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GREEN TEAM: Rock Garden processor Maria Sequeira, president Charlie Coiner, and production manager Carlos Alaniz. The company has a new processing plant in Miami.

Produce firm weathering many storms

By ALEXIS MUELLNER
Special to The Herald

Walk into the cool packing-house of Rock Garden Herbs in Miami and the sweet aroma of basil and thyme commands the senses. One whiff, and it's easy to understand why Rock Garden, which began nearly 20 years ago in West Virginia, has experienced steady growth as a national source of more than 60 fresh pungent herbs.

But for company founder and owner Charlie Coiner, the rewards have at times been overshadowed by rash of regulatory red tape and bad publicity concerning food safety and country-of-origin labeling laws.

Florida is the only state in the nation that requires perishable foods have labels identifying country of origin. That goes for the mangoes on shelves of local markets, as well as produce being shipped through Florida to another state — even if the laws don't exist at the final destination.

Troubling report

A local TV crew last fall asked Coiner why packages of tarragon contained labeling that said the leafy, tasty herb was grown in a range of possible locations — from Central Florida, to West Virginia, to Central America to Israel.

The TV crew had already been to Coiner's then-inactive farm in Berryville, W.Va., only to film fallow fields and a damaged greenhouse. "We'd stopped farming there in August, and in Clark County, a national disaster was declared

because of intense rain," says Coiner, which meant a shorter growing season last year. Coiner says he invited the camera crew to the company's active farm in Central Florida, but they declined. "They could go 800 miles but not 80 miles, I couldn't figure that one out."

As a result, Coiner's products were singled out in the report as an example of unreliable produce from an unknown source. The report spooked a local grocer, and Rock Garden's herbs were pulled from the shelves. That meant a substantial loss in sales, Coiner says.

Rock Garden is privately held, so Coiner won't get specific about sales figures, except to say that growth has been steady. While the El Niño effect has increased the demand for Rock Garden products from wetter-than-usual locales around the country and in Europe, he expects to experience the effect of the loss of Florida retail business later this year.

It wasn't the first time Rock Garden has been rocked by negative publicity. Illness from a cyclospora bacteria outbreak at a Washington, D.C., party was allegedly traced to a Rock Garden basil shipment, and a newspaper published a story about it. But later the FDA and Centers for Disease Control traced the true cyclospora source to food handlers at a Maryland catering company. Rock Garden was exonerated.

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, I've learned any sort of food-borne illness happens at the last place on the chain because those places have the least facilities and are the least [motivated] to get

inspected," he says.

New location

Jeff Bruff first met Coiner as an inspector for the Food & Drug Administration. Now he's vice president and chief operating officer of Fresco Service, a subsidiary of Armellini Foods. He says Rock Garden has found a niche for itself in the specialty herb market.

Coiner "stepped up and took a role as far as the industry is concerned by becoming involved in the larger issues," Bruff says. Coiner and Brush serve on the Miami Perishable Coalition, a group of importers and exporters in South Florida focused on regulatory issues. "He's actually working to make things better in his industry."

Coiner has invested in computerized labeling machines, invented breathable packaging to keep the leafy herbs fungus-free, and implemented on-farm bacteria testing labs.

Late in 1997, Rock Garden moved to a new food-processing plant at 2950 NW 74th Ave., formerly a manufacturing plant for croquettes supplied to the Campbell Soup Co. It boasts one of the area's largest cold-storage facilities.

Coiner, 46, grew in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia. As a seventh-generation farmer, he traces his family's lineage to the Mayflower.

"Our first farm was Lord Fairfax's first farm," he says of his grandmother's land where he first grew organic produce.