

Country Lines: by Dean C. Young

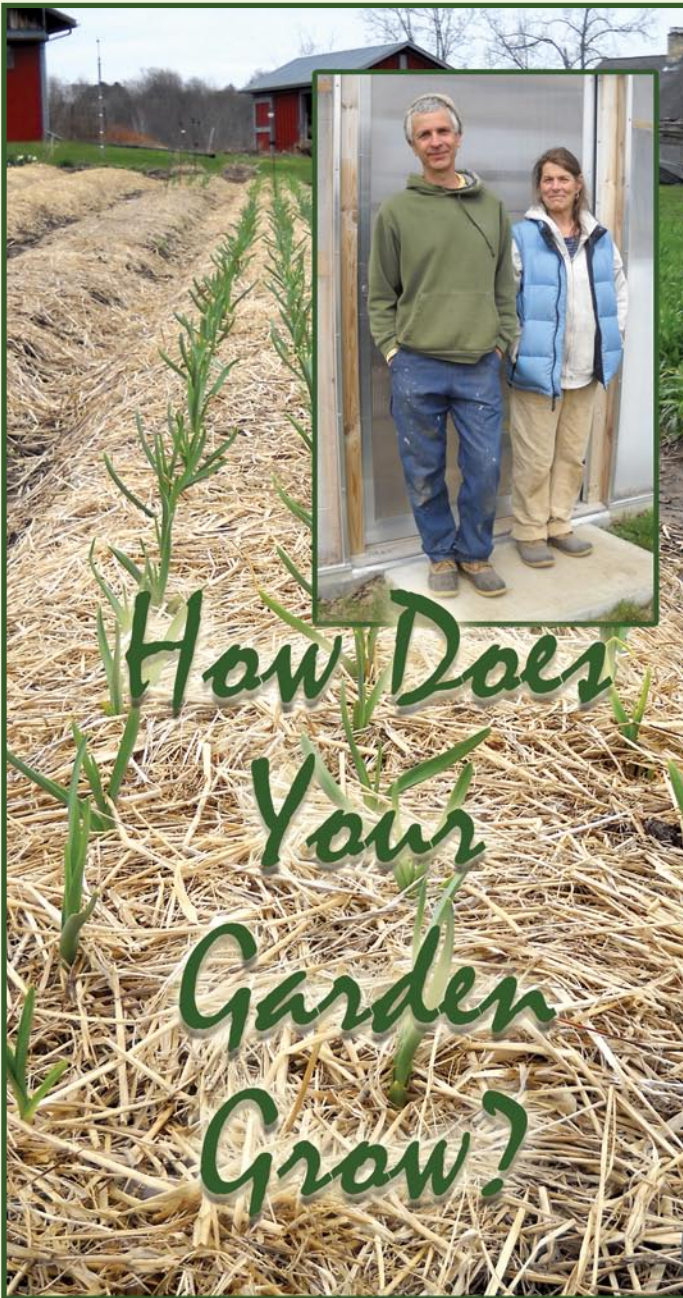
Mistress Mary might have had silver bells and cockleshells in a row of her garden, but Emily and Alejandro Puig have much more: rows upon rows of spinach, beets, radishes, peas, chard, arugula, garlic, and more. I followed the REC lines to the far northwest corner of Richland County until they ran out, or rather, ran under the ground to the Puig home and its two spacious greenhouses out back.

The first thing I noticed upon arrival was the great size of the two greenhouses that Alejandro constructed himself with a kit from New Hampshire. "I did a LOT of research," he told me, describing how not all greenhouses are created the same. Their structures vary and can make a big difference in how the houses respond to snow loads and windy days, factors most of us wouldn't think of until it was too late.

For instance, Alejandro showed me the smooth 6 millimeter UV stabilized plastic stretched across the greenhouse in one piece. Getting the plastic to stay this way depends on when you put it on the frame. "Plastic loosens when it is hot and tightens when it cools down, so when you put it on, it needs to be in moderate (70 degree) weather. Sometimes you can see (plastic covered) greenhouses that are loose all over, flapping in the wind. They were put on in the wrong temperature so when it got hot, the plastic loosened."

Alejandro had to dig at least 80 holes (by my count) with a post hole digger and place his wall poles into cement as well as keep them perfectly level so the walls were straight. Curved pieces were fitted onto the first posts, giving the walls their shape, support, and strength. Cross pieces were added for stability. It took six people to handle the plastic that would become the roof and sides of the greenhouses. "Wind is a BIG factor in this!" Alejandro laughed knowingly. Wood frames were built on the ends and an interior wall was put up to separate the growing area from the storage and cleaning areas as well as provide a place to remove muddy clothing.

My tour began in the "high house," named from its towering over the "low house." The high house is the place where warmer temperatures are needed for growing. Seed sprouting (mostly done on soil blocks), small tool storage, washing, spinning, weighing, and packaging take place in the front room that separates us from the growing area. What makes this house warmer is that it has a double layer of plastic with a layer of air in between filled by an inflation fan.





We proceeded through a doorway entering into a summer-like room. Raised beds of fine soil ripple like waves to the opposite end of the house separated by narrow footpaths that make every inch accessible for planting and picking. At the time of this article, small pieces of spinach plants were all that remained of last winter's spinach crop after it had been tilled in. Soon the beds would be worked up and replanted for the next crop. Above our heads was a network of narrow, flexible plastic tubing with small sprinklers at intervals. These are used for watering the plants and can be turned off and on individually depending on what needs to be watered. Alejandro noted, "The outside edges of the building are the wettest spots and don't require as much watering," and then added, "and we used to water it all by hand!"

Emily bent over to check a thermometer that measures the temperature of the soil, which was 60 degrees at the moment. "It's getting there," she said with some pleasure. Resting on one of the beds was a wooden contraption looking like an A-Frame without a roof. "This is a Frame Dibble," Alejandro explained. "It's a way to mark the spacing for plants rapidly by making an indentation. Then we use a trowel, make a hole, drop a block in and go to the next one."

Some of the tools for use in the greenhouses are a tilter, which creates a fine seedbed and is powered by a portable electric drill; a seeder; a broadfork to loosen soil



much like a chisel plow; hoes; wheel hoe; spading fork; rakes up to 30 inches wide; sprinklers; and late in the season, drip irrigation.

I asked what a typical day entailed. In February, the days begin later so the spinach has time to thaw. Spinach can freeze solid while it is still on the plant but will wilt if picked while frozen. Row covers have to thaw off the ground too, so it is normally between 9 and 10 a.m. when work starts. Alejandro remarked, "In February and March we usually harvest about 100 pounds of spinach a week." His eyes opened wide to emphasize, "That's picking ONE leaf at a time!"

Days can be long while straddling beds with a foot in each path and bending over, fighting gravity. Alejandro and Emily do daily exercises to keep their backs flexible and strong enough for the hours of picking. Some days can last up to 12 hours. When the spinach is all picked, it is taken to be washed three times, spin dried in mesh bags, packaged in three different sized packages, and placed in a cooler at 35 degrees. Sometimes this can mean having to warm the cooler if the winter temperatures get too cold. Most of the time, though, the automatic vents on each end of the buildings have to be open to let out some heat from the houses.

The Puigs have been organic land users since moving to their home 19 years ago, and Alejandro has been into organics since he was a boy. Though there is paperwork to fill out and regular records to keep in order to become a certified organic farmer, Alejandro and Emily feel it is worth being assured of healthy foods, grown locally

(Continued on page 29 ►)



Star-Spangled Celebration 2011

Cooperative Principle #7 – Concern For Community

While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members.

Richland Electric Cooperative (REC) has long been a believer and supporter of the 7th Cooperative principle, and it's shown every June when the Star Spangled Celebration comes to Richland Center. REC is a major sponsor of the three-day musical celebration, which routinely brings some of the best musicians and bands to entertain local fans.

It also showcases the best volunteers in the world as the Star Spangled Celebration is set up and run almost entirely by volunteers from the greater Richland and southwest Wisconsin area. This includes the REC line crew that sets poles

and hangs banners for the three-day event and other REC employees who maintain the Star Spangled website and volunteer to serve food and beverages.



Above: REC employees Dave Darling (left) and Todd Murphy (right) hang banners. Left: Nathan Friedenfels (left) and Mike Horter (right) work on the flags.

2011 Star Spangled Celebration Line-Up

Thursday, June 23

- 3:30 p.m. Gates Open
- 5:00 p.m. Marshall Star Band
- 6:45 p.m. The Band Perry
- 9:30 p.m. REO Speedwagon

Friday, June 24

- 3:00 p.m. Gates Open
- 4:00 p.m. The Briana
- Hardyman Band
- 5:45 p.m. Thompson Square
- 7:45 p.m. Chris Young
- 9:45 p.m. Eric Church

Saturday, June 25

- 11:00 a.m. Gates Open
- 12:00 p.m. Black Water Gin
- 1:45 p.m. The JaneDear Girls
- 4:00 p.m. Bellamy Brothers
- 5:45 p.m. Steel Magnolia
- 8:00 p.m. Joe Nichols
- 10:00 p.m. Miranda Lambert

As with all festivals of this nature, artists, times, and dates are subject to change.



REC Helps Students Get Real

Cooperative Principle #7 - Concern For Community

While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members.

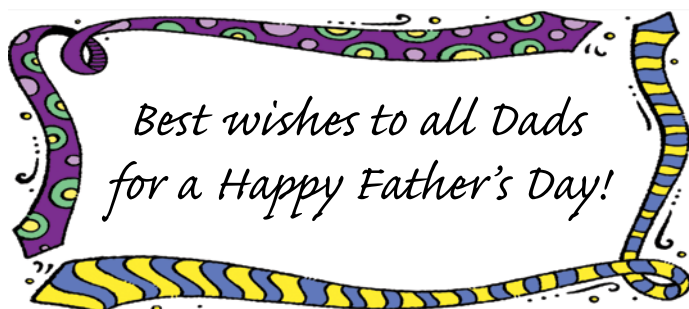
Cooperative Principle #5 - Education, Training and Information

Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public – particularly young people and opinion leaders – about the benefits of cooperation.

Two of the seven principles that guide cooperatives like Richland Electric Cooperative (REC) are Education, Training and Information along with Concern for Community. There are many ways the members and employees of REC put these principles to use throughout the year.

One such way is when REC helps out each year at the “Get Real” financial reality event, held at the local UW–Richland Campus. Hundreds of high school students from around the area gather to learn more about basic budgeting, financial services, and prioritizing the many expenses that come up in daily life. REC provides staff each year to work with the students to help them understand the cost of electricity for themselves and their family. ■

REC employee Nicole Prochaska, left, helps a student determine the cost for an average monthly electric bill at the 2011 Get Real event.



Laugh Lines

Ole took his son Little Ole to the zoo for the first time. As they were standing in front of the tiger’s cage, Ole explained how ferocious tigers are. Little Ole took it all in with a serious expression on his face.

“Dad,” Little Ole said finally, “if the tiger got out of his cage and ate you up...”

“Yes, son?” father Ole said, happy Little Ole seemed so concerned about his welfare until Little Ole finished asking his father, “What bus should I take home?”

How Does Your Garden Grow

(Continued from page 5)

and without chemicals. I did not hesitate sampling some arugula as I passed by a patch. “Tend the soil, take care of the plants, and you will have beautiful crops,” Alejandro told me while handing me a leaf.

Alejandro and Emily sell wholesale to the Viroqua Food Co-op, People’s Food Co-op in La Crosse, and Burnstad’s in Richland Center but someday hope to sell direct to customers through CSA (Consumer Supported Agriculture). Emily told me, “People like to eat closer to home,” and Alejandro added, “As people are familiar with the quality we have, the more they want it.” ■

Do you know of an interesting business or hobby or unique way of life along the REC lines? Contact the REC business office or e-mail me, Dean Young, at dad@mwt.net.



Richland Electric Cooperative

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



Shannon Clark, 1027 N. Jefferson Street
Manager/CEO P.O. Box 439
Ed Lund, Editor Richland Center, WI 53581
(608) 647-3173 • www.rec.coop

Your Board of Directors

Gilman Moe, President	Timothy Tiller
Otto “Chris” Ottesen, Vice President	Gerald Wendorf
Calvin Sebranek, Secretary	Donald Huffman
Judy Murphy, Treasurer	James Lewis
	Daniel Hillberry