The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

How to Start a Farm with No Land and Little Money

Posted by Jason Bradford on February 19, 2009 - 9:45am in The Oil Drum: Campfire
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I originally wrote the story below for the magazine Touch the Soil. Not everybody who worries about food security and is interested in doing something about it has access to plenty of land or money to buy land and necessary equipment. I was in this situation a few years ago and rather frustrated by it. Perhaps this story will give others some ideas, and I should note that Touch the Soil is a great source of information about the food system and efforts to transform it at all levels.

The publisher has given me permission to make the original article available on The Oil Drum.

I am the parent of two boys who attended Brookside Elementary School in the town of Willits, CA. On the first day of school in August 2005 I wandered to the back of the school yard and noticed that a one acre grassy field was essentially unused behind preschool buildings on the grammar school campus. From my knowledge of soils in the area I knew I was standing on a balanced loam, and within minutes decided it was an ideal site for a school farm specializing in vegetables and fruits.

A non-profit administering the adjacent Head Start preschool agreed to be the farm's fiscal agent, and a local master gardener agreed to help me make sound decisions. I wrote a proposal to the

school board for establishing Brookside Farm and the project was approved January 2006. The land was essentially free, but I had nothing else other than some ideas, a lot of friends, and interest in learning how to become a farmer. Not wanting to go into financial debt or spend a lot of my own money to do this, I started raising funds within the community. Local businesses helped with supplies. Local service clubs and individuals gave money. By December 2006 we had a very sturdy fence and cover crops sown. An orchard, berries, and table grapes were planted that winter. Following a CSA model, in early 2007 and 2008 we sold farm shares as our primary income. This year two of the twelve shares were bought by the preschool, with the rest going to private households.

[Image Caption: Soon after getting district approval for the project we made a big compost pile to "mark" the territory. Kids helped by collecting copious grass clippings and even had a little fun.]

I have many reasons for wanting to farm, but for the school system I focused on the need to improve student health and education. From my proposal to the district:

> Educators are increasingly aware of how nutrition and physical activity influence the learning process. Students fed a balanced diet of high quality foods are more likely to be able to pay attention, cause fewer disruptions to others, and be ready to learn. Opportunities to develop sturdy bones, strong muscles, efficient hearts, balance and coordination also positively impact academic achievement. The common sense wisdom comes down to this: a healthy body is better able to support the development of a good mind.

School board members worried that I could burn out and leave a mess on their property. Until food is more highly valued, the risk of farm failure is real. I argued that this project would garner widespread community support, and provide a tangible economic return in the form of food. I believe a role exists for public institutions to add economic stability to local farms by seeing that they are valued not only for the food they produce, but for a variety of cultural, educational and environmental benefits.

[Image Caption: Riotous growth on the farm in late summer 2007 is contrasted by winter snows in 2008.]

The existence of a working farm gives school kitchens an incentive to incorporate fresher, healthier produce into their meals. My long term goal is for the farm to be fully supported by the schools, but the process of incorporating more fresh produce into busy institutional kitchens takes time. I regularly provided vegetables to the kitchens and asked what was most easily used. Clearly by now the kitchen staff desire to serve Brookside Farm produce, but their ability to do so varies. The smaller preschool kitchens have had no trouble including fresh veggies, whereas the elementary school cafeteria feels understaffed. The school cafeteria prefers items that require little preparation time, such as cherry tomatoes, while the preschool will use anything grown.

Students thoroughly enjoy visiting the farm. To improve their experience, I am working with the school's garden-educator and a high school art class to produce a trail system with signage along the route. Signs will connect the activities and parts of the farm to basic curricula standards, e.g., concepts of numbers and distance ingrained by trail lengths; cardinal directions relative to the position of the sun in the sky; basic plant morphology and seasonal life cycle diagrammed, etc. A local foundation is funding a "Kid's Garden" within the farm that will be managed by the garden-educator. Beds and tools will be tailored to their body size, and creative use of plantings can tie into specific learning goals. Here's how I explained the educational value to the district:

> Directly related to education is the fact that children are very tactile beings who learn

> faster and retain knowledge better when they are physically and emotionally engaged in the subject…a school farm provides a dynamic, living laboratory of objects and processes that lend purpose to the abstractions of the classroom.

As a biologist I am naturally drawn towards working with soil, plants and associated critters, but I became personally interested in farming through my understanding of the converging crises of resource depletion, pollution, and economic instability. Brookside Farm is also a demonstration project for methods of food production, preservation and distribution that don't rely on fossil fuels, don't pollute, and don't damage soil health. This mission attracted the partnership of Post Carbon Institute, which supported the farm's development by hiring my co-worker for nearly two years, Chris Hansen.

[Image caption: Chris Hansen does early season bed preparation while a gaggle of school kids visit during recess. Picture from late winter, 2007]

It is not a lonely farm, disconnected from the people it serves by distance and commodity markets, but a social hub. Students, parents, teachers, CSA members, worker volunteers, college classes, neighbors and food activists visit regularly. Harvest day is Tuesday, and in the afternoon farm members arrive for their produce baskets. At the same time, Brookside Farm serves as a distribution point for other CSAs selling meat, eggs, milk, cheese, grains, herbs, and olive oil from other farms in the county. Tuesday evening is a regular potluck at the farm. Wednesday mornings will often find my friend Sara slicing produce to fill the solar food dryers. I can expect Austin, a 17-year old independent study student, to show up once or twice a week in the mornings.

Because it servers so many functions and is still relatively new, Brookside Farm keeps growing. This year we installed an irrigation system. I placed four bee hives on site. Our perennial plants, such as culinary and medicinal herbs, are growing and need maintenance. A photovoltaic electric system is being erected. And we now have two vermiculture bins for composting food scraps from downtown organic restaurants. Not having grown up on a farm, all these projects teach me new hands-on skills. I am looking forward to constructing an equipment shed and a greenhouse as time and resources allow.

[Image Caption: The farm now has the capacity to produce about a ton of worm castings each year from local food waste, offsetting the import of fertilizer]

The substitution of fossil fuels for labor in agriculture has created an abundance of cheap food and a dearth of farmers. Part of my struggle at Brookside Farm is employing more labor intensive, but ultimately more sustainable, practices while still keeping the food in line with price expectations. So far this has meant that CSA share sales are less than the cost of production, with the difference made up by grants, donations, and a lot of volunteer labor. With the new photovoltaic system I will begin using more time saving tools that can run on renewably generated electricity, but many of these are capital intensive.

As a new farmer of course I have learned a great deal about the predilections of various crops and their pests. But what interests me more to consider is how my character has changed. As a farmer I am viscerally aware of my dependence upon forces beyond my control and at great scale. I now face the world with greater humility. When I plant a seed or a tree, I know that it will take time to bear fruit and this imbues me with greater patience. My body is required to get up and work day after day, and because I have a responsibility towards the farm I must maintain my health. Therefore, I have learned to work at a pace that is steady and earnest, not quick and exhausting. And although each winter I make plans about how the season will unfold and what my schedule will be, no year is average and I have learned to deviate from my path when appropriate, knowing that survival requires adaptation to reality. These lessons are as good as anything I learned while still in school.

Final Note: This article was written a few month ago. I am now selling shares and planning for the 2009 planting season. Worries include the potentially severe drought in California, opportunities include installation of a 14,000 gal water tank to collect rainwater from adjacent buildings. From June through September last summer the farm used 25,000 gallons of water. A big change this year is that the Farm Manager (that would be me) is getting paid.