

12 February column

The Importance of Words

Asparagus, its delectable taste and ease of cultivation is what I had decided would be the focus of this mid-February column, but a word, “sustainable” caught my eye! Asparagus can wait.

In a Daily Press article about the Garden club of Virginia Symposium held February 2-4 at Colonial Williamsburg, there were words about the featured speakers, among them was Gloucester’s own Brent Heath, third generation bulb grower and, with Becky Heath, owner of Brent and Becky’s Bulbs. Brent is quoted, “We can all become better gardeners and help to create a sustainable future on this great earth...” That word ‘sustainable’ leapt off the page.

We are familiar with the organically nurtured display gardens at Brent and Becky’s Bulbs and the beauty of trees, shrubs, and flowers grown in composted soil without chemicals. There was bravery in Brent’s reference to sustainability, which in a few words, means you do not eat your seed corn. The dictionary definition is: “conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources.” That depletion of natural resources has been in evidence in our mindless overuse of land, forests, water and other resources but anyone suggesting that we moderate that use has been labeled a Luddite and dismissed.

Decades ago when a group argued for limits to growth in a plea for sustainability, they were accused of being anti-business, insisting our way-of-life depended upon ever expanding production, more houses, more customers, more profits, more..more.... Truly, we seemed to have confused happiness with acquisition, and greed slid out of the list of deadly sins and became the American way? Brent Heath knows sustainable practices are good for business and he is not alone in this wisdom.

I thought it rather peculiar when my mountain-climbing grandson gave me a book for Christmas featuring pictures of surfers soaring on wild waves and climbers clinging to vertical rocks by their fingernails. Hadn’t he noticed I have cleared the cabinets’ top shelves and retired my stepstool? The book has been a revelation. It is “Let my people go surfing – the education of a reluctant businessman” by Yvon Chouinard, founder and owner of Patagonia, the company that makes clothing and equipment for extreme sports. The book is proof that sustainability is good business.

Although the book is the story of the birth and development of a company whose purpose is to sell clothing and equipment, its message is one that asks us to redefine ourselves from consumer to citizen. Chouinard writes: “It would take seven earths for the rest of the world to consume at the same rate we Americans do. Ninety percent of what we buy in a mall ends up in the dump within sixty to ninety days.”

The success of the company, Patagonia, Inc. has proven that there is an alternative to endless ‘growth.’ Part of their business plan was to limit annual growth to 5% and the health of the environment was a factor in all business decisions. The implementation of their environmental assessment program resulted in the use of organic cotton, recycled soda pop bottles into fabric and similar practices. That assessment showed the single greatest use of energy in the lifetime of a product is in transportation and the way to curb that use is by producing locally where possible.

More than a discussion of how to build a successful company, the book has an extensive discussion of the environmental issues that jeopardize our future. Among the facts he cites is that global consumption of water doubles every twenty years, twice the rate of population growth and by 2025 the demand for fresh water will be 56% above its availability.

The author contrasts the actions of the farmers he saw when serving in Korea, farmers who left the soil more fertile over time, with the Midwestern agribusinesses that waste a bushel of topsoil to grow a bushel of corn and pump out ground water 25% faster than it can be replenished. Amid the pessimism there is optimism illustrated by the author's own small organic vegetable garden which over time has greatly increased its fertility and production.

To plant fruit trees and a vegetable garden is to make a statement of hope, as well as food independence. If the blueberries you sprinkle on your oatmeal in February come from your own garden, via your freezer, they will not have to be flown in from Chili.