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A Natural Hygienist Finds His Roots in the Soil

NHA board member Mark Epstein chronicles his path to opening his own organic farm.

by Marla Rose

Mark Epstein has spent the past 10 years trying to understand soil. Not just soil in general, though he is a keen student of that, too, but the specific soil in which he grows food in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. Flow Farm, where he and his family are changing the embattled landscape for the better by growing food using veganic agriculture practices, has grown out of his fascination with the local soil.

Mark's life has taken some interesting twists and turns to get to this point where the Merritt Island, Florida-raised, Chicago-transplanted math whiz is now learning how to coax beautiful produce out of his area's challenging sandy soil. But if there's anything that this disarmingly, easy-going, modern-day farmer has come to learn, it is that life may be unpredictable, but if you change your perspective, you can find some really beautiful order in all of the messiness. And you can also find your life's purpose!

Health and Farming Background

Raised as a health-conscious vegetarian by parents who had also been raised vegetarian, Mark was lucky enough to have both sides of his family profoundly and personally influenced by Natural Hygiene physicians in the 1940s, such as Dr. Christopher Gian-Cursio, Dr. Robert W. Anderson, Dr. Herbert Shelton, Dr. William Esser, and Dr. Gerald Benesh.

With his father being raised vegetarian and going to Dr. Anderson's Camp Hygiology in Rhinebeck, New York (site of the first American Vegetarian Conference), and

both grandmothers being avid organic gardeners, Mark and his four sisters were raised with a true appreciation for the benefits of eating whole fruits and vegetables in their most simple, unprocessed state. In addition to being raised in a family culture that encouraged eating for optimal wellness, the Natural Hygiene community also influenced Mark's trajectory.



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Mark Epstein with his wife Jules and their two sons, Max and Nik.

"When we were growing up, each summer our family would attend the American Natural Hygiene Society (ANHS) conferences," says Mark. "It was great to go when we were little, since we could play with other kids who ate the same way that we did. My father always talked about his wonderful summers at Camp Hygiology and their magnificent organic gardens, and my sisters and I were able to go to ANHS summer camps in the early 1970s."

Given his upbringing, love of good food, and desire for a health-minded community, Mark bought a popular restaurant-performance space in Chicago in the early 1990s called Café Voltaire, while working toward his doctorate in computer science at the University of Chicago. During this time, he became deeply influenced by John Peterson, a produce supplier for the café and owner of Angelic Organics; John was also an early adopter of the burgeoning CSA movement (and star of the popular documentary, *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*).

"Growing food was in my blood, from my grandmothers, through my father, and on to me, and being able to go out and spend time at Angelic Organics rekindled my memory of that," Mark recalls.

Mark loved the fresh herbs and vegetables they grew

but also the passionate public engagement the farm cultivated. They were intertwined to him. Visiting Angelic Organics, and seeing the community that sprouted up among CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) subscribers and the land where all those beautiful vegetables grew, Mark began to see this model as something he wanted to create in his own life and on his own land.

Flow Farm

Originally, buying five acres in Aberdeen, North Carolina (close to the famous Pinehurst golf resort community), Mark intended to do some gardening and see where it led. At first, he just enjoyed being in a more relaxed setting and getting his hands in the dirt after years of day-trading behind a computer screen. But after he married Julia Latham in 2004 and they had their first son, the couple began the transition from their busy Chicago life to residing in North Carolina full-time. Their second child was born in 2008 and has only known the Aberdeen farmstead as the family's home.

As Mark's interest in growing food deepened, his gardening became more ambitious and less of a hobby. Over the years, since his original purchase, 10 additional acres were added as land became more available; and it was during this time that Mark became serious about studying soil.

"Our natural soil is very sandy, with a layer of hard-packed clay about three inches below it," says Mark. "Our pine forest ecosystem does well with this acidic and sandy soil, but growing healthy vegetables isn't so easy. The agriculture in this region for the past hundred years or so, since they logged most of the pines, has been tobacco,

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peaches, and livestock."

The farmstead became known as "Flow Farm," and while the area around it is pristine (as it has not been logged in the last century), the larger Moore County has seen significant damage, particularly in the more rural areas. Panning out, the entire state of North Carolina is reeling from the hazardous ecological and health consequences of the more than 6,500 concentrated animal feeding operations that have created severe water and air pollution problems.

The veganic growing practices and philosophy of Flow Farm stand in stark contrast to the heavy footprint of industrialized agriculture, and Mark is proud to be an early adopter of this approach

of gentle, non-exploitative, and nourishing stewardship. Veganic growing uses none of the animal products that are so pervasive in agriculture, even organic agriculture, such as blood meal, bone meal and animal waste. Instead, Mark enriches the soil of Flow Farm using veganic methods.

"For me and my family, I have a desire to grow really healthy food, and I use a blend of science, art, and intuition to design our farming techniques," says Mark. "We started with largely depleted, acidic, sandy soil, because that's what's naturally found in a pine forest ecosystem that gets lots of rain. The main things I needed for my soil were organic matter, nutrients, and minerals, and I knew that if I added those things, then the soil organisms would be provided by nature."

Mark hit the books, and started researching and implementing what he was learning. Through a series of successes and failures, he has learned how to best nurture his land, which started by building a welcoming soil. By bringing in azomite powder from Utah and kelp seaweed meal from the coast of Maine, he boosted the trace mineral content. Additionally, a wide range of amendments were added to give the soil environment access to all of the nutrients in quantities that were both abundant and bal-



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Nurturing the land started with building a welcoming soil.



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Baby cucumbers are one of the Epstein family's favorite vegetables.



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Mark Epstein believes there is something wonderful about how potatoes grow.

anced so it would no longer be acidic and the Flow Farm plants could thrive. They grew cover crops for several years to address the organic matter and carbon needs of healthy soil. Perhaps most significantly, they also learned about biochar and built a special kiln to produce it themselves.

"My research and work with soil was born of the realization that our naturally occurring soil presented so many challenges," says Mark. "In this case, necessity was the mother of invention. If we were going to make our farm a success and grow the healthiest and most nutritious food possible, we were going to have to drastically improve the quality of our soil. I read a lot of books and articles, and I think the key moment was when I first heard of biochar in 2009."

Biochar is the result of heating organic matter, in this case, wood, to high temperatures in the absence of oxygen. This "cooking" of the wood (rather than "combusting" it) through a process called *pyrolysis*, produces a type of very stable carbon with mineral residues, resulting in biochar that is an excellent addition to the soil, one that provides a great home for soil microorganisms, and holds on to moisture and minerals. Flow Farm biochar is made from local trees, typically landscaping and forest wood waste, and is produced onsite in an artisan kiln, a process that they've been refining since 2009.


Sharing the Love

This June marks the first season that Flow Farm began selling its food through its Farm to Friends subscription program, where local families get a share of the harvest each week. They are focusing on growing produce for home chefs and local food enthusiasts who have an appreciation for their unique, carefully cultivated fruits and vegetables. Their crops this year include asparagus, pota-

atoes, cucumbers, beans, carrots, lettuce, basil, okra, pears, blackberries, raspberries, kale, collards, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, melons, sweet potatoes, strawberries, watermelons, Jerusalem artichokes, summer and winter squash, and more.

"I love growing potatoes, and my personal favorites are the Purple Peruvian, Russet Burbank, and King Edward varieties," says Mark. "There is something wonderful about how potatoes grow, and I really enjoy harvesting them. The same goes for sweet pota-

atoes. Tomatoes, like Lemon Drop and Kellogg's Breakfast, are so amazingly delicious, and Aunt Molly's Ground Cherries are a family favorite. I also love baby cucumbers and baby kale. But, really, I love everything we grow."

From island living in Florida to day-trading in Chicago, Mark is now settled in North Carolina, getting his hands dirty for a good cause. His passion for whole foods, community building, and getting his hands in the soil reveal his strong roots in a family that embraced the Natural Hygiene lifestyle. There is no telling where Flow Farm will go next, from building its local Farm to Friends subscription service and selling their delicious produce to restaurants, to making their biochar available to growers around the world and hosting veganic farming workshops and interns; and maybe even a vegan B&B! But we do know that Flow Farm will be helping to create a cleaner and healthier North Carolina and, by extension, the planet. (For more information, visit: www.Flow.Farm) 



Marla Rose is an award-nominated journalist, author, event planner and activist based in the Chicago area. She and her husband were named Mercy for Animals' Activists of the Year in 2009 and are cofounders of Chicago VeganMania, the largest free vegan festival

of its kind in the region, also since 2009. She is co-founder of Vegan Street, a website dedicated to fostering and building vegan culture, community and resources, and Vegan Street Media and Consulting, which creates smart, effective and professional communications for compassionate businesses and non-profits.