

Herbs change man's life forever

After they aided Charlie Coiner in overcoming a parasite, he decided to grow and sell them.

By TOM BURFIELD
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MIAMI — When Charlie Coiner, president and founder of Herbs Unlimited Inc., talks about the health-enhancing qualities of fresh herbs, he's talking from firsthand experience.

After graduating from William and Mary College with a bachelor's degree in biochemistry in 1975, he got caught up in the "do something good for the world" sentiment that was much in evidence during the post-Kennedy era.

He hooked up with the CARE — Care and Relief Everywhere — organization and set out for a six-month stint in Guatemala.

He planned to apply what he learned in college and what he assimilated during years on his family's cattle ranch to improve genetic strains of cattle, providing a more viable food source for Guatemalans. But all that changed when, two weeks after he arrived, a devastating earthquake struck Guatemala city, killing 33,000 people and injuring 100,000.

He spent time administering first aid, giving inoculations, burying the dead and then helping to put things back to-

gether. But near the end of his six-month commitment, he began to feel sick himself. He returned home, where doctors at Georgetown Medical Center could not pinpoint what was wrong, but tentatively diagnosed him as having Hodgkin's disease because of a mass they discovered in his liver.

"When you're in your mid-20s and you're told you have cancer, life becomes more precious," he said.

But Coiner did some reading on his own and eventually met with Dr. Hunter "Patch" Adams, the legendary doctor of alternative medicine who was portrayed by actor Robin Williams in the motion picture named after him.

At 6 feet 5 inches tall and with hair down to his waist, the real Patch Adams looked nothing like the actor who played him, Coiner said. But Adams' medical group determined that Coiner didn't have cancer after all. A tropical parasite had penetrated his liver and was virtually eating the organ from the inside out.

Coiner credits medical treatment and the addition of fresh herbs to his diet with helping him recover. He formed a camaraderie with Adams and his co-workers, and together they bought some land in West Virginia. Coiner, in effect, became the farmer for Adams' health care community.

He grew fruits, vegetables and herbs

without chemicals or pesticides to be used as controls in allergy tests.

When patients who were thought to be allergic to produce ate the organic fruits and vegetables, doctors were able to tell whether their allergies were caused by the produce itself or by pesticides that were applied to it.

Eventually, Coiner ended up with more product than he could use in the medical tests, so he started peddling it to health food stores and restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area.

He gradually got out of the fruit and vegetable part of the business to focus on herbs.

Since his customers wanted product year-round, Coiner, in 1987, started growing in Costa Rica during the winter season under the Reagan administration's Caribbean Basin Initiative, a precursor to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

When Hurricane Andrew virtually wiped out the vegetable crop in South Florida in 1992, Coiner's import business picked up further, and he opened a base in Miami to receive and distribute product.

The Miami location was ideal for distributing to the East because the infrastructure already existed for importing and transporting fresh-cut flowers. Coiner was able to piggyback his herb pro-

gram on that infrastructure.

He first sold to repackers but went on to establish his own brands and names.

He now grows 80% of his herbs in Costa Rica, Colombia and Mexico and 20% in Florida and Virginia. He said that conditions closer to the equator generally are superior for growing herbs. Also, there are economic advantages using low-cost labor to provide the rigorous hands-on care some herbs require.

Herbs Unlimited ships 30,000 pounds of fresh herbs a week under the brand names Garden, Lucinda's and San Herabacels and also does private label packaging. The firm's packing facilities comply with ISO 9000 and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point guidelines, Coiner said.

Thanks to some recent major advances in grades, the company now offers washed and dried herbs, which takes off the bacteria load and extends the shelf life, Coiner said. The process allows the company to guarantee its customers that steps are in place to ensure a safe product is added.

These practices fly in the face of critics who say imported produce is prone to bacterial or pesticide contamination, Coiner said. It doesn't matter where produce is grown, Coiner said.

"It's what kind of farmer you are and what kind of care you put into it."

"We have proven that when you do a focused herb section and you keep it stocked properly with the right mix, that will drive sales."

Kirk Schmidt
Quail Mountain
Herbs LLC

and in cross-promoted in-store demos and a company

World Variety and recommended merchandise produce with similar a separate section. advised putting peppers or tomatoes, fingerlings and mandarins category and note new products and division.

managers put all the in the section, Schueller waste of cold space, vital to some items generation.