

Dear Friend of High Falls Gardens,

Our apologies for the tardiness of this issue, but we've had a challenging spring season, as these pages tell. Our experiences seemed difficult at the time, but viewed with hindsight we can see that many people, events and forces of Nature came together at the right time and in the best sequence to prepare our new field. We feel utterly grateful, and also realize that such serendipity indicates that our garden is part of a larger unfolding of events.

With the next issue we will introduce the Growers Supplement, our attempt to link the people who are growing Chinese medicinal plants. See the sidebar on page four for details.

-- Laura and Jean

HFG OPENS NEW FIELD

The seed flats were started in February, as usual, but at the time (only a few months ago!) we were uncertain where the seedlings would be planted. Last summer we had assumed that locating a new field for High Falls Gardens would be relatively easy in Columbia County, with its 500 farms. That proved to be more complicated than we'd thought, and the story of our relocation became a saga with several heroes.

Our prime consideration was that the Thompson-Finch Farm in Ancram, though so fruitful and beautiful, is twenty miles from our homes and therefore too difficult for us to work, and for us to continue with the project a nearby leasehold was required. Beyond proximity, so many factors had to be taken into account -- soil quality, history of chemicals used on the land, exposure to sunlight, access to water and electricity, access for vehicles and others -- that the decision took a lot of work, with the usual real-world tradeoffs. Many thanks to several local farm owners including Pam Banks, Cecilia Elinson, Herb Monthie, Rich Ostrander, and Stewart and Sandra Ray, for giving HFG their thoughtful consideration.

In agriculture a deal made in March is definitely a last-minute decision, because after the season begins there's no time for reflection. In March we were running on pure faith and, with major assistance from our dear spouses Christopher Reed (carpenter/cabinetmaker) and Tim Smith (stonemason), put up a 160-square-foot kit greenhouse behind Laura's barn. (Note: Don't try this at home without readily available expertise!)

HFG and UMass Win SARE Grant

HFG, in cooperation with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has been awarded a three-year research grant. The joint proposal, *An Evaluation of Chinese Medicinal Herbs as Field Crops in the Northeast*, was funded for approximately \$61,000 over 1998-2000 by the Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Lyle Craker, Ph.D., a plant physiologist in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at UMass, will be the principal investigator. Lyle is well known in the world of herbs and also publishes a newsletter, *The Herb, Spice and Medicinal Plant Digest*.

HFG will produce seed for field trials which will be carried out at Hillview Farm and also at three sites in New England. The cooperating growers are Lynn Rose of Rose Farm in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Kasha and David Furman of Cricket Hill Garden in Thomaston, Connecticut, and Ernie and Bianca Glabau of Entwood Farm and Nursery in Burnham, Maine.

At the end of March we finally made a deal to lease land from the Sam Wright family, at Hillview Farm just outside the Village and about two miles up the creek (as the crow flies) from our homes. The field is a three-acre triangular section of prime farmland (soil type Blasdell channery silt loam), bordered by Stevers Crossing Road, the Agawamuck Creek and one of its tributaries. The Wright family had hayed the field without chemicals for many years, an advantage in terms of obtaining organic certification.

The problem with a hay field is that, according to principles of organic practice, if such a meadow is to be brought into cultivation of vegetable crops it should be sown with a cover crop such as legumes for an entire season before planting. This is to interrupt the reproductive cycle of the meadow plants, which like all healthy beings try to perpetuate their kind and will become vicious weeds against the vegetable crops. Unfortunately, HFG couldn't wait another season for good practice. The pressure was on. We'd learned that our proposal for a SARE research grant had been funded for 1998-2000 (see sidebar, above), and three other Northeast growers were ***(NEW FIELD continued. p. 4)***

Herbs and Community-Supported Agriculture

In the late 1980s amid the gathering economic gloom, a small beacon lit up the horizon. That was when the concept of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrived in America from Europe and Japan. The late Robyn Van En, who founded a CSA project in 1985 at Indian Line Farm near Great Barrington, Massachusetts, is now recognized as a pathfinder. In the succeeding decade the light has gleamed ever more brilliantly, with now over 600 CSA projects nationwide, including six this year serving New York City.

CSA is an economic arrangement whereby a group of people support a farm that grows their food. At present, the most popular model of CSA involves from one to six hundred shareholders who pay the farmer approximately \$300-\$500 per share in the spring, then collect produce every week for about six to eight months. Because this arrangement frees the farmer to concentrate on the important things such as soil-building rather than on cash flow or bank loans, the consumers in effect front the capital costs of maintaining farmland and receive superior produce as dividends.

CSA is such a hopeful sign because it is a growing counter-trend against the commodification of values in American society. Many areas of our common wealth, certainly including our food and health care (two closely related aspects of life), are made up of intangibles that do

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not have a monetary value. To commodify them is to strip them of these intangibles. Remember the tastiness of food before modern processing and shipping? Many people don't even know what fresh, high-quality food tastes like. For a baby boomer who grew up in a suburban or urban area in America, for instance, to bite into a slice of CSA-grown rutabaga can be, and often is, a revelation.

The Best Kind of Preventive Medicine

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- CSA shareholders learn to eat with the seasons, because each week they receive a bag of produce (ripe vegetables picked at the farm that very day) and

then figure out what to do with it. This is pre-WWII lifestyle, which contrasts dramatically with contemporary habits dependent on refined food products or vegetables shipped long distances which are picked green and sit on the truck or supermarket shelf for weeks.

- More of the shareholders' diet is comprised of food grown in their own locale, which helps their bodies to resonate with their own specific place and time. Many observers now believe that this is an important factor in resistance to disease.
- CSA alters people's view of who is in control of their health. They see an improvement in their own and in their children's well-being, and this satisfaction reinforces behavior -- a homegrown preventive health maintenance program. Their farmer becomes as important to them as their doctor.
- CSA ties people to land. Not to an abstract concept of land but to a specific landholding that they, in a sense, *own* and are responsible to. When you know exactly where your food comes from, your worldview shifts in subtle ways. Note that the term *organic* has not yet been used in this article. Is a certified organic carrot from California better than an uncertified carrot from New York? A superficially-educated consumer would say yes, but a CSA-educated consumer would say that it depends on where you live. If you live in New York and know and trust the person who grew that carrot for you, the New York carrot is by far superior, regardless of its certification status. (And it tastes better because it hasn't been sitting on the truck for weeks.) Naturally, people who are responsible to land (and are free of the economic constraints of industrial food production) will farm it organically, biodynamically and in the best possible way they can to preserve its nutritive capacities for their children.
- CSA helps wean people from the magic bullet fantasy. To realize that the best possible food for your body was grown nearby by a highly skilled and responsible person, who picked it ripe for you yesterday, is to gain an appreciation of what plants can do for human health. Further, to eat food in minimally-processed form and in a wide variety at different times of the year is to understand that one food (one herb, one drug) cannot by itself prevent cancer or otherwise affect a health outcome in any significant way.

From Magic Bullet to Balancing Agent

If even a small minority of people in our society achieve a more sophisticated understanding of the healing power of plants, that's a beachhead against the times.

Our era's collective inheritance of attitudes -- among them domination of Nature, denial of the spiritual, worship of technology -- has been recognized as severely limiting, if not downright fatal, and is being transcended slowly and fitfully. At present, the vast philosophical tug-of-war that marks the passing of this age of materialism is being played out rather dramatically in certain venues, and nowhere more so than among herbalists. On one hand are the Vitalists, who believe that a plant is more than a collection of chemicals, or more than its material form, even though we cannot directly perceive its totality through our five senses. At the opposing extreme are the Literalists, for lack of a better-recognized term, those who tend to accept without question the beliefs of the past 500 years and assume that anything the great gods Science and Technology cannot measure does not exist.

CSA can protect medicinal plants by removing them from the commodity realm, and can for similar reasons distinguish the services of the practitioner who works with these special plants.

As a result of this struggle we have two contrasting attitudes toward herbs. Some people regard plants as raw materials from which to manufacture products -- to make plants into drugs, in the extreme. Others are aware that healing power tends to adhere to the whole plant in its healthy and well-grown natural state, and that taking refined, manufactured products instead of the whole herb is akin to popping carrot pills instead of eating carrots. (Granted, a difference is that medicinal herbs taste awful, perhaps a message from Mother Nature that they are not to be consumed as often or in the same quantity as food.)

CSA shareholders who respect the Vitalist viewpoint provide a foundation for herbalists to rebuild their arts and again serve humanity as in ages past -- that is, with great skill, and outside of an exclusionary marketplace where health care is just another commodity to be traded.

Beyond Herbs as Commodities

Changes in people's attitudes and behavior amount to major good news for herbalists, but CSA is important not only for acceptance of herbs but also because it provides a new model for how herbalists and growers can afford to cultivate herbs and supply themselves and others. CSA can protect medicinal plants by removing them from the commodity realm, and can for similar reasons distinguish the services of the practitioner who works with these special plants.

We have gone past the time of thoughtlessly harvesting wild plants without replacing them, and have entered into the beginnings of an agricultural era that is at once more respectful of Nature and more imaginative than habits of the recent past.

For example, throughout the Appalachian range where *Panax quinquefolius* (American ginseng) grows wild, efforts to sustain wild stocks are being thwarted by poaching. The state of the cultivation art now involves imitating Nature in a controlled, protected setting, using techniques such as building a woodland soil and inter-planting with a full complement of native companion plants. The line between responsible cultivation and responsible wildcrafting may well become blurred, but whatever the activity of nurturing and harvesting medicinal plants may be called it can be connected to the consumer through the economic model of CSA.

Considerations for a Practitioners' CSA Project

A practitioners' CSA project may be envisioned as one cooperative effort linked to another. A large number of practitioners (several hundred, at least) would be required to sustain a cooperative of growers. Several growers (two or three dozen) could supply the hundreds of varieties of herbs required, but one practitioner could not afford to deal with many growers.

Practical considerations for the startup of such a CSA project would include the following:

- Identifying the appropriate subset of herbs would be a lengthy process. The needs and capacities of each bioregion would vary. Herbalists are now learning to use different modalities, such as traditional Chinese medicine, and may use different herbs now than they will use with more experience twenty-five years from now. Nevertheless, herbalists could be surveyed to identify the plants most frequently in demand, and the CSA project could start small.
- Once potential shareholder needs are identified, production costs must be determined and assessed in order to arrive at the initial product mix.
- Capital costs for drying and other production facilities must be factored into the shareholder price and either paid up front or amortized.
- The question of whether and how to supply herbs not produced by the growers will arise, and must be handled with full awareness of the impact of this issue upon the CSA model. Staying in contact with other CSA projects develops awareness. ■ © 1997 Jean Giblette.

To Find a CSA Project Near You

Call the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Inc. at 800-516-7797. They'll send you a free printout of CSA projects in your state.

In New York City call Just Food at 212-666-2168.