

# How-To Get Access to Organic Food, Economically

*NCAMP board member Terry Shistar buys low-cost organic food through a food co-op and buying club*

Terry Shistar, Ph.D.

Virtually all the food I buy is organic. We do not spend all our money on food, though, and our family includes three large males with appetites to match.

I am often asked how can we afford to buy organic food. My first answer is that for me buying organic isn't just a food choice, it is also a health care choice. Organic food saves me the expense (and other side effects) of surgery and drug therapy.

My next answer is food co-ops. I belong to two food cooperatives that help supply me with organic foods at reduced costs. One looks like a typical grocery store—of the community type. The second is a food-buying club. The two co-ops serve two different needs, and are both important. Although I want to focus on the food-buying club, I want to stress the importance of the other as well.

### What is a Co-op

A cooperative is a business or service that is member-owned and member-controlled. In the case of a consumer co-op, the members are consumers of the goods or services provided by the co-op. Cooperatives around the world subscribe to a basic philosophy as described by six principles:

**1. Open membership.** Membership is open to all people who want to make use of the services in exchange for the responsibilities of membership.

**2. Democratic control.** Co-op members are all equal co-owners of the cooperative and have an equal say in decision making.

**3. Return of surplus to members.** Any surplus or profit belongs to its members, not a small group of share-holders.

**4. Limited rate of return on investment.** Co-ops exist to provide services for members, not to invest capital.

**5. Belief in education.** Co-ops are committed to education.

**6. Cooperation among co-ops.** Co-ops work with other co-ops.

### The Community Mercantile

I have been a member of the Community Mercantile in Lawrence, Kansas for twenty years. The "Merc" started out as a food-buying club, but I joined it when it was a small storefront where you had to work four hours per month in order to buy food at member prices. The general public paid a slightly higher price.

The Merc now offers a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, frozen and canned goods, as well as most of the non-food items you would expect in a grocery store. Members get a 10% discount once a month. Members who volunteer for more than four hours in a month get a 10% discount on all their purchases in the next month. I work every Monday filling jars in the bulk herb section—which carries around 300 different herbs and teas in bulk, and is known as a real bargain in herbs and spices even among people who don't care about the other things the Merc offers.

The Merc is dedicated to supplying organic foods, but carries conventionally grown foods when organic foods are unavailable or as an alternative to certain expensive organic foods. I shop at the Merc at least once a week. I buy fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and baked goods there, and other things I don't want to buy in the bulk quantities offered by the buying club.

### The Washington Creek Community Food Co-op

A few years ago, we learned of a group of people in Burlingame, Kansas who had a food buying club, where they bought food in bulk from a natural foods distributor every six weeks at great savings. Burlingame is a 45-minute drive from where I live, but their co-op allowed us to try it out for a couple of times before deciding whether we were interested in forming our own food co-op. As it turns out, our co-op and the Burlingame co-op are very different, and it shows that you can arrange a food-buying club to meet your needs.

When we decided we wanted to form our own food-buying club, we got together a small group of people—enough, we hoped, to meet the minimum order of \$500 every six weeks. We called Blooming Prairie, the distributor that supplies the Burlingame co-op. They sent us a "Buying Club Manual" with detailed information on starting and running a cooperative food-buying club. That made it really easy. If you decide to form a food buying co-op, you will probably find such help available. Let me run through the minimum requirements.

**1. You need enough people to share the work and meet the minimum orders of your distributors.** In a cooperative, everyone contributes. Some co-ops having "working" and "non-working" status. For the new food-buying club, it is best for everyone to share the work. However, it is not necessarily limited to people who can carry heavy boxes when the truck arrives. There are jobs for everyone. Here are some important jobs in our co-op:

**Treasurer.** This is the person who

