

Physician grows primary care practice on his farm

August 4 2015, by Jeff Tolvin



Ron Weiss invites patients to experience the benefits of a plant-based diet from crops growing steps from the exam room. Credit: Jeff Tolvin

When his 69-year-old father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and

given a few months to live, Ron Weiss quit his job as a Los Angeles emergency room physician and returned to New Jersey to help.

Weiss buried himself in libraries – it was 1992 – and read everything he could find that offered hope. Having majored in botany as an undergraduate, Weiss was drawn to the connection between human and plant health, impressed by the literature on fighting illness with nutrition.

He developed a plant-based diet for his father centered on brown rice, seaweed, kale, collard greens and broccoli.

"We were told that with [pancreatic cancer](#), chemotherapy does not significantly improve the condition 85 percent of the time, and so we decided against chemo and its significant side effects," Weiss explained. "After several months on a plant-based diet, the tumor did shrink significantly and my father was able to resume his law career and lived another 18 months, most of the time feeling energetic."

Though the effects of a plant-based diet have not been proven scientifically, evidence suggests that a diet filled with a variety of plant foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans helps lower risk for chronic illnesses, including cancer. The American Cancer Society American Cancer Society guidelines say that a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and other plant-based foods may reduce the risk of cancer.

The experience caring for his father changed how Weiss, a graduate of Rutgers University–Newark and New Jersey Medical School, would resume his medical career. During the early 1990s, he developed a primary care practice in urban West New York in Hudson County, New Jersey, where he educated receptive patients to the health benefits of unrefined, unprocessed plant foods and the avoidance of food from animals, combined with exercise. The results inspired Weiss to combine his expertise in plant and medical science in a healing environment.



Weiss's 342-acre farm in Long Valley, New Jersey, includes more than 40 different vegetable and fruit crops, including 40 varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Credit: Ethos Health

Today Weiss, 53, an assistant professor of clinical medicine at New Jersey Medical School since 2009, has gone far beyond preaching diet and exercise to help fight disease. Last year he launched Ethos Health—which he believes is the only farm-based primary care practice in the country—on 342 acres in the verdant rolling countryside of Long Valley, New Jersey, in Morris County.

The novel health care setting offers patients immediate access to a wide assortment of vegetable plants growing just steps from the exam room, inviting them to experience the power of locally grown, plant-based food in a sustainable environment.

"I think we are still just scratching the surface in learning how plants can help us avoid some of the chronic illnesses that we see," said Weiss.

"There is a great deal we can do to educate our patients about how they can help themselves with diet and exercise."

Ethos trains patients in selecting vegetables they can purchase from Weiss's more than 40 different vegetable and fruit crops, including 40 varieties of heirloom tomatoes alone and multiple types of cabbage, chard, kale, radishes, turnips, escarole, squash and herbs.

Patients can sign on for "A Year of Mindful Living" and attend classes in supermarkets to learn how to shop for healthy, supplemental products. They gather in restaurants to learn how to adhere to the diet when dining out and they learn how to cook from Weiss and his team of educators and organic farmers to maximize plants' nutritional values.

Robert Ungar has followed Weiss's nutritional recommendations since last November, when he began consulting with him after being diagnosed with a rare tumor in his right eye. The Randolph resident was facing surgery and had been told that because the operation would halt arterial blood flow, he would almost certainly lose his vision in that eye.

Ungar came out of the surgery in June with his vision intact, convinced the plant-based regimen had played a significant role. "Dr. Weiss helped prepare me physically for the surgery by teaching me about nutrition and how to make changes in my diet," Ungar said. "I am forever grateful to him and plan to stick to the diet."

Weiss anticipates a greater appreciation for a plant-based [diet](#) given that researchers have isolated [50,000 plant metabolites](#), which include carbohydrates, lipids and proteins, enhancing their ability to understand how and why they may be able to thwart illnesses.

"We've seen how plant-based diets can help people," he said. "The many thousands of beneficial plant molecules work in amazing complexity in concert in the human body to produce their salutary effect."

Provided by Rutgers University

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