

Munch ON THIS



Sustainable

*By Marcia Rae
December 8, 2010*

One word that is very in vogue and very mis-used these days is sustainable. It has become such a buzz word that it has almost lost its meaning. But the concept of something (usually a process) being sustainable is an important concept -- especially in a world where things are running down and running out.

Merriam Webster says that to be sustainable means capable of being sustained. Sustain in this context means to keep up, prolong, or maintain, in a sense like the Eveready battery bunny, it just keeps on going.

When a food system is sustainable, it means that it can keep on going, that the water source is not depleted, that the soil is constantly renewed, and that healthy plants can keep on growing indefinitely. Unfortunately, for much of recent human history, our agriculture systems have not been sustained or sustainable. That is, the resources needed for the system to perpetuate are finite and dwindling.

The main plant building blocks of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) are manufactured or mined from finite sources. Nitrogen is made from natural gas and natural gas is a petroleum product. While there is much natural gas left, all the sources are known and we have reached peak natural gas, meaning that we have used up half of what was available to us. Phosphorus is mined from phosphorus rock. Potassium in the form of potash is generally mined and finite, although it is necessary to all plant life and therefore can be derived from plants usually in the form of ashes. Sources for both of these nutrients are on the decline.

Likewise the micronutrients – calcium, sulfur, magnesium, boron, chlorine, manganese, iron, zinc, copper, molybdenum, and selenium – are generally mined and/or manufactured and must be returned to the soil for healthy plant growth. Sources for these nutrients are on the decline.

Green manure (cover crops and composted organic matter) and animal waste are ways to return these nutrients to the soil; studies show that such sources make the nutrients available in ways that are most readily absorbed by plants. Farmers that practice sustainable farming seek to supply their crops with the necessary ingredients while working within the confines of the earth's finite resources. They understand that the systems on our earth are interconnected. Air is interconnected, and climate. Water systems are interconnected. People are interconnected -- all living beings and even non-living. We are playing a zero sum game -- humans against the earth. While it might seem that we are winning since there are nearly 7 billion of us, in the end we win only if the end result is sustainable, if we recognize that humans are part of the web of life on the planet, not outside it and not against it.

So, when you are buying food, organic is good, local organic is better. But the most important thing is that the food was produced using sustainable farming methods. By supporting those who aspire to produce food in earth-friendly ways, you are supporting the continuance of our abundant, living earth.

Munch on This – Know your farmer. Know your food. Why not? You can find food farmed by earth friendly farmers at WillametteLocalFoods.com.

PS – You can look right in your backyard for sustainable farming methods. Are you growing? Composting? Talk to local farmers Marco Franciosa and Kay Panek on Sunset Lane. They are great examples of a new kind of farmer. Local family owned and operated. Organic. Sustainable.

Marcia Rae can be reached at marcia-rae@hotmail.com or 714-325-4213.