

CHAPTER ONE



The New Micro Eco-Farmers

I love co-creating with the earth, as it is so simple and healing to live close to the mother earth that sustains and nurtures me every day with her beauty. I love to hold her in my hands and watch the seeds grow into fullness just by tending to them slowly along with the sun and rain.

—Mariam Massaro, Singing Brook Farm, Worthington, Massachusetts.

On less than an acre, Mariam Massaro tends certified organic herb, vegetable and flower gardens, which include more than 78 varieties of roses. Along with this, she raises Icelandic horses, llamas, Angora rabbits and Icelandic sheep in the farm's Berkshire Hills setting of western Massachusetts. The animals provide offspring and specialty wool for Mariam to create fiber crafts for sale. They fertilize and mow the gardens. In her 1850s New England farmhouse, a workshop overlooks a year-round brook. The herbs, flowers and wool are processed into products sold both locally and worldwide.

On five acres surrounded by woods, Sylvia and Walter Ehrhardt of Knoxville, Maryland created the successful Ehrhardt Organic Farm. From its earliest years, chefs could not get enough of their organic dessert quality blackberries, which bear up to nine weeks in their location. Chefs also gladly paid premium prices for their fresh-picked, locally- and sustainably-grown raspberries, strawberries, miniature squash, carrots, tomatoes, herbs and shallots. Thousands of plants were started



The Chile Man is a ten-acre farm near Round Hill, Virginia that produces natural marinades, salsas, mustards, barbecue sauces, and pesto from peppers, berries, and herbs grown on its sustainable farm. Products are manufactured in an on-farm, FDA-inspected commercial kitchen and are sold at festivals, online, at farm events and in specialty food stores.

Several years ago Robert Farr, 45, with his wife Carol and two children left a career in high-technology marketing to pursue a new life and a dream of self-reliance on the land. Check out the farm and Robert's practical tips for "Making It On Ten Acres" at www.thechileman.com.

each spring in the greenhouse attached to their living room, just a short walk from their growing area. They grossed \$12,000 an acre on miniature squash alone. Their blackberries produced two tons per acre per season. The farm, still going strong, became a demonstration farm as well, and their reputation as successful organic growers spread nationally and internationally. "Over the years, we found that we didn't need to expand our land but to make it more productive," said Sylvia.

Ocean Sky Farm, owned by Art Biggert and Suzy Cook of Washington State, is a 1.55-acre suburban full-time farm. They have operated a highly successful community supported agriculture (CSA) farm where 75 families "subscribe" to the farm by paying upfront for weekly delivery. Being microfarmers, they can adapt easily to new interests, and

eventually chose to incorporate other farm products including perennial medicinal herbs. “People come to the farm, take what they need, fill out their own receipts and leave cash or checks in the tea pot,” Art said.

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Baruch Bashan, creator of Gaia Growers Farm in Portland, Oregon, had been a part-time vegetable gardener for more than 25 years. One year, he produced 2,000 pounds of vegetables on two city lots. Not needing it all himself, he ended up donating it to the local food bank. “That last year I decided I’d had enough of working in an office as a software programmer, and wanted to do farming full time,” he said. It wasn’t until July of that year that he secured a half acre, but still had a successful growing season and launched Gaia Growers Farm. He was convinced, as he stated, that “a single, hard-working person can run a successful organic veggie and seed growing business on small acreage, without having to invest a lot of money.”

There is a change among those who farm in this century. They are not different than what they used to be. They are more of what they always were. Some come from generations of farmers or gardeners. Some have just joined those who earn a living from the earth. Regardless, they seem to have taken a long-lost power back. Are you one of them?

“After 18 years working in the corporate world, I’d had enough,” said Robert Farr, also called “The Chile Man.” He owns a ten-acre sustainable farm in Virginia, and here he shares his story with us as he also wrote it for *American Farmland Trust Magazine*. “I’d always had a relationship with the land, hiking through the Appalachians and the Rockies, and I’d grown up with my hands in the dirt. But faced with the prospect of endless days in windowless cubicles, I decided to live a dream I’d had since adolescence, and start my own sustainable farm. As soon as we closed on the farm (July 1998), in Loudoun County,

Virginia, I quit my job as a marketing manager in the computer industry and *The Chile Man* was born.” He now grows 67 varieties of peppers and other fruits and vegetables to produce more than 40,000 bottles of all-natural marinades, barbecue sauces, mustards and salsas right on his ten-acre farm.

The term I use for this book, “micro eco-farm,” sprung from this change in farmers. From urban lots to small town backyards to rural small acreage, this term is the umbrella for highly abundant, constantly improving, ecologically operated microfarms that produce a mix of fruits, vegetables, herbs, grains, nuts, mushrooms, flowers, fibers, craft materials, organic, pasture-fed dairy products, farm-crafted creations, and farming education and experiences. The examples in this book emphasize farms from fractions of an acre to five acres that earn full-time income for at least one adult. Some provide the entire income for single adults with several children, and some provide the main income for two adults and their families. It also touches on microfarms that integrate with complementary home and cottage businesses, those that prosper on six to 15 acres, and a few who earn a supplemental income.

All are sustainable in a variety of ways and are taking traditional organic production to new levels. Whether they reintroduce ancient royal gardening techniques or are the first to profit from the latest U.S. research, they connect sustainable local minifarming with the care of ecosystems and entire world populations. Some even say it’s as though they are recreating an advanced form of Eden. They are willing to work harder short term in order to have more time long term for further creativity and loving their friends, neighbors and family. This seems to be just what the earth wanted, anyway: A co-creation of human innovation combined with the earth’s superior ability to “do the hard work.” Even organic pest spraying, rototilling and weeding will become less and less necessary at the hands of these farmers.

Fueling this new entity—the micro eco-farm—are several supporting changes in human values. These include the environmental and health movement, the delicious “Slow Food Movement” (see Resources and Networking), the push to strengthen local economies and the

Salt Creek Farm is a small certified organic family farm located on the west side of Port Angeles, Washington. CSA program clients receive a seasonal abundance of fresh vegetables, herbs and flowers direct from the farm each week. Website: www.saltcreekfarm.org.

Photo: Salt Creek Farm owner Doug Hendrickson, taken by CSA subscriber Martin Hutten.



parents wanting their kids to connect to nature and their food source again.

We now know that large amounts of farm crops can be produced intensively on very small amounts of land very easily and very simply, and as this happens, the land and crops get more abundant year after year. There are many techniques that allow for this, and yet, micro eco-farmers don't always use just one of them. Often, they will synergize several, to create a new whole much more prolific than the sum of its parts.

Micro eco-farmers do not compete with mass-produced, under-priced products. As one would guess, they supply the niche markets. However, you will soon see that there are more niches than anyone ever dreamed of. These “tons of niches” collectively add up to a very large opportunity for new micro eco-farmers, almost making non-niche farms seem like the oddball.

These micro eco-farms, along with their larger sustainable agriculture cousins and sustainable home gardeners, choose the rhythm of a new drummer—that of the earth as the solution, rather than the earth

as the problem. They still touch the soil; they still plant the seeds; and they still nurture the animals. But, because of the retrieval of their power, they have switched direction, crossing the bridge back home, rather than crossing the bridge far away. No longer running from the earth as one would run from an enemy, forcing and succumbing, they are now moving towards the earth as a source of latent and untapped wisdom.

Whenever they need an answer, the answer seems to appear—such as it did concerning the honeybee problem that began in the late 20th century. Honeybee populations were dwindling. The bees could not, it seemed, sustain their health and numbers, succumbing to parasites and other invasions. About this time, Adaline Harms had secured her five and a half acres on the edge of Mt. Shasta, in California. Here, she now gardens in her greenhouse and hexagon-shaped raised beds. Adaline is one of the most spiritual and earth-loving people I have ever met. My conversations with her remind me that whatever created this earth speaks to us in many ways, including directly through the earth itself, even through its own honeybees, if need be...

“I took a trip to Arizona, and while driving on Highway 5 the length of California,” she said, “I kept seeing all the bee hives on the side of the road. I just got this feeling that I needed to keep bees. I knew absolutely nothing about beekeeping, so when I got home, I started asking around about beekeepers to learn from.” This eventually led her to someone who had worked with Ron Breland, who has a nursery and bee sanctuary in New York State and who had developed an alternative hive. Ron reportedly noticed that in nature, bees don’t build hives in the shape of file cabinets. So Ron mimicked nature’s design in his hives, and his bees thrived well.

“How quaint,” I thought before actually seeing this hive. I imagined something simple. Maybe something Winnie the Pooh would climb up and get his nose stuck into.

“So, Adaline, is it round, hexagon?” I asked.

“It’s a dodecahedron,” explained Adaline.

“A what?”

“A chalice made up of pentagons, with a similar shape turned upside down on top of the chalice to make up the brood chamber, then there are five-sided extensions that stack on top.” Adaline had a hive built according to Ron’s design and observed her bees gaining strength.

Like Adalene, these new sustainable farmers and gardeners are freer to be innovative again. Without thousands invested in equipment specialized for one specific crop, or fees paid to support large advertising firms that push a crop they are entrenched in, they can change crops, and they can change “equipment,” on a summer weekend. The following year, Adaline’s carpenter built four more hives.

“We’ve made a couple of minor alterations to the original design, while trying to stay with the original ideas and intention.”

The differences among individual micro eco-farms are many, yet this is their strength. If you are about to become one, you will create something like no other. You may develop a purely vegan farm, supplying those who consume only plant foods with aromas, textures, proteins, micro-nutrients and “life force” in a variety previously unheard of.

Perhaps you’ll operate a “Paleolithic farm,” concentrating on nuts, roots, wild greens and other foods humans once consumed before grains became a mainstay. Maybe you’ll add wild-grazed fermented dairy products as our ancestors once consumed.

In a world dominated by an oversupply of questionable grains, you may even grow grains. But yours may be pre-industrial grains such as spelt or quinoa, grown organically and intensively for higher production on smaller parcels of land, with the grain stone-ground right after harvest, right on the farm. In fact, you may even sprout your grain before it becomes bread, turning it back into a “vegetable” rather than a grain, to bake into loaves in your farm’s own hand-built brick ovens.

Yours may be one of the only farms reviving food of the Incas, such as ahupa—*pachyrhizus ahupa*—fabales, a legume grown for its sweet, apple crisp roots, or arracacha—*arracacia xanthorrhizza*—apiaceae, which looks similar to celery with uniquely flavored roots, or maca—*lepidium meyenii*—brassicaceae, with tangy, radish-like roots.

Or maybe you'll operate a farm that provides for Italian cuisine chefs, gourmet hobbyists, or local and online ethnic groups. Your unique herbs and vegetables can't be found in supermarkets. You'll provide those vine-ripened Italian tomatoes even in winter in your 10 x 10 ft. greenhouse, while teaming up with a neighbor whose goats fertilize your gardens, and who creates boutique cheeses that complement your Italian sauces sold throughout the winter months.

You may produce products for other farms and gardens: worm castings, heirloom vegetable seedlings, locally-adapted garden flowers, and heirloom seeds, to name a few. Some farms provide "experiences" even more than products, with a children's pony farm or an herb farm with herb related classes. The selling of experiences works well for those microfarms that attach to larger established businesses such as destination spas, schools, campgrounds or spiritual retreats, that automatically draw in visitors as part of the farm income. However, "microfarms within larger establishments" can also be, well, "microfarms within larger farms."



Zestful Gardens, located near Tacoma, Washington, is a diversified small scale farm specializing in annual vegetables. According to owner Holly Foster, the farm uses Biodynamic techniques and intensive cover cropping; produce is marketed through a CSA, farmers markets, and restaurants. Contact: hollykfoster@hotmail.com.

Theresa and Matthew Freund own a Connecticut dairy farm. When they filled a wagon with their garden's extra-sweet corn on the side of the road, customers stopped to buy, and also asked for lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers. Following this lead, they planted more of the things they were asked for. Eventually, their farm stand took in \$100,000 over the summer, while Matthew and his brother continued to operate the dairy. The Freunds expanded their roadside stand into a two-story barn-type building offering their fresh produce, dairy products, jams, vinegars, and they even added a U-pick wedding flower acre.

You may be a microfarmer who does not even grow food. Some produce ornamental wheat instead, or herbal goat milk soap, naturally-colored cotton or Angora wool.

"In the US, there is a lady who 'paints' pictures using flower petals out of her garden. Another farmer grows seven acres of broomcorn, makes brooms and sells them retail and wholesale," said Ken Hargesheimer, who teaches sustainable mini-farming, mini-ranching and market gardening in the US and worldwide.

"There is a grassroots movement back to family farming," he continued. He has seen for himself what he describes as "free enterprise and micro-entrepreneurship" in both urban and rural environments where mini-agriculture has been proven to produce substantial income on surprisingly small parcels.

"People can have a comfortable income, a high-quality lifestyle, and a great way to raise children," he said. "As well, the micro eco-farm can adapt to year-round work, second-family income, spare-time income, or even full-time income for part-time work." A lady took a (mini-farming) course," Ken said, "returned to Alaska, prepared her land and grossed \$20,000 the first year, and then had a six-month winter vacation!"

Micro eco-farms team up nicely with other cottage industries. Personal chefs can create one-of-a-kind cuisine from their own mini-farms. Massage therapists can create their own line of garden-fresh, body-care products. Bed and breakfast inns are very popular when

combined with small working farms, each enhancing the customer draw and promotion of the other.

Micro eco-farms fill in spaces that larger sized farms don't attend to. They use back yards, vacant lots, or their family's own small acreage. As they grow in number, it is anyone's guess as to what type of new economical foundation they could create.

Regardless of their differences, they have one thing in common. They seem to have an inner knowing that creating with the earth is attached to Something Greater than anything purely human-created, and they must continue to work

with this greatness. As they do this, their presence on the earth is collectively creating a very beautiful world.

“In the past four-and-a-half years, we’ve seen our holistic farming practices dramatically increase the bird population,” continued Robert Farr, “One of the most rewarding parts of being a small farmer is the opportunity to be in constant contact with the spiritual; to do, as Gary Snyder best said, ‘the real work.’ I need only stroll out my kitchen door to be immersed in the holiness of nature, to see the mountains, endlessly walking. All of our own sacred nature begins outside, in the worship, as the Amish say, of God’s creation.”

It often doesn’t feel so much like a business separate from leisure and hobby time, and it gets less and less important to distinguish “work” from “play.”

“It’s a relationship,” said Diana Pepper of her 2.75-acre Green Frog Farm in northwest Washington State. Diana reminds me of a “human faerie” and is a living library of earth wisdom. While she and her partner, John Robinson, occasionally wild craft their acreage’s native woodlands and meadows, most of their production is on only one-third of this acreage. Diana and John have established a Pacific Northwest native plant nursery, selling native trees, shrubs and groundcovers, plus herbs and ornamental flowers. They also create small bottles of herbal

and flower healing products, kits for massage therapists, offer workshops, and private consultation sessions. Both agree they are not separate from their livelihood: “It’s 110 percent of who we are,” said John.

At this point, micro eco-farms fill in spaces that larger sized farms don’t attend to. They use back yards, vacant lots, or their family’s own small acreage. As they grow in number, it is anyone’s guess as to what type of new economical foundation they could create. We are currently still dependent on a system that produces a few staple crops on huge acreages that ship these crops across the country and world. Jo Robinson, author and educator, states it well, “We need micro eco-farms, midi eco-farms and maxi eco-farms.”

The current problem with food production is not that there isn’t enough food, but more that it isn’t produced where it’s consumed fresh off the vine by the region’s own local citizens who are in tune with that Something Greater, making the local growing decisions, choosing the locally-needed adaptations, and keeping the food and revenue close at hand. When a stable local economy is created this way, distant shipping to and from far away lands becomes a friendly trade rather than dependency. The ability to produce locally is one of the many gifts of the micro eco-farm. And with world travel and technology that allows networking among eco-farmers of all sizes, their successes are mounting at an accelerated rate.

It is my honor to present in the following chapters a close-up of those who are actually succeeding, a treasury of what you can grow, what farming methods you can use, what animals you might like to choose from, and how the farmers reach their markets. I will present an emerging new foundational how-to on growing methods that span all forms of sustainable small farming, no matter what is grown or where the location. Then I will distill many methods that have increased production on small ground from double to up to 40 times that of conventional growing. You can choose which ones you want to explore and incorporate. Mix and match, and see if you can make two plus two equal 10, something you will see demonstrated in Chapter 6. Once you

see all that is available to you, as with every farmer I interviewed, you may find that what's inside you is the greatest success secret of all.

“I love to create. I'm strong-willed and muse-driven,” said Baruch Bashan, of the above described Gaia Growers Farm. “I got into software, like one does writing or painting. And, as with those other artist-types, having some other person decide what you create ain't quite the same thing as when your Muse calls. So, this allows me to define what is to be created.” It's as though these new micro eco-farmers sense something on the horizon that is beautiful, and they are taking us there.

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