

The Garden Plot, September 2008

By Robin Mittenthal, University Apartments Community Gardens Committee

Though most Americans now have nothing to do with growing food, we are only a few generations away from a time when things were very different. When my grandfather's father moved to the United States from Russia in the 1890s, he came to a country where more than half of the people still lived and worked on farms. By 1930, when my grandfather was 13 years old, many people had moved to cities and only one third of Americans still farmed. Fast forward to 2008, and only about two percent of Americans have anything to do with agriculture.

Two percent is, sadly, about the same as the fraction of the American population that is in jail at any given time. I am not very romantic about farming (it's hard and dangerous work even with the help of machines, and we don't all want to be or need to be farmers), but to me, this means that we have both too many people in jail and not enough people who know anything about how to grow food. Most countries are not as urbanized as the US, but according to the United Nations, 2006 was the first year in history when more than half of all people lived in cities.

Depending on others to feed us is fine – all of us, including farmers, depend on others, and interdependence can force us to care about each other – but the less involved we are with the production of our food, the easier it is for us to hold misconceptions about food. Some of these misconceptions seem just funny (ask American children where milk comes from, and many of them say “the store!”), but others have harmful environmental and social consequences.

Because we don't know or don't think about how bananas are grown, for example, we expect to see them at affordable prices in our stores even on days when Wisconsin lakes are covered with thick ice. Perhaps some people think that bananas are made from sunlight and smiles in a big clean yellow factory in Milwaukee, but the truth is that bananas grow far away in warm places, and bananas are both vulnerable to disease and damaging to the soil. When the soil is worn out or plants get sick, the giant corporations that grow bananas in Central America often take new land from small farmers, forcing the farmers onto steep hills where they cut down forests to grow food. With the forest gone, whole hillsides sometimes fall away after heavy rains.

Similarly, meat does not grow in the clean, bloodless packages we buy in the store. Most of it comes from animals that can barely move, that stand in their own feces, that are fed foods they would not eat in the wild, fed so much and kept so close together that they are given drugs to keep from dying, and slaughtered in ways that would make you sick to see. Though not everything you eat has such an unpleasant story behind it, most industrial food production has at least some ugly unintended consequences.

Gardening is a great way to try to reconnect with food, but it is all too easy to bring the same misconceptions of the machine-age, divorced-from-nature world into the garden. In particular, many new gardeners believe, understandably, that it is possible to grow any plant at any time, in any place, and with as little work as it takes to buy the same item in a store. As you might by now expect me to say, this isn't true – like children, plants have very particular needs, and we ignore these at our peril.

What do I mean? Well, to give just a few examples, plants like tomatoes and corn need hot weather, while others like radishes and peas need cool weather and will die or at least grow poorly in the heat. Some (radishes, lettuce, and a few others) can go from seed to harvest in as little as 30 frost-free days, while favorites like tomatoes and watermelons need closer to 80 or even 120 days (this means that now, September, is far too late to plant most of the plants you might like to grow). Shallow-rooted, short-lived plants like lettuce need regular watering but will grow with almost no fertilizer, while long-lived, deep-rooted plants like tomatoes need a lot of fertilizer to be productive but can do with almost no water other than rain. You get the idea, I think: not all plants are the same, and it takes knowledge to grow them well. This doesn't mean you need to be an expert to garden, but a little bit of information will make your garden more productive and spare you some disappointment.

I realize that this month and in other recent columns I have moved away from specific gardening advice to talk in general terms about what I see as problems related to food in America today. If you have been sufficiently interested to read these columns, I am grateful. If you just want to learn how to grow vegetables better, I understand, and I plan to return to more basic information beginning next month.

Happy gardening. As always, e-mail me if you have questions ([mittenth@gmail.com](mailto:mittenth@gmail.com)).