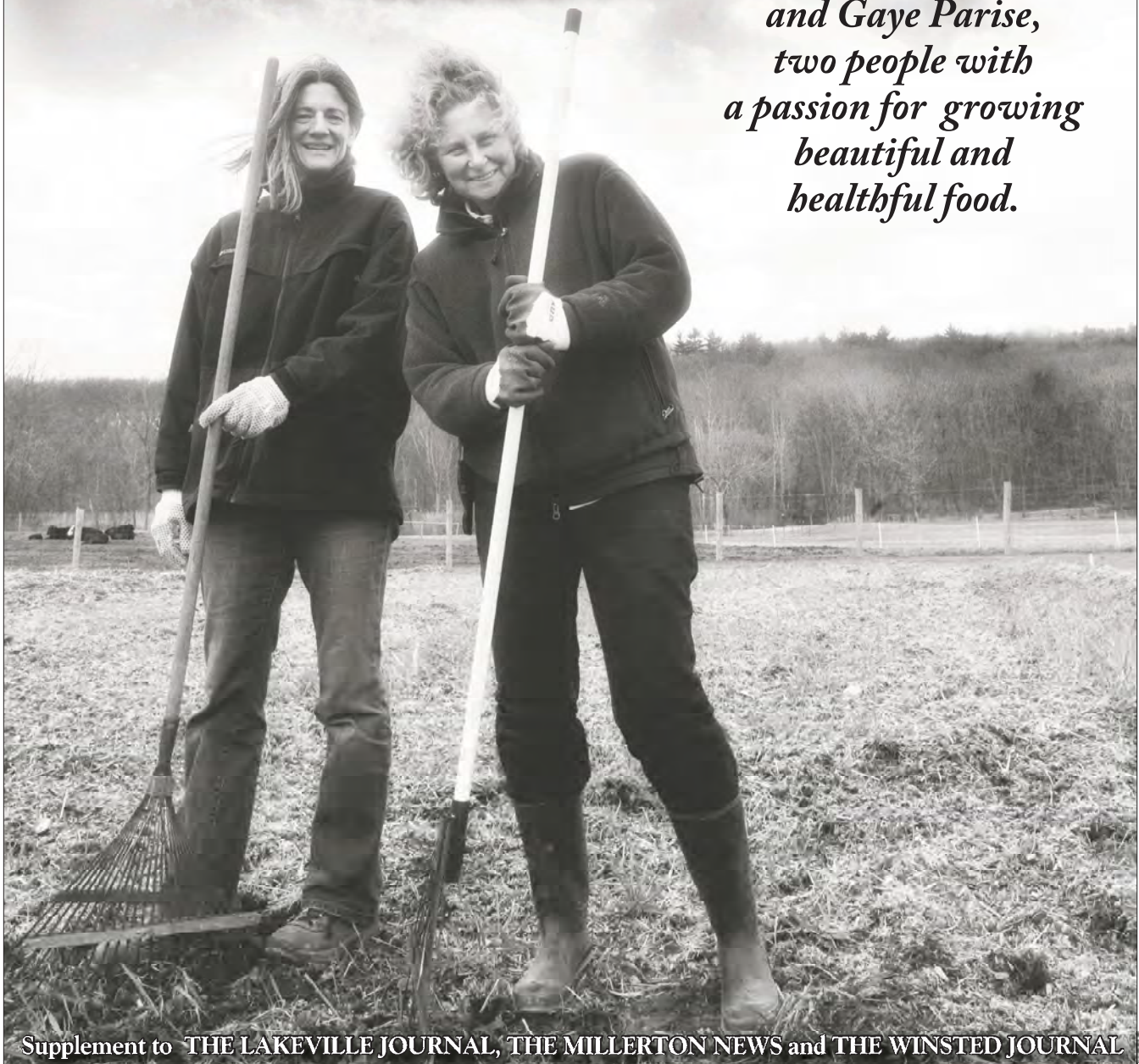


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Spring Tonic

*Peggy O'Brien
and Gaye Parise,
two people with
a passion for growing
beautiful and
healthful food.*



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Farming With a Conscience, That's a Full-time Job

On a chilly, damp day, Peggy O'Brien and Gaye Parise of Salisbury are raking the far corner of the garden plot at Twin Lakes Farm. The beef cattle in the next pasture show intermittent interest in the gardeners, sometimes pacing back and forth with them.

O'Brien and Parise have been hired by Scott and Roxanne Bok to tend the garden that supplies produce to The White Hart restaurant in Salisbury.

No chemical pesticides or fertilizers are used in the garden. O'Brien and Parise use manure compost and organic fertilizers. Companion planting helps with pest control.

"The pests that like eggplants don't like beans," O'Brien explained. She reached down into a patch covered with hay, which they use as a cover for the young plants instead of mulch—"Mulch is hugely full of junk"—to reveal green sprouts. "Our garlic is coming up already."

Most would call the garden organic, but they would be technically wrong.

"We can't really call it organic because we're not certified," O'Brien said. The USDA determines who's organic and who's not.

"You'll hear from a lot of organic farmers who disapprove of the USDA's criteria," Parise said, noting that the USDA will still grant an organic label to produce grown with certain chemical pesticides. "It's a dilution of what used to be a pristine thing."

The question of what makes something organic is one that many consumers are struggling with. O'Brien and Parise, who have been gardening organically for eight years, still have trouble navigating the organic landscape.

"It's really hard to figure out," Parise said. "You have to ask a million questions and make the best decisions. The best way is to buy local. Know your farmer."

O'Brien said she began to learn about organic gardening when she worked at the Stillpoint Community Farm in Sharon. At the time, the farm was following the principles of biodynamics, a philosophy based on the work of Rudolf Steiner that attempts to connect the ecology of the earth to the entire cosmos.

"It can be a little woo-woo," O'Brien said.

Though O'Brien didn't stick with biodynamics, she began to learn more about organic gardening.

"A lot of our food isn't as nutritious as it used to be. Once I became aware of how toxicity permeates everything, I just started to ask, 'How can you be clean?' It was an incremental kind of thing." So O'Brien grows a lot of her own food in her front yard. She also buys organic as much as possible and composts at home.

"The most important thing you can do is compost," she said.

Jennifer L. Kronholm talks with two women who are living up to their ideals



Marsden Lymouth

Peggy O'Brien and Gaye Parise, at home in Salisbury

"It's almost impossible to get truly organic compost," Parise pointed out. "You just don't know what's going into it. They get around that by heating it to high temperatures to kill anything that gets in there. I've seen commercial compost with stickers from non-organic fruit in it."

"I know my compost is organic because I only put organic food into it," O'Brien said.

"Now that organic has permeated the mainstream, I feel I have to be even more vigilant," O'Brien said. She mentioned the lax USDA standards as one problem. The practices of the companies manufacturing and distributing organic products can also be a problem.

"We were using a kelp fertilizer and then we found out the company wasn't harvesting its kelp sustainably," she said. She added she also tries to ensure the companies she buys from treat and pay their workers fairly.

This is, of course, a lot of work. And it does get overwhelming.

"Sometimes I feel I can't eat anything, I can't buy anything," O'Brien said.

"We read 'The Omnivore's Dilemma,' by Michael Pollan, and we couldn't eat for a week," Parise said.

At the end of the day, O'Brien and Parise just try to do the best they can. They buy organic seeds and organic compost, trying to use local sources. And though the plastic they use in their garden isn't organic, it is biodegradable. When they have a question about the purity of a product or the policies of a company, they research and try to make the best decision they can.

"If you don't know, find out," Parise said.

In addition to her many duties as associate editor at The Lakeville Journal, Jennifer Kronholm works part time at The White Hart.