

Food co-op grows like Amaranth

by Elissa Barnard

Amaranth is an exotic name for a common Nova Scotia weed with exotic potential. Now being studied at experimental farms in the province, the plant — abundant, edible and nutritious — can be prepared as a salad green or ground into a high protein flour.

This promising weed has been adopted by a new food co-op for its name and as a symbol of the organization's guiding principles and future direction.

Amaranth Food Co-op began operation just a month ago primarily to help members cut their grocery bills but also to eventually increase food selection on the basis of quality.

Amaranth itself is an offshoot of, Good Cheap Foods, which within a year of existence grew too large to handle its orders. This co-op was created by members of the Halifax North end housing co-op Ovo. The decided to establish a "pre-order" co-op, which is what Amaranth is, with no inventory or storefront and only the use of members' homes for all activity.

Starting out with the intention of serving North End residents, and Ovo members in particular, it grew to attract people from all over the Metro area including Dartmouth and the Halifax South End. Good Cheap Foods expanded be-

Ltd., also a supplier for Dominion Stores, delivers the fruit and vegetables.

Every two months a bulk order for natural foods will be submitted to Marnat (Maritime Natural) Foods Co-op, a store in Wolfville which acts as a middle agent in the distribution of natural food to 28 food co-ops in the province. Marnat contacts suppliers in Montreal and the United States to purchase whole grains, rice, dried fruit and nuts.

In the short term the co-op's goal is to enable the food user to get closer to the supplier. In the long term it is to get the food user closer to the producer, to the point where Nova Scotia farmers would be supplying co-ops directly with "non-pesticide" food, including grains, and organic meat. O'Leary says there is interest among the farmers, especially among those organic farmers who now have no markets.

This extended development could take up to five years, Mayo says, but "then the food users can start choosing. They will have a greater selection of what kind of food they want and at what price."

The present financing and organization of Amaranth are practically foolproof, Mayo said. As previously mentioned the co-op operates on a two week cycle, of an order week and a free week. The Monday night before an order is to be placed, a volunteer phones members to remind them about upcoming meetings and preparing their orders. Between 7 and 9 on Wednesday



Dal Photo/Morris

night members call in their requests to a co-ordinator's house. There volunteers divide the individual orders by product and add up the total demand for each food, calling it in to the suppliers on Thursday morning.

Friday the order is delivered to Mayo's house on South Park Street and a cheque is made out to the supplier. Members distribute the boxes of food into individual orders on Friday night and price them according to a price list received from the wholesaler. Between 10 and 12 a.m., Saturday Mayo's basement becomes the co-op "store" as members arrive to collect their groceries.

They pay by cheque on the spot. The total is rushed into the Amaranth bank account early Monday morning before the distributors have a chance to draw on the cheque issued the previous Friday.

Upon joining the co-op each household purchases a \$10 share, to be refunded upon

leaving. There is also a five per cent mark-up on each member's total order. These extra funds will grow to provide "a little float", Mayo said, insuring funds to cover the issued cheque before money is collected from members and allowing money for non-labour expenses, ranging from maintenance to the zeroxing of information sheets.

All labour is provided on a volunteer basis. A person from each household must work for a few hours every six weeks, and a small rotating committee of three co-ordinators oversees the operation for three months at a time. Thus cost is kept down to a minimum.

At present there are approximately 27 members or household units belonging to Amaranth. That amounts to approximately 40 people, Mayo said, including some students. The ideal number of members rests between 25 and 30; any more and the organization gets too big to handle.

Both Good Cheap Foods and Amaranth are willing to help new co-ops get started. Names of interested persons are already being taken.

As the lowly weed Amaranth promises to nourish without expense so does the food co-operative promise a partial escape from escalating prices, soaring fast beyond the individual's control.



yond the ideal maximum, and according to Ovo member David O'Leary, it decided to split. Amaranth was created with an identical structure and given the same suppliers to serve residents of the city's South End.

Now it too, along with Good Cheap Foods, is operating at full capacity and there is still a lot of interest, O'Leary said. As more people become aware of the necessity for good, healthy food, they are willing to go out of their way to obtain it, according to Amaranth member Susan Mayo.

At present the co-op is limiting itself to cheese and produce, to give its members a 30 per cent reduction in the cost of these products compared to the supermarket price. Every two weeks food is purchased at wholesale prices directly from two local distributors. McKenzie's Sales Ltd., of Dartmouth supplies the cheese, while Roy O'Brien

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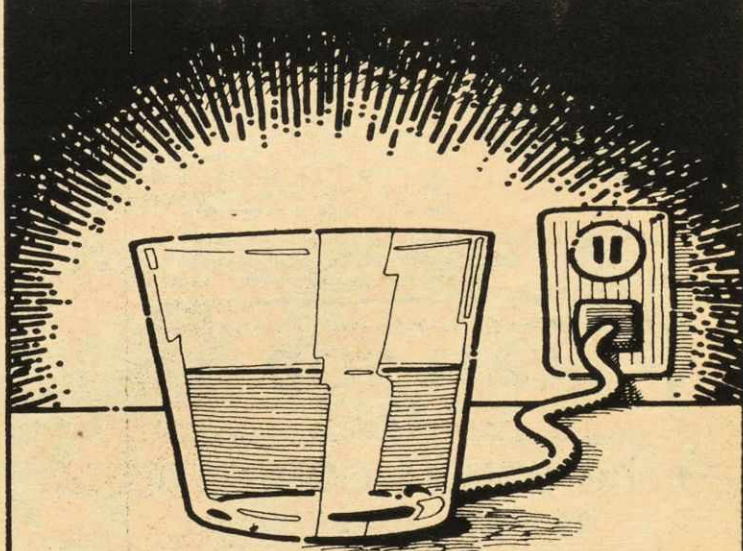
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