

The Work of Eating Locally

By Christine Loughlin, OP

On Saturday we had a delightful visit with four young men who came to inquire about Crystal Spring Community Supported Garden. They are members of a food co-op in Allston which is closing. The young men were on a pilgrimage, so to speak, visiting three local community gardens in search of the one they would join. These young men want to know the place, to connect with the land, the people, the farmer, and the whole community of life forces that are the source of their food.

For those of us who live in the Northeast, to eat is to participate in a global food system. We drive to a store called a Supermarket. There we find lettuce from California, tomatoes from Mexico, apples from New Zealand, grapes from Chile. We can buy organic blackberries and strawberries from Guatemala which are organically produced but not sustainably grown. Within the “free trade” system, thousands of children labor in the fields picking organic fruits and vegetables for wages as low as 78 cents a day. The price of agribusiness’ organic produce does not include the cost of social and ecological destruction.

Yet, we cannot find Massachusetts grown apples, tomatoes, lettuces, grapes, strawberries even when those crops are in season. We cannot find them because the closest supermarket to our home is owned by a corporation based in the Netherlands. It is not in the interest of that corporation to know the story, the people, the terrain of this locale. It is in their interest to produce mass acreages of one crop to be sold at a low price that will appeal to masses of consumers and net the largest profit.

The food we eat travels an average of 1500 miles before it comes to our table. What we eat comes from a global everywhere, yet from nowhere we know in particular. The distance from which it travels represents our separation from the knowledge of where, by whom, and how our food is grown, processed and transported.

Suddenly, like spring awakening, more and more people have begun to recognize the ecological and social destructiveness of our globally based food system. We have become accustomed to shopping for “cheap” food unaware of the “cost.” Corporations own millions of acres and control our global food system. They have n knowledge, commitment, or affection for any place, but draw gross capital gains from every place. Thus, in all bioregions forests are depleted, rivers diverted, ground waters polluted, soils desecrated, local economies destroyed.

As I look out the window this sun-drenched morning, I see the freshly tilled glacial soil damp after last night’s rain. The hemlock sways in a gentle spring wind. All creation is at work in the garden. When we eat, we participate in that work. Food is the gift of a long evolving creation story providing the human with nourishment to participate in that story. Our actions in the world must be worthy of that gift.

Crystal Spring Garden is about more than organic vegetables. It’s about reshaping how a group of families that live in the suburbs can rethink our place in the world. It’s learning to participate in a local, sustainable food system. It’s building a relationship with the terrain of this local place, the soils, the insects, the seasons, the watershed. It’s connecting with folks that want to support each other in our great homecoming to the natural world of which we are intimately a part.

The four young men understand this. They are witness to one of the most radical acts of our time—to *learn to eat locally*. With them and all the members of the community garden we are learning what it means to eat from our own “foodshed,” that is to be nourished by what grows in the northeast bioregion of our country.

What draws so many to a community supported garden (CSG) is the prospect of organic vegetables locally grown in a sustainable manner. It is not unusual for members to come to visit the garden—and why not? The deep relationship we have with food invites us to commune with that which nourishes us.

That explains the tremendous outpouring of protest when the USDA recently proposed guidelines for what is organic. The proposed definition includes irradiation, sewage sludge fertilizer, inhumane animal factory farming, and animal cannibalism (feed produced from diseased animals). The USDA's comment period elicited more than 120,000 responses, the most that department has ever received.

This Streams newsletter is mailed far and wide. Those involved in this Community Garden hope that other readers will research the local organic movement in your area and participate in this exciting venture. It's good for the whole natural world. ■ CL