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Kitchen Gardens:

From the White House to Your House

by Jean English

Douglas Fox

The establishment of a “kitchen garden” at the White House by Michelle Obama has helped to raise the visibility and value of growing one’s own food, if only on a small scale. Having a garden used to be commonplace in Maine, both for fresh consumption in season and to have produce to save and can for later. The time is right to reconsider and support the value of kitchen gardens, from both a nutritional and economic point of view.

Mainers spend about \$3 billion on food and food services. About 96 percent of this is from food produced out of state (Maine Department of Agriculture 2006). Dependency on food imports has implications for Maine’s economy and its economic resilience. Although much has been written on the benefits of local farm production, little information is available on the value of home (and community) gardens.


According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) almost 420 pounds per capita of selected, commercially produced, fresh and processing vegetables and melons were consumed in 2009 (www.ers.usda.gov). With good soil and close planting, a gardener might get a conservative yield of about one pound per square foot using a raised-bed technique. Therefore, in a 400-square-foot garden, just 20 x 20 feet, one person can grow enough vegetables for him- or herself.

Extending the growing season can increase that yield and provide an alternative to dependency on the summer growing season. For example, Unity College students used yield figures from the campus’ unheated hoop house to estimate how much of a person’s vegetable needs could be supplied by this 24- by 26-foot space over the course of a winter. Students used the USDA

recommendation of 2.5 cups of vegetables per day per person. This “Maine winter garden,” planted in late summer, supplied more than enough vegetables for one person for 380 days.

Farming and gardening are fairly dependent on fossil fuel inputs. Energy sustainability depends on a harvest of more energy than is put into its production. Students compared energy inputs and outputs for spinach production. Pimentel and Pimentel (1996) report 0.23:1 calorie output to input for commercial spinach production. In this study, fossil fuel use was minimized. By using hand tilling and a common organic fertilizer, the students achieved a 1.3:1 output to input ratio.

Home gardening keeps food and energy dollars in state. If one-tenth of the 500,000 households in Maine were to grow a 400-square-foot garden, saving \$600 per year, this would represent \$30 million. Anecdotal observations suggest that home cultivation also encourages direct purchases to farmers, especially during the shoulder seasons around the main growing season.

Capacity for home and community gardening adds to the state’s economic resilience, the ability to cushion the effects of downturns. Home gardens were once the rule rather than the exception. Knowledge of how to grow, preserve, and prepare vegetables was handed down from one generation to the next. Much of this knowledge has been lost, and the supporting infrastructure, from dairy farm manures to well-equipped farm and garden centers, has also been eroding. On the other hand, the availability of local seed has grown, as has interest in home food production. Today, according to the Garden Writers Association Foundation, 40 percent of U.S. households grow vegetables and fruits. Even small home gardens can provide experience that Mainers can use to expand production in hard times, benefitting themselves both nutritionally and economically. 

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