

Turning our Lawns into a Patchwork Farm

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April is here! Spring is here! The sap is rising and my feet are tapping. I want to be gardening which is just what I was doing early this morning--pressing pea seeds into cool damp soil.

I am doing this gardening in Mrs. Felice's side yard. She's my neighbor, an elder in town. She and her husband Tony moved into their place in 1950. In the early years, the garden spot served as a play field for the neighborhood kids. Later Tony put a vegetable garden there and Mrs. Felice canned the harvest. After Tony passed on the garden lay fallow for a long time. That's changed now. Last year when I moved in next to Mrs. Felice she agreed to let me grow vegetables there.

On the surface this is just a story of neighborliness. I grow vegetables on Mrs Felice's land and share the produce with her. Deeper down within the soil of imagination, though, lies the seed of an idea that has to do with food, community, health, and sustainability.

Before presenting the idea, allow me to offer some context by connecting a few dots:

- Dot 1: Almost all of what you and I eat comes to us from far away—the average distance being about 1200 miles.
- Dot 2: The longer it takes for raw foods, like fruits and vegetables, to get to us, the less fresh they are and, therefore, the lower their nutritional value.
- Dot 3: The further from home that our food is grown, the less we tend to know about the conditions--environmental and social—surrounding its production.
- Dot 4: Large amounts of fossil-fuels, which are in finite supply, are used in the growing, processing, packaging, and transporting of our food. In fact, ten Calories of energy, on average, are used to produce each Calorie of food we consume. In an age of rapidly depleting fossil fuels, this hardly appears sustainable.

Taken together, these 'dots' reveal that we, de facto, participate in a non-sustainable, far-flung, and impersonal food system that often offers food of limited nutritional value (because of questionable farming practices and extensive food processing).

In a healthy and sustainable food system, by contrast, food would be whole and fresh and produced by local farmers and the amount of energy used in its production would be less (not more!) than the food, itself, contained. The burgeoning success of farmers markets and community-supported farms in our region attests to our interest, as citizens, in sustainably produced, local, wholesome food.

Now, for that idea I have been promising—an idea born of my friendship with Mrs. Felice. She wasn't able to grow food on her land. I was. I offered; she agreed. Now let's scale up. Here in Central Pennsylvania, we have a lot of land in our front yards, backyards, church grounds, school grounds, business parks that could be used for the growing of food.

At present, we spend a good bit of time and money maintaining our largely sterile, lawnsapes. Many of us even hire gardeners to care for our grounds. As an alternative, why not allow a young person, anxious to get a start in agriculture but without the means to buy land, to start a neighborhood “farm” by knitting together land parcels in your neighborhood, thereby creating a patchwork farm. Those of you in the suburbs, with half acre and acre lots, could be heroes as you transform your subdivisions into diverse, productive patchwork farms. Think of the advantages: You’d get fresh veggies, make deeper connections with your neighbors, give your kids the chance to live in the midst of something real and vital, and have the satisfaction of knowing that the surplus wholesome food from your land was going to be offered to others through local and regional farmers markets.

It’s “just an idea” whose time may have come....