

The Gifts of Summer

Although it was not quite summer, I was given a generous bag of lettuce, newly picked from among the towering larkspur. It was a double gift – lettuce and hope. Many of us remember when most of our food was grown within a day's drive of home. We have become so discouraged by the worldwide land-grabbing, resulting in great profits for international companies and great poverty for the people who tilled their small farms, that our grasp of hope has become precarious.

In speaking of vegetable growing my gardening friend assured me that indeed things were changing, that people were once again appreciating the value of healthy food and were experimenting in ways to produce it. I tucked the message into the bag with the lettuce.

“The Economist”, the costly periodical that is so often quoted to end argument, reports: “average American meal travels around 1500 miles from farm to table”. To further confound and confuse, in the US four times as much energy is used in the packaging, transporting, storing, and preparing fruits and vegetables as is used in growing them in the first place. The figure given for spoilage due to jet lag and other vagaries of transportation is about 33%.

Of course we can't produce massive quantities of food locally, but we can grow food for the people who live in the area. With summer, more and more fresh and tasty local food is available. As we are a rural county, that is not a surprise. What is a pleasant surprise is that gardens are springing up in the most unlikely places.

In large cities community gardens are occasionally found surrounding abandoned factories and even in Manhattan, neighborhood gardens are appearing in vacant lots and on roofs. How heartening to learn that Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Ma. has “City Farm” lab. This lab designs energy-efficient farms inside city buildings. Sounds impossible until you know that the plants are not spread but stacked! Machines do some of the work, special devices circulate mineral-rich water and special grow lights assure photosynthesis. One may assume that those brainy engineers will figure out the details of fresh taste and small profits.

This is all very encouraging as not every area has the land. How fortunate we are that Tidewater has plenty of space for gardens. The baskets of zucchini that arrive for Sunday services in our counties attest to the ability of our climate to grow wonderful vegetables. The list of species that can be grown is sufficiently varied that the diet promoted for health is available with only small additions of meat and dairy for balance.

One hopeful remedy for the environmental consequences of 70 years of industrial agriculture is the current movement for sustainable agricultural land trusts. Over 47 million acres are being managed by trusts and easements by over 1700 state, local, and national organizations. Agricultural land is being preserved and training and service provided to help new farmers enter farming. In some state legislatures proposals are being introduced to protect valuable farmland from urban sprawl.

These efforts need to become a part of civic conversation. Is it time to address our mindless eating and think about what we put on our plates? There are lots of hopeful ideas out there waiting for us to help with if we are just willing to take the time to pay attention.

A friend lent me a most curious book, “Plato at the Googleplex; Why Philosophy Won't Go Away” by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, wherein Plato does indeed visit the Silicon Valley headquarters of Google, as well as continue a book tour to talk shows and other manifestations of

the modern world. One phrase struck me: “Google is gathering information, Plato said very softly. It’s not clear it’s gathering knowledge.”

Do you think we need to grow more lettuce as a path to knowledge?

19Jun14