



Efraín Sanchez is a man with a mission and a very clear message—Go green!

Efraín's large farm, Los Nacientes ("The Springs"), is perched on a mountaintop in Berlin just outside San Ramón and just below the clouds (at approximately 5,000 feet elevation), where banks of mist nestle in the crevices of the hillsides and waft through the trees. It is this climate that many believe produces the best coffee in Costa Rica—maybe even the world! Efraín's tentative smile belies his passion for what he does, and it only took a few minutes of conversation about organic farming and living green for his fervent enthusiasm for these topics to bubble to the surface like an effervescent spring.

Who is Efraín Sanchez and why is he so passionate about organics? For starters, he is the first coffee farmer in Costa Rica to have his product certified organic, a process that was years in the making. In 1987, he began the conversion of his conventional farm to organic. This procedure took three years because all prior chemicals that had been used on the property had to be washed from the soil before the organic certification process could even begin. Four years later in 1991, he received his first certification from BCS in Germany, and shortly thereafter he was also awarded certification from the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA), which is an international certification. Finally, in 1995, he received certification from the USDA. As it states on the label of his Los Nacientes coffee, the environmentally friendly methods by which he grows his coffee promote the long-term sustainability of soil and water supplies in the western valley of Costa Rica. This limits pollution and erosion, ensures a better habitat for both humans and animals and creates a better-tasting, ecologically-grown coffee bean. His top-graded Arabica coffee (SHB--Strictly Hard Bean) is grown cooperatively with a small group of producers within the Organico Los Nacientes association, and is in high demand. Currently he exports 100,000 kilos of his premium organic coffee a year to Canada, Czech Republic, Italy, and the United States, which is his biggest market.

Obviously this arduous process of transforming a conventional farm to one that is solely organic is not for the uncommitted or faint-hearted. When asked if organic farming is more difficult than conventional farming, Efraín explained that once you've created a balanced ecosystem, natural processes take over thereafter to sustain that ecosystem. Sounds simple, but how does he achieve a balanced ecosystem? He cultivates beneficial insects to control the ones that are detrimental to the plants. This, too, is not an overnight process. Once the beneficial insects are introduced into the environment, it takes approximately eight years to fully convert the land to this balanced state.

If Efraín had his wish, everyone would go green. The biggest hurdle is people who feel it is too major an undertaking, even though they might be persuaded that organic living—and the farming that supports it—is better than using the fossil-fuel-dependent conventional methods. "It's the mental obstacles that are the hardest to overcome. Organic farming and green living are lifestyles that require commitment, and a lot of people feel that they aren't capable of changing their habits or exploring their relationship to our environment, even though this is much better for the planet and for individual health," said Sánchez.

"Planting ideas about organic living in the younger generation may be the only way to preserve our future and that of Mother Earth," he muses. Two days a week he visits two of the 42 different schools in the San Ramón area where he teaches a class of 10-12 year olds. "Before this age children are more interested in playing than learning about the environmental and health benefits of organic living." His program, Escuelitas Verdes —"Little Green

Schools”—has about 30 they receive full credit. of the kids in his class will fundamental changes to their worth the effort.

At age 44, the sprightly Efraín benefits of organic living. He on medicinal plants when he doctors and taking to a doctor was 20 years ago. regime are, of course,



students in his class for which Although he realizes only 10% actually make these lives, he still believes it is

is the perfect example of the is trim and fit and relies solely gets ill rather than going to pharmaceuticals. His last visit The staples in his health curcuma (the Spanish word

for turmeric), lemon grass, oregano, ginger, and epizote (a Mexican carminative), all of which have medicinal properties. Efraín learned about medicinal plants from his grandfather who was a Nicoya Indian and with whom he grew up in Berlin. He also learned about these plants from other campesinos who traditionally rely on herbal medicine rather than allopathic medicine. Although he holds no university degrees in agriculture, he believes his education was the best he could have received. Rather than gaining academic knowledge in a classroom, he learned ancient and modern farming techniques from other farmers from Peru, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. His education came from the people who had already done what he wanted to do.

Don Sanchez isn't just growing organic coffee at Los Nacientes; he also produces an abundance of other organic items—marmalades, season he has 200 part-time workers and 30 permanent workers. Then the farm is a beehive of activity with rooms set up in the main building to create and package the marmalades, also sold under the Los Nacientes label.

In addition to the coffee and other crops he grows himself, the farm processes approximately 25,000 kilos of turmeric each year, which are exported to Germany and then the U.S., for inclusion in a whole food vitamin line called “New Chapter.” The turmeric, which contains phytonutrients called curcuminoids (see *The Spices of Life*, page 18) is organically grown at Finca Luna Nueva near La Tigra on the road to La Fortuna, then shipped to Los Nacientes where it is placed on huge stacks of screens in a solar dryer for approximately two weeks. After that period, it is transferred to a large wood-fired cylindrical dryer that keeps a constant temperature of 50C as it turns. In keeping with his belief in recycling and not letting anything go to waste, the dryer is powered by wood that has been trimmed from the trees on his farm.

Efraín credits turmeric for keeping him in good health. Each morning he takes a spoonful of ground turmeric in water because he knows, as do many health scientists, that turmeric has anti-cancer properties, is a powerful antioxidant that scavenges free radicals, is capable of cleansing the liver and stimulating bile production, and has just recently been determined to be capable of dissolving the amyloid protein plaques in the brains of Alzheimer patients. In countries where turmeric is part of the cuisine there are lower rates of prostate cancer, breast cancer, heart disease, and gall bladder problems.

As if he didn't already have enough projects on his plate to keep him busy 24/7, Efraín is taking his organic philosophy one step further. He has an exclusive agreement with the real estate company CR Communities to help create and maintain a wholly organic, sustainable development called, auspiciously, Organic Heaven, for which he has donated 12 hectares to be divided into home sites. If you are wondering why Efraín would choose to work with only one company in real estate development, he has a simple explanation. “I've been here all my life and I've seen real estate developers make lots of promises, which are rarely kept. Over the years I've had various offers from

developers, but I've always said 'No.' And then I met Preston Gitlin and Andrew Mastrandonas (owners of CR Communities) and I finally feel confident enough to work with them because they want to develop San Ramón in a positive way rather than tear it down or bury it with a backhoe. Protecting our traditions in San Ramón is very important to me, and to them."

For those serious about a sustainable, organic lifestyle (and shouldn't we all be), this new project will indeed be a practical, down to earth piece of "heaven." Efraín will grow organic coffee, vegetables, and fruit, as well as overseeing the raising of trout and freshwater crustaceans. Most importantly, he will maintain the integrity of the land. His big challenge will be the food production as well as teaching the homeowners how to practice green living. Homeowners will not only receive organic food at no cost, they will have no maintenance expenses in return for Efraín's access to the land's remaining agricultural areas. He will continue to farm the land and export his produce internationally ensuring that he receives benefit in return for his efforts. He believes organic developments will be the wave of the future and will attract like-minded people from all over the world. Plans are currently being drawn up to convert CR Communities' other enclave, Pacific Views, to an organic community. He wants foreigners who come to live in Costa Rica to have the opportunity to live a truly green lifestyle that not only promotes the sustainability of the land, but also enhances the lives of the people who live there. "When more people start thinking this way, the world will be a better place."

Going green and organic is much more than a marketing slogan for these men. It makes practical sense and has benefits for the environment, the community—both the long-time residents and the newcomers. Organic living is Efraín's vision of the future. It is not about instant gratification; it's about long-haul planning to benefit everyone, especially the environment. He and his family will stay involved over the long term, continuing to harvest the benefits of land that has been in his family for generations.

The Los Nacientes coffee label boasts a drawing of a pair of hands cradling Mother Earth with a green plant sprouting from the center and the words "The earth is like our children" encircling the drawing. Efraín hopes we will all treat our planet as carefully as we would a child and take care of it accordingly. Going green is that first step!

Editor's Note: The Green Man is an archetype of vegetative rebirth and the natural growth cycles of nature found in different cultures through the ages.

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The Green Man



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