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'Our water is cleaner, our land is cleaner'

Local environmental organization creates new category for agriculture

TRAVERSE CITY — Strawberries and blueberries grow on Bernie and Sandee Ware's Bear Lake farm, as do mushrooms, asparagus and a host of seasonal vegetables.



Record-Eagle/Keith King

Bernie and Sandee Ware accept an award in the agriculture category during Friday's annual Northern Michigan Environmental Action Council Environmentalist of the Year Awards event in the Park Place Dome.

The Wares do things the organic way, so no synthetic pesticides or fertilizers are used. It's been like that for about 10 years, and they wouldn't trade it for anything.

"Our water is cleaner, our land is cleaner, we have a lot more activity with birds and bees that were never there before," Sandee Ware said.

The Wares, along with Leelanau County farmers Jim Moses and Linda Grigg, received the Northern Michigan Environmental Action Council's Environmentalist of the Year award in the agriculture category. NMEAC hosts the awards each year and doles out awards in a variety of categories.

Moses, Grigg and the Wares are pioneers in local organic farming, NMEAC folks said.

"Both of these families have been in on organic farming before it became a household term, when people thought of it as something that was pretty weird and unacceptable," said NMEAC board member Ann Rogers. "They made the case for food that is healthier for you, and fresher."

Moses and Grigg, who farm mushrooms, tomatoes, salad greens and more near Maple City, went organic in 1989.

"Organic farming is not about the lack of pesticides and fertilizers, it's about the positives," Grigg said. "Soil life, it gives the vegetables more flavor and more nutrition, and it's better for us and the planet."

NMEAC has given environmental awards for years, largely based on nominations from the community, but this is the first year they had an agriculture category. The group was glad to honor a few people who chose to go down the organic path.

"You have a little bit of courage to get into this," NMEAC board Chairman Greg Reisig said. "With farming, the fertilizers and pesticides have been encouraged, and they're almost ingrained in the farming experience now."

The organic group joined a host of other winners who fought pollution, promoted open spaces and more. Organic farming might not be the first thing people think of when it comes to environmentalism, but it's nonetheless important, Reisig said.

"A lot of the people that are nominated may not even think of themselves as environmentalists, but they really are," he said.

Sandee Ware hopes other farmers give organic a try.

"You have to believe it's going to work," she said. "A lot of chemical farmers go into organic farming thinking that they have to have something to put down as a fertilizer, they have to have some chemicals to spray onto a bug, instead of trusting the environment. Once you get your land cleaned off, the environment takes care of it itself."

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