

# Harvest of hidden treasure

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(Second of two parts)

“You can’t starve on a farm, if you’ve got any guts at all,” 80-year-old Minnie Richardson of Leyden tells the camera in Bernardston filmmaker Rawn Fulton’s 1978 documentary, “Root Hog or Die.” The milk, butter, eggs, vegetables and meats on the tables of Franklin County farm families were all produced by their own labor, traditionally limiting what had to be purchased from the market.

That doesn’t necessarily mean that having plenty of farms around is a guarantee of good nutrition. But when we look around beyond the pure economics of farming in Franklin County — the nearly \$57 million in products sold, according to the most recent census data in 2007 — and beyond the obvious advantages of having a bumper crop of fresh agricultural products in the region, the potential for teaching young people and their parents about better nutrition is one advantage cited by some observers.

Along with demonstrating ways we can all move toward greater self-reliance and pointing to ways we’re fed by the natural environment, making a greater segment of the population more aware of locally grown farm products may translate into better health, the agricultural advocates agree, although the benefit is not entirely quantifiable.

At the West River Health Center in Orange, where Seeds of Solidarity has one of its “Grow Food Everywhere” community gardens planted for everyone to take advantage of, dieticians and nurse practitioners can show patients exactly where in the five gardens they can find the green, leafy vegetables that are recommended for them.

With the level of obesity in children and adolescents now at 17 percent — a threefold increase from the prevalence a generation ago, according to the Centers for Disease Control, Jay Lord of the Greenfield community agricultural organization Just Roots, says that having schoolchildren visit a farm, work in a garden or learn to cook vegetables they’ve had a hand in growing may be an important way to help them be better nourished in the future.

“We had second-graders from Four Corners School visit,” Lord says. “They started going through the garden and picking the kale. Here were kids who had the kale in their hands and 95 percent of them started eating it like a lollipop. They probably never would have touched it at

home, but they had picked it. How do you invest people in eating food that's healthy for them? A lot of it is a cultural change."

Whether that kind of experience will be enough to counteract the carefully crafted commercial messages that bombard us all the time and whether that will be enough to truly change eating habits remains to be seen. But Kelly Erwin, director of the Massachusetts Farm to School Partnership, says national research — including a Vermont study — shows that "exposing kids to food through going to a farm, having a school garden, cooking with whole foods in school, or having farmers visiting them, all had a long-term measurable impact, long term, on the amounts of fruits and vegetables they're eating per day. Any way they can have a tactile, sensory experience seems to have a lasting impact on their own feelings about what they eat and enjoy."

The Farm to School Network, which works with 60 to 80 Massachusetts school districts, colleges and other institutions each year has seen a sevenfold increase over six years in their purchase of food from local farms. The network also works closely with parents and families through cooking demonstrations and sending produce home along with recipes, "recognizing that kids in some ways are ambassadors to change the food situation at home."

### Quality of life

The most nebulous of all effects of the region's re-invigorated agricultural sector may be on quality of life.

"There's a real clear link," said Sidehill Farm's Paul Lacinski. "The open space largely attributable to a rural, agricultural lifestyle has a lot to do with people's quality of life."

While some of the new "back-to-the-land" movement is entrepreneurial, says Greenfield Community College Farm and Food Systems Program coordinator Abrah Dresdale, much of it is a reaction to the "fragmentation and isolation" in the national culture, as well as the industrialization that's dominated the food industry over the past half century.

"There's something about coming together with people who share common interests to recreate certain culture in the modern context that's nourishing for people," she says. "A more re-localized, self-sufficiency model, where people providing for their own food needs, and their neighbors', or at least people knowing the source of their food, contributes to a sense of self-sufficiency and confidence about our food supply. It's a piece of the social fabric and overall community trust. And there are all sorts of benefits from that."

In the Pioneer Valley, says Cris Coffin, New England director of American Farmland Trust, "I think people recognize there are multiple benefits of agriculture. People realize it's kind of a win-win-win supporting agriculture, because it's protecting the environment, providing a beautiful landscape, providing access to what everybody thinks is wonderful food, and it's having a positive net economic impact on the community."

Coffin, whose organization has done numerous “cost of services” studies showing that keeping farmland in production makes better financial sense for communities than developing that acreage into homes, adds, “I think people in this region could easily name five reasons why they think farming is so valuable. It’s kind of that layer-on-layer-on-layer of benefit that people understand.”

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