

Organic Farming and Chinese Herbs

by Jean Giblette

Imagine a future in which millions of North Americans eat clean, whole food that comes directly from local farms, and herbalists obtain top-quality medicinal plants from some of these same trusted sources. Then consider the implications of this vision for health, not only for patients but also for local economies and ecosystems.

The food part of this dream is today's reality for hundreds of thousands of Americans. For Oriental medicine practitioners, a study of these changes and how they came about can point the way toward ensuring the safety and quality of our traditional medicines.

A connection to ancient wisdom is an important part of the process. That wisdom is not necessarily our grandparents' knowledge, for most of the European descendants who colonized America were inept farmers by ecological standards. The use of petrochemicals in agriculture began in the late 1800's, one mistake led to another, and now we have an unhealthy, industrial food system dependent on subsidized fossil fuel based transportation. The tragic aspect of this history is that good information has been available, always, throughout our obsession with petrochemicals.

In 1908 the U.S. Department of Agriculture sent a high level observer to China, Korea and Japan to discover how it was possible to maintain soil fertility for millennia. Dr. F.H. King toured for months, returned home and recorded his observations in the classic *Farmers of Forty Centuries*,¹ but died before completing the final chapter on his recommendations for change. That work is being continued now, nearly a hundred years later, as ecological agriculturalists throughout the world rediscover the practices that sustained fertility in China.

The corrective forces are already established in North America, growing steadily among the grass roots. A widely distributed network of skilled artisanal farmers has come out of the Baby Boom generation, whether "back to the landers" of the 1970s or born into farm families and now managing their inheritance. These people created the organic food movement, and then the U.S. federal government appropriated the term "organic" in service to agribusiness. In response, many of these ecological farmers are moving beyond organic, choosing to reaffirm basic tenets, including biodiversity, local

self-sufficiency, community building and economic justice, which are necessary to food quality and security.

These farmers have always understood that ecological agriculture is an expansive rather than a reductive concept. It's also an exciting exploration, involving new applications of old knowledge. The following brief sketch of their worldview suggests why these changes are critically important for medicinal plant cultivation.

The primacy of the biodiversity principle to quality in our traditional medicines was discussed at the Alliance meeting in May of 2001 by Andy Ellis and Dr. Helene Dillard. Helene is a plant pathologist at Cornell's agricultural experiment station in Geneva, New York and, like Andy, an advisor to High Falls Gardens. She noted problems with the current organic standards, apparent in the multi-acre field of certified organic celery she had seen on a previous trip to California. This celery may be certified, but monocropping as an agricultural practice constrains nutritional quality. While consumers may prefer this product to celery sprayed with chemicals, do practitioners want to accept such limits for medicinal plants given to their patients?

"When herbs are grown in the wild," observed Helene, "they are produced in a natural ecosystem, and natural systems are remarkably powerful. That power comes from an incredibly complex web of interactions among a vast number of organisms and processes that are balanced, interconnected, and resilient." The growers who work *with* rather than against nature know that biodiversity is key to soil health, and the life in the soil fosters the plant's ability to express its own potential as a aid to animal or human health.

Life attracts other life, and enrichment promotes health. Animals are an essential part of the fertility cycle, as eco-farmers have rediscovered. Alchemy takes place inside the guts of ruminants and earthworms. Dr. King found that in ancient China everything, including "humanure," was recycled continuously in a closed loop within small family-based land holdings that supported as many as 12-15 people on two acres of land.

Self-sufficiency, the idea of the farm as a complete, whole organism, is one of the basic tenets of

biodynamic agriculture. Steffen Schneider, a biodynamic farmer of the 400-acre Hawthorne Valley Farm located three miles from High Falls Gardens in upstate New York, understands how this acts as an important organizing principle. "Complete self-sufficiency like that of the traditional Chinese farmers may be unattainable for us right now," he said. "But as a goal we strive for, it has the effect of directing our efforts in such a way that the health of the overall farm organism is optimized."

Diversified, independent farms like Hawthorne Valley, rather than large monocropped corporate operations, appear to be the most appropriate sites for the cultivation of top-quality medicinal plants. But if the economies of scale provided by large operations are unavailable, how does a small farm make money?

The answer is perhaps easier to see in eastern North America, where small, diversified operations have been the norm since the Europeans arrived. A valuable new economic model arrived in the eastern U.S. about fifteen years ago from the teikei ("face-to-face") groups in Japan, via Switzerland,² and has become a popular and effective means for thousands of small farms to stabilize their income base. Community-supported agriculture (CSA), defined as an annual commitment between a farmer and a group of people nearby who eat the food the farmer produces, is used by Hawthorne Valley Farm and an increasing number of others. No two projects are exactly alike but, by being "off the grid" of the worldwide commodities trading system while receiving direct, consistent support from the community, these farms stay solvent and even profitable.

The principles of self-sufficiency and diversity in farm operations, and the face-to-face, committed relationships with the customers, are changing the prospects for domestic medicinal plant cultivation. The cutting edge in direct marketing arrangements is found in California, where the Sonoma County Herb Association has established a herb exchange (SCHE) to link buyers to sellers.

According to Peggy Schafer, one of the SCHE pioneers and a grower who specializes in Chinese medicinal herb starts, only a few of their farms are certified organic because the fees are too high. "Our customers can come to the farm, talk to us and look around," she said. "We grow crops on a contract basis, meet very specific requirements and deliver the product within hours of harvest." Her rationale reflects the practical reality of ecological farmers nationwide who deal directly with their customers

and may choose to opt out of certification to save expenses.

The SCHE doubled its volume in 2001, the second season of operation, and sold 850 pounds of fresh herbs and 75 pounds of dried, representing 100 different varieties including ai ye, bai zhi, ban lan gen, and he shou wu. Longer-term crops such as gan cao and huang qi are coming along. Like other fledgling agricultural enterprises across the country, the Herb Exchange has yet to achieve financial stability. They are attempting to find grants to subsidize operations while they build volume and customer base.

In CSA, participants recognize that the commitment to buy food in this way is a political act, with positive benefits over time to their own and their family's health but also to the farmer, their locale, and the larger community in an unlimited sense. If a similar model is applied to the long-term needs of the traditional Oriental medicine community, the implications spiral out beyond the act of buying herbs, and even the assurance of availability and quality of traditional medicines.

Thorough assimilation of traditional Asian wisdom means that both practitioners of Oriental medicine and ecological farmers apply the knowledge of healing in an open-ended way. Fidelity to principles is more important than imagining the shape and size of the eventual outcome. This is the time for the profession of Oriental medicine to ask, what kind of proactive stance can we take, what alliances can we make, to create a future in which top-quality medicinal plants are readily available to us?

"The next decade is a critical time for farming, both in this country and the rest of the world," concludes organic movement leader and New York farmer Elizabeth Henderson, in her comprehensive description, *Sharing The Harvest*. "Each new CSA is another little piece of liberated territory, and a step toward the sustainable world that is our only possible future."³ ☺

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¹ King, F.H., 1911. *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (Rodale Press has a paperback in print.)

² Henderson, Elizabeth and Van En, Robyn, 1999. *Sharing the Harvest* (Chelsea Green Publishing Co., Box 428, White River Junction, VT 05001, 800-639-4099, www.chelseagreen.com)

³ Ibid., p. 67.