

The View From HIGH FALLS GARDENS

Volume I, Number 1

January 1995

From wooded rock ledges a hundred feet above a creek that flows into the Hudson River, we bring you old news. The rock is 450 million years old. The news is but a few thousand years old, but most of us in America are hearing it for the first time. Laura Smith, cofounder of HFG, explains:

Dear Friend of High Falls Gardens:

I became interested in herbal medicine 25 years ago when my oldest son, as a baby, had febrile convulsions, and allopathic medicine was unable to help him. Whenever he had a fever, his temperature would rise until he went into convulsions. Aspirin did nothing to slow the rise of the fever. Finally, I bought a copy of Back to Eden by Jethro Kloss and began using what I had on hand on the kitchen spice shelf. The evil-tasting brews I managed to get my son to drink worked almost instantly. From there, it was a simple jump to medicinal teas for many common ailments, especially colds and flu. Without any reason other than "if one herb is good, then two must be better," I began combining herbs in my own naive way. Now I find that the Chinese, who have been practicing herbal medicine for thousands of years, always combine herbs to balance the formula and maximize the body's ability to rebalance itself.

There are major differences between traditional Chinese herbal medicine and the practices most familiar to us in the West (the European and Native American traditions). Single herbs for single symptoms are commonly used in the Western herbal traditions. For the Chinese, an herbal formula never has less than three herbs and often more than ten. The herbs are chosen to balance the body and each other, the approach being more to the whole system rather than a single symptom. For instance, if one has a headache, what specifically is out of balance in the system? Is the headache accompanied by fever, perspiration, muscle aches, cough, sore throat? There are different formulas for each of these cases. There are also formulas to build up the immune system, to strengthen the Qi and/or blood.

I became interested in Chinese herbal medicine when I heard that Chinese women do not suffer from menopausal symptoms. PMS had always been a problem for me and was worsening with the approach of menopause. Frankly, I was plain scared, and very relieved to learn of a viable alternative to hormone replacement therapy. (We will be covering this subject extensively in future newsletters.) My friend Jean had become interested in growing Chinese herbs at about the same time, so we joined forces and began planting, building a library, taking courses, and becoming totally excited about the subject. [Letter, continued page 6]

HFG GROWING CHINESE HERBS IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

High Falls Gardens has taken a small step forward in a great endeavor of the 21st century--to recreate the ancient Chinese medicinal formulas here in America, using locally and organically grown herbs. HFG has enlisted a group of experienced gardeners and organic farmers in Columbia County, a still-rural area in upstate New York between the Hudson River and the Berkshires, who have begun to grow some of the herbs.

China includes a lot of territory north of 35 degrees latitude, and many of their native plants do well here in America. Some of the herbs have already been cultivated as ornamentals in the West for at least a hundred years, examples being chrysanthemum flower, peony (root), and rose-of-Sharon (root, bark, seed and flower). Others are trees that were imported from China a long time ago, such as white mulberry and ginkgo. In some cases there are close equivalents between Chinese species and European or American species that were used in each respective tradition for analogous purposes, an example being Vitex (chaste tree).

Many of the herbs are perennial plants that require several years to reach harvest stage. Adaptation to a long-term harvest cycle requires new methods of farming as well as innovations in bringing herbs to market. Fortunately, organic farming in Columbia County, as elsewhere, has already become a hotbed of creativity and is capable of meeting the challenge. We at HFG are dedicated to bringing you news of these events.

OUR DREAM

One day soon, perhaps before the millennium, you will be able to buy herbs--locally, organically grown, and fresh or dried--and combine them in well-known ancient formulas to augment your diet and boost your resistance to disease, or even to help yourself or a member of your family get rid of a winter cold, relieve arthritis pains, or make a revitalizing spring tonic.

Realization of our dream will take a few years. Knowledge of the cultivation and preparation of these herbs is being disseminated now, rapidly, but this is a huge, elaborate body of knowledge. Along with our herbs we must cultivate an open mind. ■

SOIL AND HEALTH: THE CONNECTION

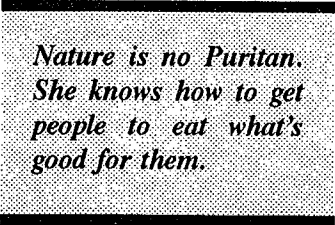
Recent discoveries of what we do *NOT* know will shape the arts and sciences of the 21st century.

Within the last twenty years, new evidence of chemical processes in soil and in plant growth, as well as in the human body and its response to disease, reveals layers of complexity far beyond anything imagined by 19th or early 20th century scientists.

We are seeing correspondences that point to a direct link between the vitality of soil, and the plants grown in it, to the health of people who eat the plants. This link is becoming a major quality-of-life issue that promises to overturn many of the assumptions underlying modern economic development, especially in food production and trade throughout the world.

The Sophistication of Soil

As an example of how old, simplistic assumptions are being confounded, let's look at the "N-P-K" code familiar to those of you who buy bags of garden or lawn fertilizer. In agronomy (soil science) it has long been a given that nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (N-P-K) are the "building blocks" of soil. However, the recent interest in organic farming and composting has revealed substantial evidence of elaborate, unknown processes in healthy soil, which depend on the cooperation of creatures such as earthworms, nematodes and bacteria (which, by the way, are killed by treatment with pesticides). These processes are so complex that if one adds, for instance, a quantity of pure potassium to healthy soil, the chemical is transformed in ways that, over time, yield a soil with less potassium than was there to begin with! The soil, in other words, is somehow capable of maintaining its own balance.



*Nature is no Puritan.
She knows how to get
people to eat what's
good for them.*

The inherent complexities of healthy soil point to a whole new horizon of knowledge, unimagined before, which suggests that the reductionist reasoning that gave us N-P-K is hardly a good approach for understanding Mother Nature. The true investigators of the 21st century are the humble students, gardeners, farmers and others who know that humankind belongs to the Earth and that cooperation with Nature is the best education as well as the most prudent course of action.

Unfortunately, however, we now have worldwide industries based on N-P-K. Modern industrial agriculture views soil as a medium to hold plants erect, upon which are spread chemical fertilizers, pesticides and fungicides. For a while this was enough to boost crop yields; the phenomenon heralded as the "Green Revolution" led some to proclaim prematurely that the means were available to end human

hunger throughout the world. This boast has been given plenty of attention in the mainstream media, especially since World War II, the period that the petroleum and chemical industries have been maximizing profits from crude oil by manufacturing artificial fertilizers and other petroleum byproducts. Most unfortunately, especially for formerly self-sufficient people displaced by industrialism, the Green Revolution is turning out to be mere public relations hype. Recent evidence suggests that, after an initial boost, crop yields peak and then decline after a number of years on chemically treated soil; the soil becomes "worn out" and agribusiness must move somewhere else to find new lands to exploit.

Meanwhile, the Amish in North America, certain farmers in Bali and the Peruvian Andes--to name three examples among many--continue using traditional methods, farming the same land for many generations with no loss of fertility.

The Power of Real Food

In nutrition and in the medical arts there are similar vast horizons looming. Our entire world economy, based on the use of tragically undervalued fossil fuels for cheap transportation, rests precipitously upon the assumption that a carrot grown on an agribusiness plantation in Central America and shipped 5,000 miles to market, arriving at its destination weeks after harvest and lounging on the supermarket shelves for awhile, is equal in nutritional value to a carrot grown organically in a backyard garden and stored in a root cellar. This assumption also is proving to be false. There are at least three ways that the backyard carrot is superior, aside from the fact that it's free of pesticide residues.

• Better Taste is More Than an Elite Concern

Varieties of vegetables grown by agribusiness have been bred through hybridization especially to withstand the rigors of transportation, to resist deterioration, and to make processing more profitable. The so-called "Franken-Tomato," the bio-engineered tomato containing a flounder gene, is one more step in this direction. All these "advances" have sacrificed taste and aesthetic appeal to commercial values.

Think about what tastelessness does to human beings: in the case of food it makes them less likely to want to eat their vegetables! And it is the consumption of vegetables themselves, not necessarily vitamin supplements, that helps prevent cancer and other diseases. Vitamins are only a few out of hundreds of compounds in vegetables that contribute to human health.

We now have at least two generations of people in America who have never tasted real vegetables, the way Nature made them. Nature is no Puritan. She knows how to appeal to people, to encourage them to eat what's good for them. Most of the secrets of the great French chefs

depend on access to fresh, local, well-grown food in classic varieties. By the way, if you were wondering why the French farmers created such a ruckus over European economic unity and GATT, just remember that they are defending these standards of quality of life for the whole world and not merely their own narrow economic interests.

Vive la France!

- *Alive Versus Dead*

The taste of the backyard carrot is so good because there are processes going on inside that plant, complex exchanges that we don't fully understand. The living plant is continually exchanging nutrients and even information with the air, water and soil in its immediate environment. (Conveniently, in the case of carrots and other root vegetables, you can leave them in the ground until after the first frosts and they're still good.)

Is it possible that one-third of Americans are too fat because they're not getting enough of what they really need?

After the plant is harvested, these processes continue for only a short time, as is well known by anyone who has picked flowers and tried to keep them fresh in water. The action of the plant's natural energy circulation, nutrient flow, volatile

essences and who-knows-what other wonderful mysteries, produces the striking fresh taste that comes as a revelation to someone who's been a prisoner of industrialism all his or her life. That plant alchemy benefits us, and when the alchemical goodies are lost through deterioration, processing, or hybridization, we lose by eating a denatured plant instead of a potent one.

Let's consider the effects of live food versus dead upon the human body, and thereby shed some light on the epidemic of obesity here in America. Is it possible that one-third of the American population is too fat because their bodies are not getting enough of what their bodies need *in terms of quality*, thereby setting up irresistible (and justifiable) cravings? Remember, the mass consumption of dead food is a phenomenon peculiar to North America since the Second World War (now, unfortunately, being exported to the rest of the world by agribusiness and the fast food corporations). Other people in other times and places may not have had *enough* food to eat, but at least it's been real food. Time to shed the Puritan viewpoint at last!

- *In Tune With Nature's Rhythms*

Fresh, locally-grown food tends to be consumed by people within that geographical region, on a seasonal schedule corresponding to the time of harvest. This is now being recognized as valuable to health in terms of our bodies' abilities to regulate themselves, to withstand seasonal temperature fluctuations and the allergies and viruses that tend to affect people at certain times of the year. Why? Well, it has something to do with staying in tune with the energies of the earth and sun, which are converted by the soil and stored in good food, and from there consumed as

power sources for our bodies. For a New Yorker to eat a bowl of strawberries from Chile in January (besides the fact that they're tasteless--a message from Nature right there) gives your body the strange signal that summer has begun. You'll probably survive, but with consistent eating patterns like that, will you thrive? Obviously, this is not a black-and-white situation, it's more like minimum daily requirements or maximum tolerance levels. If you're eating a high enough percentage of your food as high-quality, locally-grown, you're giving your body sufficient means to stay in tune. How much is enough? *Please*, these concepts aren't even recognized by establishment nutritionists, let alone the subject of research.

How Our Bodies (Personal and Politic) Depend on Soil

At this point you may be wondering why, if Chinese medicinal herbs are our focus, we have to be so concerned about global issues such as world trade. The reason is that once people realize how their health improves through eating high-quality food, they become motivated to ensure a dependable source of supply.

It's the same for herbs. Right now we have no way to know what's happening with herb cultivation in China or whether the herbs are fumigated or irradiated at the port of entry. The Communist rulers have embraced agribusiness along with the rest of the worst ideas the West has to offer, and the environmental news from China is very bad. There's something about holding a dried imported plant in your hand that makes you wonder how it was grown and processed.

The very best guarantee of quality is to grow your own, but the second-best is to have someone nearby who grows more. Preferably in your own county, where you can go see how it's done. In fact, we can say that the best reason to save family farms is to save the means to build our bodies' immune systems. Plus, our buying locally, direct from the producers, means they get more

The best reason to save family farms is to save the means to build our immune systems.

money which cycles directly back into the local economy. This principal is the foundation for the restoration of our economic health, all over the world.

The need to preserve our personal health will become more critical in the years ahead because of the increasing number of assaults to the environment. (Ultraviolet radiation, known to affect the human immune system, will increase until after the turn of the century even if the Montreal Protocols for ozone loss reduction are honored.) All of us, out of our own personal need, will become more conversant with the politics of food production. Until we manage to elect leaders who have our interests at heart, we are much safer in returning to traditional methods, rediscovering what we've forgotten, and going on from there. ■

[Letter, continued from page 1]

One thing that bothered both of us almost from the beginning was the fact that we have no idea about the conditions under which the herbs coming from China (or from Central America, for that matter) are grown. The Chinese government does not seem to be concerned about the environment. Besides, the herbs are required to be fumigated before coming into this country, so they contain sulfites. They may also be irradiated, potentially lessening the value of the compounds they contain.

We discovered that "TCM," the acronym for the Chinese government's official medicine, is something of a misnomer. When the Communists took over China in 1950, they decided to standardize medicine by taking a piece here and a piece there from various regional traditions and calling it "Traditional Chinese Medicine." They repackaged their own traditions to become more acceptable to the modern science of the West.

When China opened up in the 1970s, acupuncture got lots of attention and that technique has become most Westerners' idea of Chinese medicine. But in fact, the greater part of the traditions involved herbs--along with diet, exercise and meditation--as the means to preserve health.

With TCM embracing Western medicine, the traditional value assigned to plants, along with the careful methods of cultivation and preparation, have been relegated to the realm of folklore and are no longer respected. Corporate or state medicine and agribusiness, whether in China or the West, regard plants as mere raw materials to serve as a base for "value-added" products.

Fortunately, many of the heirs of the regional traditions have managed to escape to the West, thus preserving the integrity and flavors of this diversity and creating the cross-fertilization that we are part of right now.

In this country, the importance to our health of organically-grown food has already been widely acknowledged, and we are very concerned that the herbs we are ingesting have the same high quality we require in our food. See Jean's article on Soil and Health, in this issue, to find out why these matters are critical to the way we approach medicinal herbs.

Putting all these things together, Jean and I took a look around us and thought, "Why not here?" We talked to a few of our local organic farmers, who became enthusiastic about the potential of Chinese medicinal herbs as a new cash crop for small farms. And that's how High Falls Gardens, now a cooperative growing project, was born.

We have some varieties of herbs growing right now, and this newsletter represents our efforts to raise money for seeds and rootstock to develop the project further. We plan to report on HFG as it grows and to publish articles on the uses of Chinese herbs.

Your membership and support are very important to HFG, so please join us in helping to ensure a future supply of high-quality organic herbs and, along the way, exploring one of the richest troves of ancient knowledge. ■

HIGH FALLS GARDENS

P.O. Box 778

Philmont, NY 12565-0778