminishes the flow of Pennington Creek, the hatchery would be in serious trouble.

The proposed sale has been protested by National Park Service and numerous Johnson County residents who believe PESA's proposal could ruin the aquifer or, at a minimum, severely damage the Blue River and other streams in the area. Either result would hurt wildlife and jeopardize the economic viability of many cities in south central Oklahoma.

The following bills are currently pending in the state legislature:

- HB1083 (Hilliard) - determine maximum annual yield based on 100-year life of an aquifer, require applicant for temporary permit to prove that aquifer will not be depleted in 100 years.
- HB1421 (Roan) / SB288 (Gumm) - moratorium on temporary permits.
- HB1422 (Roan) - designate the Blue River a state scenic river.

Call your legislator now and ask him or her to support these bills.

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Organic Farming has arrived in Central Oklahoma

Grocery shoppers have noticed an increasing supply of products and produce labeled "organic" on local grocery shelves. In fact, organic food products are among the fastest growing segments of the food industry, with sales increasing by about 20% each year. The United States Department of Agriculture organic standards went into effect on October 21, 2002, giving precise meaning to the organic label. Land used for production of organic produce must be pesticide-free for three years before harvest. Fertilizers cannot contain synthetic substances, petroleum, or sewage sludge. Animals that are raised for organic meat cannot be given antibiotics or growth hormones. Other requirements include the banning of irradiation and of genetically modified organisms.

Almost all of the organic products in our stores are trucked in from distant locations, mainly California. However, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of small farmers in central Oklahoma who are following organic methods and are selling their products directly to local consumers. Most of these farmers are not certified organic because of the cost and paperwork requirements. Instead, they establish personal relationships with their customers and are eager to invite them to visit their farms and observe their operations.

Robert and Barbara Stelle (392-2680) established their farm, Sunrise Acres, in 1996 on 10 acres located 6.5 miles north of Blanchard. Robert retired from Western Electric that year and taught as an adjunct professor in the computer science department at Oklahoma City University for two and a half years. Barbara continues to work for the city of Bethany. They have 6000 feet of greenhouse space (they built the greenhouses themselves) and about three acres of outside garden plots. Without using any pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, they grow herbs and bedding plants and a large variety of vegetables, including some unusual and heirloom varieties. In each of the past few years they have sold 20,000 sweet potato slips to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections facility in McCloud for the inmates to plant in the prison gardens. Vegetables, herbs, and bedding plants from Sunrise Acres are sold at the OKCOSU Farmers' Market, and garden seeds, seed potatoes, onion plants, and sweet potato slips are available at the farm.

One of the newest organic farms in this area is Oak Creek Farms, which is located in the same general area as Sunrise Acres. Randy and Natalie Smith (392-3433) are currently in their second year of farming about one acre of cultivated land. They use a sustainable production method, including integrated pest management, barriers and mechanical methods, natural fertilizers, and composts. They grow many common types of vegetables, including hot and sweet peppers, summer and winter squash, tomatillos, tomatoes, cucumbers, okra, onions, garlic, spinach, and chard, and they especially like to try rare and heirloom varieties. The Smiths also produce several types of herbs: basil, dill, cilantro, parsley, and edible flowers. Morel mushrooms may be available for sale in the spring. A current project is building a number of permanent raised beds for expanding their operation. Their produce will be available this year at the Norman Farmers' Market.

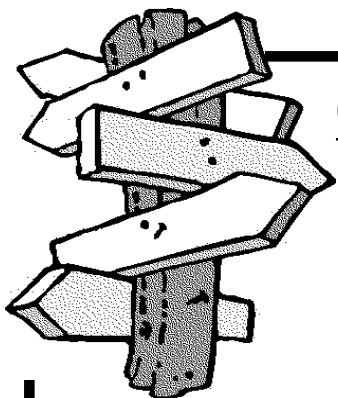
A different type of direct marketing method is being tried by Don, Peggy, and Heather McGehee (405-944-5940) of P,D, & H Farms. Last summer they started a small CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) service. Fifteen customers from this area signed up and paid in advance for organically-grown produce from the McGehee farm, delivered weekly to a Norman location. The McGehees live on 15 acres this side of Okemah and grow many types of vegetables and herbs on land that has been in the family and pesticide-free for four generations. They also offer organic pork, lamb, and eggs for direct sale. This winter they have been improving and enlarging their operation and are planning to expand their CSA for the coming season.

Tim and Cindy Sterling (364-GOAT) bought the land for their farm in 1994 when they moved to Norman. Their five acre tract on the northeast side of town is called Swinging Gate Farm because of the many visitors who keep the front gate 'swinging'. They raise several types of dairy goats: Alpine, Nubians, and Saanen. Much of the goat milk is blended with skin nourishing oils to make a variety of soaps that are sold in several shops in Norman and other Oklahoma cities. The goat manure provides a rich, natural fertilizer for their garden of raised beds, where they grow organic herbs and vegetables. Their latest venture is a 20 by 28 foot greenhouse, and they are looking forward to selling their goat milk products, bedding plants, and produce at the Norman Farmers' Market again this year.

All of the preceding farmers have elected not to seek certification as organic producers, although some of them are considering this option along with other types of certification, such as the CNG (Certified Naturally Grown) designation. CNG certification has the same standards as the National Organic Program, except for the record-keeping.

A small farm in Noble has chosen to be certified organic. Earth Elements Farm is operated by April Harrington and Gene King (872-3722) and specializes in Genovese Basil, which Harrington and King sell to the public and to a few restaurants and which they process into a gourmet pesto. Their medicinal herbs are used to make a line of natural body care products that are available in many stores in Norman and other cities in this area. In addition, they grow culinary herbs and a variety of spring produce. Workshops on home canning, organic agriculture, and soap making are offered several times a year. They plan to sell their products at both the Norman and the Edmond Farmers' Markets this year.

The existence of these and other small organic farms in central Oklahoma provides many benefits to the Norman area. Consumers can buy fresh, seasonal, pesticide-free produce without the expense associated with the middle man. Some varieties of produce that cannot be trucked long distances are locally available. Sustainable agriculture methods promote environmental protection and consumer safety. These farms help preserve our rural communities and inhibit urban sprawl. Moreover, a close relationship between farmer and customer promotes a better quality of life for all of us.



Outings

[If you have comments or ideas concerning the Red Earth Group outings program, contact Rick Poland by telephone at 405-360-5001 or by e-mail at rgpoland@swbell.net]

February 26 & 27: HIKING, CAMPING & BACKPACKING WORKSHOP - Backwoods Equipment Company at NW 122nd & May. Rating: Easy. Fee \$15 and includes a seventy page workbook. Contact Tom Libby at tomlibby@yahoo.com. Experienced outing leaders of the club will cover a variety of topics including tents, sleeping bags and backpacks; physical conditioning and first aid; boots and clothing; food and water and wilderness manners. Emphasis is placed on how to choose, care for and properly use your equipment to get the most out of your wilderness experience. (Note: This is an Oklahoma City Group outing.)

March 29. Brookhaven Creek Cleanup from 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Help the Red Earth Group keep this natural area free-flowing by removing brush, trash and other debris from Brookhaven Creek. Meet at Morgan Park (north of Robinson and east of West 36th) with work boots, gloves and water. Leader: Rick Poland (405-360-5001 or rgpoland@swbell.net)

April 12. Dayhike and Tour of Blue River Area - See for yourself what is being threatened by the proposal to pump water from the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer. Join us for a tour of the Reagan National Fish Hatchery near Mill Creek. We'll also visit Devil's Run, a geological wonder on Pennington Creek with eroded cave-like areas, which was once considered as a site for a state park, and see the headwaters of Spring Creek. We'll finish the day by visiting the Blue River Wildlife Management Area (camping is available), a 3,321 acre area extending approximately six miles along the banks of the Blue River. Habitat is cedar, post oak and hickory forest interspersed with short grass prairie. The river is rocky with frequent small (one to two foot) waterfalls. A great place for birding-122 species identified at last year's Christmas bird count. The Blue River area is public land but Devil's Run and the headwaters of Spring Creek are not so don't miss this "once in a lifetime" chance to experience these beautiful areas. No fee. No pets. Rating: Easy. Leader: Rick Poland (405-360-5001 or rgpoland@swbell.net).

Fresh Air

From your Red Earth Co-Chair

Forward! brave shocktroops. Yea, though I walk through the valley of shabby depths, I will fear boll weevils. Something like that. We are Doomed. It is all over. We lost. We're gonna die. Extinct. deedle dum de dum la la de dum

Uh, I can't help but notice that we're still here. We might as well do something to keep from being arrested for vagrancy. Now I must reiterate what Committed Activists have noticed for a long time: it does not take very many letters, very many phone calls, or very many visits to persuade the uncommitted politician that public sentiment on some particular issue is very strong. That number for Oklahoma House members is under a score; two dozen for a State Senator will often do the trick. (The numbers are higher for national senators and representatives, of course.) So while the Nation is under "Environmental Orange Alert" (similar to the terrorist orange alert, except that the people doing the damage to the environment are petrochemical corporations, certain clear-cutting lumber companies, Agriculture Conglomerates, etc.) it is essential that we MOVE OUR LAZY BUTTS, and respond to Club calls to write letters to politicians. Now some of us have been very good about writing letters to the Editor, too. I confess that I have been bad about that, but I'm going to change my lazy, reckless ways and correct that. So come on! Get with it. Watch your E-mail and respond with haste to requests for messages, letters, phone calls. It really makes a difference.

Thanks for your support.
Dave Miller

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Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer

A public meeting to discuss this issue will be held at 2:00 p.m. on March 9 at the Pontotoc Technology Center on South Richardson Bypass in Ada, Oklahoma. If you can't attend the meeting, but want to learn more about this issue or help fight the proposal, go to the excellent website for the citizens group opposing the aquifer: www.arbsimaquifer.net/index.htm. The website contains numerous articles concerning the project, information on the Oklahoma Seaside Alder and actions you can take to help protect the aquifer. You can also visit the area on a Sierra Club outing on April 12 (see outings notice).

Hazardous Waste Recycling Event

The City of Norman's annual hazardous waste recycling event is tentatively set for Saturday, May 3. As usual, we hope lots of Sierra Club members will volunteer at the event. Volunteering at the event is hard work but it is very satisfying to see all the dangerous trash you are helping keep out of the landfill. Further details will be announced in next month's newsletter. You can also check the City of Norman website: www.ci.norman.ok.us.



" If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen."

Henry David Thoreau

Red Earth Group Officers

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* indicates Executive Committee member

Executive Committee Election

The following Red Earth Group members were elected or re-elected to the Red Earth Group Executive Committee

Rick Poland, Walter Kelley, Suzette McDowell, and Jim Long.

They will join David Miller, Lee Fithian, and Nicolette Nicar as the Executive Committee for 2003. Officers and Chairs were elected and appointed at the January Executive Committee meeting.

Sierra Club
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