

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

SPRING 2020

The Audacity to Believe

Local organic farmers leading the way

Intrepid organic farmers pack bursting boxes while grocery shelves stand barren. They *farm on* because it's in their DNA.

Authentic organic farmers are pivoting daily to problem solve. Now is the time to support their investment in bioregional/local food systems—to vote with our dollars, not just because we appreciate nutritious food, but also because we believe in farming systems that prioritize ecosystems, carbon sequestration, and healthier communities.

COVID-19 invites us to consider our connection to the broader food world, from the lumbering industrial food supply laid bare by this crisis to agile regional food systems bolstered by organic farmers modeling resilience.

When we think beyond the package to the people who made those ingredients possible; when we increase (when possible) our purchases of local, organic food; when we incrementally move the dial with our dollar, our actions impart power.

This marketplace activism is especially crucial for the champions of organic agriculture—cooperatives, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, and farmers markets. Our organic farmers are only as strong as the infrastructure that supports them.

If you live in an area with a food cooperative and are financially able to invest, now is the time to become a member. If you live in an area with



PHOTO BY LIV FROELICH

Tricia Bross at Luna Circle Farm, a certified organic vegetable producer in Rio, Wisconsin

a CSA, now is the time to volunteer and sign up for a summer or fall share.

“We see the value for local sourcing and the community-local food connection now more than ever before, and believe that CSA forms the backbone of a strong local food economy in times of both hardship and calm,” say the co-founders of the CSA Innovation Network, which is working to build awareness of the value of CSAs to consumers.

Now is the time to stay engaged and informed. Cornucopia is hearing a message of solidarity from farmers, cooperatives, and natural food markets about the importance of maintaining strong

organic standards as our foundation. We have the audacity to believe in a better way.

A label with meaning ensures a continued marketplace for our organic farmers, who need our support and our collective vote of confidence. They have long been leading the way; we may finally be poised to follow.

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Strengthening Food Sovereignty Movements

Skillshare sessions connect diverse communities to hope and knowledge

BY MICHELE MARCHETTI

On a Sunday evening in March, Rowen White Zoomed in from her home, remotely joining more than 150 farmers, land stewards, and collaborators to discuss food access, resilience, and the recently launched effort to send bundles of seed packets to tribal communities and families in need.

Rowen, a Seed Keeper from the Mohawk community of Akwesasne and a seed sovereignty activist, is one of dozens of featured speakers in the BIPOC Farmers Community Skillshare on COVID-19, a collaborative effort between Soul Fire Farm, Northeast Farmers of Color, Black Farmer Fund, HEAL Food Alliance, and the Castanea Fellowship.

In the months since COVID-19 created “social distancing,” Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) from farming and food sovereignty activism communities are finding connection in these virtual Skillshare sessions.

Each gathering is an opportunity to learn from the speakers, connect with peers, and honor and acknowledge grief and anxiety by participating in ceremony or listening to a poem or prayer.

The 75 to 200 attendees convening biweekly for mutual support include farmers eager to support emergency response efforts, as well as food advocates yearning for skills and resources to help their communities and families. Topics of the Skillshare sessions range from the mind-body stress connection to land access and transition.

“The sessions are based in this idea of self-determination and cultural relevance and Black and Brown farmers and land stewards really coming together to connect and share



PHOTO BY NESHIMA VITALE-PENNIMAN

Dayo Marsh, farm team member and program facilitator, harvests garlic with participants during a weeklong Soul Fire Farming Immersion.

our own bodies of knowledge—bodies of knowledge that we’ve held for generations—share innovations, and share the brilliance of how people are growing food and medicine and healing relationship with land,” says Larisa Jacobson, co-director & partnerships director of Soul Fire Farm.

The Skillshare sessions reflect a broader goal to empower and equip the next generation of BIPOC farmers and community members, strengthening a support system that was necessary before the pandemic and will continue to be so in the years ahead.

“Our food system was built on—these things sound very hard to hear sometimes—slavery, genocide, land dispossession, discrimination, forced displacement, forced migration, and the need for people to come here as immigrants and refugees and work the land under

often harsh conditions,” Jacobson says. “That has not changed. It’s still very real.”

In some cases, the pandemic has further illuminated pre-existing inequity. Aspiring farmers and land stewards participating in Skillshares call out and deeply feel the divide between those who have access to land and those who don’t, reports Jacobson.

“The response to that has poured more urgency than ever into thinking how cooperatives, collectives, and BIPOC-led land trusts (such as the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust) can form to make it possible to be on land in the future.”

While the sessions are facilitating human connection, the organizers are hyperaware of the voices missing from the conversation. The ad hoc initiative is working with Grow NYC and the Hudson Valley Farm Hub to create resources to support

those whose isolation is intensified by inequitable access to, or a lack of familiarity with, technology. The underrepresentation experienced in the virtual support groups is symptomatic of a broader problem in local food systems, she says.

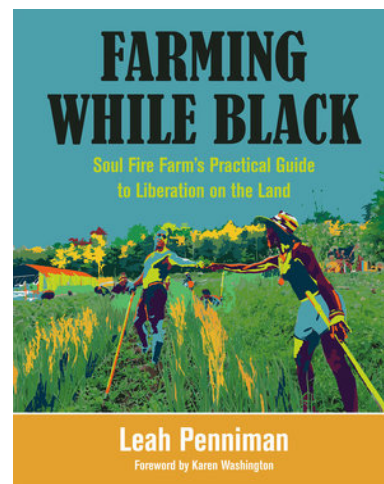
“The last workshop that I led before gatherings could no longer happen was about making CSAs more accessible and inclusive for communities of color, migrant and refugee communities, communities that are not accessing the internet, and speakers of other languages,” she says. “It’s so relevant to what’s happening now.”

One of the most significant, and hopeful, outcomes of the Skillshare series is the “Food & Land Sovereignty Resource List for COVID-19,” a massive, ongoing document mapping an unfolding web of support with threads reaching nearly every corner of this country.

The document, available at soulfirefarm.org or (518) 880-9372 (Google voice), connects a web of resources across the movement. Many of the noted resources specifically benefit BIPOC-led organizations, providing opportunities for allies to offer their own resources, whether it’s time and money or land and seeds.

“So there’s that powerful potential for resource redistribution, mutual exchange, and reclaiming of land and capital to fuel some of these efforts,” Jacobson says.

For Jacobson and her colleagues, supporting their communities to survive and thrive during this time of disproportionate impact on Black, Brown, and migrant and refugee people is just part of the work—the central undertaking is figuring out how these initiatives translate to abiding change.



“This book, *Farming While Black*, is a reverently compiled manual for African-heritage people ready to reclaim our rightful place of dignified agency in the food system.”

—Leah Penniman

Dr. Jennifer Taylor, An Advocate for Organic Agriculture

From Dr. Jennifer Taylor’s vantage point, small farms aren’t going down without a fight. “It’s a love relationship that farmers have with building healthy soils and growing good food,” says Taylor, whose many roles in the good food movement include serving as Cornucopia advisor, Rodale Institute board member, and associate professor at Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University (FAMU). Taylor is also coordinator of FAMU’s Statewide Small Farm Program, a sustainable development program which partners with underserved farming populations and their communities to provide education, hands-on training, and technical assistance in organic farming systems, alternative market development, small farm sustainability, and well-being.

Whether in Florida, Georgia (the home of Taylor’s own Lola’s Organic Farm), or the rest of the world, organic farmers are imbuing hope. And customers are showing their appreciation. While she worried people would avoid farmers markets during the pandemic, customers are increasing their purchases of local, organic produce and re-engaging with seasonal eating.



PHOTO BY LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

Cornucopia congratulates Dr. Jennifer Taylor for being named Florida’s “2020 Woman of the Year in Agriculture.”

For Taylor, this exchange has power. More people supporting organic food, the principles of organic agriculture, and organic farming systems helps ensure healthy environments for farm families, farm workers, and surrounding communities.

Taylor would like to see a stronger exchange of information from farmer to farmer and is currently pondering ways she can continue to leverage her own farm, which routinely holds workshops on the benefits of organic farming strategies and hosts farmers interested in organic.

Advocating for policy and capacity-building strategies inclusive of minority, Indigenous, and resource-poor farmers, Taylor is passionate about promoting and enabling food access, assisting organic farmers in growing nutritious food, and supporting the benefits of

organic farming systems.

Looking beyond marketing, she says, “Sometimes we feel the end goal is the label. But learning should not stop with organic certification. Continued learning about the practices of organic farming systems and agroecology is required, and implementation is key,” Taylor says. “The label walks with it.”

Organic Innovators

Cornucopia campaign elevates the country's top-rated dairy producers

Authentic organic dairy farmers are a hearty bunch. With grit, strength, a love for animals, and pride of heritage, every waking moment is consumed by managing their beloved herds, their revered soil, and the various inputs and outputs needed to keep their animals, their businesses, and their families alive and well.

For years now, dairy farmers have been weathering milk surpluses and falling prices—enduring storms brought by industrialization. Yet authentic organic farmers, who invest heavily in their farm ecosystems, struggle to remain competitive in a marketplace that externalizes environmental costs and rewards economies of scale.

Last fall, US Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue told small-scale organic dairies that they are destined to die. He didn't account for their indomitable spirit or their vital role in regional food systems.

Hardened by years of struggle, organic farmers are showcasing innovation rooted in creative distribution channels, farm diversification, and strong customer relationships. Cornucopia is striving to learn about the ways in which organic farmers are coping with today's changing markets.

On a recent phone call with Strafford Organic Creamery in Vermont, dairy farmer Amy Huyffer noted, "Business-wise, this is a really good time for us; sales are way up. This is the first time in years that we are catching up financially."

PHOTO BY CORNUCOPIA'S RACHEL ZEGERIUS



Earl Ransom of Strafford Organic Creamery in Strafford, Vermont

On a broader scale, Organic Valley brand's CROPP Cooperative, which sources from more than 1,800 farmer-members across the country, is uniquely positioned to withstand the pandemic due to its "localized, diversified, and resilient" supply chain, says CROPP Public Relations Specialist Elizabeth McMullen.

Cornucopia is committed to doing our part to keep these farms thriving. In that spirit, we are launching a new campaign to highlight the top-rated, five-cow farms from Cornucopia's Dairy Scorecard. We aim to elevate the critical role these authentic organic dairies play in the marketplace and in our communities.

Specific attention will be given to the exemplary management practices that set top-rated farms apart from other organic dairy farms, including:

Animal Welfare When cattle exhibit natural behaviors, including grazing and socializing, welfare is improved. Benefiting from a more holistic approach to animal health and milk production, cows on authentic organic farms often live longer.

Soil Truly pastured cows broadcast their own waste, but what happens

when they're in the barn? Spreading manure and urine onto fields improves on-farm soil fertility without added fertilizer.

Pasture While organic dairies are required to provide at least 30% of their cows' diet from fresh pasture during the grazing season, Cornucopia's 5-cow farmers achieve 70-100%.

Organic Principles

In closed herds, heifers (female calves) born on-farm replace aging dairy cows. This starkly contrasts the practice of repeatedly cycling conventional livestock into a factory dairy, a loophole exploited by industrial organic.

Cornucopia is proud to elevate the the critical role of authentic organic dairies, while empowering consumers to make the best choices for their families. Stay tuned to our website and newsletters for more farmer features like these in our ongoing campaign.



Strafford Organic Creamery

A wild orchard hugs the driveway. The sleepy sugar shack awaits syrup season. And large round bales, set to sustain the herd of Guernsey cows until the growing season, stack high against the calf barn. Strafford Organic Creamery exudes a charm that is quintessentially Vermont.

Second-generation dairy farmer Earl Ransom explains, “We strive to grow high-quality forage: grass, alfalfa, legumes, and clover in the summer and harvest it properly, so we can feed that in the winter.”

Spring through fall, the cows rotationally graze 56 paddocks, moving onto fresh grass every 12 hours. Keeping the herd healthy is top of mind at Strafford—that and making uncompromising dairy products.

The creamery produces and processes all of its products on-farm, selling to 27 stores throughout Vermont and New Hampshire.

Loyal customers extol the handmade eggnog, chocolate milk (sans carrageenan), and ice cream made from the most wholesome ingredients, including mint picked on the farm and local eggs cracked by hand.

Seven Stars Farm

This spring due to COVID-19, a Pennsylvania community missed out on its beloved annual celebration of “Cow Skipping Day,” a chance to cheer on the cows at Seven Stars Farm as they bound off to their first day of pasture.

The herd of Jersey cows will graze through late fall on the 420-acre biodynamic farm, getting 88% of their diet (DMI) from pasture.

A point of pride for Seven Stars is its robust composting system. The cycling of organic matter provides a healthy balanced diet for the soil and the plants, contributing to superior pasture fertility and thriving dairy cows.

The farmers meticulously monitor windrows of compost made with bedding, biodynamic tinctures, and the manure of healthy cows—as opposed to potentially problematic manufactured fertilizer.

They turn it unceasingly, wait patiently for the rich texture and earthy smell, and talk excitedly about getting it out on the fields with an anticipation that matches that of their skipping cows.



PHOTO BY CORNUCOPIA'S RACHEL ZEGERIUS

John Putnam of Thistle Hill Farm in North Pomfret, Vermont

Thistle Hill Farm

Accolades from the American Cheese Society, the United States Championship Cheese Contest, and the UK's World Jersey Cheese Awards, among others, line an entire wall of the cheese house at Thistle Hill Farm in North Pomfret, Vermont. By way of a Boston law firm (John) and EPA subcontracting (Janine), these unlikely cheesemakers have created a passionate following for their own Tarentaise that extends far beyond the Green Mountains.

The Putnams' attention to detail and love for farming are palpable in the prize-winning Tarentaise, crafted exclusively from the highest-quality milk from their Jersey cows—sourced only when the cows are out on pasture.

With the recent disappearance of many restaurant accounts, they will be selling at the Norwich Farmers Market for the first time in years and turning their attention to food co-ops, which John calls “the last bastion of retail.” In this time of distancing, it's yet another example of resilient farmers finding solutions through community connection.



PHOTO BY CORNUCOPIA'S MICHELE MARCHETTI

Cindy Dunphy of Seven Stars Farm in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

Into the Woods

The animal welfare, farming, and consumer benefits of silvopasture

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD

With the huge push for pastured poultry in today's marketplace, grassy expanses marked by mobile chicken housing are an easy sell. But there's another scenario that deserves consumers' attention.

In that story, chickens or turkeys scratch and socialize under trees or a canopy of shrubby plants, members of a mutually beneficial network with wide-ranging benefits.

Silvopasture intentionally combines trees, forage plants, and livestock in integrated, intensively managed systems. Chickens and other types of poultry that are allowed to range among woody plants often thrive in these environments, in part because the earliest poultry lived in woodlands and forests.

Some organic producers fully embrace this production method by giving their poultry free range of orchards, tree farms, or shrubs and vines grown on-farm. The cover provided by woody plants protects poultry from predators. But combining livestock with trees offers other compelling advantages as well.

Bird welfare is enhanced by an environment that supports their instinctive drives. And diverse understory typically offers more foraging opportunities than grassy pasture.

Foraging also stirs up fallen leaves or woody debris, helping them compost faster in the process. Poultry manure is spread more evenly on the ground in these systems, preventing nitrogen pollution. And birds operate as a "cleanup crew," eating pests that might otherwise harm plants.

For the producer, combining poultry with woody plants is smart business. Because silvopasture systems can be more diverse and resilient, farmers

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



Silvopasture combats climate change better than other livestock production methods, storing excess atmospheric carbon in both the biomass of the woody plants and in the soil itself.

are better insulated from risk.

Producers can also gain new income streams from such forestry products as nuts, fruit, produce, and even the trees and shrubs themselves. Wood products and nursery stock present additional income opportunities.

On a global sale, silvopasture production methods benefit the environment. Research suggests that silvopasture and other forms of agroforestry combat climate change better than other livestock production methods, storing excess atmospheric carbon in both the biomass of the woody plants and in the soil itself.

Research regarding woodland environments that interlace pastures with trees has been especially promising.

Farmers who raise chickens and turkeys in these systems are able to use land for agriculture without cutting down carbon-sequestering trees, bushes, and other vegetation. This presents a niche ideal for small producers.

So why isn't this practice widespread? Silvopasture takes time, patience, and an appetite for systems that run counter to norms found in organic farming.

Consumers looking for pasture-raised poultry may not understand the inherent benefits to raising livestock with an agroforestry approach, creating a marketing challenge. It takes an educated consumer to recognize how raising poultry under trees offers benefits for both farm and flock that transcend the commonly understood advantages of *pasture raised*.

To learn more and for help finding high-quality organic poultry products and eggs in your area, check out Cornucopia's associated reports and accompanying scorecards.

Cornucopia has also produced a Do-It-Yourself Guide to purchasing high-quality poultry in areas where consumers may not have access to authentic certified organic brands.

Organic Farming is the Protest Movement

The wisdom of Wood Prairie Family Farm

BY RACHEL ZEGERIUS

Hardcover books, almanacs, seed catalogs, and three-ring binders spilling loose leaf papers reach skyward behind Cornucopia advisor Jim Gerritsen as he Zooms in from a dimly lit office in Bridgewater, Maine.

It's been a long and transformative month since our conversation just days before the MOSES Organic Farming Conference in late February. It feels like a year.

Spring is always busy at Wood Prairie Family Farm. But this year, the Gerritsens have been swamped with a nearly unmanageable surge of orders. Like so many things these days, this is “unprecedented.”

The Gerritsens raise and sell organic seeds for growing vegetables, herbs, and grains. Foremost, they provide customers with some of the highest-quality seed potatoes in North America, shipping to farmers and gardeners in all 50 states.

Several years ago, researchers at North Dakota State University compared organic seed potatoes from a number of different suppliers. Wood Prairie's seed came out on top in a three-year trial, a goal hard won through 44 years of observation, reflection, experimentation, and cultivation.

Ask Gerritsen why their potatoes are superior, and the conversation quickly turns to soil, which he and his family have been thoughtfully stewarding on the edge of Maine's North Woods for decades. Gerritsen proudly points out that the farm's soil is currently composed of 6% organic matter, compared to 1-2% of that of his neighbors.

PHOTO OF JIM GERRITSEN BY LOTTIE HEDLEY



Organic farming systems (with and without integrated livestock) tend to foster higher percentages of organic matter in the soil when compared to their conventional counterparts. Organic matter provides nutrients and habitat to organisms living in the soil, while also improving water-holding capacity and sequestering carbon.

This type of careful land stewardship requires complex decision-making, based on long-term planning perspectives and a deep understanding of natural systems. Jim and his wife Megan are in the midst of transitioning this knowledge and the farming operation to their son Caleb, itself a 10-year process.

Organic agriculture cannot be rushed; potatoes are in a four-year rotation at Wood Prairie. Out of 56 acres in production, only 12 are producing potatoes at any one time. The other 44 acres are in rotation to build soil: 12 in grain, 24 in other cover crops, and the rest in pasture.

Typical on any organic farm, two-thirds to three-quarters of the ground is cover crop. Organic farming—by law and by nature—is committed to “continuous improvement.”

In their pursuit to understand and promote whole ecosystem health, organic farmers shine a light and help us consider the impact of our actions on multiple interconnected systems. In this way, authentic organic farmers pay a great service to the Earth, to our communities, and to future generations.

Their value stands in stark contrast to an increasingly centralized and industrialized food

system, characterized by interrupted supply chains, food waste, food scarcity, and other flaws.

Gerritsen says, “More than 75% of the calls these days are from customers starting and/or expanding home gardens, expressing a lack of confidence in the food supply.”

As more and more people seek solutions in local food systems, authentic organic producers steady the scaffolding. They have been readying the soil for decades, independently and cooperatively, cultivating regionally specific varieties, regionally adapted markets, and diverse economies rooted in, and sustained by, relationship.

As we boldly imagine a more hopeful future and collaborate toward community resilience, we honor the bioregional wisdom, quest for understanding, and pursuit of the common good embodied by authentic organic farmers like the Gerritsens—our most valuable national treasures.



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We Are Listening

The suffering unleashed by this pandemic humbles Cornucopia staff daily. We are uplifted by the stories of neighbors delivering food to those in need, of communities organizing to keep everyone safe, and of farmers continuing to show up for all of us.

Suddenly, what seemed quaint to many—family-scale organic agriculture and local food systems—highlights a meaningful, broad-scale alternative to a profit-maximizing food system that devalues human and planetary well-being.

At Cornucopia, we are listening and adjusting our work to better support these brave farmers, farm workers, food system pioneers, and brands leading the way.

Please share your stories of evolving challenges and opportunities so we can continue to strengthen healthy farmers and food systems.

**—Jonathan Rosenthal,
Interim Executive Director**

The Co-op Safety Net

Values-based solutions in a time of need



“Concern for community” is one of the seven guiding principles of cooperatives. It’s also at the core of the responses and solutions offered by co-ops throughout the country as they keep their owners and neighbors fed.

We recently asked First Alternative Co-op in Corvallis, Oregon what that community safety net looks like in action. “As the national food distributors are struggling to keep up with demand, our local businesses and farms have been able to make extra deliveries and

go above and beyond to make sure our community gets what it needs,” says Emily Daniel, brand manager.

Local is more than a buzzword at First Alternative. Local purchases account for 35% of total sales and are reflected by a comprehensive labeling strategy developed in-house to build connections to hyper-local producers.

Soon, shoppers will also be able to identify which items are hydroponically grown. The co-op is creating a symbol for those items, allowing owner-members to “make informed purchasing decisions based on their preferences,” Daniel says.

Co-ops across the country are caring for their communities in multiple ways. In this time of a national health crisis, they have implemented substitute shopper programs that deploy healthy owners to shop for those who are immune compromised, online ordering systems, curbside pickup, and increased compensation and paid time off for employees.

As First Alternative marks its 50th anniversary with shoppers social distancing in the aisles, its own ability to adapt shows us that a community strengthened by a cooperative can unite powerfully, even when its members can’t join hands.