



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

Small Farms are the Future

By Meghan Mix

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Despite the challenges of operating in a financially sustainable manner, in my opinion, small farms are still the way of the future. In light of the pandemic, climate change, and increasing social and political unrest, I strongly believe that small, human-powered farms are going to play an increasingly vital role in our region's food supply in the 21st century. And when I say small, I mean it! In this pondering, I use the term small to describe farms that are, what many would consider, "micro-operations:" ecologically-based and community-oriented (ie - they sell locally). I understand that small farms are diverse and there are some that sell the majority of their produce in Seattle, but for the purposes of this article, I'm focused on those that sell all or most of their product on the Peninsula. I'll use Hopscotch as an example.

As I touched on in [What Constitutes Success?](#), I love farming because I like working outdoors, managing my own time, hanging out with my baby vegetables, getting to know people in the CSA or at the farmers market, and producing something real. But most importantly, I like having a role in the societal and cultural movement to increase local communities' food sovereignty.

And I say food sovereignty rather than food security because food sovereignty means not only that people have access to nutritious food, but also that a community has autonomy over obtaining and producing its food. Below is an explanation.

"Food security does not distinguish where food comes from, or the conditions under which it is produced and distributed. National food security targets are often met by sourcing food produced under environmentally destructive and exploitative conditions, and supported by subsidies and policies that destroy local food producers but benefit agribusiness corporations.

Food sovereignty emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society. It promotes community control of productive resources; agrarian reform and tenure security for small-scale producers; agro-ecology; biodiversity; local knowledge; the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers; social protection and climate justice." (ChangeforChildren.org)

And while I can't even begin to claim that I have the same knowledge base as indigenous or black farmers, I am drawn to the concepts of supporting small-scale, local producers, equity, food justice, climate justice, and community. And I'd like to think that, at Hopscotch, I am expanding our community's sustainability, resilience, food security, and food sovereignty by:

- Producing high quality, healthy foods that are available year-round, and increasing the options people have for putting local food on their plates each day.
- Helping Jefferson County feed itself by showcasing the potential abundance of small open spaces (areas previously deemed unsuitable to agriculture or previously fallow/overgrazed land).
- Designing a model that can be replicated, to encourage young entrepreneurs to start businesses with limited funding. (Hint hint: there is sooo much open space in Jefferson County that would work for ag on a micro-scale.)
- Educating community members on issues surrounding food systems and small-scale farming.

In addition, small farms themselves are resilient. I know that term gets thrown around a lot, but if the pandemic has shown us anything, it is that certain businesses will thrive over others in uncertain times. I see these businesses as those that provide a necessary resource for the community in which they are based without heavy reliance on outside inputs or supplies. (Yes, I understand that almost all businesses are, to some extent, reliant on our international distribution system - see more thoughts about that in [*HOW LOCAL IS LOCAL?*](#) But some are less reliant on it than others.)

At Hopscotch, I am working to localize more parts of the processing chain by growing the berries and veggies that are used to make my farmstead canned goods. This not only helps keep more money in the local community, but also reduces transportation food miles.

Plus, small farms are, well, small enough to pivot. If the restaurants farms sell to shut down, a small farm can pivot quickly and sell their produce via CSA, as Hopscotch did starting in 2020. When food is grown locally and distributed locally, there is no reliance on far flung transportation systems, or purchasing decisions made by a distant distributor.

Not convinced yet? Unlike larger operations, small farms take minimal investment and can be run using minimal equipment with practices that will allow the community to thrive in its ecosystem well into the future.

For instance, at Hopscotch, I use human-scale, hand-tended, organic and sustainable production methods that require few off-farm inputs or fossil fuels. My goal is to create a regenerative growing

system that focuses on responsible soil management, environmental health, and nutrient dense produce. More specifically, I incorporate practices that will allow the land and ALL its inhabitants to thrive for generations to come:

- I use permanent, raised beds and a no-till system that allows soil microorganisms to flourish.
- I employ thoughtful crop rotation (for soil health), incorporate crops to attract pollinators and beneficial insects (for pest control), and irrigate with a drip system (to conserve water).
- I maintain soil fertility with the use of compost, mulch, and cover crops. I never use chemical fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides.
- I grow as many heirloom and open-pollinated varieties as possible to promote biodiversity.

And this year I have observed the amazing difference this effort has made - I've seen more salamanders, newts, frogs, rove beetles, and snakes than ever before. And I've seen amazing fungal networks start to develop (I have mycellium threads!!). And all of these things have lead to more abundant plants. (2022 has been a good veggie year, despite the weather!)

Everybody eats. We all need food, and food production and distribution plays a huge role in the health of our planet - ecosystem and watershed health, biodiversity, human health, transportation/oil extraction, and so much more. And since everyone eats, changing the way the food system at large operates will make a lot of difference. Even if it changes one small farm at a time.