Summer Conference Taking Shape
by Jason Valcourt

TED Style Talks

We always hear the good stuff, the ultimately triumphant outcome. Huge profits! Amazing harvest! The perfect system! It comes packaged in a nice new book or a smart presentation and we gobble it up and aspire to the same accomplishment.

But, most successes are driven by trial and error, and well, failure. The best laid plans... get broken. And broken again. Until we succeed. Failure is the driver of success, and ultimately makes us more resilient and helps us improve.

At this year’s NOFA Summer Conference look for special workshop sessions where you can expect to hear the honest, bare bones reality check about how failure, humility or hardship has helped create successful endeavors. Would you like to share your story?

Debates

We know you are strategizing and ruminating about the state of affairs of the world, and how to improve on seemingly intractable situations. Well, let’s hash out the details and have an honest and open conversation!

Can farmers afford to pay a $15/hr minimum wage? Is No-Till better than Till? Can you really make the living you want to make as a farmer? Can mega farms actually feed the world?

We’re bringing back the tradition of the debate. What are you burning up about? Please share your ideas for debate topics – things you’d like to debate on or hear debated out.

Panel Discussions

We are gathering two groups of panelists to discuss the topics of Carbon Sequestration and Food Sovereignty. Do you to have questions or objectives you would like addressed?

The Summer Conference reflects the input of many in our community. Please be a part of the organizing process by offering your ideas for consideration. Send via email to jason@nofa-mass.org or call 970-275-1355.

Dismantling Injustice In Our Food System

Leah Penniman, 2016 NOFA Summer Conference Keynote Speaker

Situated on 72 acres in the rural hills northeast of Albany, New York, Soul Fire Farm connects people with land, good food and a sense of their own power. Since its inception in 2011, the farm has grown food for neighbors in urban Troy and Albany, and furthered food sovereignty regionally, nationally and globally. Soul Fire Farm is also a home base for the education and organizing work of Leah Penniman, her husband Jonah Vitale-Wolff and their two children.

Leah is a fascinating and passionate educator, farmer and social justice activist. Her sense of hope and inevitability in ending racial and other injustices in the food system is heartfelt. It has grounded the transformative work done by Soul Fire Farm and many others in what Leah calls a movement of regenerative Black agrarianism.

She shares an ever-expanding perspective on farming and activism, working regionally, nationally and internationally. Though this is not Leah’s first NOFA Summer Conference, it will be her first in some time. She is one of two 2016 Summer Conference keynoters; the other is restorative land management pioneer Chris Schmita year. They spent half the year working with indigenous farmers in Mexico on a Fulbright Fellowship. There they exchanged farming techniques and ideas for organizing to resist the corporate food system. When they returned they focused on the infrastructure at Soul Fire Farm, building a new barn and housing for their apprentices. They also became a non-profit and fundraised to pay people a living wage for the first time. This year their programming is expanding.

In 2016 they will offer three immersion trainings for Black and Latino farmers. These week long trainings are designed to help people of color gain “basic skills in regenerative farming and whole foods preparation in a culturally relevant, supportive, and joyful environment.”

“[There is a] dangerous and precipitous decline of land owning Black farmers in this country,” says Leah. “Farming is officially the whitest profession in the United States, and that’s not an historical accident. That’s of grave concern, because the food system should not be in the control of just a single ethnic group for our own security.” In addition to the external pressures Black farmers face, Leah also recognizes inherited trauma from the history of slavery and sharecropping on the land. Soul Fire Farm works to address those traumas in their programs.

“I’m so hopeful,” said Leah. “I think that right now there’s a really strong movement of regenerative Black agrarianism.” She cites a number of organizations all across the country working on farmer training, credit and land access. “The local success stories are really powerful, and I’m confident that we’ll start to see a shift in the national data. That this next census is going (Continued on page A11)

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Section B: Supplement on Farming on Public Land
We are thankful to Secretary Vilsack for the meeting with GMO labeling advocates. Tara Cook-Littman, GMO labeling advocate: ‘Not Enough Common Ground’ In Vil­sack Meeting

Details are finally trickling out about the meetings at USDA in which Agriculture Secretary Tom Vil­sack tried to help industry reach a peaceful accord with GMO labeling advocates. Tara Cook-Littman, founder of GMO Free Conn­nected, says she and four other advocates rejected an industry proposal to use electronic labeling and instead “stood strong and united for mandatory, on package GMO labeling.”

“We are thankful to Secretary Vilsack for the time he spent with us, but in the end, there was not enough common ground to emerge from that room with a GMO labeling proposal,” she agreed upon by leaders from both camps,” Cook-Littman wrote in a blog post on the website of Citizens for GMO Labeling. Food, agriculture and biotech groups have continued to stay largely quiet about the discussions.

With Cool-Littman in the meetings were: Gary Hirshberg, co-founder of Stonyfield Farm and chair­man of Just Label It; Scott Faber, vice president of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group; Chris Miller, Ben & Jerry’s social mission activism manager; and David Bromer, cosmic activism manager; and David Bronner, cosmic government affairs for the Environmental Working Group. Represent­ing the industry, sources say, were: Randy Russell, president of the Russell Group, which rep­resents the Grocery Manufacturers Association; J.P. Bilbrey, chairman and CEO of the Hershey Com­pany and chairman of GMA’s board of directors; Charles Conner, president and CEO of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives; Dave Censky, CEO of the American Soybean Association; and Paul Grimwood, president and CEO of Nestle USA. Source: Tara Cook-Littman’s blog: http://bit.ly/1QEljTk

Vermont’s two Daves pose with Senator Patrick Leahy sporting “Keep the Soil in Organic” T-shirts

Support Grows to “Keep the Soil in Organic”, Leahy to Press Vilsack for Moratorium

A letter to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack calling for an immediate moratorium on any new organic certification for hydropodonic production has been signed by NOFA VT, NY, CT, MA, and NJ, as well as MOFGA and many other organizations. A petition in support of this letter has been circulated at the NOFA chapter Winter Conferences. One of the most exciting moments of the NOFA-VT confer­ence was when Senator Patrick Leahy of VT held up a Keep The Soil In Organic T-shirt, and announced his strong support for this movement. He promised that he would press for an immediate moratorium on new organic certifications of hydroponic grow­ers with Secretary Vilsack. His support was echoed by Jenny Nelson, who spoke for Senator Bernie Sanders at the meeting. To learn more, or to sign the petition, go to KeepTheSoilInorganic.org. Source: personal email from Dave Chapman, February 15, 2016

Vermont Considers Regenerative Agriculture Certification Program

Vermont Senate Bill 159 proposes the state adopt a certification program, similar to the USDA’s organic certification program, to certify farms that continue, over a 3 year period, to build topsoil or sequester carbon or increase soil organic matter. Details on metrics and methods are yet to be worked out. Certified farms might be rewarded by payments from the state, although that is not a part of this bill. Source: http://bit.ly/1QEljTk

Argentine and Brazilian Doctors Suspect Mosquito Insecticide as Cause of Microcephaly

The proposed connection between the Zika virus and Brazil’s outbreak of microcephaly in new born babies is undergoing a challenge. Latin American doctors are proposing another possible cause: Pyri­proxfen, a pesticide used in Brazil since 2014 to ar­rest the development of mosquito larvae in drinking water tanks. A report published by the Argentine doctors’ organization, Physicians in the Crop-Sprayed Towns (PCST) not only challenges the theory that the Zika virus epidemic in Brazil is the cause of the increase in microcephaly among newborns, but proposes an alternative explanation. According to PCST, the Brazilian Ministry of Health failed to recognize that in the area where most sick people live, a chemical larvicide that produces malformations in mosquitoes was intro­duced into the drinking water supply in 2014. This pesticide, Pyriproxfen, is used in a state-controlled programme aimed at eradicating disease-carrying mosquitoes. The Physicians added that the Pyri­proxfen is manufactured by Sumitomo Chemical, a Japanese ‘strategic partner’ of Monsanto, - a com­pany they have learned to distrust due to the vast volume of the company’s pesticides sprayed onto Argentina’s cropland. Source: www.theecologist.org, Feb 10, 2016

USDA Study: GMO Alfalfa Has Gone Wild

In 2011 and 2012, USDA Scientist Stephanie Greene and her team scouted the roadsides of three important alfalfa-growing areas — in California, Idaho and Washington — for feral (wild) alfalfa stands. Because alfalfa is a hardy perennial plant, it readily forms self-sustaining feral populations that persist for years wherever the crop is grown. Greene and colleagues found 404 feral alfalfa populations on roadsides. Testing revealed that over one-quarter (27 percent) of them contained trans­genic alfalfa—that is, plants that tested positive for the Roundup Ready gene. They believe that most of these feral populations likely grew from seeds spilled during alfalfa production or transport. Researchers also found clear evidence that the Roundup Ready gene was being spread by be­es, which are known to cross-pollinate alfalfa popula­tions separated by up to several miles. Their results suggest that “transgenic plants could spread trans­genes to neighboring feral plants and potentially to neighboring non-GE fields.” While they did not test this latter possibility, there is no doubt that non-GE alfalfa has in fact been transgenically contami­nated—not just once, but on many occasions. Source: http://ecowatch.com/2016/01/21/gmo-alfal­fa-gone-wild/

Not all of the feral alfalfa stands in Greene’s study were simply genetic copies of the Roundup Ready strain. At least one site yielded positive results for seven examples of barnyard grass, a weed that is widely regarded as a pest. She noted that barnyard grass is commonly sprayed with Roundup, a herbicide that kills non-GE vegetation but leaves the genetically engineered alfalfa plants intact.

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“Cross-sector building for a stronger food movement” is the way Colette Cosner, the soon to be departing Director of the Domestic Fair Trade Association (DFTA) introduced our work at the 2016 Annual Meeting in Bellingham, Washington. Representatives from farmers, farmworkers, processors, distributors, retailers and not-for profits came together for three days of farm tours and discussions hosted by Community to Community, a Bellingham-based DFTA member.

DFTA annual gatherings start out with a day of tours of farms and food businesses that exemplify fair trade. First stop was Viva Farms, an incubator that leases plots of \( \frac{1}{4} \) to five acres to beginning farmers and supports their marketing with a farm stand and wholesale marketing. Of the 14 current participants, seven are Latino and one is a recent immigrant from Korea. Viva’s land sits right next to one of the Sakuma Brothers Farms blueberry fields - endless rows of bushes on land that has been cleaned of weeds using herbicides and where the berries are machine harvested (more about the strike against this farm business later). The second stop on the tour was Bow Hill Organic Blueberry Farm, a striking contrast with Sakuma. At Bow Hill, workers hand pick the blueberries at peak ripeness. One of the farm workers spoke comparing the conditions with his previous experience working on an industrial scale farm. At Bow Hill, he is treated with respect, and paid a livable hourly wage, instead of piecework. Farmer Harley Solten added that handpickers also observe the plants carefully and help with both pest control and food safety. Harley and his wife Susan have only been farming for seven years and reinvest all their earnings in the farm. Harley is able to earn a decent living by serving as the coordinator for a food hub of 50 diverse small farms that use Bow Hill as one of their aggregation points. This year, their sales hit $1 million.

The afternoon attraction was a visit to the headquarters of Familias Unidas por la Justicia, the union formed by the strawberry pickers at Sakuma Brothers, and then a chance to join the workers in picketing outside Sakuma headquarters while a representative of National Migrant Ministry attempted to persuade the CEO to negotiate with the striking workers. The strike against Sakuma Brothers is on-going and the workers have added a boycott of Sakuma’s buyer, Driscoll Berries, the main US distributor of berries, both conventional and organic. Driscoll, billed as a family business, purchases berries from hundreds of farms up and down the West Coast and in Latin America. The day ended with a festive dinner at the farm market of Bellewood Acres, a fruit farm that has added a distillery where they transform their apples into vodka, gin and brandy. Dinner for Saturday came with a tour of the Bellingham Food Coop, a new member of DFTA, which has an impressive 38,000 members and has just expanded to a second store.

The host for this year’s meeting was Community to Community, a woman-led organization of farmworkers and their allies. (Three weeks later the members of NOFA-NY gave its Director, Rosalinda...
Guillen, a standing ovation for her keynote at their 2016 Winter Conference.) In welcoming the DFTA, Rosalinda explained that her group is eco-feminist, committed to justice for Mother Earth and to building a solidarity economy by supporting cooperative development and worker struggles for gender and racial justice in order to create a food system where “all stakeholders find resolution together.”

The peer review session at these gatherings is one of my favorite parts. Members pair up across sectors for an hour of exchange on who they are, what their organizations do, and what improvements they have made in realizing the principles of domestic fair trade. This year, I spent the hour with two leaders of the recently opened New Orleans Food Coop. They were very interested in NOFA since there is no multi-state organic farming group in their region. I learned about their struggles to source local organic produce and about their success in building a staff that is representative of the largely minority communities in their city.

The main items on the DFTA agenda were a Board report on the on-going strategic planning process, and discussion about a new set of criteria on animal welfare for the Fair Facts evaluations of domestic fair trade claims in the US market. Decisions at DFTA are made by consensus, with one vote per organizational member: members voted in favor of the addition to the Fair Facts program. The Board laid out DFTA’s main programs:

* Education on domestic fair trade: the Fair Facts evaluations, public presentations, speaker series.
* Advocacy: taking public positions on immigration reform and fair contracts
* Membership: outreach to new members and internal education through monthly webinars.

There was a brainstorming session on how to better promote the Fair Facts evaluations. (The evaluations are available on the DFTA website – www.fairfacts.thedfta.org.) And we were introduced to the new Director, Erika Inwald, a National Hunger Fellow who worked with Unite Here and the National Family Farm Coalition.

The meeting also included workshop sessions on the EPA Worker Protection Standards and the Good Food Purchasing Policy (GFPP) adopted by the Food Policy Council in Los Angeles. I attended the GFPP workshop and heard the story of this excellent set of procurement policies for the city from Joann Lo, director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance—a DFTA member—and about the Real Food Challenge, the project led by college students to bring “real” food to their campuses. The LA policies have already increased city purchases of local food for the 750,000 daily school meals by $50 million. (You can see the GFPP on the website of the LA Food Policy Council - http://goodfoodla.org/policymaking/good-food-procurement/).

To conclude the meeting, members met by sector for elections. Each sector – farmworkers, farmers, retailers, processors and civil society organizations – has two representatives to the Board. Although the farmer sector is seriously underpopulated, we have outstanding representatives – Jason Freeman of the Farmer Direct Coop and Ben Burkett of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (the keynote speaker at the 2016 NOFA/Mass Winter Conference).

Farmworker organizations have been much faster than farmers to grasp the value of fair trade and to make DFTA membership a priority despite their limited resources. The Agricultural Justice Project was able to benefit from the good mix of stakeholders by holding a luncheon right after the DFTA to solicit comments on the Food Justice Certification standards, currently under revision. (You can see the standards and add your comments at www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org).

Food Purchasing Policy (GFPP) introduced by the Food Policy Council in Los Angeles. Today, BRANDT carries over 50 products that have been approved for use in organic production.

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Chapter 2 Korn tells how he traveled to Japan at age twenty-three, learned about the culture, came back to the United States and studied soil science, returned to Japan at the invitation of friends he’d made on his earlier visit, and eventually happened on the village where Fukuoka’s farm was.

In chapter 3, the author relates how, in 1974, he asked the veteran farmer’s permission to stay at the farm in order to work and study under him, was given permission, and ended up living and working on the farm for two years. Near the end of this time, he and Chris Pearce, a friend who was fluent in both English and Japanese, prepared a draft translation of Fukuoka’s book that would become The One-Straw Revolution.

In chapter 4 we learn how the book got published and led to widespread demand for Fukuoka as a speaker in the United States. Korn first showed his translation to poet-activist Gary Snyder, Snyder sent it to Wendell Berry, and Berry helped Korn polish and clarify the writing. Rodale agreed to publish it. Fukuoka had been known by hardly anyone outside his farm, but “after the book’s publication he was suddenly known and respected throughout the world.” The rest of chapter 4 narrates many of the places where Fukuoka visited and spoke in the United States. Everywhere he went, he listened and observed respectfully as well as spoke. He observed from an airplane that much of California seemed to be a desert, and he developed a passion for desert restoration.

Chapter 4 concludes Korn’s telling of Fukuoka’s story. Chapter 5, “Indigenous Ways,” begins his comparison of natural farming with other, similar ways of farming. According to Korn, pre-plow, indigenous peoples (a few of whom still remain) were committed to community, balance, harmony, listening to and learning from nature, and sustainability and resilience. These were exactly the values Fukuoka was committed to, but he had to learn them as an adult on his own rather than as a child picking them up from his culture, and he had to use them to restore damage before he could practice them as maintenance.

In chapter 6 we learn that traditional Japanese farming, as practiced from about 1600 to 1945, shared with indigenous farming a commitment to protecting and care for nature, but it still involved imposing human will on the land and still required a lot more work than natural/indigenous farming.

Chapter 7 assesses organic farming and permaculture and finds them more democratic than traditional Japanese farming, which was practiced under a totalitarian political system; nevertheless, they still involve a lot of work and the imposition of human will and intellect on nature.

The thesis of chapter 8 is its title, a quotation from Fukuoka: “Without Natural People, There Can Be No Natural Farming.” Many who are initially interested in natural farming, according to Korn, don’t really get it because they interpret it as a “set of techniques have . . . been groomsed to serve the objectives of modern society” including accomplishing great things and accumulating unlimited material wealth in order to feel that one’s life will really count. But on the other hand, this seemed to contradict all the terminology of conversation that pervades the book. Repeatedly Korn represents his teacher as urging people to “ask” nature what it needs and then “listen” to nature’s answer; nature will “tell you” what you need to do to thrive together with it. But a conversation by definition requires two; it is an engagement of One with an Other. Maybe Korn means that the conversation is only a means to serve the purpose of becoming one with nature, and when you become one you no longer need the conversation; you just have wordless meditation.

I keenly enjoyed getting acquainted with Korn and Fukuoka through their stories as represented in One-Straw Revolution. The thesis of Korn’s stories is that they need to see all existence as one, and to become part of that one, losing oneself as an individual in the One. But on the other hand, this seemed to contradict all the terminology of conversation that pervades the book. Repeatedly Korn represents his teacher as urging people to “ask” nature what it needs and then “listen” to nature’s answer; nature will “tell you” what you need to do to thrive together with it. But a conversation by definition requires two; it is an engagement of One with an Other. Maybe Korn means that the conversation is only a means to serve the purpose of becoming one with nature, and when you become one you no longer need the conversation; you just have wordless meditation. I suspect that with more study and perhaps through conversations with adherents of Asian spiritualities I am a Christian, I would understand this one dynamic better; as presented in One-Straw Revolutionary, however, it doesn’t make sense to me. Nor do I want to become one with nature any more than I want to become one with myself. If you want to have the grip of that kind of thinking, then you will mistakenly hope that natural farming will provide another set of techniques to help you do what you already want to do, whereas natural farming is not a set of techniques but really a spiritual path that leads you to want something different.

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There is a tradition in German writing going back German in 1995

Secrets of Fertile Soils: Humus as the Guard

Questions of Fertile Soils

It is difficult to convey this kind of thinking to many Americans, trained as we are in a very materialistic and reductionist science. It strikes one as impressionistic rather than linear, intuited rather than deduced.

Secrets of Fertile Soils is a testament to the power of humus in shaping our natural world. There are chapters on Humus itself, as well as Compost, the Functions of Roots, Tillage, Water, Earthworms, Rot and Decomposition, Cells, Carbon and Carbon Dioxide, Bacteria, Nitrogen, Soil Formation, Trace Elements, and a Warning about the loss of Order in Nature. His descriptions of these ideas are often engaging and resonate as truths. His chapter on earthworms is almost lyrical and yet filled with practical advice and information on their workings in soil. Having learned a bit about worms myself recently, his words captured their wonders well.

But occasionally he will throw in a completely novel idea without any substantiation. An example is his treatment of rot versus decomposition. For Hennig, rot is basically decomposition in an anaerobic environment, such as under water or in muck or mud. He associates it with excrement, manure, disgusting smells, insect pests and pathogens. Decomposition is aerobic decay and is associated with compost, pleasant odors such as earthy or fungal smells, a lack of pests and pathogens. Decomposition is necessary to separate the constituents of a living organism into the basic parts that can then be put together biologically to create new life.

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more buyers to the area. They can often share the purchase of some inputs, and perhaps most important, they can provide each other valuable shared experiences and support.

Regarding fencing, the best choice for perimeter fence for hogs is a combination of woven and barbed wire. Also, a second electrified fence keeps the animals back from groups of the same species contained in adjoining farms.

The single best place to buy a new hog is on the farm of origin. Klober lists several reasons for this: (1) You can see how the animal was produced. Facilities should be similar to yours, (2) You can view full- and half-siblings to see the strength and uniformity of the genetics, (3) You can view the breeding herd, including sire and dam, (4) It is probable that the small farmer working with limited numbers would value genetic depth and consistency, (5) You can visit with and get to know the producer, (6) The stress load on the animal will be much less if taken directly from the farm.

Veteran hog farmers recommend selecting replacement gilts only from their oldest sows. Their reasoning is that these females have had the time to build up the greatest levels of natural immunity to the "bug" mix on the home farm and to pass it on to their offspring. Also they are the most durable of the females.

Klober’s chapter on herd maintenance starts with a discussion of animal identification. The first choice for individual animal identification is ear tags. But ear notching is one of the oldest methods of swine identification and is considered to have the least lasting. Herd records should include when the boar was introduced, exact breeding dates (if observed), ID of service sire, ration changes, health treatments, and general observations. In the days and weeks following birth, herd records would include losses during lactation, sow conditions, pig growth, and health care practices as they were delivered.

The book also has some marketing tips for those considering starting a hog business. First, have some really good business cards made for your farming operation. Second, develop some good letterhead and envelopes. Third, have a well designed road sign nearby. Fourth, prepare a simple one-to-four-page, double fold flyer that potential customers can read over at home. Fifth, get the name, address, and phone number of every visitor to your farm and follow up with them after they visit. Sixth, cooperate with other local farmers to draw buyers to that area.

There were some weaknesses also in this book. The book had no glossary. A glossary would have been helpful for people like me who have never raised hogs before. The wagon wheel setup on page 42 had no information on measurements. No information was provided regarding how long the hogs are kept in the wagon wheel setup. Also is the wagon wheel setup really consistent with the author’s term free range?

Another weakness is the author’s suggestion of using soy feed supplements. There was no mention of the fact that most soy feed is genetically modified and therefore dangerous to the health of the pig and to the consumer of the meat of that pig. Fagan, Antoniou, and Robinson (2014) note that GM soy had 27% higher levels of a major allergen, trypsin inhibitor, than the non-GM parent variety. Also the GM soy was found to contain high residues of glyphosate (a known carcinogen according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer) and its breakdown product AMPA. Conventional and organic soybeans contained neither of these chemicals. Fagan et all (2014) gives a long list of other health hazards related to consuming GM food. Serelini et all (2014) also lists the health hazards of GM feed for animals. But not only is GM food harmful in many ways, the glyphosate used to produce GM feed causes the following problems: nutritional deficiencies, reproductive issues and increased risk to thyroid disease, kidney failure, cancer, tumors and early death. Glyphosate exposure also leads to an increased risk of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma (Samuels & Benefe 2013).

But soy in general (whether organic or not) has been shown to reduce the assimilation of B12, calcium, magnesium, copper, iron, and zinc, and thus can stunt growth. High levels of soy have been linked...
to thyroid and autoimmune diseases. As if that were not enough, soy foods contain high levels of aluminum, which can be toxic to the nervous system and kidneys. For more information on the dangers of soy, visit www.westonprice.org.

An alternative to feeding hogs soy feed supplements would be to feed them free range and self-organized or to purchase used, left-over hops from a nearby beer factory if there is one nearby. Some farmers sprout grains and peas for feed (Foreman 2014). Tish Streeten (2005) explains how he produces GMO-free feed for his livestock.

How to anyone considering starting a small scale operation of outdoor hog raising should consider reading this book.

References and recommended reading

The Organic Medicinal Herb Farmer, The Ultimate Guide to Producing High-Quality Herbs on a Market Scale
A new approach to growing local medicinal herbs including information on geo-authenticity, wild-crafting, and developing a business plan. by Jeff Carpenter and Melanie Carpenter. Forward by Rosemary Gladstar. $19.95 paperback, published by Chelsea Green, 376 pages
reviewed by Lucy Staut Huebner

If you are interested in any aspect of Medicinal Herb Farming, this book is for you. It’s well organized, beautifully written, loaded with information, discusses many important environmental issues, and most of all inspires the reader.

Preparing his Eagle Scout project, my son was charged with preparing a report that any person could use as a guide to complete the whole project on their own. This book does just that for the Medicinal Herb Farmer. But this is more than simply a how-to book. The authors have woven their own story and thoughts about sustainable and organic farming into each chapter so the text is interesting and a pleasure to read. I marked many passages to revisit later and found the text encouraging and realistic.

My neighbor and friend Tish Streeten, who produced the documentary Juliette of the Herbs, stopped over when I had the book out. She is a colleague of one of my friends Rosemary Gladstar and the Carpenters and she’d heard many good things already about this book within the herbalist community. We thumbed through the book together and she too was immediately impressed with the wealth of information. On that winter afternoon, the book sparked a great conversation about the upcoming spring and possibilities of growing herbs.

This book is beautifully organized starting with the excellent foreword by Rosemary Gladstar. The first seventeen chapters cover each aspect of Medicinal Herb farming in detail. For instance in the chapter about “Tools of the Trade” the authors talk about both hand tools and power tools and include richly illustrated with a wealth of photographs from the Carpenter’s farm. They use many informative graphics and sidebars very effectively to delve more deeply into topics.

Global Eating Disorder by Gunnar Rundgren published by Regeneracion, 2014, $19.95, paperback, 402 pages reviewed by Wilson Austin

As a student of anthropology who is slowly finding his footing somewhere in the world of sustainable agriculture, I can’t say I’ve recently happened upon as book whose content I’ve been more excited to digest than Global Eating Disorder. It’s as actually surprising as it’s self. The book looks at the globalized food system—it’s development, it’s footprint, it’s human-impacts—predominantly through a social scientist’s perspective.

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Leah is a high school science teacher with farming roots stretching back to her first summer job with Boston's Food Project and a history working with young people, including co-founding Worcester, Massachusetts's YouthGROW and working with Albany’s Youth Organics. She is passionate about issues related to diet, health and lack of access to nature. “We’re trying to connect youth with land,” noted Leah, “to good food and to, really, a sense of their own power. That means they can be producers and contributors – when society gives them so many messages that their role is to consume, to consume media, to consume video games, to consume knowledge. It means that they can be actual participants and share their brilliance in a meaningful way.” Soul Fire Farm is also expanding its programming to work with court adjudicated young people. Added Leah, “so they can get out of the trouble they’re in with the law while learning skills and be able to pay court ordered restitution.”

This year Soul Fire is also offering skill training and community building workshops like seed saving, herbal medicine and ancestral healing. An Undoing Racism Farmers’ Immersion training will happen this July, targeted to those with white privilege. Participants will learn to grow and prepare food and work to integrate dismantling racism in their personal and professional lives.

Helping NOFA become a more inclusive organization

“I’m really grateful to NOFA,” said Leah. “When I was a teenager I started going to the NOFA Summer Conferences and I remember being so wide-eyed and a little naively excited about the idea of growing my own food and self-sufficiency. I remember buying books and drinking up workshops. It was very instrumental.”

After several years of attending, it became increasingly difficult for Leah, as a person of color, to still feel like NOFA was her peer group. “I went around one year with invitation cards for this unofficial workshop for people of color in the organic movement,” said Leah. “We all gathered and I wasn’t the only one feeling alone.” Some people of color instead started attending The Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners Conference, which came out of a NOFA workshop in the early 2000s.

In her late teens, Leah began to work on Many Hands Organic Farm, NOFA/Mass Executive Director Julie Rawson’s farm in Barre, MA. “As I have watched her move through life and into this present iteration of farmer/educator/social justice activist for Brown and Black farmers,” observed Julie, “I felt it was time for her to bring her work to us, and help NOFA become a more inclusive organization. That she will do, with our enthusiastic support.”

“It’s essential. The world is changing,” continued Leah. “I think that it’s really difficult for organizations that are born out of white leadership and white culture to really transform and become inclusive. It definitely happens, but it takes such a wholesale commitment, almost a singular goal in order to do that. A lot of organizations don’t make that decision. For NOFA to stay relevant and to truly contribute to the world we want to see, racial inclusivity has to be a part of that evolution.”

The beginning of a conversation

Preparing for this year’s growing season, Leah looks forward to experimenting more with intercropping of annuals and cover crops. The farmers in Oaxaca (“the masters of polyculture,” explained Leah) shared some strategies with Jonah and her. At Soul Fire Farm they have made a renewed commitment to try to produce as much of their fertility on farm and in closed loops as possible.

They are also trying a new management structure, moving away from their beginner level apprenticeship program towards a farm manager in training apprenticeship model. Three such apprentices will start this spring. Leah’s enthusiasm for being back on the farm is palpable: “I’m excited to get back to full production so we can feed families. I just love the soil, the seeds, I love it all. I miss it a lot.”

That’s the beauty of Leah and her work. She not only sees the big picture and can connect the dots. She also sees the small acts in every day life that add up to big ones.

When asked about her message to the 2016 Summer Conference, she said: “I’d like to focus on strategies for ending injustice in the food system. There are many great examples going on locally and internationally of people doing just that. The most relevant conversation we could be having is how to contribute to that movement.”

Leah thanks Black Lives Matter for putting racism in the public discourse in a way it hasn’t been since the 60s or 70s. She makes some policy suggestions to address racial inequality in farming, including full scholarships to land grant universities for minority farmers and having existing established minority farmers be adjunct faculty for those institutions so they can run on-farm trainings and get paid for them. “There are some people who are willing to listen to those suggestions,” said Leah, “where, before the Black Lives Matter movement was so prominent, it wasn’t even on White people’s radar. It’s time, you know!”

We can have a truly just and sustainable world

She also cites South American and Western European policy models that recognize the important environmental services farmers produce, like biodiversity protection and filtration of water. “We need to start moving towards an economic model that honors the real work that sustainable farmers are doing,” said Leah. “I’m collaborating with some lawyers at National Resources Defense Council to try to turn these suggestions into campaigns.”

To have a truly just and sustainable world, which Leah believes we can have, they’re also working in the context of a global food sovereignty movement. Leah believes we can have, they’re also working in the context of a global food sovereignty movement.

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Rural Regeneration: CSAs around the World at the Urgenci 6th International CSA Conference in Beijing

by Elizabeth Henderson

Every two or three years, Urgenci, a tiny not-for-profit based in the south of France, pulls together an international conference devoted to CSAs and solidarity economics. In the words of Andrea Calori, an organizer of Gruppi Alternativi Solidari (GAS) from Italy and president of the Urgenci board, “Urgenci’s vision is to serve as a network connecting the dots to create an agriculture with people in the center. There is dynamic tension between local action and building alliances among peoples.” Thanks to Sharing the Harvest, I have had the good fortune to attend four of the six conferences so far – in Portugal, Japan, California and most recently, Beijing.

The rise we are seeing in the US of young people, both rural and urban, reconnecting with the earth is reflected around the globe, with CSA-like projects multiplying in most European countries, including Eastern Europe, and many countries in Asia. Rather than giving a blow by blow account of the conference and farm tours, let me highlight what I am learning about the varieties of solidarity economics, focusing on what we can borrow to improve CSA in the US. I will also share some thoughts about the value of CSA advocacy before UN agencies, and end with the incredibly optimistic thoughts of Wen Tiejun, activist and professor, who has inspired thousands in China to dedicate their life energies to Rural Reconstruction.

When Urgenci started ten years ago, the claim to be an international network of CSAs was more a dream than a reality. Initially, there were a lot of French farmers and AMAP (Association pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne, French: Association for the Maintenance of Family Farming) consumer activists charged up with the wildfire spread of CSA in France, a scattering of other Europeans, a few Americans and a solid base in Japan. This year, all continents were represented – a trickle from new areas like Africa, Australia and Latin America along with strong representation from many parts of Asia, North America and Europe. It is worthy of note that significant support came from Beijing’s Tsinghua University and from Shunyi District Government, on the outskirts of Beijing.

Encountering CSAs in other countries sheds light on some of the distinctive characteristics of our situation in the US. For the most part, in the US, CSA has passed under the radar, evading government regulation and assistance. There is no national charter, no national network, no laws promoting or regulating. In some areas, cooperative extension has been helpful, giving workshops, tours, technical assistance, but most CSA development has been grassroots, led by farmers, groups of consumers and not for profits like the NOFAs and the Biodynamic Association and a few excellent networks, Just Food and the Fair Share Coalition. A commercial website – Local Harvest – has the most accurate listing. The number and variety of CSAs continues to increase. However, as the CSA “brand” enters the mainstream, entrepreneurs are taking advantage of the critical benefits of CSA.

CSA was born in Northern California and most recently, Beijing. The new Swiss and UK and Europe-wide CSA networks have written charters as well. The basic concepts in all of these declarations are similar, though a dissertation could be written analyzing the many subtle cultural differences. Common to the charters we find:

* Continual improvement.
* Popular education about the realities of farming, and end with the incredibly optimistic thoughts of Wen Tiejun, activist and professor, who has inspired thousands in China to dedicate their life energies to Rural Reconstruction.

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As a grand finale for the Beijing conference, the Chinese participants announced their new CSA Alliance with both a charter and a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) symbol. Uniting under an agreed upon set of principles might be a way to bring a new burst of energy to CSAs in the US.

To organic farmers everywhere for treating their animals and the earth with care and thanked us with some of the finest organic ingredients around, thanks.
Village peasant with a harvest of fresh bok choi from one of the Shared Harvest greenhouses.

The Natural Farmer

Spring, 2016

As in France, there is a rich history of peasant organizing behind the rapid spread of CSA in China. The first farm recognized as a CSA – Little Donkey – started operating in 2008 and there are now over 500. Having toured 8 farms, not speaking Chinese and having but the skimpiest knowledge of Chinese social history, I can only claim to show you a tip of the fascinating iceberg. The spread of CSAs has been dependent on mainstream cheap food.

Shi Yan of Little Donkey translated CSA into Chinese as a shorthand for a diverse array of practices and a specific operating model, and serves instead as a way to empower village peasants left behind by urban industrialization while providing healthier food for urban people who are dependent on mainstream cheap food.

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atom bomb on that city at the end of WWII and has spent all his life observing what that exposure did to survivors. Shinji accedes that farmers may be able to produce safe produce, but he has taken a Geiger counter there to do his own testing and considers it immoral to expose young farmers to contamination.

In the US, organic farming groups like NOFA tend to pay very little attention to international agricultural policy. For Urgenci activists, influencing the policies of the Food Security Committee (FSC) of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN has been a top priority. (I have had to learn a whole new list of acronyms to follow the conversations.) There were representatives of IFOAM, Via Campesina, as well as networks from Latin American family farmers and international solidarity economy at the Urgenci conference in Beijing and lots of discussions about strengthening collaboration among these organizations. They have all joined forces to put pressure on FAO to change the recommendations it gives governments to shift resources among these organizations. They have all joined Campesina, as well as networks from Latin America to form a whole new list of acronyms to follow the conversations. Change won’t be fast, but the impact is deep. People are really passionate about it. Have confidence. We have a lot of conflicts and arguments – It is hard to come up with one voice. We should look at this as normal. When we discuss our ideas we look for differences. But when we act, we move forward.”

2 Farm Profiles: 

Shared Harvest Farm CSA

Shi Yan, the founder and head manager of Shared Harvest Farm, says, “Interest is really growing, and it’s not just on the surface. People are really passionate about it. Change won’t be fast, but the impact is deep. CSA is not just a company or business, it’s a social movement.” She rents about 6 acres plus 24 large greenhouses and a building for their offices from the village of Liu Zhuang Hu on the outskirts of Beijing for about $23,000 a year under a 15 year contract. The village has 170 families for a total population of 450. Unlike the reconstruction at the village where Little Donkey is located where 5-story high rises are replacing traditional housing, the homes in Liu Zhuang Hu are single story with a central courtyard. The streets are well paved and clean. There is a newly constructed community bath house and an attractive park. The Party Secretary, Mr. Yo, heads up the village committee for rural reconstruction that has guided investments for ten years. He is supportive of Shi Yan’s farm and is also actively developing eco-tourism. The village has constructed homestay accommodations, attractive rooms with electric heating and on-demand hot water and invested in a methane digester newly constructed at the farm that is already producing gas for the communal cook stove.

Shared Harvest has been at this new location for 2 years while continuing production at their original site, a farm managed by a peasant farmer and his family. The project grows 50 crops in the field and in 24 greenhouses that produce throughout the winter. In all, they use 12 acres. Across for a few varieties they save (beans, onions, some leafy greens), Shared Harvest purchases most of the seed they use from conventional Chinese seed companies, since there are no organic seed companies. Shared Harvest provides 600 members with 50 weeks of produce (85% of production), as well as selling to a buying club made up of 6 groups with weekly deliveries to schools (10%), and a farmers’ market (5%). The farm harvests and delivers daily to the 600 subscribers with village farmers paid to do the deliveries. They are shifting to a new system with a professional delivery service. Average production is 10,000 kilos a month. When members asked for rice, the farm selected a farm they trust in a rice producing area. The Shared Harvest crew repacks the rice into 1-kilo packets. Communications between Shared Harvest and members are electronic. Cheng, Shi Yan’s husband and former field manager, has developed an app that allows customers to establish an account and select what they want each week from the list of available produce, including rice, vegetables, eggs, chicken, pork and mushrooms. The leader of their mushroom production is a young man who showed up and asked for a job. Shi Yan had no openings so she challenged him to start his own enterprise. He chose mushrooms and has developed his own style, using crushed corn stalks mixed with wheat straw as the medium. He is now one of the few organic mushroom producers in China.

They offer two share sizes – for 8000 yuan or 3000 yuan a year (or about $24 a week for the large scale agroecological methods, and from agriculture for export to developing local markets. Funding streams from the UN that counterbalance the money that the Gates Foundation and major corporations are investing in land grabbing and the development of “progressive,” (read industrial) and “scientific” (read GM) agriculture in Africa and Latin America could tip the uneven balance of forces in the global food system.

The conference ended with a burst of youthful energy. Young farmers from all over China enacted a joyous ritual pouring samples of the soil from their farms into a long glass cylinder, as triumphant music swelled and everyone stood and cheered. Professor Wen made this remarkable closing statement: “China has announced we are moving from Industrial to Ecological Civilization – a difficult process... Express your feelings, but do not be discouraged. This should be a movement with a wide participation for the majority. The world belongs to us. We will have contributions from all of you. Have confidence. We have a lot of conflicts and arguments – It is hard to come up with one voice. We should look at this as normal. When we discuss our ideas we look for differences. But when we act, we move forward.”

The beet looked up from his furrow. “You planted me with such care,” he said to the farmer, “let me return the favor by preparing your taxes.”
There are two groups of farmers – 15 “old farmers,” peasants who live in the village and are over 50, and 20 “new farmers”, recent college graduates who are housed in the village and share a somewhat Spartan existence, working long hours and eating meals together in the farm dining area. The old farmers earn about $500 a month, 30% more than on conventional farms, and work 8 hours a day. The new farmers get more – over $800 a month – but seem to be on call around the clock. Some of them helped with the two conferences, so hours were probably extra crazy.

A highly skilled and experienced man – Ma Ji-zhong, whom they all call Uncle Ma – directs the greenhouse operation. He looks energetic and healthy, though he chain smokes and told me he is 60 years old. He worked in conventional greenhouses for 18 years and grew up on a farm. His approach is to avoid the need for pesticides by carefully manipulating heat, air flow and humidity. There are two greenhouse sections of trees and sales stand so there is some competition. The government had paid for his two greenhouses in the yard, her brother was repairing broken equipment, and her dad was grinding corn for feed. Their home is on the classical Chinese model – the outer door to the street opens into a courtyard surrounded by the other rooms. The whole family joined in the delicious meal they prepared for us with vegetables from Shared Harvest and their own cherry liqueur.

Shi Yan explained that their price is twice commercially. Organic Fertilizers. Nature Safe’s 13-0-0 provides the highest organic nitrogen formulation available on the market. Naturesafe.com Available in bulk, super sacks and 50 lb. bags.

We observed the crew packing the share boxes and were surprised at how much plastic wrap they use. Shi Yan explains that they started using so much packaging last summer when members complained of wilting during hot weather.

**Cherry Valley Coop**

On a frosty day with a light coating of snow on the ground, Scott Chaskey, Erin Bullock and I visited Cherry Valley Coop. Fifty three families are members of the coop, located only a few miles from Shared Harvest. Each family manages about 1 acre each of cherry trees. Our guide, Du Juan, a lovely slim woman of 30, returned to her home village five years ago after studying agricultural sales and marketing at a technical college. Her father heads the coop. He has introduced a flock of 31 geese for pest control. They eat grass, weeds, and fallen fruit, fertilizing as they go. He is pleased with the system and has been able to stop spraying pesticides. Du Juan’s older brother, worked as a mechanic, before also coming back with his wife and small child to work with their dad. They use ecological methods but do not sell as organic since certification is complicated and expensive. She says of their apples, a variety from Japan that has a pattern of russet dots on the skin, that they are—“not pretty on the outside, but on the inside. Customers fall in love with the taste.” And are willing to pay 3 times the conventional price!

Recently, when the central Chinese government cracked down on bribes and food gifts, the coop found itself in financial trouble since much of their sales had been to government members. Du Juan has helped the coop develop direct sales and steadier markets. Slowly and carefully, she has introduced a pick for the ripe cherries. She thinks this is the best path since the varieties are soft and sweet, and the farmers are getting old. Each family has its own section of trees and sales stand so there is some competition. Shared Harvest has a project with Greenpeace and environmental benefits are high on their list too. Most of the people her age have left. Some villagers regard her as odd and whisper that there must be something wrong with her. The CSA conferences since 2010 have meant a lot to her and she believes that what her coop is doing has much in common with CSA – steady pricing, long term relationships. Her mother sells some of their apples to people who come to the farm and grateful customers send her presents. Du Juan worries that CSA is growing too quickly, not in an organic way and risks getting like the fake coops. While Du Juan shared her reflections about the coop with us, her mother was cooking one of those weeder geese on a grill in the yard, her brother was repairing broken equipment, and her dad was grinding corn for feed. Their home is on the classical Chinese model – the outer door to the street opens into a courtyard surrounded by the other rooms. The whole family joined in the delicious meal they prepared for us with vegetables from Shared Harvest and their own cherry liqueur.

Du Juan’s father refuses to allow the coop to pay her a salary since he wants her to go back to the city and get married. Most of the people her age have left.

The coop holds a cherry blossom festival and coordinates with neighboring villages that have eco-tourism ventures. The government had paid 25 yuan for the ripe cherries. Du Juan raised the price to 40 yuan and introduced cherry picking gift certificates. She is hoping to build a collective feeling and has organized group trips to other farms.

When people feel collective spirit, she says, they are more likely to act together. It is a delicate balancing act since then the government gets upset and some people are wary. The government wants coops but not empowered farmer collectives.

**The Natural Farmer**

Spring, 2016

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