

Grow, Eat, Be Thankful

What started my thinking about farms and farming was a note from my apartment dwelling, big-city living daughter who on impulse had signed up for a CSA box. CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture and the trend has grown remarkably as eaters realize that if farmers have an assured market for their vegetables, they will grow them. Her box contained sunchokes, feathery greens ‘that are a little bitter’, beautiful leeks, and multicolored beets. Such wealth decreed that she round up recipes and friends for an eating adventure.

When we think of our country’s ‘natural resources’ we tend to think in terms of gold, oil, coal, but our greatest resource is our farmland. You do not need to subscribe to the purity of a Norman Rockwell world to be concerned that we are losing farmland to urban sprawl and highway construction.

Between 2002 and 2007 over four million farm acres were converted to developed uses, an area about the size of Massachusetts. Houses and strip malls may be a wealth-producing crop, but you can’t eat them. Food is important! This loss is not directly attributable to population growth. From 1982 to 2007 the US population grew by 30%, but during that same time frame developed land grew by nearly twice that ratio or by 57%.

Like our national waistlines, our so-called ‘life styles’ have also sprawled. Whatever happened to the idea of running a tight ship, a life of comfort and security but one also of efficiency and respect for the environment? With population pressure, development is inevitable but that growth needs to be done with care and without the waste of vital resources.

Farmland is used for development because it is flat, relatively inexpensive, and easy to plop houses onto. It requires a lot more ingenuity, talent, and investment to redesign and refurbish a faltering section of a city or town for the purpose of giving it renewed life. When that sort of redevelopment is successful, you have a real place, a place for walkers, bikers, and baby-buggy pushers, not merely acres of suburban grass.

We are fortunate that Gloucester and Mathews have farms and farmers, that we are still rural. We need to support farms in every way we can. One encouraging development is the increase in farmers markets nationally in the last decade: there are almost 8000 of them now. These are not hobbies; they are businesses. When an accounting was made last year that included sales to restaurants, the “local” food industry was found to have revenues of 4.8 billion dollars, real lettuce.

More and more people are planting a few fruit trees and keeping bees or chickens both for good eating and to nourish their connection to the land. The obscure world of zoning and regulations is where preservation happens and you don’t need to have a farm to pay attention to your local, county, and state government with their myriad public servants to keep this land of the life worth living from being lost.

Planting for the future

Although there are a lot of Elm Streets in fact and fiction, there are not a lot of elm trees, *Ulmus Americana*, lining them. Those of us with long memories, a mixed blessing, remember when the vase shape of the elms allowed the branches to meet in shading small town streets.

The elms were decimated by a deadly fungus, the Dutch Elm Disease. Virtually wiping out in the US, the disease did not reach everywhere. Alberta and British Columbia are free of the fungus. Diseases do not carry passports and so borders are meaningless but in Alberta there is an active program to protect those remaining elms.

It began in 1975 and one of its features is a law that prohibits the pruning of American elms from April through September, based on the likelihood of bark wounds attracting the bark beetles that carry the fungus. Do these beetles leave, die, and burrow underground in cold months? A further protection is the ban on importing firewood from outside the province. November is ideal tree planting season and if you don’t have an elm, try apple, maple, pecan, oak – a tree is a tree.

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