

San Francisco Chronicle

PENINSULA

Friday

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1998

FARMING IN THE '90S

CULTIVATING
COMMUNITY ROOTS



Photos by SAM DEANER / The Chronicle

David Blume digs into compost used for mulching crops on Our Farm, his organic farm in Woodside, where he practices permaculture, an agricultural style that works in harmony with the natural environment.

Woodside growers want to save family farm, heal the planet

Unless you knew exactly where to find it, the little farm northeast of Highway 280 in Woodside is easy to miss.

By Michael McCabe
CHRONICLE
STAFF WRITER

It only takes up three acres and most of it cascades down a steep slope, all but invisible from Jefferson Road.

The tomatoes, beans, corn, cukes, eggplant and torpedo onions — to mention a few of the star performers — all look perfectly ripe and juicy, begging to be tasted.

Modest and unassuming though it is, there are a couple

of big ideas underlying it all that may be on the verge of sprouting up in profusion well beyond Woodside. David Blume, one of the full-time farmers at this tiny plot called simply Our Farm, hopes these ideas will inspire the Future Farmers of America to take up shovel and pitchfork and follow his example.

"We want to save the family farm, pure and simple," Blume said as he darted up and down like a mountain goat from one row of vegetables to another. "At the same time we would like to heal the planet."

The way to do that, said Blume, 42, is through "community supported agriculture," or CSA, the first of the big ideas. CSAs harken back to farming styles practiced for hundreds of years in Europe and Japan. But in a nation dominated by conglomerate



Blume, left, teaches Lij Tafari, 23, to train cucumbers to climb a trellis. The trellis imitates the edge of a forest by replacing the natural shade of trees.

farming, it is relatively new here.

CSAs sell directly to fresh food addicts. In the case of Our Farm, customers pay a monthly fee upfront and then come to the farm to pick up their veggies, all of it organically grown. Or they head to prearranged spots in San Francisco and the East Bay

for their weekly boxes of produce, depending on what is in season. Over the year Our Farm grows at least 45 kinds of fruits and vegetables.

The other big idea, the underlying philosophy of Our Farm's CSA, is something called permaculture, a

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A bee pollinates a flower.

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Fertile Ground

FARMING IN THE '90S

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for Permaculture on Peninsula



Photos by SAM DRANER / The Chronicle

Nate Shortz hustles past corn after hauling compost down the terrace of David Blume's organic farm in Woodside. Below, farm worker Lij Tafari cools off in the shade.

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combination of the words permanent and agriculture. It aims to integrate plants, animals, landscapes, structures and humans into symbiotic systems where the products of one serve the needs of another.

A permaculture design, Blume said, teaches you to understand and mirror the patterns found in healthy natural environments. The idea is to work with — rather than against — nature to create permanent agriculture by incorporating sustainable living skills into daily life.

Take weeds, for example. In permaculture, weeds are not necessarily all bad. At Our Farm, Blume lets a few weeds coexist along with melons and corn to buy off the deer. Deer forage on what they know as part of the natural landscape, Blume said, and tend to ignore crops planted for humans. Some weeds attract good bugs that eat bad bugs. A few weeds are even tasty and nutritious.

Then there is the wonderful world of ponds. Ponds attract toads, which are wonderful farm workers, part of the night crew. Toads eat 160 types of bad bugs a night, Blume said with a broad grin, citing graduate-student studies. Ponds also attract dragonflies, which eat 300 mosquitoes a day. The water hyacinths in the pond provide compost. And on it goes.

"Everything here has to have several uses," Blume said. "The minute you sterilize the system (with herbicides and insecticides) you take up the responsibility for all the stuff that nature does for free. Everything in the garden should depend on two or three other things, and also be depended upon by two or three other things."

Natural and Practical

Permaculture may sound a bit utopian, but it is based on ruggedly practical and carefully worked-out procedures, sort of the next level up after organic gardening.

The word permaculture was made up by Bill Mollison, who lives in New Zealand. In the 1970s he co-wrote several books on the subject, and today there are hundreds of permaculture organizations like Blume's throughout the world. Blume, who majored in ecological biology at San Francisco State University, teaches a two-week course on the subject around the country. One is going on now in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Here is the way Our Farm works: As a CSA, it is a collaboration between consumers and farmers. Blume and his fellow part-time farmers raise produce for a limited number of consumers, or sharers, at a fixed price: regular shares cost \$24 a week; small shares are \$17 a week. The sharers receive the farm's produce, at or near the cost of production, Blume said, throughout the year.

"This is what we mean by trying to save the family farm," Blume said. "If you are trying to grow corn and are going up against a conglomerate like Cargill you won't be able to compete. You need to farm the old-fashioned way with diverse crops so you always have something to harvest, or close to harvest."

"Today farmers spend 50 percent of their time marketing their stuff. That doesn't leave much time for farming. At a CSA it is more like 80 percent farming to 20 percent marketing. As the old saying goes, the best fertilizer is the farmer's shadow."

The Bay Area already has at least 15 CSAs. Most are two hours or more away from consumers, Blume said, and many of them deliver their produce to farmers' markets.

The only other CSA project on the Peninsula, according to Blume, is Hidden Villa in Los Altos Hills, where Blume had been executive director. Hidden Villa has a waiting list for new consumers.

Our Farm, which Blume started in 1994, has 65 paying customers. That is expected to increase to 120 within the next two months.

"The extra crops are already in the ground and nearing harvest time," Blume said.

By eliminating all the middlemen, CSA farmers receive enough compensation to sustain production of food for the sharers, Blume said. He estimates that within the past decade, more than 2,000 CSAs have been developed around the country. Some estimates for the year 2005 envision more than 75,000 farms embracing this model in this country alone.

Current consumers are grateful they don't have to wait that long.

"For me the quality of this produce is standard now and I am almost disappointed when I see friends buying non-organic food, the quality and taste are so superior," said Isabel Bauer of Redwood City.

Bauer, who tries to visit Our Farm every Thursday to help out, usually with the harvesting, said she most appreciates the community aspect of the CSA.

"I really want them to stress more that this is community supported agriculture," she added. "I think this would enrich the relationship between the sharers and the farmers, and among the sharers as well."

Supporting Sustainable Agriculture

Another consumer, Sister Diane Everett, a Russian Old Orthodox nun in San Francisco, became a customer of Our Farm in large part to support sustainable agriculture.

"When I got my first batch of produce I opened the lid and there was this hand-written note describing all the produce and describing what they did at the farm during the past week," she said. "They had these cute pictures of some of the produce which they said attract good bugs. To look at them you would call them weeds. I think they call them healthy greens. They're delicious."

Our Farm holds regular tours for the public, schoolchildren and international groups. It is part of the International Institute for Ecological Agriculture, or IHEA. This nonprofit group is dedicated, Blume said, "to healing the planet, while providing the human community with research, education, and the implementation of socially just, ecologically sound agriculture." Blume is presi-

dent of the IHEA.

"What we do with community-supported agriculture is unique because you take the risk along with us, the farmers," Blume said. "If we get devastated by weather, for example, you have a chance of losing some money. But in reality CSAs are the most stable farms because we grow such a large variety. Weather conditions will always favor one crop over another. This year we got a third crop of broccoli coming in. This is real farming, and it's right here in the Bay Area."

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on community-supported agriculture and Our Farm, call (650) 365-2993, fax to (650) 366-2241, or e-mail David Blume at dblume@permaculture-institute.org. Our Farm is located at 834 W. California Way, Woodside, CA 94062.



Tafari walks up the south hill on Our Farm, where plants and crops are integrated to form symbiotic relationships.