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Home > Archives > 0110

Features

Organic Farmers: Heroes of the Soil That Sustains Us All

by Cara H. Cadwallader

"What is there to eat?" It's a simple enough query. School-aged children run home from boisterous classrooms screaming, "Mom, we're hungry!" Petulant teenagers return from an afternoon spent prowling the local strip mall complaining, "Dad, there's nothing to eat." Meanwhile, dogs and cats prowl underneath tables and press up against human legs demanding to be fed. As in all nations, species, and tongues, the question remains, "*Qué hay para comer?* What is there to eat?"



Berry Logan at La Milpa Organica Farm in Escondido, CA. Photo: sandiego.robb.org

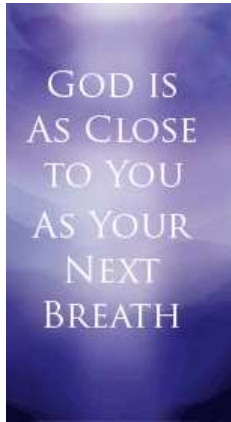
Our food and our biological need to consume at least three meals a day inextricably bind us together—both as human beings and as stewards of this planet Earth, the only edible home we have known for millennia.

In our technologically complex civilization, the way we grow and eat our food has dramatically changed over recent centuries. Farming was once a labor-intensive activity in which 90 percent of Americans were actively involved in the art of agriculture. The Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century brought with it the prevalence of farm machinery that is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. As a result, the U.S Environmental Protection Agency estimates that less than 2 percent of Americans today are actively involved in the production of the food that they put into their bodies.

The 20th century brought a persistent march toward a global market and corporate food giants have followed in the wake. Now, Big Ag (agriculture) is a multi-billion-dollar industry that hoards a majority of arable land while using unsustainable farming methods, such as monoculture. Unlike permaculture, which emphasizes the use of renewable natural resources and the enrichment of local ecosystems, monoculture involves the cultivation of a single crop to sustain a farm or a region.

Take Singleton Farms for example. Steve Singleton's family has raised Irish potatoes on 800 acres of northern Florida terrain for generations. His is just one of the many farms that provides Frito Lay with its annual two billion pounds of starchy chipping potatoes. Consequently, Farmer Steve must be vigilant in his protection of this highly vulnerable, singular crop against a host of predatory pests, diseases, mites, and blights. The most convenient way to do this is to spray the fields with petroleum-based chemicals designed to eradicate all pesky afflictions. However, soil on speed leads to a loss of nutrients and a compact surface. In other words, the immediate fallout of monoculture is the alarming rate of depletion to our topsoil.

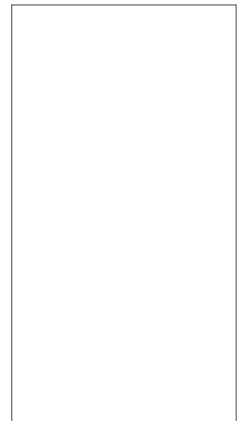
Most organic farmers will tell you that their most important job is to take care of the soil. All life depends on it. The quality of the soil is directly linked to the nutritional value of the food, which in turn, is connected to the health of the people who eat it. Organic farmers, in their steadfast preservation of nutrient-rich soil, are the humble heroes of



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the planet.

Taking it one step further to bring organic farm practices into the community, the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC) in Sonoma County is taking strides to encourage ecological literacy. This 80-acre permaculture farm, which is comprised of bio-intensive organic gardens and orchards surrounded by 70 acres of oak, fir and redwood forests, has helped to plant over 150 school gardens in San Francisco and Sonoma counties. The busy farm offers ongoing educational workshops, plant sales, and community gatherings as a means of recreating our agricultural history. Dave Henson, Executive Director of OAEC, is hoping to drive home his intentional community's message of "Earth as living organism."

While Frito Lay and Farmer Steve's working relationship generates a gigantic carbon footprint in the amount of fossil fuel it requires to ship potatoes from Hastings, Florida to the nearest Frito Lay processing plant 300 miles north in Perry, Georgia, OAEC keeps its produce within the local foodshed. Typically comprised of a 100-mile radius, a local food system relies on a human workforce, versus the machine-based practices of monoculture.

Nonetheless, monoculture keeps the cost of grocery-aisle foodstuffs down at a rate so low that most small-scale organic farms simply can't compete. The CATO Institute reported in June 2009 that out of the \$10 billion to \$30 billion in subsidies that the U.S. Department of Agriculture distributes to farmers, over 90 percent of this money goes to the Big Ag farmers of five crops: wheat, corn, soybeans, rice, and cotton. Our small local farmers are therefore our everyday heroes caught in a battle reminiscent of David and Goliath.

As Barbara Kingsolver wrote in her book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, "Organic practices build rather than deplete the soil, using manure and cover crops. They eliminate pesticides and herbicides, instead using biological pest controls and some old-fashioned weeding with a hoe. They maintain and apply knowledge of many different crops. All this requires extra time and labor. Smaller farms also bear relatively higher costs for packaging, marketing, and distribution. But the main difference is that the organic growers aren't forcing us to pay expenses they've shifted into other domains, such as environmental and health damage."

Indeed, the seemingly low-cost of Big Ag comes with many hidden expenses and externalities that become the burden of both society at large and future generations. Escalating disease rates bear an undeniable connection to the food we eat. According to the 2009 report of the Alaska Healthcare Commission, 70 percent of all deaths in the United States are caused by cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, while 75 percent of all U.S. healthcare spending goes to the treatment of these diseases. Now consider the report's conclusion that 80 percent of heart disease, stroke, and type II diabetes could be prevented if Americans had a healthier diet.

Beyond the decline of public health is the degradation of our planet, a matter that is also inextricably tied to the food we eat. For example, petrochemicals sprayed on large agricultural fields along the Mississippi River flow into the Gulf of Mexico, creating a massive dead zone. At its peak in 1999, this dead zone was an astounding 7,728-square-mile area surrounding Louisiana in which oxygen levels were too low to support marine life.



The alternative is clear. Fortunately, it is also quite simple. The solution rests in exploring the question, "Who is your farmer?" Spending your hard earned dollars at local farmers markets and investing in your relationship to the land, as well as to the people who grow the food you put into your body, is no longer just a chic way to demonstrate

your global awareness—it is a dire necessity.

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In this new year, make becoming a locavore a priority and not just a resolution. Opportunities are abound. In San Diego, CA, the local food movement has led to the creation of a "Friends of Local Farms" group. Once a month, the regional community gathers together on an organic farm where they share a potluck dinner, watch a movie, listen to live music, and simply enjoy each other's company.

In November 2009, the community gathered at J.R. Organics, an 88-acre farm in Escondido, CA that has been cared for, tilled, and sustained since the 1950s by the Rodriguez family. The transition of the farm's practices is an inspiration in and of itself. In 1958, Amado Rodriguez acquired a conventional farm and in 1985 his grandson, Joe Rodriguez Jr., led its transition into an organic vegetable producer. At the time, Joe Jr. was challenged by the task of finding an alternative to pesticides. His family had been relying on petrochemicals for decades but after years of being sprayed, the bugs were becoming more and more resistant. The higher the insects' tolerance, the more chemicals needed—up to 200 gallons per two acres was what the corporations were prescribing, along with the usual doses of petroleum-based fertilizers. The costs were adding up and the health consequences were becoming too dangerous to overlook.

Joe Jr. then took a bold step and led the way for his family's organic revolution. Today, his greatest joy is watching both his children and the family farm reach their ultimate potential—without the harmful effects of toxins in the water they drink, the food they eat and provide for others, and the air they breathe.

Still, it's not a picture-perfect world. Joe Jr. must now worry about the drought in southern California and the rationing that the municipal water company has been enforcing since 2008. As a result, his family is now only farming on 60 acres of their land; the other 28 are left fallow and they are no longer able to provide produce to one of their biggest clients, Whole Foods Market. Without this income, the family farm has taken a huge financial hit. Joe Jr. wonders what will happen when, in 2013, all agricultural water discounts will be eradicated in San Diego County and his farm's rates will be identical to those of residential consumers.

Over the course of this past year, I have been inspired by the tenacity of my local farmers. As my relationship with them has grown, I have inquired as to what other challenges these unsung heroes currently face. Emily Rocchi, a farm apprentice, shared the difficulties of being dependent upon nature. "To farm is to manipulate what nature already does," she explained. "The farmer's job is to choose which species of plant to encourage. However, because nature is beyond our control, the farmer is subject to whatever nature wants to do. Whether or not the farmer wants the seeds to grow is irrelevant."

Rocchi then went on to describe her relationship with the plants that she helps to cultivate. She expressed how "they can communicate with us. They can tell us if they are lacking nutrients by yellowing, or water, by wilting. They can also tell us if they are doing well or if they are under attack. Unfortunately, ways to help them aren't easy to come by."

Contrasting Big Ag, whose practices highlight the erroneous belief that we can control nature, Rocchi, along with La Milpa Organica farmer Barry Logan in Escondido, CA, and Sage Mountain Farm owner Phil Noble in Aguanga, California, all emphasized that their greatest joys as organic farmers are the relationships they share with the land, working with it rather than against it. They also find fulfillment in connecting with the people they serve. For both Logan and Noble, great contentment is experienced while listening to their friends and customers at the farmers market relate how vegetables purchased last week were prepared, or while watching a young boy evolve from his fear of "green stuff" into a full-fledged vegetable lover. As Logan professed, "We're changing the world, one salad at a time."

Thus, the next time you pick up a voluptuous calabasa, a juicy heirloom tomato, or a pungent bunch of basil, remember that your purchase is a long-term investment, just like your house and your education. Think of your local farmers when you bite into the fruits of their labor, and consider your relationship with them as venture capital in your health, as well as in the wellness of your loved ones, your local community and the planet which sustains us all.

And when your young ones run up to you and ask, "What is there to eat?" see what's

inside the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box that your farmer provided you with this week. Together, begin fantastically dreaming up all of the new concoctions still to be discovered with what's inside. Introduce these impressionable children to your local farmers. Have them ask about meal suggestions for seasonal squash or about canning tips for an abundance of berries.

Honor your local farm heroes by sharing in the magic of agriculture and watching the Earth sprout forth and give birth in the spring and summer only to then fade beneath the fall moon and in the cold winter months. Let us not forget that it is the creativity embodied in America, along with our problem-solving skills, which will lead us into this next era. Let us acknowledge the abundance we have while working toward a healthy, sustainable, and delicious future for all.

Cara H. Cadwallader is the Volunteer Coordinator for San Diego Roots Sustainable Food Project (sandiegoroots.org). She is also a movement practitioner who is developing her theory regarding the EarthBody connection. Contact her at cara@sandiegoroots.org.

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