Passages

Sustainable Food and Farming Systems

Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture

Serving the Community of Sustainable Farmers, Consumers and Businesses Throughout Pennsylvania and Beyond

Number 77 March/April 2009

BUSINESS MEMBER PROFILE

The Organic Mechanics Soil Company LLC

Greening the Garden

Mark Highland of The Organic Mechanics Soil Company LLC works in his garden. He believes environmental sustainability is a core value of his business.

By Michelle Isham, PASA Member

Great plants start with great soil. That's the philosophy behind Organic Mechanics Soil Company LLC, a West Chester, Pennsylvania-based company that blends specialty-potting soils for farms, wholesale nurseries and retail outlets.

"I got into horticulture and saw that everything began with the soil," said Mark Highland, president of Organic Mechanics.

Organic Mechanics Soil offers environmentally friendly peat-free potting soils blended from compost, pine bark mulch, coconut husk fiber, worm castings, rice hulls and/or perlite. Highland chose to make his product peat-free for two reasons — the negative environmental impacts of peat harvesting and shipping the peat from Canada — where the vast majority of all horticultural peat sold in the United States is harvested — to Pennsylvania.

According to Highland, despite shipping coconut fiber from Sri Lanka the environmental impact of coconut fiber is much lower than that of peat. The fibers are dried and compacted and shipped on a container ship. Once the fiber reaches the company it is reconstituted.

"When we get one container of this coconut fiber in it's like getting in five containers because it fluffs up to five times its size," explained Highland.

In addition to replacing peat with coconut fiber, Organic Mechanics Soil is working towards using rice hulls as a substitute for perlite. Perlite — a naturally occurring siliceous volcanic rock — is primarily harvested in Africa and requires further processing once it reaches the United States. The rice hulls are a byproduct of rice harvesting in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas, which shortens both the shipping and the refinement processes.

"Environmental sustainability is a core value of what we do," said Highland.

Highland became interested in soil and sustainable growing practices as a student at the University of Florida. Enrolling in the university's environmental horticulture program proved to be an eye-opening experience for the former art student.

"I found the program in environmental horticulture…and I thought, 'This sounds great.' Then I found out that horticulture is one of the most polluting industries of them all," he said.

Highland decided to combat the conventional wisdom that dictated fertilizers and pesticides were the way to lush plants. He turned his attention instead to the soil. "I fell in love with soil. I love soil," he said.

After graduating, Highland moved to Oregon and worked on an organic farm for three years before opening his own landscaping business. While working, he continued to research soil and soil amendments. Eventually he earned a master's degree from the University of Delaware, where he studied compost amended potting soils.

Highland founded the company in 2006, with just one blend of soil, the Premium Blend. The company has since developed a range of five different blends and is currently wrapping up seedling trials for a germination mix that will be available this fall.

"We think we're on to the best germination mix ever," said Highland.

Organic Mechanics Soil's formula of combining a high-quality product with environmental sustainability is working well. Highland has projected the company's sales doubling in 2009.

"We have a product that is high demand right now. Not only is it organic it's local and we're adhering to environmental principals."

Interview with Mark Highland, page 11.

The Organic Mechanics will be hosting a PASA field day on Saturday, May 30th. See page 8 for details.

2009 PASA Board

continued from page 3

ral produce for the college dining hall. As the farm manager, Jenn provides students with hands-on training in sustainable food production and supports faculty and students with research and internships. In addition to raising 5 acres of vegetables, herbs and cut flowers, the Dickinson College Farm maintains a flock of sheep for meat production and multiple solar applications for farm-based energy needs.

Jenn was first elected to the PASA board in 2006. She has been actively farming since 1997 and is committed to supporting local food systems through education, outreach and community organizing. She serves on the Membership and Conference Planning Committees and is chairperson of the Educational Outreach Committee.

"I am honored to continue as a board member. I have great respect for PASA and remain motivated and committed to building the organization in ways that support farmers and eaters."

Brian Moyer

Berks County

Brian Moyer, together with his wife, Holley, own and operate Green Haven Farm in Fleetwood. They raise pastured chickens and turkeys, sheep, pigs, and meat goats. The Moyers started with pastured poultry to create a cash flow in order to build other livestock enterprises, which has led to their current diversified 27-acre farm. They've used multi-species grazing to reclaim land while at the same time creating a product line that allowed them to begin farming on a limited budget. They market their products through four CSA's, farmers' markets and restaurants as well as direct sales from the farm. They are founders of the Skippack Farmers' Market. Brian is also Vice President of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association (APPPA.)

Brian was initially elected to the PASA board in 2003 and currently serves as vice president. He chairs the Leadership Development Committee, which helps identify potential board members through work with Regional Advisory committees, and co-chairs the Conference Planning Committee. Brian regularly gives presentations to various groups about PASA and sustainable agriculture.

"Serving on the PASA board has been as challenging, rewarding and humbling as any of my farming endeavors. I welcome the challenge of helping PASA grow with the hopes that the future harvest of that growth is more profitable farmers working the land providing healthy food for all people while respecting the natural environment."

Kim Seeley

Bradford County

Kim Seeley is a dairy farmer/processor who, with his family, runs Milky Way Farms in Troy. Kim received a B.S. in Agricultural Economics from Penn State. After operating a dairy confinement system, Kim changed approaches due to general frustration and concerns over herd, customer, and farmers' health. Milky Way is now a fresh grass, dry hay based system. The herd is rotationally grazed and was created on-farm by cross-breeding seven purebred dairy breeds over 18 years. The Seeleys produce milk, ice cream, cheese, and butter. In addition to selling retail, the farm provides the Pennsylvania College of Technology with all of their fluid milk.

Kim joined the PASA board in 1999 and currently serves as President. He co-founded the Northern Tier Sustainable Meat Co-op, which sells to the Pennsylvania College of Technology and other local restaurants. He volunteered on his local Dairy Promotion Board including serving as board President.

"I am very impatient with the current erosion of farmers from the Pennsylvania landscape and am eager to show fellow farmers and agribusiness people positive and credible solutions to current food and farm problems. PASA's mission is very important to me, and I intend to help PASA lead the way to a new food system, without delay." ■

Editor's Note: Board officer elections were recently held for two positions at the March meeting. Kim Seeley and Brian Moyer were re-elected as President and Vice President respectively.

INTERVIEW WITH MARK HIGHLAND *continued from page 1*

■ **What is unique about your business/organization?** We make organic, peat-free potting soil in Chester County, PA. We embrace environmental sustainability as a core value. Mark Highland, aka The Organic Mechanic, founded this company in 2006 after researching potting soil science for almost 10 years. Our earth-friendly potting soils are designed to increase soil biological activity and use water efficiently while supporting plant growth.

■ **What does the term "sustainable" mean to you, and how do your incorporate that into your business/organization?** Sustainable is more than existing without decreasing the ability of future generations to provide for themselves. Sustainability is a complex system

To reduce our carbon footprint, we chose to use locally made composts instead of peat. We use bio-diesel in our trucks and equipment, wind for power, and recycled packaging whenever possible.

■ **What do you see as some of the critical issues facing ag and ag-related businesses today?** Affordability, land, lines of credit, access to markets, fuel costs, centralized distribution

■ **What do you see as the connection between sustainable ag and the consumer?** We all have to eat food, drink water and breathe air. Without eco-system services to provide those elements of our existence, none of us would survive very long. People think water comes from the city or aquifer, and air just is. Food however, is a different story. Everyone has to eat, and food makes people happy. Let me clarify that; good food, healthy food makes people happy.

I think sustainable agriculture will resonate with consumers, especially in the context of community. Local, fresh foods look and taste better, but consumers are beginning to understand they vote with their dollars. As a consumer, I like my money to go to people, real people I know or have said hello to, and not a uninterested person working a register at a job they dislike. It's the engagement of community in conversation, making friends, or at least knowing you are helping support the greater good in some small way. It takes 1,000s to make a difference, but I think with time, the majority of consumers will be won over on food quality. If it tastes better and is more nutritious, what's not to love? ■