



**FRAGRANT BUSINESS:** Charles Coiner looks over his business, Rock Garden, and employees Willidean Payne, left, and Susan Peyton.

# Local herbs part of city diet

By Val Van Meter  
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Clarke County attracts news businesses for many reasons but Charles Coiner says he moved his enterprise because he found "wonderful neighbors."

"That's more important than soil pH or anything," Coiner explained. The 33-year-old native of Staunton was in need of a new greenhouse after the one on his Jefferson County, W. Va. farm burned down last winter. You can't run a business supplying herbs and specialty vegetables and flowers without a greenhouse to start young plants in the dead of winter. Coiner noticed along Rt. 340 north of Berryville, the greenhouse that had served the old Richardson produce market and stopped to inquire.

Mrs. Richardson was "helpful and encouraging" and in December, The Rock Garden began what will be a complete move to Clarke County.

Coiner describes his business as "mostly an experience of people working together."

It began with a small garden, which gave Coiner back his health after a very serious illness.

"I became very interested in food," he admits, adding the garden

was about all the work he could do because of his poor health. Growing up on a farm and with pre-medicine studies at William and Mary, Coiner was receptive to the ideas of a physician he met who was a natureopath and nutrition counselor.

"I self-learned the horticulture part," Coiner says, and with three friends, he began an organic vegetable farm along the Shenandoah River in Jefferson County, just about a mile north of the Clarke County line.

"It had to become a business to survive," Coiner says of his operation which now employes as many as 20 people during the spring and summer season.

That's not to say it was simple to make a less than 10-acre plot produce enough to make a living for that many people.

"It had to flow like water into the niches that suited it," Coiner explains, adding there was no way his operation could "butt heads against the big time growers."

Herbs are one part of his business. He sells to retail outlets in the metropolitan area and also grows pharmaceutical herbs on contract for various companies.

Coiner says you can't label herbs

as hard to grow because there are such a wide variety of them. Some grow anywhere, some are very finicky. Some like tropic environments, some are fickle and produce no seed but must be propagated by root divisions. Some are annuals, some are perennials.

It took some pavement pounding and miles on his truck to interest Washington, D. C. chain stores like Safeway and Giant, and good restaurants, to pamper their customers with fresh, organically grown herbs and specialty vegetables like golden beets, miniature squash and yellow cherry tomatoes. But now, The Rock Garden label is personally delivered to Washington, Baltimore and Richmond during the summer months and is even shipped to New York and Chicago.

In order to supply year round work for his employees, Coiner branched out into flowers which are cut and dried and turned into wreaths during the winter season and he also purchases miniature vegetables from around the world so he can supply his customers all year long.

Coiner would like to see more people interested in good, wholesome food and he feels that American's dietary habits are changing. He points to the Wendy's fast food chain which is now offering a "light" menu.