

Small Local Farms: The Future of Agriculture

by D.E. Bentley

Looking out at a small patch of early aster blooms and developing goldenrod as I watered my garden, I diverted the hose at their roots while passing between my outer row of fruit trees – apples that produced their first few blooms this year and should provide a harvestable crop next fall. This attentiveness to the wild flowers is an act of relative futility, destined to raise jeers from fellow beekeepers. Bees need so much more than this small and meager contribution to sustain and produce surplus given the recent drought condition; a few acres of nurtured crop, planted or preserved by well-meaning beekeepers or backyard naturalists, is unlikely to have an impact on my colonies. Still, this small act of defiance against the rain gods—who seem to be slipping in their duties this year despite an abundance of dancers seeking to ceremoniously summon forth drops from the drifting clouds—returned my thoughts to the changing nature of farming practices in New York State, the US and around the world.

In sharp contrast to the kitchen gardens and family farms of our recent past, most of what we eat comes from massive industrial agricultural enterprises that provide us with a global marketplace of regional and exotic foods. It is amazing the vast variety of products that are now available. With large scale mono-culture farming practices come a host of concerns: the safety and nutritional value of foods; the health of field workers and consumers due to applications of insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and antibiotics; large scale waste and disposal of perishables in some parts of the country and world while there is widespread starvation in others; increases in pesticide resistant and invasive harmful insects and invasive “super” weeds that reduce yields; the loss of family farms and rural land area, a reduction in biodiversity and continuing global warming due to fossil fuels and wastes from Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs).

Countering our post WW II large scale farming practices is a growing trend toward smaller community farms and other alternative agricultural ventures that provide, I believe, our best potential for sustainably meeting the needs of the world's expanding population.

Despite the continued dependence on industrial agriculture, there are waves of farming innovation that are reconnecting producers and buyers of food. These include concentrated local farming in urban areas using rooftops, vertical walls and vacant lot community gardens. Many cities are also allowing small livestock and apiaries. These initiatives provide opportunities for positive social interactions and education as well as locally produced food.

In rural areas, where most of our food is produced, innovative farmers are looking at new ways to successfully farm. Incentives are allowing some large farms to transition to organic farming practices and there are movements toward free-range options for raising chickens and other captive foods. Small acreage farmers are at a significant disadvantage in many ways. As explained to me by one local farmer (who farms about 450 acres - owned and leased) “the larger the farm, the more credit available and lower pricing structure on seed and fertilizer (priced according to volume used). ... Large farms receive more USDA subsidy than smaller farms because payments are based on acreage. Large farms can also afford income guarantee and yield guarantee crop insurance. This insurance protects the large farm from loss of investment and income when harsh weather conditions exist.”

Policy makers at the global level are now beginning to realize the importance of supporting innovative farming practices and smaller farms. The “Trade and Environment Review 2013: Wake up before it's too late,” report released by UNCTAD (United Nations Commission on Trade and Development) calls for a dramatic shift back to smaller, more diversified and organic farming. The report states, in part, that “Developing and developed countries alike need a paradigm shift in agricultural development: from a ‘green revolution’ to a ‘truly ecological intensification’ approach. This implies a rapid and significant shift from conventional, monoculture-based and high external-input-dependent industrial production towards mosaics of sustainable, regenerative production systems that also considerably improve the productivity of small-scale farmers. We need to see a move from a linear to a holistic approach in agricultural management, which recognizes that a farmer is not only a producer of agricultural goods, but also a manager of an agro-ecological system that provides quite a number of public goods and services (e.g. water, soil, landscape, energy, biodiversity, and recreation).” See <http://unctad.org/> for more information about the UN report and suggested strategies for diversifying global food production.

At the local level, the creation of new small-scale sustainable and organic farms is expanding outward to form a global network of food providers meeting the needs of local communities and urban markets as more people are becoming aware and concerned about where and how their food is produced. More of these smaller farms are creating farming cooperatives, to buy in larger volume and increase their global competitiveness. They are also creating specialty markets for their products. The use of high tunnels and other season extenders are increasing the range of foods that can be grown in northern production zones and allows food consumers - all of us - to purchase and consume more foods locally, lessening our dependence on industrial growers and the impact these large scale operations have on local farm economies and the land. Although my small patch of wild asters may not provide an adequate nectar source for my bees, farming practices that provide nutritious crops - while safeguarding the well being of surrounding eco-systems - can create a patchwork of forage that allows for their survival and ours.

One farming initiative that has grown in popularity is Community Supported Agriculture or CSAs. Not everyone has the time, inclination or space to grow enough food for themselves and their families. CSAs provide in-season foods—usually produced using organic and sustainable farming practices - to members. These memberships, in turn, provide economic stability to the farmers. Many also encourage the involvement of members in farm operations. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County lists eleven CSAs that deliver within the county, including Shimmering Light Farm in Naples, NY, Wild Hill Farm in Bloomfield and Fisher Hill Farm in Canandaigua. Local Harvest, an online network source whose vision is to connect “people looking for good food with the farmers who produce it” maintains a directory of over 30,000 suppliers of local produce and other farm-generated products around the US. They list 27 CSAs that serve the Greater Rochester area (www.localharvest.org). Knowwhereyourfoodcomesfrom.

Tom Hoag, report a later than usual crop and slowed production; although they expect to harvest more berries soon, they will likely be smaller and perhaps not as sweet as last years crop but “they will still be delicious.” “The weather will have an impact on prices too,” Boite explained, “especially when farmers like us grow food using sustainable practices. It's always harder if you don't believe in using pesticides or herbicides on grass and weeds.”

Irrigation practices are another area where small-scale farming differs from industrial agriculture. Small farm operations often do not have access to the equipment used on large scale farms—which allows for irrigation but also wastes water, our most vital resource. Many small-scale farms and CSA producers are looking for alternatives to spray irrigation systems. They use mulch to conserve moisture, create rainwater collection systems, maintain irrigation ponds and use drip irrigation or water tanks - directing water where it is needed most and reducing the amount of water used.

Perhaps the most important way that small local farms differ from the industrial farming models is their connection to and attentiveness to the land. Many farmers live on and work farms that have been in their families for generations. Young families are recognizing the importance of farming - and rural life - to their emotional and physical well being, resulting in an emerging back to the land movement of first time farmers. They have an emotional rather than merely economic connection to the land. This personal connection - a genuine caring for the land - allows these farmers to be attentive caregivers and land stewards. It also results in a more nutritious and delicious food supply. Mary Boite summarized this concept nicely: “Good food is not cheap to produce, but eating good food means better nutrition, and less health costs. Local eating helps the local economy and just tastes a lot better!”

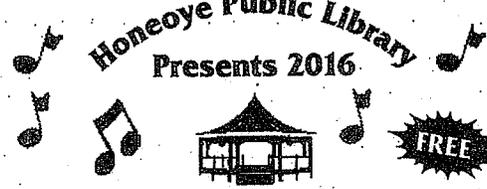
The individual actions and contributions of family farms, CSAs and rooftop ventures may seem insignificant when compared with hundreds of thousands of acres of industrial farmlands, but the benefits gained are immeasurable. Collectively, these small endeavors can and do make a difference; they hold the promise and potential for a more sustainable farming future for the wellbeing of all living things - including us.

Another site that promotes sustainable agriculture and consumption, lists close to one hundred CSAs in New York. One of the earliest CSAs in New York State, Peacework Organic Farm, is located in Newark, NY; it was founded in 1998 to provide for Peacework Organics CSA (peaceworkcsa.org). Peacework provides food to its members for 26 weeks of the year (May to mid-November) and members are encouraged to contribute to help sustain the farm. Peacework is unique in that it is the only working farm owned and protected by the Genesee Land Trust; the CSA leases the land. (<http://www.geneseeandtrust.org>). This working farm is now a one hundred and fifteen acre preserve consisting of fields surrounded woodlands.

Another newer area CSA that is contributing to the availability of locally grown organic food is Earth Dragon Gardens in nearby Groveland, NY. Earth Dragon Gardens practices “earth friendly” sustainable farming through the use of organic seeds and other organic practices for “a healthier crop, healthier you and healthier planet.” I have had a couple opportunities to talk with Earth Dragon Garden's owner David Frenette. During a recent discussion, Frenette indicated that he has been meeting season demands for his CSA but has seen drops in yield due to the dry conditions. Drought concerns have come up repeatedly in my discussions with other growers this season, including a local blueberry producer who is in the process of establishing a sustainable blueberry crop and a farmer worried about his soybean and corn crops.

Basil Seggos, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Conservation (DEC) issued a drought watch for the entire state on July 15, 2016 after consultation with the State Drought Management Task Force and Federal partner agencies. Although a “watch” is only the first of the four levels of state drought advisories (followed by “warning,” “emergency,” and “disaster”) if current conditions continue it could have significant impacts on water for crop irrigation. Drought conditions are worse in some areas of the state and continued lack of rain could lead to water restrictions in some areas. Local farmers are concerned about the economic impact of current dry conditions on their crops. Richmond township blueberry farmers, Mary Boite and

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Aug. 5	Honeoye Community Band & Odd Men Out
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Aug. 19	The Brothers Blue (Old Time & Bluegrass)
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