

## Down-to-earth energy

**Organic farmer Colleen Thornhill and her family attribute their glowing good health to their diet of pesticide-free vegetables and fruit**

Story **LINDA SHAW**  
Pictures **RUVAN BOSHOFF**

**W**e're gazing with admiration at a large barrel of organic compost. "Just put your hand in and feel how wonderfully warm it is." Organic vegetable farmer Colleen Thornhill is not joking. She takes my hand and plunges it into a two-metre pile of horse manure.

"Now smell your hand." To my utter astonishment, it smells like a bed of flowers.

Then it's on to the lettuces — huge, fluffy piles of greenery. And not so much as a snail bite out of any of them.

"Healthy plants, like healthy people, don't get sick," says Colleen. "What I have difficulty in understanding is that man left it up to the universe to give him nature — and then decided he could improve on it. The arrogance of that never ceases to astound me. If you just look at the veld, you'll notice the flowers, plants and trees manage to flourish and grow — without pesticide."

Colleen's theory is this: growing organically simply means growing in harmony with nature. By feeding the soil — not the plant — the soil micro-life balances the plant's nutrient requirements, and the two feed each other. In the meanwhile, the soil is aerated, oxygen is generated and evaporation is reduced. Healthy plants are able to grow free of pests and diseases.

Insects only attack ailing plants, she says. Healthy plants are ones that grow in healthy soil. And healthy soil is kept that way with organic compost.

The results are there for all to see. Colleen grows the kind of vegetables never found in even the most upmarket of supermarkets. And, as she points out, "the taste is miraculous and the nutrient value is 100 percent higher."

So how difficult is all this really? An organic garden, sufficient to supply the needs of a four-member family, can be grown on a section of the miniature square lawn found in the front of any townhouse, says Colleen. Organic compost can be made in the kitchen, with leftover vegetable peels and bits of old newspaper.

Nevertheless, as with anything natural, most of us have moved too far from our roots, we have to be shown the way back — step by step.

This is why Colleen started OAASA — the organic Agricultural Association of South Africa. She is dedicated to a cause — a woman who has found a way to happiness and health and who wants to share it. "I'm not interested in selling my vegetables. My focus is working towards slowly changing the collective psyche. I want people to become aware of the value of recycling, and to understand that they don't have to be dependent on the system to live a full life.

"There's nothing more wonderful than feeling in control of your life. And one of the first ways to achieve that is to know you can feed yourself."

OAASA is a non-profit organisation with some 500 members from around the country. "Some of the members, like the ones in Tzaneen, grow to sell. And of course, since we can't all grow all the different types of fruit and vegetables, we often sell to each other. But what we're most interested in is creating an official forum to communicate with the Government, a national network of like-minded people.

Colleen has also, singlehandedly, set up a communication system to spread her ideas. A single phone call will result in an hour on the phone and informative free leaflets through the mail.

"I've got to the point where I am determined to be as independent as possible. I wanted to send out step-by-step information leaflets, so I learned to silk-screen. I wanted to write a journal, so I learned to write. I had to illustrate the

journal so I taught myself to draw and do layout.

"I realised my vegetables needed a cover to protect them from the weather, the birds and the dogs — so I designed and patented one myself. Today I manufacture them here. They're very light and transportable, and come in a variety of sizes.

"But mainly, I want to stir up interest. I want people to ask questions and disagree with the responses. Our planet needs our help. And our bodies are begging us to treat them with a little respect. And the beauty of it is, it really doesn't take that much to give them what they want."

Colleen herself has been through a slow and systematic lifestyle change over some 20 years. "One thing I have to say for myself is, when I do something, I give it everything I've got. So, in my twenties, I was as decadent as anyone else. I drank, smoked, behaved like a lunatic and gave no thought to tomorrow.

"I wasn't unique. We all took it for granted that waking up in the morning meant nausea, grogginess, maybe a hangover, and almost certainly a headache. That was normal for us."

Colleen would probably never have thought any differently had it not been for her nagging sinusitis. "It got so bad, I was even willing to change some of my bad habits. So I started slowly. I gave up red meat, then, much later, dairy products, then white meat ... and so on. I even gave up smoking, which was the hardest of all."

Today, Colleen's diet is 90 percent raw fruit and vegetables and 10 percent cooked vegetables.

"People ask me if I feel deprived, and that really amuses me. Now I wake up feeling like a person. I'm full of energy, and joy — ready for the day. I don't get depressed, and I never get sick. I don't have medical aid because I don't need it. My children have never taken antibiotics or had their teeth filled. And they've never, ever been to a doctor."

Ah yes. What of the children?

Here we have 19-year-old twins — Lisa and Tammy — who are so glowing with health and youthful vitality that neither looks a day over 13.

Says Colleen: "I was still in my twenties when I became a single parent of twins. And I realised very quickly how much I needed to rely on — and cultivate — my own resources.

"One thing was certain. If I was going to survive single parenthood, twins and a full-time job, I would have to be healthy. For me, there was no choice."

Colleen has remarried. Her husband spends as much time in the family vegetable garden as his work allows. "I never forced either my children or my husband to join my crusade," she says. "I just gave them the information, so they were able to decide for themselves."



Colleen and her 19-year-old twins Tammy and Lisa. They have never been to a doctor or taken antibiotics in their lives

Tammy, a gorgeous, friendly young girl laughs: "We've seen first hand how much damage all these poisons can cause. When my mother gave up smoking, for instance, our lives were hell. She was impossible to live with for weeks. You can't get a clearer message than that."

A relaxed and beautiful Lisa confirms: "Today, when I watch people wheel their shopping trolleys past me in a supermarket, all I see is piles of tartrazine and dead animals." And yes, their friends think they're weird.

But as Colleen says: "I don't want them to feel deprived of anything. I want them to experience life in all its facets. But I need them to know that every decision they make is a personal choice — and each choice has its consequences.

"If you want to drink a bottle of whisky, you will suffer the next day. And in the long term, your body will begin to protest in a more lasting way. Everyone needs to know that a lifestyle choice is theirs."

"I'm just very glad and very lucky my girls have come to think the way I do."

So what is life like for a family that does few of the things other people do?

"Yes, maybe we are a bit insular. My husband and I find it difficult to go to a party where everyone's smoking and shoving bits of fatty meat into their mouths. As the body gets healthier, it becomes increasingly sensitive. All the pollutants — noise, smoke, even deodorant spray — become hard to take. Even a shopping spree can feel like a personal attack.

"So, yes, maybe we've made ourselves unfit for the world. But what we're hoping and praying, is that, slowly but surely, the world will realise how much it's missing. And it will make that tiny bit of extra effort to save itself from any more pain." □

For further information, contact Colleen Thornhill at (011) 464-1511 or 464-1742.

Vegetarian  
Colleen  
Thornhill  
strives to exist  
in harmony  
with nature