

# Introduction:

## Sustaining Community and Agriculture

Since 1991, I have been living with a hundred people at Twin Oaks, an income-sharing, work-sharing intentional community (commune) and ecovillage established in 1967 in central Virginia. Before I moved here, I gardened for about seventeen years in the UK.

I decided to write this book after six years of writing monthly articles for *Growing for Market* magazine, at a time when my community was searching for more ways to earn money. I wanted to contribute by doing work I enjoyed. I also thought how valuable it would be for me and other gardeners at Twin Oaks to compile my shards of information for quick reference. I knew the exact book we (and probably many other growers) needed didn't yet exist and saw that as my opportunity to provide information for small-scale sustainable vegetable growers, on crop production, planning and organizing.

Many growers nowadays are producing a wide range of crops, over a long season. Here is information about a full range of vegetables, succession planting of popular crops and season extension techniques to provide food for the complete eating season. This book details varieties that are productive and disease-resistant, and techniques that are efficient. Relatively new methods such as the use of drip irrigation, biodegradable plastic mulch, plug transplants, farmscaping (the inclusion of flowers to attract beneficial insects), sus-

tainable weed management, and computer software for record-keeping, calculations, planning, research and marketing are included. The organic seed movement and the popularity of baby salad mixes are exciting recent directions.

I am in USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 7 (out of 11), and the American Horticultural Society Heat Zone 7 (out of 12). Books from the Southeast are rare and Southern growers are traditionally under-served, as most US vegetable production books are written in New England or the Pacific Northwest. My book starts with a Southeastern "flavor" while remaining fully useful to growers in other regions. My experience growing in England gives me familiarity with cooler summers and milder winters.

I don't address finding and buying land, or USDA Organic certification. There are already books about those things. Our farming is sustainable: we work with awareness of limited resources, ecology and the long-term future of the planet. The methods we use are organic in spirit. Like many growers, we have decided that the all-round costs of Organic certification are not a good trade-off for our farm.

This book is intended for farmers growing vegetables sustainably on a few acres, using manual labor, hand tools and some machinery. These growers may be new or experienced and want to learn more. This includes CSAs (Community

Supported Agriculture farms), market growers, growers supplying restaurants or institutions, interns and apprentices on sustainable vegetable farms, students of courses in sustainable agriculture, urban farms, multi-plot city gardens and community gardens, schools with food gardens, intentional communities, hobby gardeners stepping up into commercial organic farming—or expanding their vegetable gardens to provide a larger proportion of produce for their own households—and people working on local food security and safety issues, all of whom are looking for information on small-scale food production.

At Twin Oaks I am the manager of three and a half acres (one and a half hectares) of vegetable gardens, part of our organic farm, which also includes dairy, beef, poultry, bees, herbs, tree fruit, mushrooms, seed growing, ornamentals and forestry. The work of the garden crew supports our community. And the community supports us. Our vegetable production is like a CSA with one very big box (the walk-in cooler at our dining hall). We're also like a grower supplying a restaurant or institution.

In very many ways gardening here is much like gardening on this scale elsewhere. We share the challenges most growers have with weather, pests, diseases, shortages and gluts. My managerial tasks are similar to those of other growers—getting organized, keeping up with the schedule, finding enough energy, keeping ahead of ten people, running back and forth to issue instructions and check how clearly they came across, recognizing problems and acting in a timely way.

Like a CSA, we need to grow variety, not just specialize in carrots and garlic because they do well here. We have a captive market, so we don't need to meet and greet customers and actively

*sell* each bunch of kale. (We don't even bunch our kale, we pick into five-gallon/19-liter buckets and deliver it to the kitchen just like that.)

You won't find much in this book about marketing. Production is my strength, not making sales. Our version of marketing is education, labeling and presentation. We need to be responsive to our diners and our cooks. We can grow lovely parsnips, but if cooks won't cook them, they go to waste. In that way, it's like supplying restaurants—we talk with our cooks, find out what each likes to cook with and supply information about unusual vegetables. We use the feedback we're given, and figure it out one vegetable at a time.

Like other farm managers, I consider how to distribute the available hours over the whole season for maximum productivity. I disappoint some people who would like to garden in April, because I know we'll need those hours in July for harvesting and hoeing. There's a balance to be found between having fewer people work longer hours so that they get faster and more experienced, and having a bigger pool of people learning.

In other ways my role as a manager at Twin Oaks is quite different from that of an owner-manager. I'm constrained from taking big risks and I'm cushioned from big calamities. My budgets, both money and time, are decided by the whole community of a hundred people, and balanced against other calls for resources. I hand in my annual budget requests and then I adjust my plans to fit the money and hours provided. Adjusting to fit money and labor available is probably familiar to all farmers.

As far as money goes, I alone can't decide to make a major investment, for instance, to double the greenhouse space. It means that the money I live on is independent (in the short term) from

whether the garden has a bountiful or disastrous year. It means that I don't have a seasonal cash flow problem. It means that we don't have to focus primarily on growing vegetables that would bring in the most money if sold on the open market. It does however require careful thought in order to get best value for each dollar spent.

At Twin Oaks Community we each have a weekly work quota of around forty-two hours. Members can pick-and-mix jobs, and craft their own careers. Consequently we have different levels of involvement in the garden work. We have a group of six to seven Full Crew members, who commit to working a lot in the garden and helping out with other responsibilities to keep the whole thing running smoothly. Each season we form a bigger pool of people (the paracrew) willing to work four to six hours a week with us.

When it all goes smoothly, this is pretty nice. It makes sure we have enough people to do the work and lets people ease in and out of garden work to fit with their other commitments, stamina, health and ability to cope with the weather. We have extra help from visitors who are here for three weeks to check out the community. The visitors are a big unknown; they might be next year's crew in the bud, or they might be people with no skills in gardening. Those who operate CSAs and have sharers picking crops have similar experiences.

One of the biggest differences between my job here and that of most growers is that I very much "live above the store." I hear people's likes and dislikes over dinner; I see what gets thrown in the compost bucket. I might run into one of our "sharers" before I've even had my first cup of tea of the day. Sometimes a "customer" scurries



The entrance to the author's community. Credit: Bridget Aleshire.

from the carrot patch, hiding a blur of orange, in case they're helping themselves too soon. One of the best times was the night I stepped out with my flashlight to turn on the irrigation, and surprised some people sleeping out in the corn patch!

As you read the drier details of our planning

systems, picture a motley bunch of people doing our best to keep it all together, grappling with the humidity, bugs and heat of central Virginia in the summer and winters that sometimes seem too short to get a good rest, and other times more severe than we feel we deserve!

### Virginia Climate Summary

- Twin Oaks is in USDA Winter Hardiness Zone 7a: the average annual minimum temperature is 0–5°F (–18 to –15°C)
- The average rainfall for a year is 42" (107 cm). This is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year, at an average of 3.1–4.6" (7.7–10.8 cm) per month.
- The average daily maximum temperatures in December and January are 47°F (8°C) and 88°F (31°C) in July. The average night low temperatures in January are 26°F (–3°C) and 65°F (18°C) in July.
- The growing season, from last frost to first frost is around 167 days. The approximate date of the last spring frost is April 30th (later than May 14 only happens one year in ten); the approximate date of the first fall frost is October 14 (earlier than October 1st only happens one year in ten).
- Our climate is controlled by 3 weather systems:
  - 1) in the main by moisture from the Gulf of Mexico
  - 2) by the Bermuda High Pressure area in the summer
  - 3) by the recurrent waves of cold Canadian air in winter
 Rainfall peaks in January, February, March and early June and August. Due to the erratic movement of thunderstorms, some parts of our area may experience long periods of drought. September–November is the dry season but is also the hurricane season.
- Our latitude is 38°N, which is very relevant to onion growing and to daylight hours
- Little plant growth occurs between November 21 and January 21, when there are less than 10 hours of light each day.