

New Organics Minor to be Offered by Horticultural Sciences Department  
By: Jennifer Klee

GAINESVILLE, Fla.— As more and more consumers are switching to organic produce, the University of Florida Department of Horticultural Sciences has decided to offer a brand new undergraduate minor in organic and sustainable crop production.

The minor is the first of its kind in the state of Florida. It will consist of 15 credits, with some classes that can be used towards the minor being offered as soon as the spring of 2006.

The faculty and staff are currently planning this new minor as a result of many students asking for specific classes on organic food that until now were not offered to UF students.

“There are a lot of students on campus from different majors that are interested in learning more about organic fruits and vegetables, and there are currently no specific classes being offered on them,” said Melissa Webb, the horticultural sciences academic coordinator.

According to a recent USDA report on the consumer sales and growth rates of organic foods, the organics industry is increasing at a rate of almost 20 percent a year.

While organic food sales still only amount to about 2 percent of the total food retail sales in the United States, UF feels there is a genuine interest about organic crops in the student population.

The minor will bring about the debut of a brand new class to the department called Organic and Sustainable Crop Production. This class will be part of the core, or required, classes that will be taught for the first time in the fall of 2006. The other core

class, Alternative Cropping Systems, has been taught in the past, and will be modified for the minor.

To fulfill the rest of the 15-credit requirement, students will be able to choose classes from three broad areas-- Crop Production, Pest Management, and Resource Management.

The department has already lined up prospective faculty members to teach the new courses, and it is working on advertising the new minor. They are especially targeting non-horticultural sciences students who have an interest in organic food.

Heidi Liljedahl, a 19-year-old UF sophomore who is studying advertising, has a special interest in organic food, and is considering taking some classes in the new minor.

“I go out of my way to shop for organic food and spend a little extra for it, both for the taste and the knowledge that I'm not eating antibiotics or pesticides,” said Liljedahl. “It would be really awesome if people are interested in this minor.”

The horticultural sciences faculty is hoping to attract non-majors like Liljedahl who eat organic food and are interested in learning how organic foods are processed.

“There is a lot of consumer and public interest because [the organics industry] is touted as pesticide free,” said professor Rebecca Darnell, the assistant chairperson of the department. “We have students who have asked if the program will be available. We just need to get the word out [about the minor] and we're ready to go.”

Danielle Treadwell, an assistant professor specializing in organic and sustainable vegetable crop production, said that there are several misconceptions when it comes to what encompasses organic foods.

“Organic is a production philosophy that focuses on soil quality as the means of production for crop quality,” said Treadwell. “It’s all about environmental preservation on a big scale.”

Treadwell also noted that all organic crops prohibit the use of synthetic products in production. All pesticides used on organic crops must be approved and using nonrenewable resources on the crops is not encouraged, she added.

“The horticultural sciences faculty is very excited about the new curriculum in organic production,” said Treadwell. “We look forward to preparing the UF students to be leaders in a very dynamic agricultural industry.”

The department will begin a mass advertising campaign for the major in the spring when fall registration opens up to students. Sign-up for the minor has already begun, and Melissa Webb has asked that all interested students stop by her office at 1515 Fifield Hall to learn more.

“We’re hoping to get at least 50 students and then have it develop into a major,” said Webb.