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From the Ground Up

Photo and Story by Morris Sullivan

Pauline Copello stands at a potting bench, popping kale sprouts out of trays, preparing them for planting, while Tracy, a gray tabby cat, chases an imaginary mouse behind her. A child's toy truck sits nearby, waiting for its 6-year-old ³driver² to come home.

At age 39, Copello is the owner, manager and main field hand at Pauline's Lucky Market Garden, where she grows and sells a variety of organic vegetables. Throughout a 10-year period, she has turned a long-time interest in organic gardening into an increasingly lucrative niche for herself, building a family business that is environmentally conscious.

Copello started farming in Barberville about four years ago, but her background in organic farming dates back to her childhood - her mother and father were organic gardeners long before it became trendy.

"We always had a garden," Copello says. "I enjoyed the garden, too - not the working in it part, really, but the eating part." Later, she found her way to Oregon, where she worked at a farm. "Physical labor has always appealed to me. I'm a hard worker and I like being outdoors."

After a few years, she returned to Ormond Beach to be near her parents and soon began gardening again - growing vegetables in a friend's backyard. ³It was on a very small scale,² she says, but she was able to start selling a little produce to locals interested in organic food.

That was 10 years ago. She didn't have a lot of luck growing and selling organic produce at first - at the time, few locals were interested in organic food. Her little organic ³market garden² grew, however, when she hooked up with local restaurateurs who wanted fresh-grown produce, including at Le Crepe En Haut in Ormond Beach, for whom she grew vegetables like her "spring mix" of arugula, lettuces and other green leafy vegetables.

"I got married and turned my backyard into a garden," Copello says. Before long, she dreamed of finding a larger space and expanding.

"We found this place four years ago. I didn't feel ready, but that was before the property values skyrocketed, so it was probably a good thing. I don't think we could do it today," she says.

By then, Pauline's Lucky Market Garden was doing business with several other restaurants, Ormond Beach health food stores, and the DeLand Organic Co-op.

She now has an acre under cultivation with room to expand. Her parents help with deliveries and her husband, an estate appraiser and antique dealer, also works the farm when he can.

"My son likes to garden, too," Copello says. He has his own garden area set aside, and the profits from his radishes and other vegetables go into his savings account.

"Right now," she says, "I'm harvesting green beans. And I grow cucumbers, arugula, bok choy, three kinds of kale - a little bit of anything I can market in this area."

Copello is trying to expand into strawberries and blueberries and experimenting with plants like an heirloom squash and a "designer" broccoli.

"I try to steer away from the common place and go for the more unusual," she says. "I'm always trying something new."

Being a female "has been a big plus" in her work. "There isn't really a group of organic farmers around here," so there is no "good ol' boy network"

to shut her out, she explains.

Many of Copello's customers are female business owners in a similar age group. "A woman selling organic produce really appeals to them," she says. "And most of us started off at the same time, so we're excited for each other when we succeed."

"I think a lot of the people buying organic are women," she says. Women, especially younger women or women starting a family, tend to be more health conscious. "And women tend to do the shopping," Copello adds. "So this was really a natural."