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Cuba's farmers went back to pre-chemical roots

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The future of food in Maine (and the United States) is, irony of ironies, Cuba.

Our own Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association featured Canadian agronomist Wendy Holm in its most recent newsletter. She is leading farm and restaurant tours to Cuba this fall and winter to understand and learn from that country's plucky -- and rapid -- move from "conventional" farming (machinery and heavy fertilizer and pesticides use) to a new agriculture based on local production, urban gardens and low- or no-input (meaning chemical pesticides, fertilizers, or herbicides) food production.

Cuba: The thorn in our side. The most embargoed, thwarted state, lying less than 100 miles from our territory. Leaders Fidel and Raoul Castro have been our nemeses for almost half a century.

Cuba, whose agricultural supports came from the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1989, had to invent a new version of its food supply. The Soviets were not able to provide the machinery or petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers that had made Cuba a South American powerhouse for sugar cane and even dairy and meat production.

Per-capita calorie consumption fell, according to United Nations food estimates, from 3,000 calories to 1,900 -- enough to take away any extra belly fat. Starvation was a real possibility.

Our main-stream media pundits (and, of course, Fidel-bashers on the right) predicted the end of the Castro regime with famine-engendered chaos as the cause.

That didn't happen, though.

"What happened was simple, if unexpected," Bill McKibben wrote in Harper's Magazine in April 2005. "Cuba ... learned to stop exporting sugar and instead started growing its own food again, growing it on small private farms and thousands of pocket-sized urban market gardens -- and, lacking chemicals and fertilizers, much of that food became de facto organic."

According to McKibben, Cuba has created "what may be the world's largest working model of semi-sustainable agriculture, one that doesn't rely nearly as heavily as the rest of the world does on oil, on chemicals, on shipping vast quantities of food back and forth."

Cubans import things like rice (from Vietnam) and apples and beef (from the United States).

And the new agriculture in Cuba is labor-intensive -- for both humans and re-introduced oxen teams, a staple of the campesino-based agriculture of pre-Castro days.

Nor is the new model strictly organic: fertilizer is used on rice fields, for example. But per-capita food consumption has returned to 3,000 calories. That's enough to reinstall a modest potbelly on many middle-aged Cuban males, McKibben reports.

Is Cuba a model for U.S. agriculture?

Our future is not determined by events that propelled Cuba -- the swift collapse of a major subsidizer (the Soviet Union). But remember, "conventional" agriculture in the United States is heavily subsidized by our government, as is ethanol production, driving up the price of commodity corn and soy and in turn driving up food prices for processed foods, dairy and meat nationwide.

(As a side note, vegetable and meat prices at Long Meadow Farm have not increased since our labor costs are stable, and the price of the pasture grass for our beef critters hasn't gone up.)

Instead, costs of "conventional" agriculture are determined by rising energy prices and eventually by the unavailability of fossil fuels.

(Another side note: "Conventional" should not be applied to the prevailing agriculture in the United States. Our petroleum-based system has only been dominant since the end of World War II. For about 10,000 years before that, "conventional" agriculture didn't use chemical-based pesticides, fertilizers, or herbicides.)

In other words, our agricultural system is unsustainable and the question is "when" and not "if" it will collapse.

We have the luxury of knowing the future and the opportunity to take steps to prepare for it. We can encourage local agriculture, encourage building our soils and encourage local farming in rural and urban locations.

And, although Michele Roy and I can't afford the journeys to Cuba this fall and winter (about $4,000), we will see if any of the participants were from Maine, Quebec or New Brunswick -- and see about getting together and sharing information.

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