



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

How Local is Local? (c) 2020

The first couple of months of the pandemic brought a boon in sales for many local producers. While I wasn't sure what the summer would bring, I did feel fortunate for all the community support. Not surprisingly, many larger factory farms did not fare so well.

Rebecca Thistlethwaite, in her Local Harvest newsletter, writes *"Their extractive, unsustainable, 'too big to fail' model, and others like it, are being laid bare by the coronavirus pandemic [...] Through extreme consolidation, vertical integration, specialization, and the relentless pursuit of quantity over quality, we are left with a system that both cannot feed us nor sustain itself during environmental or economic disasters. [...] In any ecological community, diversity within species and among species is one of the most critical factors in how quickly that community bounces back after a disturbance, such as wildfire or hurricane. The very same can be said for economic systems and food systems. Diversity of scales, production techniques, business types and ownership models, and market outlets make those systems more resilient. When one business closes up, many more can take its place. There are built-in redundancies and competition helps keep prices both fair and realistic."*

I agree with much of what Thistlethwaite says. As much as I decry our factory food system and our national (and global) economic systems, I recognize we are ALL dependent upon them, even here in our little farm-topian bubble.

Take my pickles, relish, and preserves, for example. The pandemic has helped me realize how reliant I am on ingredients from far away places that I don't have any control over procuring. Yes, I grow the veggies and berries that I use, but I most certainly don't grow my own sugarcane or make my own vinegar. And what about all those canning jars and lids?

For a couple of months earlier this spring, our Food Co-Op stopped accepting special orders because they (and their suppliers) were so overwhelmed. I rely on the Co-Op to get the things I can't grow or source locally myself (mainly sugar, vinegar, and some spices). And when I tried to order canning

jars from my normal supplier, I found that the ones I use for pickles were backordered until mid-September, essentially after the processing season would end. Hmmm.

Things have since gone back to "normal" on the supply chain front for me. Since June, I've been able to get what I need via the Co-Op's special order system... And those canning jars that weren't supposed to arrive until September? They showed up last week :) However, not having almost immediate access to the long-distance supplies I need to can my produce has given me pause, and forced me think twice about how local my products actually are. If I am completely reliant on key items that come from a far away factory, whether that be my organic sugar or my glass jars, I'm at the mercy of long-distance transport and our national economic system and supply chain. Yes, I still consider my pickles, relish, and preserves to be local products, handcrafted and made with love, but I now think a little more deeply about exactly what it means to be a local value-added producer.