

LOCAL FOODS AND MARKETS

Kale For Sale: One attempt to eat locally in Delaware County

By Rebecca Morgan

I spent three seasons on an organic vegetable farm in Virginia when I was in my twenties. The farmer there frequently quipped, "Anyone can grow food. The hard part is selling it to the right person." While "the right person" is not a static demographic across the board, for small-scale farms, it often means someone with money. Or at least someone who has enough money to spend \$7.00 a pound on tomatoes, and 6.00 a pound on broccoli and \$20.00 for a four pound chicken. In other words, not your typical permanent resident of Delaware County.

And yes, you've heard it all before. The particular conundrum of sustainable farmers charging what the real price of real food costs, while the benefits of the real food stay primarily in the hands of those with real money, or at least extra money, ironically not the same population generally suffering from obesity, diabetes, and other food-associated health problems.

Here in Delaware County numerous initiatives are underway to rebuild a vital farm and food system, and get youth, seniors, and just regular eaters engaged in eating locally. In Walton, we kicked off one local food initiative with the Walton Farm to School Project, which received funding from the Catskill Watershed Corporation to pay Walton High School students to grow food for the Walton community. Our motto was "Grown Here to Eat Here". The

larger objectives of the project were to get local food into the school cafeterias and teach students the process from Arugula to Zucchini of growing, harvesting and marketing organic produce. The focus of the 2010 season became selling our organic produce to the Big M. This was, as they say, a hard sell.

The Walton Farm to School Project delivered boxes of organic produce every week to the Big M, often less than five hours after harvest. However, due to a series of factors, the food did not exactly fly off the shelves. While the owner and managers at the Big M were generally supportive, the challenges grew. First, we had to engage in some aggressive advocacy strategies to get decent shelf space. After our initial requests to get better space for our produce didn't pan out (we were selling a local, organic product, grown by the hard-working youth of our community as cheaply as we could...what's not to love??), our crew showed up unannounced in the Big M parking lot to meet with the owner directly. He put it this way: "if you can get your product here every week in reliable quantities, we'll give you prime real estate. But if it looks like shit, it's over."

What we delivered was beautiful. Fresh and vibrant, newly-washed, the produce practically sang opera. However supermarket policies dictate that the newer product sits in the cooler until the older product sells out. While logical on some level, it often meant that our produce on

the shelves was older, drying and wilting. More raspy Johnny Cash than glorious Maria Callas.

Also, we had more swiss chard and kale than the Walton population was willing to purchase, and our other more palatable crops (cucumbers, beans, squash and zucchini) just couldn't compete with the box truck prices no matter how low we were willing to go. So we gave boxes of high quality, organic produce to the food pantry on Friday afternoons. "Grown Here to Eat Here" was our motto after all, and since our project was subsidized by grant money, we could afford to essentially give it away. Local? Yes. Economically viable? No. We also experienced significant marketing challenges. Our efforts to introduce Waltonians to the multiple benefits of kale (in the form of pamphlets, recipes, Hail to Kale signs, etc.) often resulted in damp, unreadable signs - shredded paper over the produce. The Big M simply did not have the staff, the time, or the ability (desire?) to effectively laminate all of our signs, so much of what we brought in was packaged up in plastic (it will last longer this way, we were told) and sold alongside the produce from Chile and California with no distinction.

Ultimately we moved a few thousand pounds and dollars worth of produce through the Big M. We had a small, but devoted following, and for that we are enormously thankful. We still had the fall school cafeterias to feed.

However, lo and behold, kale isn't such a hit with 9th graders either. We did get salad, spinach, radishes, swiss chard, peppers, tomatoes, and yes, kale into the cafeteria, but when abundant fall rains flooded our fields, our growing season came to an end.

All is not lost. The students learned a great deal and the ball was set in motion to ensure that



Women from the Walton school cafeteria with the farm to school's first harvest of salad, spinach, radishes and japanese globe turnips.
Photo by Rebecca Morgan

high quality food gets to those with limited resources.

Kale, anyone?

For more information on the Walton Farm to School project, contact Rebecca Morgan at 607-865-8747 or rebamacmorg@hotmail.com. Rebecca Morgan is the Walton Farm to School Project Volunteer Coordinator located in Delaware County, NY.

NON DAIRY LIVESTOCK

Livestock Guardian Dogs

By Ulf Kintzel

It occurred on a spring morning in the mid 90s in New Jersey. I had lambing season. I drove out to my flock to the pasture I rented from the state. When I arrived I discovered a devastating scene. The flock was clearly disturbed. The field was littered with dead lambs. A couple of sheep were injured. I did not know what had happened at the time. I had not been long in the United States and was unfamiliar with natural predators for sheep. I investigated the lambs but could find no mark on them. It was a scene that can make a grown man cry. I spoke with a local trapper and showed him the scene. Without hesitation or doubt he told me that this was the work of a coyote. He had killed the lambs by grabbing them by their throats and suffocated them. The trapper found the track where the coyote had come in and set his trap. Since this individual coyote was starved, mangy, and desperate it took only one day to trap and kill it.

The question became what should I do moving forward? I had heard about the tremendous losses sheep farmers out West had suffered due to coyotes. Many of them had been put out of business because of these losses. I feared I might become one of them. Black Bears were also multiplying in New Jersey at that time. I felt I had to do something. I researched my options and it soon became clear to me that I would not settle for a donkey or a llama. I had used herding dogs for many years, I was very much a dog person, and it had to be a guard dog. But where should I begin searching for such a dog? What breed would suit me? I knew absolutely nothing about them.

In my search for answers I came across a government employee who was part of the guard dog field trial the USDA conducted in the 80s in Idaho and at a second location in Massachusetts. I wish I could recall his name to give him full credit for a comprehensive introduction to guardian dogs and the time he was willing to spend with me on the phone. A description of the field trial and research of farms and ranches that were already using guard dogs can be found at this website: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/companimals/guarddogs/guarddogs.htm>. The information on this website can also be found in a brochure called "Livestock Guardian Dogs: Protecting Sheep

from predators", United States Department of Agriculture, bulletin number 588. It is the most comprehensive and most accurate information that I have come across in a world full of misinformation about guardian dogs. Using guardian dogs is actually an ancient form of protecting livestock which has experienced a resurgence in the past few decades. The fact that many means of killing coyotes have become illegal as well as the growing numbers of coyotes have contributed to that.

Raising and training a guarding dog

After being weaned from its mom the guardian dog is raised with the sheep - or with whichever livestock it has to guard. That starts most commonly at the age of eight weeks. Just like our companion dogs view us humans as pack members, the guardian dog learns to see the livestock it will later protect as its pack. Raising the pup with the sheep must be done at a young age when this imprinting takes place; it cannot be successfully done with an adult dog. The ultimate goal is that the dog will seek the presence of the flock at all times, has no or little desire to leave it to go other places, and in fact only feels comfortable when being with the flock. When raising the pup with sheep it is advisable to do it while having little lambs to have "age-appropriate" companions for the young dog. It should also have a place where it can retreat, i.e. when being pushed around by protective sheep mothers.

The desire to guard is an instinctive behavior. Guarding dogs have usually very little prey drive and a strong innate desire to protect. It cannot be taught; if the instinct is not there the guardian dog will be useless. The training of a guardian dog is limited to stopping undesired behavior like playing too rough with sheep, chewing off docked tails that are about to fall off and the likes. The training methods are fairly simple. One just has to correct the dog when caught in the act and an appropriate command should be given simultaneously, i.e. "leave it" or "no". When the dog is straying too far from the flock just chase it back and shout "get back" at it - it should soon seek the comfort of the flock.

There are many more details about raising a guardian dog, what behavior to expect, why it is okay that the protector of the flock may eat an already dead sheep but not kill one. But it would go beyond the scope of this article to



This guardian dog is showing the appropriate instinct by placing himself between flock and intruder without leaving the sheep.
Photo by Ulf Kintzel

address them all. I would like to defer to the brochure about guardian dogs that I previously mentioned. Almost all the answers to your questions can be found there. When the dog reaches adulthood it should become an effective deterrent. Keep in mind that coyotes are opportunists and not brave hunters like wolves are. Between the electric fencing that I use and my current guard dog "Berthold", a four-year-old Great Pyrenees, I can sleep well at night, even when the coyotes are literally hauling in my backyard.

Misconceptions

The most common misunderstanding I run across is the desire to have a herding dog as well as a guardian dog in the same dog. That is impossible. Let's examine that. A guardian dog sees the sheep as its pack, its own kind so to speak. Herding is a form of hunting. The herding dog sees the sheep it herds as prey. Any serious herding dog would do all kinds of undesirable things to the sheep if not controlled and corrected by its owner. In short, a guarding and a herding dog show interest in the sheep for very different instinctive reasons. These reasons are mutually exclusive.

A true guardian dog is protecting the livestock and not its territory. That means it will protect the livestock wherever it is and not its familiar territory. That is especially important when the flock is not stationary, when it grazes at least temporarily away from the home farm. Protecting its own territory can at times look like the dog is protecting livestock. However, these dogs may fail to protect the sheep when they are on pasture that is not part of the dog's territory.

Using a guardian dog will reduce your predator losses but predator loss may not necessarily be zero. If you continue losing a sheep or lamb now and then it may not at all mean that your guardian dog failed. If the acreage is too large, too hilly, or too overgrown, a coyote may out-

smart your guarding dog at times. In fact, the guardian dog may have never known the coyote was there. Keep your pasture smaller in order to avoid it or use more than one guardian dog.

The most controversially discussed topic of raising a guardian dog is whether or not the dog can be part of the family as well as a true guardian dog. In other words, should the guardian dog be with and obey the farmer or should human interaction be avoided or at least limited? I am in the latter camp. While my guard dog may follow me around when I am in or near the flock and while he is certainly happy to see me, I cannot call or touch him. He will avoid me. I feed my dog in a little trailer that I can close up should I have a need to examine or treat the dog. A guardian dog that is too attached to the owner may want to leave the flock to be with the owner or his family. That is perhaps okay when you just have a few acres and a few sheep. The dog will be still near the sheep. However, that may become a problem when one farms several hundred acres and when the pasture is miles away from home. There is certainly a happy middle ground. After all, at times Humans need to be able to get a hold of the dog. But keep in mind what the dog's purpose is. It is to guard the livestock and not to be a companion dog for the farmer or the family.

Ulf Kintzel owns and manages White Clover Sheep Farm (www.whitecloversheepfarm.com) in Rushville, NY where he breeds grass-fed White Dorper sheep. He offers breeding stock and freezer lambs. He can be reached at 585-554-3313 or by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com.

Copyright 2010 Ulf Kintzel. For permission to use either text or photographs please contact the author at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com.