

## Tomball farm is a 'partnership with nature'

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*Susan White, left, and Carol Keating check out one of the berry bushes at the Keatingrove Farm in Tomball. Photo by Jerry Baker*

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**CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT**

Carol Keating still experiences a sense of wonder and anticipation when she sees crops ready for harvest on her land.

Keatingrove Farms has been her home for several decades, but since Keating and longtime friend Susan White transformed the Tomball property into a certified organic farm, it has become a passion.

"This food comes straight from the ground without any chemicals on it or the soil, and it's delicious," Keating said. "The earth is teaching us all the time about what needs to happen. It's a partnership with nature, and it's something we enter with great respect."

The farm sells its organic produce on-site, at 22603 Park Road near FM 2920, 8 a.m.-noon on the first, third and fifth Saturdays of the month.

The farm's harvest is brought to the Tomball Farmer's Market, Main and Cherry streets, during the same hours on the second and fourth Saturdays.

### **Building a new legacy**

It was Keating's late husband, Tom, who discovered the 60-acre site in 1980. The Keatings moved a 1914 farmhouse from Grimes County on to the property, and Tom raised pecan trees.

After Tom's death about seven years ago, Keating decided to remain there.

"I spent quite a bit of time thinking what it would mean to be a good steward of what I had been given," she said.

Around that time, White urged Keating to read Barbara Kingsolver's book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*.

The book describes the experiences of Kingsolver and her family during the year it spent on a family farm, living almost exclusively on what family members could raise and grow.

It makes a strong case for organic food, naturally sustaining the soil and eating locally grown products.

"I called Susan and said, 'This is it,'" Keating said. "It brought to the surface a passion we both have for organic, delicious food."

Keating and White decided to use Keatingrove to provide the same kind of fresh foods described in the book for themselves and others.

About four years ago, they immersed themselves into their new venture.

### **The real deal**

The farm earned its USDA organic certification 1½ years ago. Keating and White had to submit a detailed plan encompassing what they would be growing, where they'd get their seeds and what would be planted where so the crops could be rotated each year.

Since they wouldn't be using chemicals, they had to outline their intended methods for discouraging pests and fungus while promoting healthy, well-nourished soil.

Later, USDA inspectors tested their soil and plant tissue samples for the presence of chemicals. The soil will be re-checked annually.

The work is considerable, White said, but it's what they want to do. "It's really good practice," she said. "As far as I know, we're the only certified organic farm in Harris County."

Currently, about 200 plants are growing on Keatingrove's fields, including zucchini, yellow squash and lots of hybrid and heirloom tomatoes — favorites of Keating's.

Also at the farm are green beans with potatoes, onions, cantaloupe and berries coming soon.

"It's so much fun; we're just having a ball," White said. "You start thinking like a farmer, if we have a big rain how will it affect the crops?"

Currently, Keating and White work with three other people on the farm's operations.

### **Learning process**

Keating said she's still learning as she goes and also teaching others about the nature of eating locally grown food.

"You do get this high quality, but you don't have everything all of the time."

The lettuce is finished for the year, she said, but the cantaloupes will thrive during the hot summer months.

"It's like conducting a symphony. The strings are done, but it's time for the brass."