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# INCREDIBLE EDIBLES

## Home Grown in Maquoketa: Small Farmers Market Gaining Big Strength

BY BRIAN MORELLI

Although this spring was a weather rollercoaster, farmers and gardeners were always thinking about planting. They cleared their fields, tilled the soil and dropped seeds into the ground. Many people bided their time until the first garlic, lettuces and asparagus of the year sprouted out of the Earth.

I am thinking about farmers' markets, fresh veggies and bumping into friends that held up for the winter. And so one Saturday late in March, I drove to check out what is in store this year for locally produced foods in Maquoketa, a medium-sized (for Iowa) community in Eastern Iowa of about 6,100 people. Striving like most Iowa communities, the town is trying to attract industries for economic development, as younger people flock out of town. It's about half an hour in the middle of Dubuque to the north, Davenport to the south and the Mississippi River to the east.

Maybe the biggest news in Maquoketa is the new four-square, a super-sized Wal-Mart—a 24-hour, small city variety. As usual, there was some resistance from those worried about it destroying smaller, local businesses. But Wal-Mart got approval and plopped its anchor down right off the main road, Highway 61, which runs north-south to the west of the main part of town.

I zipped passed a semi-packed parking lot in front of the “Wally World” as I tried to find the home of Ron and Cheryl Heinrich, a small-scale organic gardening couple who grow sweet corn, potatoes, asparagus, apples and a variety of berries. They live in the scenic northwest area at the edge of town just past Maquoketa Caves State Park. I pull up to the front-yard and a sign reading “R & C Produce.”

“We're not fancy, but we get an awful lot of food off this place,” Ron said shortly after meeting me in the driveway.

Ron, 62, and his wife, Cheryl, 61, toured me through their 2 ½ acres. Their gardens and apple and peach trees are spread out across the property, which butts up to a neighbors more traditional Iowa farm. They yield about 85 pounds each or more of asparagus, strawberries, sweet corn and potatoes, and about that much of their other varieties of berries like black, red and yellow raspberries, peaches and plums.

Much of it goes to feed themselves and the families of their children, who now live with their own with children. They freeze, can and jar and Cheryl fixes jellies, jams and pies. They use what they can and sell the rest. “We're not big at all. We just have a little bit to share,” Ron said. “You sell the best and eat the rest.”

The Heinrichs still have their phone number listed in a few directories, such as the alternative agriculture directory at the Jackson County website ([www.JacksonCounty-Iowa.com/agriculture\\_alternative.cfm](http://www.JacksonCounty-Iowa.com/agriculture_alternative.cfm)) and on their “R & C Produce” sign, but most of what they sell goes to six or eight regular buyers.

Their produce isn't certified, but they follow organic practices, they say. They use crop rotation, cover crops, manure, weeding by hand and ask farming neighbors not to spray on windy days.

“It's a mind set,” Ron said of growing organically. “You have to set your mind that you are going to do it as healthy as possible.”

Now inside their home with gospel music playing on the radio, Cheryl agrees. “I think that is what causes the cancers; the chemicals we use in farming that run into our drink-

## PLACES TO GO IN AND NEAR MAQUOKETA

### Nim's Garden

Vernon Nims, Jr.  
616 South Niagara  
Maquoketa, IA 52060  
563.652.3324

Open from Spring to Fall. A direct consumer market for in-season vegetables and fruit.

### R & C Produce

Ron & Cheryl Heinrich  
10932 94th Ave  
Maquoketa IA 52060  
563.652.6143

Asparagus, rhubarb, strawberries, black raspberries, sweet corn, peaches and potatoes.

### AREA FARMERS' MARKETS:

#### Maquoketa Farmers' Market

Parking lot south-west of the Platte and Main streets intersection  
Saturdays 7:30 a.m. – noon, from the second week in June to the last week in September.

#### Bellevue Farmers' Market

Gazebo on Riverview Street  
Saturdays, 7 – 11 a.m., May 13 – Sept. 16

#### Preston Farmers' Market

Twogood Park off Hwy. 64  
Thursdays, 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., June 22 – Sept. 21

#### DeWitt Farmers' Market

Lincoln Park  
Mondays and Thursdays, 4 – 6 p.m., May 23 – Oct. 27



Ron & Cheryl Heinrich of R & C produce in Maquoketa, Photo by Brian Morelli

ing water," she said. "I think we've done it to ourselves. We aren't out to change the world, but there is something about growing it healthy and going out and picking your own food." They said they've always kept a garden and avoided the chemical treatments throughout raising their kids.

"If I was, as we've always been, a poor family, and if you want to eat good, you eat out of the garden. You eat out of the land," Ron said of grocery stores' high organic food prices.

I was somewhat surprised to hear them advocating so strongly for organics. For some reason the organic, sustainable movement seemed to me like a younger, almost new wave avocation. Ron and Cheryl are admittedly not new wave. They don't even have an internet connection. Ron says, "I am retired. Why would I want to sit at a computer?"

My surprise could come from the fact I am from a wooded New England region, and I never really spent time on a farm. But I am starting to hear, definitely not widespread, but several farm families follow organic practices privately.

"It's not new. It is just coming to the forefront," Ron said of organic growing. "A lot of us have been doing it for a long time. We just did it privately."

They grew up as part of farm families, and have always been within 20 miles of where they now live. In the 1970s, they had their own small herd of livestock, 15 cattle, 25 sheep and some pigs, but as it became too expensive to keep up with advancing technology, Ron got a job with the USDA. Now they are just hobbyists, they say.

They used to sell at the local farmers' market, but now they just sell directly to their handful of customers. One of their customers is Elaine Edwards, a baker who coordinates the local farmers' market. She buys their berries for her pies. Elaine bakes and sells 20 pies and 20 mini pies each week. The full-sized pies, ranging from blueberry and gooseberry to strawberry-rhubarb and pecan, sell at market for \$7.

The Maquoketa Farmers' Market is modest, Elaine describes in a phone call from the Heinrich's kitchen. Set in a parking lot in town, southwest of the Platte and Main streets intersection, wares include produce, baked goods and crafts. The market attracts six or eight regular vendors and about 100 plus customers each Saturday.

"It is basically the same people every year, but I am seeing it get more popular over the years," Elaine said. "Lettuce, the onions, the radishes and the strawberries are the one main thing they came after. If they know they're there, they'll come after them."

Most customers are older, while some younger patrons come because the subsidized food program WIC is accepted by some vendors, Elaine

said. She attributes the markets' growth to WIC, but she said those customers are only coming because the food is free.

"The younger people aren't, but it's the older people and middle aged people that like the (produce) home grown," Elaine said. "The younger ones could care less."

Elaine said in Maquoketa the younger generations in general prefer prepared foods. "Because they don't want to cook. They don't want to have to fix anything, only want to eat what is prepared," she said.

The Heinrichs had a similar assessment of their area. They said life is too rushed for young people to think or care about where their food is coming from or how it was raised. "It's a hurry up world," Ron says.

## Eat Local at Summer of the Arts

This year, food vendors at the Iowa City Arts Festival and the Iowa City Jazz Festival will feature locally grown ingredients. That means fresh, tasty food to go with fresh, tasty entertainment.

Sheraton Iowa City Hotel and hotelVetro present the  
Iowa City Arts Festival June 1-3, 2007  
Toyota-Scion of Iowa City Jazz Festival June 29- July 1, 2007



For more information go to [www.summerofthearts.org](http://www.summerofthearts.org)



[www.jcfa.org](http://www.jcfa.org)