

IN THE GARDEN WITH SHAMBANI ORGANICS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER JEWELL

The road to Shambani Organics is as beautiful a northern California road as I have driven. You come across the rock strewn valley floor grassland at the foot of the Mt. Lassen wilderness area. After a twisting rise into the foothills, a pair of enormous old gnarled black walnut trees marks the entrance to the farm. Two Queensland Heelers wag all around. The wooden house sets into the land as it slopes away toward natural woodland and a year-round creek. A view from the top of the farm looks out over a small orchard, the two white greenhouses, and a field garden green with spring crops, then across the tops of oaks to the patchwork valley floor and the coastal mountains spreading along the horizon. A creek sings, still fat with recent rains.

Shambani Organics is a small, family-owned and operated business growing organic vegetable and herb starts on this three and a half acre farm in the foothills between Manton and Shingletown. Laurie and Wayne Kessler began the business in 2006, after two rotations as Peace Corps volunteers in Eritrea in the 1960s and mid-1990s and years in between when Wayne was a portrait photographer.

“When we returned home to California in 2002 [after their second Peace Corps assignment], people thought we were retired,” Laurie told me laughing, “and we told them, ‘no we’re unemployed.’” This most recent re-entry into American life gave them pause. Not ready to retire and wanting to continue working for peace and self-sufficiency, they researched several possibilities, including a community access kitchen, but Wayne had always been a gardener, and as the very layout of their farm suggests, they already tended fruits



and vegetables themselves. Then they met John and Colene Trinterud of Peaceful Glen Organics in Mendocino County’s Round Valley.

Peaceful Glen attracted Wayne and Laurie because the Trinteruds were living their work, eating eggs, honey, vegetables, and fruit from their labor, and their work encouraged others to do the same. Not just “do no harm,” but the work helped to support community and sustainability for birds, bees, plants, and people. After working in the Trinteruds’ greenhouse for some time, the Kesslers both came to realize

that this is how they wanted their work to feel: seasonal, rhythmic, nurturing, and in the soil, with an end-product of helping others to want and learn to grow their own food. In the tradition of Wendell Berry and others, Wayne and Laurie see growing our own food as the way to connect ourselves to our environment, realize and contribute to healthy soils and clear air and water, reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, and recognize our interdependence in producing everything from seed to compost to clean water to fruits and vegetables. Starting with a sixpack of starts, the Kesslers know we can grow independence, understanding, *and* food to feed our bodies and minds.

Now in its third growing season, Shambani Organics has two cheerful gleaming white greenhouses and a large shade structure house for hardening seedlings off and for cold-hardy and summer starts. They earned California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) certification, and in 2007 their son Colin returned from five years working with the military in Germany to join the business. He and his partner Jenn live on the farm as well, and she, a local teacher, helps part-time



as needed. The Kesslers grow dozens of varieties of spring, summer, fall, and winter vegetable and herb starts from organic, open-pollinated, uncoated seeds that they research and purchase from a variety of seed companies, including Territorial Seed, Peaceful Valley Seeds, and Seeds of Change. They are excited about working toward a cooperative locally-adapted seed-referral and seed-share program, and towards that end, they follow the Shasta County Seed Savers group and others.

In growing and selling vegetable and herb starts rather than vegetables or herbs, the Kesslers get to enjoy the transformation from seed to sprout and revel in the diversity of herb and vegetable varieties they can work with at the same time as they teach people to know, grow, eat and enjoy their own high quality, delicious tasting and lovely-to-look-at food. Rather than sell produce, the Kesslers want to provide others with the empowering sense of nurturing and growing the food on their plates.

Their goal makes that clear: “The goal of Shambani Organics is to be a viable business that both meets our own personal goals of sustainability and promotes home-gardening for others,” Colin told me. “Selling high quality herb and vegetable starts helps other people begin home-gardening. It helps people who already have vegetable gardens to increase

the diversity in their garden and to extend their growing season,” he pointed out, emphasizing year-round gardening. “One of the important aspects of home vegetable, herb, and fruit growing is that it allows us—all of us—to control our own food supply,” Wayne added, “which is a big step toward independence.”

Wayne’s advice for getting started on home vegetable growing: “Choose a few varieties that you really like—perhaps things that are easy to preserve in some way: drying, canning, or freezing. And don’t start too big—you could even start in containers on your deck. Start simple, and once you’ve got the hang of it, then expand.” Besides starting small, Wayne emphasizes growing your own vegetables, herbs, and fruits as easily as you can. “Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed,” he urges. “Use labor saving devices such as ground covers or good mulches to reduce your garden’s need for water; invest in automatic irrigation, from a soaker hose on a timer to a full-fledged underground drip system with a smart-clock. Work in compact areas so it is easier and more time-efficient to weed, water, and feed your garden. And add good, organic compost to your soil.”

Of course the point of all of Wayne’s tips for growing a vegetable garden is aimed at helping the gardener succeed, because if you don’t have fun doing it, and it is too hard,

you won't continue. Wayne is the quintessential garden mentor—his voice is melodious and soft, his face is kind, and his words never seem to lecture; rather they are encouraging and nurturing. "A green thumb is nothing more than dirty fingernails," he says wryly, in a way that would give hope to even the most hesitant of beginning gardeners.

Wayne teaches vegetable gardening workshops at nurseries such as Bracken Garden Center in Redding and at special events such as spring and fall workshops sponsored by People of Progress in Redding. All three Kesslers point out in one way or another that it might be counter-intuitive from a business standpoint to teach other people to do what they themselves are doing—but their strategy works in their favor in the long run, providing them with more sophisticated, informed, confident, and happy customers.

Over the years of coming and going from this, their home base, the Kesslers have formed a web of relationships with

other gardeners and growers in the area. Their neighbors raise llamas organically, and the Kesslers use the composted llama manure on their home field crops. They swap the extra produce they raise in their home garden with friends down the valley who have a large flock of chickens and provide the Kesslers with eggs. Now the Kesslers are starting their own flocks of chickens and turkeys and expanding into seed-saving.

In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan cites Claude Levi-Strauss's statement that food should be "not only good to eat, but also good to think." Shambani Organics vegetable starts both grow into good food and promote good thinking as gardeners become pro-actively and cooperatively involved in their own world and choices. Growing food and nurturing both relationships and the environment are at the very strong and healthy, lovely and delicious root of this vegetable and herb seedling business. Shambani is the Swahili word meaning In the Garden—and if Wayne, Laurie, and Colin Kessler are successful, that's just where you and I will be, year-round. 🌱

You can hear Jennifer Jewell's series of garden profiles, In a Northstate Garden, on KCHO 91.7 in Chico and KFPR 88.9 in Redding on Saturday and Sunday morning. For more information or to read more of her garden writing visit jewellgarden.com.

SHAMBANI INFORMATION

Shambani Organics starts its season the first week of January, sowing seeds in the greenhouse for perennial herbs and all the early greens such as lettuces, chard and kale; varieties of peas; onion and garlic starts; and brassicas, including broccoli, cauliflower, brussell sprouts, cabbages. These are sold in the very early spring and are available in September and October for fall and winter gardening. For later spring and summer gardens they grow many tomato varieties including red, yellow and purple, cherry-tomatoes and many heirlooms; peppers, eggplant, squash, cucumbers, melons, beans, corn, okra, and herbs including basil, oregano, French tarragon, bulb fennel, and dill. Besides the starts they grow regularly, the Kesslers are happy to take custom orders. They are also available for consultations to design and get your garden started or to improve an existing garden's efficiency and productivity.

Shambani Organics seedlings can be found at the Chico Farmers Market in the very early spring, the Redding Farmers Market in April and May, Siskiyou Farmers Market in June, and at area nurseries including Wyntour Gardens, Bracken Garden Center, and Creekside Gardens in Redding, Upcountry Gardens in Shingletown, and at Happy Valley Nursery. You can also contact the Kesslers directly at 530.474.1646 or read more about them at shambaniorganics.com.

The Kesslers' recommended books for vegetable gardening in the Northstate include Steve Solomon's *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades* and Brenda Little's *The Practical Organic Gardener*.



Chico Grange #486
**Promotes Local Agriculture,
Environmental Stewardship,
and a Vibrant Community.**

*Come join us. Meetings 3rd Monday of each month.
Potluck at 5:30 ~ Meeting at 6:30. 2275 Nord Ave.*

Have Your Next Event in Our Beautiful Hall

*Take a look at www.chicogrango.org
Call 895.1976 for rental information*



Upcountry Gardens
A mountain nursery & gift shop

**A bit out of the way but worth the trip!
An old lumber mill pond and tall pine trees
make a beautiful backdrop for the nursery.
A great selection of plants & trees not commonly
found in other nurseries. Give us a call!**

31874 Hwy 44 Shingletown CA
530-474-3240

Spring & Summer Hours:
Mon-Sat 9-5 Sun 11-3