

Back to Earth

Tom Berndt



ORGANIC MAN Ray Nielsen of Green World Path consults and makes and distributes organic products worldwide.

- With housing all but dead and one out of 12 workers jobless, Tampa Bay's northernmost county is seeking – and finding – ways to keep its economy growing.

If Ray Nielsen had his way, there'd be organically grown vegetables sprouting anywhere they could – in small backyard plots, on rooftops, in window boxes. He'd like to see a surge of present-day versions of World War II "Victory Gardens," when homeowners were encouraged to plant small gardens to up the nation's food supply.

For 37 years Nielsen has preached all things green, organic and natural. The 73-year-old helped write the national organic certification standards into law in 2002, and he's taken his message around the globe, from Canada to Taiwan.



Now Nielsen has purchased nine acres of land in Hernando County to take his ideas about nurturing plants and controlling pests to a new level. He and a staff of 10 run Green World Path, a new 17,000-square-foot manufacturing and distribution center for organic products like Plant's Best Defense, WaterLawnLess and Grower's Dream Team.

Organic farming, he says, is a high-tech growth industry.

"We're importing organic food in this country because we can't keep up with the demand," says Nielsen, who has a degree in soil science and animal science. At one time he says he had a 2,000-acre farm in Michigan and several hundred acres in southern Florida that he gradually turned organic.

He cites statistics from the Organic Trade Association: U.S. sales of organic food and beverages grew from \$1-billion in 1990 to an estimated \$20-billion in 2007, with continued growth expected at 20 percent a year.

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“The airport’s been a sleeping giant. In the last five years it’s really kicked in, with a whole lot more to come.”

*—James Kimbrough
Chairman and CEO
SunTrust Bank*

Nielsen and his crew blend, ferment and compound natural soil bacteria and fungi, essential oils and complex carbohydrates to create a rich brew of high-energy plant food. “Organics is all about prevention,” he says. “You build up the plant so it can protect itself from pests.”

Nielsen says his passion for organic farming stems from seeing first hand the other side of the story – what man-made chemicals do to the soil.

“I want to teach everyone we can to learn how to grow food with a high vitamin and mineral content that is profitable for the grower, good for the community and is sustainable,” says Nielsen.

He’s begun a series of free organic gardening classes at Green World Path and hopes each year to repeat the success of his day-long company open house in June, when 500 people came to sample organic food and wine and learn organic growing tips from various experts. He’s also redesigning his Web site (www.greenworldpath.com) as the “go-to” place about everything related to organic gardening.

The company is about to launch a six-foot hydroponic unit that allows plants to grow vertically in the air using liquid nutrients rather than soil.

“You can grow 10 times more food in the same space this way,” says Nielsen.