

GROW it-yourself

BY YAN ROBERTS

Growing your own food is learning the subversive art of self-reliance. Taking action and being in charge of the things that you put into your mouth has somehow become radical. Today, being a simple gardener in a highspeed culture is deeply subversive. Quietly walking away from the grocery store and happily growing as much food as you can is the biggest thing us little peaceful people can do. You have permission to break the norm.

One hundred miles is still too far -- but it was just catchy enough to encourage people to make the first step, serving as an entree to our acceptance of being in a relationship with our food. We don't yet have enough producers in our community for us to be promoting the local food movement as the end-goal viable solution. Everything you need to grow the food you eat is within the distance you can throw a beet.

Get some seeds, start with something that's small -- the best opportunity for you to change the world, your community and yourself is in a package of seeds. Plant your own seeds, work your own soil and eat your own food.

Every time we line up in the grocery store checkout aisle, especially when the line is long and the magazines especially puzzling, each of us is given the choice to either continue brutalizing the human enterprise with our addiction to the steady supply of faraway foods or to abandon the shopping cart and flee the store without anything.

Local food has become a distant metaphor for us to weigh the harm done by our plates, for us to casually tally up our gains and losses -- "well this potato only endured a four hour drive so I feel pretty good about myself." We all know now that far-away-foods are a source of strain to Earth and a moral discomfort to ourselves, the movement of local-food gave us that understanding. But the danger before us is that many buy local carrots, three bunches a year, and then feel real good as though something significant has been done, the world will be alright again.

All good ideas are reducible to us; humans are clever that way. We can take a good idea and turn it into an ideology that is somehow hollow compared to the original. What we haven't changed about our eating is our expectations; we still expect

other people to grow for us, which would be less detrimental if we had thought to alter the economic farming mode. We had six decades of mass production that turned a carrot into a commodity. Economically we made most of the family farms extinct here at home and then we even went so far as to out-source food production entirely. The more conveyer belts we added, the cheaper and cheaper the carrots got - we seriously undervalued food, while undermining entire environments and economies at the same time.

We need to have a connection into the process of food. Understand the value of a carrot, understand the amount of work and uncertainty and heck, even the tremendous amount of joy that went into that carrot. No significant local food system will establish until more of us understand what food is and what exactly it takes to grow it. We need to individually establish a relationship with food beyond simply eating it.

Okay, I'm an optimist. I use the ancient technique of optimism as a navigational tool for distinguishing which solutions will bare the eventual triumph of good. How do we get out of this jam?

All living things are fed, each bit in nature, each of us. Even all the structures of our humanity are kept alive by us feeding into them. "So how," you may ask, "do I stop feeding our food system (before it does the world more harm) when it's the one making the food? How do I cut off its food supply when the supply goes to me?" Well there, you just nailed it... cut off the supply to yourself, cut off your current food supply and you will stop feeding the whole system.

What we put out into the world on a daily basis is our art - every activity that we do expresses to others something about our grasp and our understanding. As we grow and explore life, what's important to us changes and calls out. Make your art out of dirt, seeds and vegetables.

We live in an accelerating time with increasing disenchantment of the current ways. There's a collective unwillingness to continue pretending that we don't know what it is we should be doing. When gardening, you hardly ever wonder what you're hungry for. Full of hope you speak with your hoe, you speak with your hunger for change.



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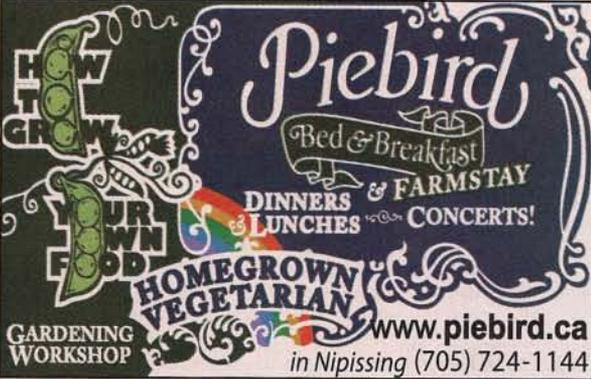
Other civilizations had decades of drought kill off their food source; we gave ours up willingly when we traded a bag of community for a sac of globalization. We chased away the family farms with sticks and rock-bottom prices. We spent half a decade stuck in traffic somehow wrongly convinced that it took less work to mow high-maintenance lawns than tame butterfly-filled backyard veggie plots. Now that we again see the need for growing and getting that food-knowledge back, it would discredit those generations of farm-absence if we returned to exactly the way things were. We need to incorporate the changes the world and ourselves have undergone in the time since our society left the farm - we have added the weight of additional morals, a broader understanding and a greater consciousness. Instead of meat or fleece or milk, let's raise our animals for their love and happiness. To many, organic gardening means a reliance on manure from a saddening industry. It's curious to watch how plants and people deal with the same problems. The plants wouldn't ever care to correct any of the crookedness of their surroundings in the ways we humans try. Do only what your plants would do. We both know they are not going to borrow a pickup truck and haul manure from offsite or buy bags of sterile topsoil for their seeds. Here at Piebird, we grow a lot of comfrey which has four times more nitrogen and potassium than barnyard manure. Comfrey's nutrients are mined from deep in the subsoil, tapping into leached reserves unavailable to other plants.

Bring nothing into the garden from off-site. No bagged nutrients, no overpriced stuff from the sea, no dust from volcanoes or salty bloodshed on your beets. Mining nutrients from elsewhere is no better than the strangely uncouth foreign policy of our nations and is indeed a great deal worse. Plus, a garden is a good place to practice those good human skills we can utilize in the other hours of our life - practice making do what you have around you rather than shopping for what you need. Besides a shiny new hoe every couple of years, our food costs zero dollars; open-pollinated seeds are saved, soil is enhanced by many buckets of brewed compost tea to keep the microorganisms up.

One thing that we tell our gardening workshop participants here at Piebird is, "you can spend less time growing your own food than you currently spend shopping at the grocery store" (especially when you add in all the hidden time associated: taking out the trash from all the packaging, sorting the recycling, flipping through the flyers, coupon-cutting, waiting in lineups, etc.). Utilize the processes of nature rather than work against them. Some people perhaps enjoy the noise of rototillers or breaking their back digging dirt. I must tell you that it's much easier to just leave the soil alone and leave it to the earthworms - they'll do a better job than you. One earthworm can digest over 35 tons of matter per year. You can build amazing soil just by creating a habitat for underground life with humus and mulch.

Get growing! Every mouthful of food that you produce yourself will take a truckload of strain off the global food supply. Now is the time to cause your commotion! This is the spring that all other springs were trying for. Happy compost piles everywhere will be purring like housecats. Start your small peaceful revolution with a handful of seeds. 

Yan and his wife Sherry run Piebird B&B / Farmstay and operate a heirloom seed company Soggy Creek Seed Co in Nipissing Village, Ontario.



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