

Sustainable Agriculture

Volume 6, Issue 9 – September 1998

Locally produced foods more friendly to the environment

Choosing foods grown in your local community that have minimal processing and packaging is better for both you and the environment, says a nutritionist who spoke at a recent meeting of the Society for Nutrition Education.

It's urgent to re-localize food choices, said Joan Dye Gussow, a nutrition professor at Columbia University, for these reasons:

- Eating locally reduces the energy cost of transporting food long distances.
- The process of global capitalism threatens local environments.
- The U.S. public is increasingly disconnected from their food sources and inattentive to the viability of their food system.
- Eating food grown locally might be the only way to ensure that what we eat has been produced safely. Where is the logic, Gussow asked, in eating a raspberry from a country where you wouldn't drink the water?
- Buying locally helps stem the catastrophic loss of small farms. The U.S. loses one million acres of farmland a year, Gussow said, and purchasing from a local producer helps that neighbor stay in business.

We need to make nutrition education more relevant in the community, Gussow said, and clarify that wholesome, locally produced food is an essential "bridge" between agriculture and health.

Not enough research has been done comparing the costs and consequences of local vs. "long-distance" diets, Gussow said, but it's clear that non-renewable resources are better preserved with local produce. She urged people to try to purchase most of their food from farms you could visit in a day. Or, spend at least \$10 per week on local produce through Farmer's Markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements.

Gussow gave the keynote address at the annual meeting of the Society for Nutrition Education (SNE) in Albuquerque, N.M., July 19, 1998. The mission of SNE is to "promote healthful, sustainable food choices."

Information provided by Mary Darling, nutritionist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service; and nutritionists at Purdue University. Darling can be reached at (612) 624-6286, or e-mail mdarling@che2.che.umn.edu.

U of M organic agriculture field days draw good crowds

A few years ago there probably wouldn't have been 120 people at a field day on organic agriculture. But that's how many attended one in late August at the University of Minnesota's Agricultural Experiment Station at Lamberton. Researchers Paul Porter and Elizabeth Dyck organized the event.

Extension Service educators also report increased interest on organic production marketing, economics and certification. "I'm amazed at the interest people have in organic agriculture," says Dave Schwartz, extension educator in Meeker County, where field day visitors at the Craig and Angie Anderson farm near Dassel saw excellent weed control and yields of corn, soybean and small grain near the county average. And another field day organized by Clay County Extension Educator Jim Stordahl highlighted growing sugar beets organically in the Red River Valley.

For more information on organic agriculture events, contact the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture web site, e-mail misamail@tc.umn.edu.

U of M mission includes working with small farmers

There's no "silver bullet" or one solution for Minnesota's many types of farmers. But working with small farmers clearly falls within the University of Minnesota's mission, and many faculty and staff are interested in doing more work with smaller farmers, according to a University of Minnesota Small Farm Task Force Report. The task force was appointed by Mike Martin, dean of the College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences.

"By working directly with farmers to develop research and outreach programs, and by partnering with other organizations and agencies interested in the survival of smaller farmers, we are confident that we can do a better job of assisting farmers seeking alternatives to getting bigger or getting out," the report's summary says.

The 15-member task force was co-chaired by Bill Wilcke, Department of Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering, and Warren Sifferath, Dakota County Extension Educator. "The task force learned that issues such as family quality of life, cost of health insurance, rural employment opportunities and viability of rural communities are at least as important as ag production issues," the report says. It's available at www.bae.umn.edu/extens/. You can also get a printed copy from Bill Wilcke, (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.umn.edu.

Regulate commercial fertilizer as well as manure, economist suggests

Manure is regulated, so why isn't commercial fertilizer? Regulating commercial fertilizer could be more equitable for livestock producers, help improve water quality and make regulations more enforceable, says a Minnesota economist.

Current feedlot regulations have the undesirable side effect of making plant nutrients from manure less attractive to farmers than those from commercial fertilizer, says Dick Levins, economist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. "Regulations discourage livestock production, a major source of economic activity for rural areas," Levins says.

"But if we want to have both an expanding livestock industry and high quality water, farmers without livestock must somehow be induced to use the growing supply of livestock manure. You don't have to be around a lot of farmers to predict the answer to the question, 'would you rather use commercial fertilizer

without regulations or use manure and have the MPCA and other agencies looking over your fence?’ Yet this is exactly the policy environment in which we are trying to encourage proper land application of manure. The incentives are wrong.”

Levins says a system that regulates feedlots indirectly by limiting the use of commercial fertilizer looks promising. Here’s how it might work: When a livestock facility permit is applied for, a land application plan of the type now used would be developed. The extra commercial fertilizer needed for all land to which manure is to be applied would be determined. Operators of that land would be given rights to buy only that amount of commercial fertilizer.

“Such an approach would work best if all commercial sales were regulated to cover only agronomic rates. Each farmer would initially be permitted to buy enough commercial fertilizer to cover all crops at agronomic rates. But these amounts would later be lowered when manure permits came into play. The farmers would trade their commercial fertilizer rights for nutrients from manure,” he says.

Such a system would “level the playing field” for livestock producers and is possibly more enforceable than current regulations, Levins says. He says there’s another important reason to consider such a system: “Some studies have shown that nitrogen leaching can be a serious problem even when agronomic rates are followed. Significant improvement in water quality may require nutrient applications rates that are lower. A comprehensive nutrient management system would then not only be desirable—it would be necessary.”

Levins can be reached at (612) 625-5238. His article is in the Minnesota Agricultural Economist, Spring 1998. Or, write to Waite Library, Dept. of Applied Economics, 1994 Buford Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108-6040 . Phone (612) 625-1705; e-mail lletnes@dept.agecon.umn.edu.

The Farmer’s Wife documentary will be shown Sept. 21-23

The Farmer’s Wife is a documentary portrait of three years in the life of a Nebraska farm couple facing the loss of the farm, their self-respect and their marriage. It is scheduled for showing on public broadcast channels Sept. 21, 22, and 23 at 9 p.m. Check local listings for more information.

Protecting the “rural character” in urban areas

Residential cluster development is a way to permanently protect open space, rural character and environmental resources in new housing developments. And a new series of publications from the University of Minnesota Extension Service is designed to help local officials, community leaders, developers and homeowners address the critical issues of residential cluster development.

The four Residential Cluster Development fact sheets include an overview of key issues such as zoning, alternative wastewater treatment systems, storm water management, and management options available to municipalities and developers when establishing a management structure. The fact sheets are available from local offices of the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Or, contact the Distribution Center at 1-800-876-8636, or 624-4900 in the Twin Cities.

Get on the list for the new Agroforestry Advantage newsletter

The Agroforestry Advantage is a new quarterly newsletter that you can get by contacting the Center for Integrated Natural Resources (CINRAM) at the University of Minnesota. The first issue features an article on living snow fences, which are effective in preventing snowdrifts, improving visibility, and

reducing slush and ice. A 10-foot tall living snow fence can trap 20 to 30 tons of snow per linear foot, saving \$3 a ton for plowing and removal. That's roughly \$100,000 along a quarter-mile of living snow fence.

Contact CINRAM at 115 Green Hall, 1530 Cleveland Ave. N, St. Paul, MN 55108-1027, (612) 624-4299.

New training video on sustainable agriculture decision cases

A new training video introduces decision-case teaching in sustainable agriculture by having people work through real-life agricultural decisions. It's available for \$60 from the University of Minnesota Extension Service Distribution Center, (612) 624-4900 or (800) 876-8636 You can get a more detailed description of the video, then click on "catalog." Search for item number EP-6741

Other new resources...

Managing Cover Crops Profitably, 2nd Edition, is a new book from USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN). It sells for \$19. For more information, check their web site, call (301) 504-6425, or e-mail san@nal.usda.gov.

Newly available from USDA's Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) are an eight-page bulletin titled **Nutrient Management: More than an On-Farm Priority**. Up to 10 copies are available free. You can also get a copy of *Building Soils for Better Crops*, a guide to soil organic matter management. Single copies are \$10 and there's a discount for bulk orders. Call John Nelson at (802) 656-0484, or e-mail jonelson@zoo.uvm.edu for more information.

Calendar of 1998 events...

These events are sponsored by numerous organizations. More information is available on MISA's website

Saturday, Sept. 19, Sheep & Grazing Day, West Central Experiment Station, Morris. Call (320) 589-1711 for more information.

Tuesday, Sept. 22, Field Day, Meeker County. Reviving and Enhancing Soils for Maximizing Performance of Pastures and Livestock. Contact Liberty Land & Livestock (320) 587-6094

Friday, Sept. 25, Field Day, New Zealand Agritech Road Show. Contact Chuck Schwartau (612) 388-8261

Saturday, Sept. 26, Princeton, MN. Homesteading Workshops & Family Fun Day. Contact Jackie or Carol (612) 389-3748

Saturday, Oct. 3, Field Day, Aitkin County. Surface Application of Liming Materials. Contact Jane Grimsbo Jewett (218) 845-2832

Sunday, Oct. 4 through Wednesday, Oct. 7, Minneapolis, MN. Farming the Agroforest for Specialty Products. Contact Scott Josiah (612) 624-7418

Thursday Oct. 15 through Saturday, Oct. 17, Brainerd, MN. Land Use Leadership Conference - New Approaches to Land Use Policy Making. Contact Elizabeth Lund (218) 829-3591, ext. 8856

Saturday, Oct. 17, Field Day, Winona County. Small Farm Composting of Urban “Wastes.” Contact Dick Gallien (507) 454-3126

Saturday, Oct. 24, Field Day, Stearns County. An Alternative Management System in an Organic Community Supported Market. Contact Candace Mullen (320) 236-7852

Wednesday, Nov. 18, Field Day, Goodhue County. Extending the Grazing Season with the Use of Silage Clamps. Contact Jon Luhman (612) 388-6789

About this newsletter...

For the past year we've been funded by the Minnesota Extension Service and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) with support from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

We're always looking for story ideas. Send them to the editor: Jack Sperbeck, 405 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 625-1794. E-mail: jsperbeck@extension.umn.edu. Other editorial board members: Helene Murray (612) 625-0220, murra@021.tc.umn.edu; Tom Wegner (612) 374-8400, twegner@extension.umn.edu; and Bill Wilcke (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.umn.edu

Our mission statement: To help bring people together to influence the future of agriculture and rural communities to achieve socially, environmentally and economically sustainable farms and communities.