

Polk Growers Not Concerned

With Wal-Mart Venturing Into Organic Arena

By [Kyle Kennedy](#)

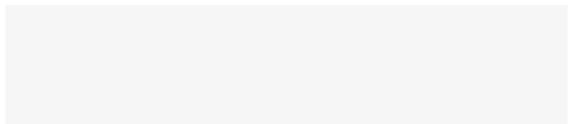
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AUBURNDALE | Wal-Mart is expanding its reach into the organic food business, and Rodger Bilbrey is neither concerned nor surprised.

Consumer interest in organics has shown no sign of slowing, and Bilbrey has all the



business he can handle at his organically grown produce farm in Auburndale, where 35 members pay an annual fee for fresh lettuce, eggplant, kale and other items.

"Our membership is full. We actually have a waiting list of about 20 people right now who would love to get in for next year," said Bilbrey, co-owner of Bilbrey Family Farm. "It definitely has grown."

Earlier this month Wal-Mart announced a new venture with the Wild Oats company that will broaden Wal-Mart's selection of organic foods. The retail giant says its products will be competitively priced with other organic brands, "removing the price premium associated with organic groceries." At the same time, Target is rolling out a new line of natural and organic products as part of its "Made to Matter" collection.



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Local organic farmer Rodger Bilbrey uses a rototiller to weed at the Bilbrey Family Farm in Auburndale on Wednesday. Below, Bilbrey shows the inside of a watermelon radish at the farm. Nationally, organic food sales increased from about \$11 billion in 2004 to an estimated \$28 billion in 2012.

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The reaction from organic growers in Polk?

"I think it's probably a good thing," said Gil Daigneau, who runs Go Natural Organics, a farming cooperative on Dewitt Drive in Lakeland. "It's obviously an indicator of demand, because Wal-Mart doesn't do anything unless they thoroughly analyze it. In my opinion, there can't be too much good food produced, regardless of who does it."

Loosely defined, organic food is that which is produced without the use of most conventional pesticides, as well as chemical additives or fertilizers.

Nationally, organic food sales increased from about \$11 billion in 2004 to an estimated \$28 billion in 2012, according to a report by the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. Organics accounted for more than 4 percent of total at-home food sales in 2012, and that figure is expected to grow considerably in the years ahead.

A 2013 survey by the Organic Trade Association found that 81 percent of U.S.

families buy organic products "at least sometimes."

"There's a growing awareness of how serious it is — how chemicals can affect people in their diet," said Peggy Campbell, co-owner of Barefoot Creek, a Lakeland-area business that produces organic vegetables and herbs and teaches organic gardening classes.

"We have just seen an explosion in interest since we started growing and selling," Campbell said. "We joke that we might put ourselves out of business by encouraging people to grow their own ... (but) we think there's room for everybody right now."

The organic food business did not always seem like a sure thing, Daigneau said.

"I've been doing this for about 19 years, and when I first started people didn't give a flip about it," he said. "You couldn't get people to cross the street (to buy organics) ... but now I have people coming from all over the place."

Daigneau's Go Natural Organics is a 15-acre farm that supports a clientele of about 150 people, who pick their own produce. Members pay \$100 fee that serves as a credit balance and can be replenished as desired. The offerings include tomatoes, carrots, onions and green beans.

The Organic Trade Association notes the price of organic foods is still an issue for consumers, and Bilbrey said the costs of production can be difficult for growers.

A membership at Bilbrey Family Farm typically costs about \$560, which covers a weekly allotment of produce during a 33-week period each year — averaging to \$17 for each batch.

Bilbrey and Campbell also sell vegetables at Lakeland's Downtown Farmers Curb Market.

Even as large chain retailers play a greater role in the organics business, Bilbrey said farming operations like his will always have certain advantages.

"We don't want to be one of those big conglomerates. We want to stay a small farm with a certain group of people who want what we provide," he said. "Our members know they're welcome to walk the fields anytime they want to ... they get their share of vegetables, and they know where they came from."

[Kyle Kennedy can be reached at kyle.kennedy@theledger.com or 863-802-7584.]