

Providing for Ourselves

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A favorite activity in February is to study the hatchery catalogs and dream about summertime flocks. I guess I've planted enough vegetable gardens over the years to know that by late summer, I won't really be able to tell the difference between Detroit Dark Red and Red Ace beets, so the lure of seed catalogs seriously pales in comparison to those pictures of cute baby chicks and handsome multi-colored roosters.

Back when Peter, now 14, was just a baby and we were visiting friends, their teenaged daughter proudly showed me her 3 big 4H hens. The wheels started turning in my head, thinking suddenly that if Laura could raise her own eggs, certainly I could too! That has led to many hundreds of hens, roosters, and broilers, ten of thousands of eggs and freezers full



of meat. In the spring we eagerly await the box arriving in the mail, those sweet-smelling yellow balls of down, their bright eyes looking curiously around the old watertank that becomes a cozy and comfortable brooder in the pantry, close enough to the kitchen so we can pop in often to watch, listen, and tend to their every need. The children, wide eyed, gently hold their delicate little bodies and kiss their soft heads. But soon the smell gets unbearable, they move outside, then to their movable 'Salatin' pens to travel

around the orchard for the next 6 weeks feasting on lush grass, fresh air and good organic feed. A couple years ago, Peter figured out how to hitch the lawnmower tractor to the front of the pen, making moving it easier for us to make sure the birds have a clean house and fresh grass every day, and making the chicken operation something that the children and I can easily do together.

Last February, we listened to Eric Nordell speak about the hogs they raise each year, feeding them waste from the garden and letting them 'pig-erate' and turn their composting manure. Again, the wheels started turning - if Eric and Anne could do that, couldn't we? By spring, the leanto on the barn was transformed into a spacious, airy, fresh-smelling pig pen for 5 remarkable porkers and this summer, the children and I had a wonderful time bringing them goodies from the garden and watching for hours as they played 'noseball' with eggplants, tag with each other and used their water tank as a kiddie pool. They loved when we scratched behind their ears and thought stale blueberry bagels were a great delicacy! We enjoyed every bit of their piggyness and now we are reaping the rewards with a freezer full of the very best ham, bacon, sausage, and kielbasa in the world!

To some, it seems barbaric and unthinkable to raise animals with care, respect and love - and then eat them. It is far preferable to buy packaged meat in the grocery store and forget that an animal ever had anything to do with it. But to us, raising meat is an integral part of providing for ourselves. We realize that to eat meat is to kill, but if we are going to eat meat, then we want those animals to be happy, well-cared for, and able to be themselves - a tag-loving, bagel-eating pig, or a grass and bug- eating hen.



There is something infinitely satisfying and basic to sitting down to a table laden with roast chicken, cornbread made from our own corn and eggs, potatoes, asparagus, raspberries - and know that we raised it all.

Sure, its organic, uncontaminated by pesticides and all those other mean and nasty things, but most importantly, it is ours!

The organic system is really not that much different. Far too many people still define organic farming by what we don't do - no pesticides, no herbicides, no synthetic fertilizers, no GMO's. When such people try organic farming, they look for permitted substitutes for the inputs they are accustomed to buying. We call this 'input substitution', trying to buy an organic input to replace a prohibited input without really changing the basic system. "If I can't use synthetic nitrogen, then I must go out and buy manure". "If I can't use herbicides, then I must buy certain implements to kill weeds." Buying lots of inputs is fundamental to conventional agriculture philosophy, where a dead soil yields little natural nutrition for plants, where monoculture selects for weeds that are extremely well adapted to the conditions and herbicide cocktails, and where agribusiness salespeople fill your mail box and hound your every footprint. But when this philosophy is carried into organics, too often there is frustration, failure, and needless expense.

The core of the organic system is really providing for ourselves at a very basic level. It surprises many people when we tell them that our primary source of nitrogen comes not from manure or any purchased 'organic' fertilizer, but instead from the red clover cover crop we grow under all our small grains. That while we do have a generous selection of weed control implements, they are not our principal line of defense against weeds. Our cultural practices, crop rotations, soil fertility and health are the most important way weeds are controlled, the mechanical weeders and cultivators are mostly for cleanup. That we leave our straw out in the field and don't harvest the clover for hay because it is more important to us to feed the earthworms and microbes than to eke a little extra income out of each field, for they are the key to our longterm soil fertility.

Biodynamic farmers have long believed that the farm should be a self-contained unit, where animals eat the crops and recycle the nutrients back to nourish the next crop. With specialization in conventional farming these days, animal production and grain production are often separated by hundreds of miles. The manure becomes a serious waste product

rather than a valuable nutrient resource, and the grains are raised with synthetic fertilizers, with enormous quantities of fuel used for trucking. The natural cycle of supply and demand is broken and environmental pollution results on both ends.

We organic farmers must do better than that. Perhaps we can't all reach the Biodynamic ideal of a closed system, but it is important to actively find ways to provide for our own needs. This can and should be on a community basis, not just on individual farms.

Once upon a time, there was a handful of organic grain farmers in New York and one organic flour mill. The farmers were limited in their markets and more often than not they sold their grain as conventional because there were few opportunities. Then a few more farms transitioned to organic, and then a few more. As the community grew, so did the infrastructure. Several conventional grain cleaning facilities became certified and started

buying and processing soybeans, spelt and other small grains. One farmer built a pole barn, bought a seed cleaner and started cleaning seed. A conventional soybean expeller saw an opportunity, became certified and started producing organic soybean meal and soyoil. Others in the group became salespeople for organic products.



And one crazy New York couple teamed with another organic farmer to start an organic feed business, which resulted in them (us!) buying the old Agway feed mill in town a few years later and now operating it as a full scale organic feed mill with 5 employees, buying grain from many of the other farmers in the group.

New York now has 6 organic feed mills and is also served by several feed mills in neighboring states and provinces. There are now at least 4 certified organic soybean cleaning plants, an organic soybean roaster, an organic soybean expeller, an organic flour mill, an organic buckwheat processor, an organic nut butter plant, several organic milk processors, an organic tofu maker, an organic slaughterhouse, and a organic large spelt dehuller all in this state. There are now too many organic businesses in the area to list them all here and more starting all the time. As the infrastructure grows, we worry more about not having enough supply to meet the demand than about other farmers taking our markets!

All of this has resulted in expanding markets and market diversity for the New York grain farmers. Market diversity has allowed the farmers to improve their crop rotations and find greater economic stability on their farms. It didn't happen with one farm, it didn't happen all at once, but as the community grew and cooperated, the infrastructure grew to provide for the needs of the group.

Our own latest venture is into organic seed. The National Organic Program requires that organic farmers use organic seed, if it is commercially available in the quantity, quality and form desired. Seed is a curious thing. So basic, something that we all produce in quantity

each year, and yet there is far more to good quality seed than simply planting bin-run grain. Old farmers around here talk about saving their own seed and having it ‘run out’ after a few years. While the common explanation is that the genetic contamination or poor handling, we suspect there’s more to it than that.

There is nothing more basic in providing for ourselves than saving seed, and yet unless we understand a little about seed physiology, we risk putting ourselves at a distinct disadvantage, agronomically and economically. The best quality seed is produced from the best quality plants. If a plant is grown under nutritional or environmental stress, seed



quality will be one of the first things to suffer.

Germination tests tell only part of the story. Seed vigor is much more subtle, not a simple ‘alive or dead’ rating, but a measure of how well a seed will germinate and grow, especially under adverse conditions. Low vigor seedlings can result in significantly reduced yield and increased weed, insect and disease pressure.

As organic farmers unable to resort to chemical seed treatments to ‘improve’ poor seed or herbicides to rescue us from weed outbreaks, we simply can not afford to use anything but the highest quality seed available. Organic seed should be grown on our very best fields with nutritionally balanced soil, the fields should be rogued to control weed problems and off-types, seed should be harvested, handled, cleaned and

stored with upmost care, and, if it is to be sold legally, seed must be germination tested and labeled according to the law. Simply providing for ourselves by saving seed may not be enough, we have to know what we’re doing and do it well - or let someone else in the community provide that piece of the infrastructure. But we’re not waiting for Monsanto or Dupont to produce organic seed for us! The New York organic community is providing for ourselves and we don’t need to spend billions on genetic engineering to do it either.

For now, the winter storms may blow and temperatures hover around zero - we have lots of food in the freezer and in the pantry! Of course the children like ice cream, pizza and other fun things like that, so do we, we’re not that unusual! But hopefully they are also learning that it is important and satisfying to provide as much as possible for yourselves, and to share as much as possible with the other people around you.