

**GREENS/Continued from Page 1A**

sustainable manner, and really taking care of the soil, and that being a foundation for our personal health.”

With health as a focus, a group started growing sunflower microgreens, snow pea shoots, Daikon radish microgreens, and wheatgrass.

“The idea originally was everybody would help with the growing and production, and then they would enjoy the benefit,” Nisly explains. “Then it kind of evolved into a few people doing most of the work, and most of the people getting the benefit.”

“At some point I decided to take it on as a business,” he says. “That’s how it started, and it’s just grown from there.” He moved his shoots and microgreens out to a mobile home on Highway 1 toward Washington for a while, and then in 2008, he moved production to his current farm near SouthTown.

Microgreens may be familiar to more of us today, at least as a garnish on the side of our plates, but they still aren’t exactly mainstream.

The edible plants, which are ready to harvest after six to nine days of growth, can provide us with needed diversity in our diets and have the potential to address nutrient deficiencies, according to a Feb. 2022 study in “Plants,” an academic medical journal. The study also demonstrated that microgreens have anti-inflammatory, anti-cancer, anti-bacterial, and anti-hyperglycemic properties. As a result, interest and consumption of microgreens is growing.

“I suppose I’m one of the pioneers or early adopters,” Nisly admits.

It’s taken time for Organic Greens to grow its sales and product line; Nisly initially took his greens to New Pioneer Co-op and a few restaurants in Iowa City, and has since expanded to Hy-Vee stores and other small grocers and restaurants in Fairfield, Iowa City/Coralville, Cedar Rapids, Grinnell, Des Moines, Ankeny, and Ames.

In addition to his initial four plants, Organic Greens now grows basil, cilantro, arugula, sweet potatoes, butternut squash, cabbage, asparagus, and more. The microgreens

and herbs are grown indoors, and the larger vegetables are grown outdoors.

At this moment, as it celebrates 25 years in business at the end of March, action is ramping up at Organic Greens. The award of two significant grants will allow the business to expand in an important way. A Choose Iowa grant will allow Nisly to purchase a 15 x 30-foot walk-in refrigerator and 10 x 15-foot freezer. Another grant will help him set up an indoor clean room and purchase an industrial-size processor that will chop, slice, and dice hard vegetables. Together, these additions will allow Organic Greens to expand its offerings to K-12 schools through the Local Food for Schools program.

“I’ve been delivering sweet potatoes to the Iowa City School District for at least five to six years,” Nisly says, but these additions to his space will allow him to fill a gap and seize an opportunity.

The gap is that schools don’t have the equipment to process vegetables themselves, nor do they have the staff to do it. The opportunity is that other growers have plenty of product that can be difficult to sell; this #2 produce is perfectly edible and delicious, but due to imperfections in appearance, is avoided by most consumers. By creating a dedicated processing space, and the ability to keep produce fresh for longer periods, Organic Greens will be able to salvage #2 produce and provide highly nutritious, locally grown vegetables to area schools.

The crops Nisly has chosen for this school food project are sweet potatoes, butternut squash, and cabbage.

“We’re really going to try hard to add romaine lettuce onto that, because romaine lettuce was the number one request from the schools that we surveyed,” he says.

“We focused on cabbage, sweet potatoes, and butternut squash because those items have either a long window of availability or storability,” he explains.

Cabbage, for example, can be harvested fresh from mid-July to mid-November; under proper



CHERYL ALLEN/THE NEWS

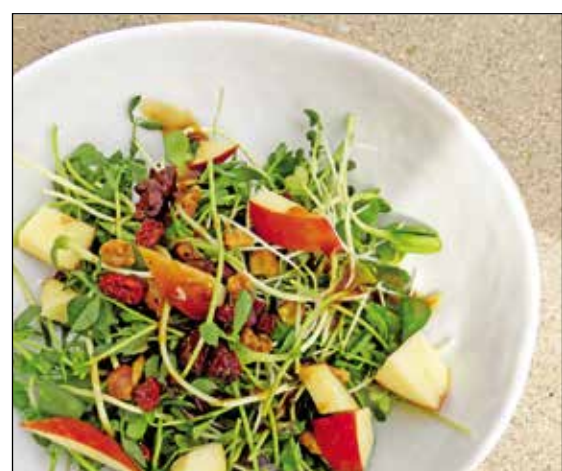
James Nisly with a variety of the organic shoots and microgreens that are grown indoors. Their growing period is a matter of days, and each variety has a distinctive flavor.



Mini Greens Salad Mix, Daikon Radish Microgreens, and Snow Pea Shoots are on the shelves at the Waterfront Hy-Vee in Iowa City. They each retail for \$4.99.



Vibrant green pet grass is just one product grown by Organic Greens.



A salad is just one way microgreens can be enjoyed; inside wraps and sandwiches are others. Nisly suggests a salad of greens, croutons, dried cranberries, chopped apples, pecans or walnuts, avocado, feta cheese, olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

conditions, it can be stored for three to four months. As a result, schools can serve fresh cabbage from the beginning of the school year through March.

“The other thing is that those crops are easy to grow in Iowa,” Nisly says. “I think it’s possible to scale up production.”

Nisly says that local school districts such as Mid-Prairie, Highland, and Lone Tree are not yet participating in the Local Food for Schools program, but he hopes they eventually will. For now, the four school districts that are “really enthusiastic” about receiving veg from Organic Greens this fall are Iowa City, Clear Creek Amana, Waukee, and Urbandale.

“They’re sharing recipes

and feedback so that we can really hone the whole process and create best practices, and then share those best practices with other schools as they become interested,” Nisly says.

When asked about how he came to be so knowledgeable about growing produce, finding grant opportunities, and discovering ways to get nutritious food to people, Nisly says, “I just care about it.”

“I’ve been pushing on getting better quality food into the schools for at least 15 years, since my oldest daughter was in elementary school,” he continues. “It’s just something that I care about, that I’m passionate about. You just keep pushing on doors, and they start opening up. They started opening up in a really significant way just in the last year. I’m really thankful about that.”

After showing The News an email he received that commended him for his work and positive influence on the local/regional food system, Nisly

says, “It’s not about me, it’s about what we’re all able to do to make things better.”

“It’s no secret what the standard American diet, a poor quality diet, is doing to the health of everybody,” he continues. Citing the decline in life expectancy in the United States – a drop of 1.8 years in 2020, compounded by a .9 year drop in 2021 – and the number of prevalent diseases that are linked to poor nutrition – overweight and obesity, heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, and cancer – he says, “We’ve got to do something. [Growing organic produce] doesn’t pay well, but at least it’s meaningful.”

More and more growers are joining Nisly in his vision for healthy, sustainable, organic food.

“I’m really optimistic about this year and working together with more people who have a similar vision,” he says. “I think the future looks bright.”

**THANK YOU!**

Brenneman Pork would like to thank the Kalona, Keota, Wellman, and surrounding communities for their help and support with clean up after last month’s storm.

*We are so fortunate to live in such a strong and supportive community!*

*Thank you again.*

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