

WVU Health Research Center
Julie Pratt Interview with Bob and Lynnita Gregory, Summer 2012
Excerpts for use in Change the Future WV materials and events

Approved by Bob Gregory, 8-20-12

[Gregories.2.mp3 00:48:06]

Bob Gregory: BG LG: Lynnita Gregory

About Berea Gardens and owners Bob and Lynnita Gregory

BG: When we first came to West Virginia to search for place to farm, we settled here in part because we noticed so many gardens in the area, and we realized, although the economic situation is difficult for most folks, there's still a sense of self-reliance and a connection to the soil that you don't find in other parts of the country. That truly appealed to me.

We do a lot of work with the University Extension Service people. This year Berea Gardens was named as an Innovative Sustainable Grower in West Virginia, which was a blessing for us. I received a scholarship to go to the Small Farm Conference where I was able to network with a lot of other people that have similar values and are moving the food industry here in West Virginia in a similar direction.

LG: Bob and I were married in 2002. We met in early Spring that year. I was a nurse, he an agronomist. There was commonality in terms of understanding, but from totally different viewpoints, about where we stood in terms of health and well being and the potential to do work together that would promote prevention and life rather than disease and spiraling downward.

The importance of healthy food and good nutrition

BG: When we see all the problems that we're faced with in society today, my personal opinion is that most of those can be mitigated by a good quality diet, by participating in some way in the production of the food that you're eating, even if it's just a few tomato plants in a couple of containers on your patio. I'm not one that believes everybody is called to be a full-time farmer, but I think that all of us need that connection with nature and with God's creation to really have a full balance in our lives.

There are study after study after study that has indicated the importance of diet in not only children's behavior, but also their long term health. The CDC is saying that one in three children born after the year 2000 is going to develop diabetes before adulthood. Why is that? Well, it's because of what we're eating. I believe the greatest health challenge we have in this country today is obesity. It leads to diabetes, heart disease and all kinds of other issues.

I think a lot of us are thinking a little too narrowly about the cause of obesity. We place a lot of the blame for obesity on the person themselves, for lack of self control or poor choices about their diet. But the reality from my experience in agriculture over these many years is that we're producing foods today that don't have nutrition in them.

I know from personal experience that when my body is craving a specific nutrient because I've eaten out of the garden for many years. If I need some Vitamin A, I start to crave greens, and as soon as I have a serving or two of that, I'm satiated.

But, if we're eating foods from the industrial model exclusively, our bodies are in a constant state of craving. So, if we can increase the quality of food that people are eating, we're going to find that the obesity issue starts to dissipate, too. If I eat a nutrient-dense meal and my body is fully satisfied, I'm not going to be reaching for that soda or craving those chips. That's one of the greatest contributions that small-scale agriculture can make to the health of America today – simply by providing a higher nutrient value food due to the fact that it's fully ripened and fresh.

One of the consequences of the globalized food production system is that we're transporting things halfway around the planet before they get to our plates. In order to do that, we're breeding produce for transport more than for its nutritional value. We're producing varieties of broccoli that can sustain a journey halfway around the world and last for six to eight weeks in cold storage. That broccoli is often harvested far before its peak of ripeness and many of the nutritional elements in food are not formed until that point of ripeness. The local food system has an advantage because we harvest the day before we go to farmer's market. People are getting ripe produce, has an advantage nutritionally over anything you can buy in the larger commercial market.

LG: Most people don't understand that connection between the soil and our human bodies and how similar the soil chemistry is to our chemistry. Our soils are depleted of magnesium. Guess what I saw in nursing? Everybody is depleted in magnesium. Why? Because they're not getting it in the food they eat. It all started to make sense from a prevention perspective, this is beautiful work. From a personal connection, you go to bed at night and you feel like whatever happens tomorrow, I'm just going to do what's right and let God take care of the rest. It sounds kind of trite, but when you're out there turning back to the soil and you're pulling a whole dinner out of the ground, it gives you a sense of richness that goes far beyond a big paycheck, and you want to share it.

BG: I have a tremendous sense of urgency about this. I worked for many years working as an agronomist in large-scale industrial agriculture, and I understand how precarious that system is. It's been a blessing to watch the interest in this local food movement grow over the last decade or so, and it's really starting to gain traction now. But, I see at the same time, the consequences to health because we haven't moved as quickly in this area as we needed to, our rapidly reaching a point where we as a society are going to be too unhealthy to make a major shift like that. So, I see a real sense of urgency as far as educating people about the value of eating fresh. Older people remember that and appreciate that, but where our real challenge lies today is with young people.

Food production and distribution systems

BG: The Calhoun County Farmer's Market in Chloe began about seven years ago. Because of the dedication of the vendors there - they were steady and they were there week after week after week – the market gradually developed had some vitality. Tom McColley and Loretta Sanger were two of the original vendors. It's their commitment to it that's really made it work.

We studied that market before we entered it two years ago to find out what we could bring that wasn't already there so we could expand the diversity in the market. That's really one of the keys to making a farmer's market work. With people so accustomed to one-stop shopping, it's nice if they can rely on the fact that if they come to a farmer's market, there's going to be something there that they want and can use.

The market up in Grantsville started last year with some funding through Change the Future WV. Janet Heiney, the County Coordinator, was instrumental in organizing the market.

Only a small fraction of people participate in agriculture anymore. Today, less than 1% of the population is responsible for producing all the food in this country. That's a little bit scary, because not only are the skill sets in producing food rapidly disappearing - it only takes one generation to lose a skill set like that - the educational system that's intended to replace that is producing specialists rather than well-rounded farmers. We have entomologists and soil scientists and specialists of all kinds, but the reality is that the skill set which includes both the science and the art of growing quality food is rapidly being lost.

Also, with less than 1% of the population is producing the food, it means that the power and the control over the production of that food is held by a very small group of people. Because of that, the choices that we have about what is in our diet and what products we have available to us are dictated more by market forces than they are by the reality of what's good for us. Part of what we see happening with the local food movement is that the public in general is beginning to awaken to this issue, and we want to be there in a capacity to support those decisions and those changes as positively as possible.

We've got some unique challenges in West Virginia. The geography makes a small market farm operation like we have pretty difficult because of the distances that we have to travel, the sparseness of the population, and that, even for our organic produce, we cannot command a premium price in this region. It simply isn't affordable for the people that we want to get the food to.

We're working in part with Change the Future to try to develop a means of attracting some of the growers and begin to aggregate some of our efforts and find some regional distribution pathways. If I'm good at producing a specific crop and my neighbor down the road is good at producing a different crop, we can aggregate those products to get them into the public's hands in more accessible ways. The farmer's markets are a wonderful thing, but not everybody who wants to buy the produce can come out during the limited hours that farmers' markets are open.

A challenge for growers is that production and marketing are really two separate activities. When you take time away from the farm to do the marketing, the farm is always going to suffer, particularly this time of year when we have so much pressure from variations in weather and weeds and insect problems. This is one of the reasons why we want to organize the growers in such a way that some of the burden of marketing can be relieved from the growers. If we can aggregate our produce and develop methods of distribution so that it doesn't require so much time for the grower, that would be a tremendous advantage.

We're working with Change the Future WV and the Extension Service on distributing a survey on a wide basis to find out, "Okay, if we want to produce local food and we want people to consume local food, who are the producers? Who has an interest in doing this? What kind of production capacity do we have?" At the same time, we need to educate those producers in standards of production and in issues of food safety that are very much on the government's mind right now, how to produce things that will comply with the new Food Safety Modernization Act. Also, how to produce things consistently so that consumers can rely on us as a source of quality production.

I believe that if that if a good distribution system was in place, that you'd find growers coming out of the woodwork in all of the little hollers all around here who would want to take advantage of that. I saw this work very clearly when I was over in Virginia. We had a small college, but we had a large campus. We had about 800 acres and we cultivated crops on about 300 acres of that, and about five acres was dedicated to very intensive, organic produce production.

We became associated with a man in Charlottesville that started operating a CSA, which is community-supported agriculture program, where people buy a share or subscription to a produce service that delivers produce to them on a weekly basis. This man had some great insight because there were quite a few Mennonite farmers over in the Shenandoah Valley and he knew of some other growers, so he coordinated with all of us to grow different things at different times of the year. He took the burden of marketing off of us because at that point, we were no longer retailers. We were wholesaling to him. When he purchased from us, he purchased large quantities to fill all his CSA boxes. His CSA has now grown to about 5,000 members.

The support that he has been to the agriculture community has been tremendous, because instead of me trying to grow 57 different things during the course of the year to keep some variety in that box, I can now concentrate on the two or three things that I do well. It makes the whole system far more efficient. That's my real desire here, is to see someone with the marketing ability, somebody with the business savvy to put something like that together so that the grower can do what growers like to do, and that's grow stuff.

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Related reference:

The Hur Herald, 3/22/12

http://www.hurherald.com/cgi-bin/db_scripts/articles?Action=user_view&db=hurheral_articles&id=47612

CALHOUN'S BERA GARDENS EARNS WV INNOVATIVE SUSTAINABLE PRODUCER RECOGNITION

Bob and Lynnita Gregory of Berea Gardens Agricultural Center in Orma, WV were one of four recipients of the 2012 Innovative Sustainable Producers in West Virginia Award sponsored by West Virginia Sustainable Agriculture Research Education (SARE) at the 2012 West Virginia University Extension Service's Small Farm Conference in Morgantown earlier this month.

This recognition celebrates the professional, innovative and sustainable approach of West Virginia farmers, showcasing their passion and raising the profile of the important role they play in West Virginia.

The recognition is designed to promote a positive image of West Virginia farmers and inspire and encourage career choices and investment in West Virginia agriculture.

"Bob and Lynnita Gregory deserve to be recognized as role models for other farmers across the state," says local WVU Extension Agent, Brandy Brabham.

Brabham nominated the Gregorys because she believes that they fit the criteria for using a whole-farm systems approach that enhances, rather than harms, natural resources.

While new to the area, the Gregorys have experienced success in making sustainable farming systems economically viable over the long term. They also lead and participate in several activities that support the community. They are committed to both the Calhoun County Farmers Market and the Grantsville Farmers Market.

They have been involved in the Calhoun County Health Coalition as part of the Change the Future West Virginia Initiative and lead several agricultural courses at their facilities on Milo Road.

They have also engaged the community by hosting workshops and partnering with local agencies to promote the importance of locally grown food and even explore the development of a produce growers group in the Mid-Ohio Valley Region.

Their farm is a diversified vegetable, fruit, and staple crop operation geared toward providing food self-sufficiency and also allowing for sufficient production to meet our economic needs through marketing to the community.

They currently use 4 of our 120 acres for intensive food production using a combination of high tunnels, low tunnels, raised beds and field culture systems.

They are in the process of planting and propagating a number of fruit tree varieties, as well as small fruits, mostly berries & grapes, with the intention of establishing an additional 4 acres of fruit crops.

To learn more about Berea Gardens and the Gregory's work, check their website at bereagardens.org

To learn more about WV SARE's educational resources and grants through the Northeast SARE region go to nesare.org