

Sustainable Diet



THE WORD “DIET” has many connotations. Hearing that word people often think of having to eliminate certain foods from what they are eating. The definition of “diet” in my copy of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* begins “The usual food and drink of a person or animal; daily sustenance.” That’s what I’m talking about: getting your usual food and drink, your daily sustenance, in a way that is sustainable. The definition of “sustain” in that dictionary is “To keep in existence; maintain; prolong.” A sustainable diet would be one in which the food choices are grown in a way that maintains the earth so that it can be kept in existence. Just growing this diet would replenish the earth. It’s a different way of thinking about what you eat.

For the most nutrition, the least distance in space and time from the soil to the table is the best. This means that if you are following a sustainable diet you will be eating locally and seasonally. What you don’t grow, you will acquire from local growers and your selection will be regional. For far too long people have had access to food shipped in from faraway places. The environmental cost of that is tremendous. Currently people have a hard time discerning what is in season in their area when the grocery store has anything they could want, all the time. Begin to notice the origins of the food in the produce section of your grocery store.

Growing your own or buying from local growers quickly educates you to seasonality. That doesn't mean that you will never again eat something grown elsewhere. Cultures have been trading for eons. Those items will become treats, as they once were, rather than everyday fare.

You will need to cook, a skill that is being lost with the availability of so many restaurants. Much of what is offered as prepared food does not meet the definition of a sustainable diet. When I was growing up, most people took their lunch to work in a lunchbox. Dinner together as a family was a given each night and eating in a restaurant was a rare occasion. I realize that times have changed, but if you are going to be eating food from your garden or from local growers you will be cooking it yourself. When you do go to restaurants, patronize ones that serve local food from sustainable growers. You vote for how you want the world to be with every dollar you spend, with every bite you eat.

Not everything can be eaten soon after it is picked, so you will need to learn how to preserve food. Your excess tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, cabbages, etc., will need some attention to save them for later months. A sustainable diet uses the least fossil fuel in this preservation. Although I still do some canning, I've turned to solar food drying and fermenting as my preferred methods of preservation. Some crops can just be stored until time to eat them. All you need to learn is the proper handling.

The world population has topped 7 billion and is rapidly increasing, stretching thin our available food growing areas. Considering that, this diet emphasizes crops that can grow the most food in the least space. The food choices in this plan are intended to meet your nutritional requirements. If you are to get all your nutrients from your garden, the one hardest to get is calories. You need to be able to fill yourself up. Potatoes, sweet potatoes, parsnips, leeks, and garlic are some of the crops that provide the most calories in the least space.

A sustainable diet feeds you, while at the same time feeding the soil and building the ecosystem. Crops are chosen for their ability to provide both food for you and food for the soil. Grains produce carbon material for compost building in the form of stalks and straw. Some crops, such as clovers and alfalfa, are grown to supply the nitrogen component to

the compost pile. In a sustainable garden, over the course of the year cover crops grow in about 60 percent of the garden. Before you put this book down thinking that you can't possibly turn that much of your garden over to cover crops, remember that there are 12 months in the year and often people only use half of that time, leaving their garden to the mercy of the weeds for the other half. I'll show you how to plan those soil-building crops into your rotation.

I concentrate my efforts on staple crops and soil-building crops. The vegetable crops most people are familiar with, such as tomatoes and cucumbers, add variety to your diet and can be worked into the sustainable garden plan. Since we're talking eating only what grows best in your region, you need to pay particular attention to variety selection and seed saving. Certain varieties of each crop grow best in specific areas. If you save the seed of what does best in your niche area, you will have developed a strain of that crop that will surpass anything you can buy from a seed company.

Your meals will change with the seasons and you will become more attuned to the place you are in. Adding animal products to this diet is feasible, however the space it takes to grow the food for the animals that feed you becomes part of your nutritional footprint. My vision of the food system that develops around sustainable diets doesn't include a beef industry or a broiler industry. Instead, beef would come from the male offspring of dairy cows and from the old cows themselves. Meat from chickens would come from young roosters and old hens. We would eat less meat and prepare it in different ways. For example, rather than large pieces of fried chicken, chopped chicken and gravy would be on the menu, served over mashed potatoes or noodles. A sustainable diet can be an adventure, not a deprivation. There are so many things to try, we just have to get ourselves out of our culinary rut and do it.

I have written this book for anyone who wants to consider a sustainable diet and learn how to grow it. For those new to gardening, just growing anything is an accomplishment and you will learn more each year. Also, your soil will keep getting better and better. Many of you will be much further along this path and just need to fine-tune what you are already doing. This is a book to help you think through the whole

process and decide how you can make it work for you. With this book, and others I'll suggest, you can embark on an educational journey just as if you were taking my class, except you will be moving at your own pace. I always suggest keeping a notebook with information you've gathered. Do some research on areas you need to learn more about and write up your findings for your notebook. The best way to learn is to teach others, so get some friends interested and share what you've learned with them.

What If the Trucks Stop Coming?

What if the trucks stop coming to the grocery stores? This is the question I posed to my students at the beginning of the Four Season Food Production class I taught at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College. I wanted them to think about how they would feed themselves with homegrown or local food supplies. Their task was to complete a group project that would examine what food was available from farms within a 100-mile radius of where they lived and to estimate how much they would need for a year. Extra credit was given to each student if they brought in a highway map with circles showing distances of 25, 50, 75, and 100 miles from their home. It was essential that it be one of those fold-out maps to show all the secondary roads and small towns.

It was a real awakening for most of the students. First, they had to think about what they were eating. Some could not imagine eliminating processed food from their diet. They had to think about how much food they would need and how they would store it, with the grocery stores closed and all. In reality, those stores only have about a three or four day supply for normal times.¹ Their shelves would be empty sooner if there was a panic. Working in a group was one of the great aspects of the project. Students, who may not have interacted otherwise, were now asking each other what skills, equipment, and other resources they had. My original intent was to encourage them to get to know the local growers at the farmers markets and where their farms were located. They did that, but quickly realized that if the trucks actually did stop coming to the grocery stores, local growers wouldn't be able to meet the demand with current production. Also, not all their food needs, or

desires, would be met with the current local supply. They would have to depend on each other.

This project certainly got everyone thinking and talking to one another and that is really important. If actually faced with the possibility of the trucks not coming, some people might act out of fear. They would acquire firearms and ammunition, begin to hoard food and supplies and build secret places to put their stash. I don't believe there are enough guns and ammunition to keep hungry people from helping themselves in times of peril. I have written this book to help people act out of love and compassion. Each community needs to develop resiliency to meet whatever the future brings. Many signs point to the collapse of systems as we know them now. That doesn't mean collapse of our society; it just means we have to change to meet our new circumstances. Change is part of the organic process of our life and is inevitable. You have always lived with change. The houses you live in, the clothes you wear, interests, hobbies, jobs, food choices, etc. have all evolved as you have grown into the person you are now. Certainly, we have to do everything we can individually to contribute to our own needs, but without community, we cannot survive. When things change, new opportunities open up. We can help our communities embrace the opportunities that will lead to a future with food enough for all and a healthy earth.

Making Changes

This book will help you learn how to calculate how much food you would need and how much space it would take to grow and store it. Furthermore, it will teach you to do that sustainably by building the soil and using the least fossil fuel in growing your food and getting it to the table. This is actually the food growing part of permaculture. Permaculture is a design system whereby all the energies within a system are used to maximum efficiency, the excess from one operation becoming a resource for another. Three important permaculture ethics² are:

1. **Care for the people:** We do what we can with our resources and increase our skills as much as we can, considering everyone who needs to be fed.

2. **Care for the earth:** Whatever we do needs to be replenishing the earth, not leaving a trail of garbage and toxic waste behind us. Everything is connected. Consider yourself living downstream from anything you have ever done or contributed to.
3. **Redistribute the surplus:** Everyone has talents in certain areas. If you think you don't, just keep an open mind and know that if you follow your heart you will discover your talents. That's where redistribute the surplus comes in. When we do what we do best, we probably have more than we need of some things and not enough of others. Share what you have through gift, trade, or sale.

Many people want to develop a small farm that will provide their family with a substantial part of their food. This book will help you understand how to do that. I know many of you are anxious to sell vegetables at the farmers markets and elsewhere. Before we can feed others, however, we need to know how to feed ourselves. I have seen farmers at the markets who have some food items for sale that their families haven't even had a chance to eat yet. Shouldn't farm families eat as well as the customers? If you take your time and grow a wide variety of food for your family first, planning out how much you need and how much you will actually harvest and when the harvest will be, and learning how to prepare it for the table in a way your family will eat, you will have undergone an educational process that you couldn't get anywhere else. Those few short years of learning will also be years of soil building and skill building. Every endeavor on a homestead seems to require additional tools and infrastructure. If you start right in as a market gardener, you will be playing catch-up for years, always needing tools, supplies, or a building that you hadn't anticipated until then. If you learn to grow for your family first, you can anticipate what it would be like to ramp up production and better plan for it. Even a small urban garden is a step in the right direction to begin your education.

Back up a bit, though. Before you can even imagine growing a large part of your food, you need to imagine eating a diet of those foods. As you travel this journey your eating habits will change, leaving behind food brought to you by the industrial food complex, and incorporating

homegrown/local food eaten in season. Stay open to the possibilities and adjust your goals as you learn more. Be kind to yourself and make changes to your diet gradually.

For a few years I was on a committee at my church that partnered with a church in Haiti, providing aid. There was a yearly meeting for all the churches doing that in our diocese. One year when I attended, the lunch that was served was really hard for me to understand. Lunch consisted of sub sandwiches from a chain restaurant, offering three choices of meat or vegetarian, chips, cake and about a dozen choices of soft drinks. The dishes and silverware were disposable, in spite of there being a church kitchen available. I knew that it was volunteers who planned and gathered everything together, and since I didn't want to do that, I should have been grateful. However, I thought it would be more appropriate if the lunch consisted of something we could imagine the people we were helping in Haiti eating, or food local to us. Afterward, I wrote a letter saying so. I never received a response to that letter, but the next year lunch was provided by the local Food Not Bombs group and consisted of soup, salad, and bread. The beverages were tea, coffee, and water. It made a huge difference to me that day. I hope others realized the change that had occurred. The following year the planning committee suggested that participants bring their own non-disposable plates and cups to use. Things were definitely moving in the right direction. Sometimes, just taking another look at what you're doing, with specific goals in mind, will help you find new ways.

Right now you might think it's a good idea to grow *all* your food, and maybe you can do that. However, once you really get started you might realize that it would be better to grow some of it and support local growers for the rest. Deciding how to use the resources at your disposal efficiently is a big step. I'll give you some examples of how to use a limited growing area to your best advantage. Growing your own food is time-consuming and dirty work. You have to be ready to make a commitment to a place (your garden) and to learning new skills. I can only teach gardening in the context of the "whole system." Besides the ecosystem of what's going on in the soil and plants, it also means what is going on in your kitchen and lifestyle. If your time is filled with activities

now, something will need to change to make time for gardening on a larger scale, because it is not only the gardening, but the eating that will be evolving. Cooking from the garden is different from cooking frozen or canned food from the store. Using food fresh from the garden is even an adjustment for chefs who have only ever used produce trucked in from a distance. Some people like to jump into the deep end, so to speak, and let new projects overwhelm them. Remember, however, to think of the significant others who will be on this journey with you, although not so involved. Take time to think through the changes you are making. Gradually, some things that used to seem important are not so much on your mind anymore, as your new lifestyle begins to develop.

With all that in mind, let's get started.

