

Fresh from the Farm? Support a Local Urban Farm in Evanston

A Guest Essay By Debbie Hillman

May I suggest an inexpensive but enjoyable activity? Prepare yourself a tasty dinner (my favorite recently is a local restaurant's grilled vegetable pesto sandwich), and sit down with the following questions:

What does it take to live?

What does it mean to live well?

Finally, what does it mean to live well in a particular place, say, Evanston?

The first question has some obvious answers. In order to stay alive for any meaningful time, we need air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat. Those three are the most basic necessities of life. And to live well, we need to trust that these three vital elements of life are as fresh and wholesome as they can be. But to even begin to know and improve the quality of our air, our water and our food, we need to know where they come from.

Living in this particular place called Evanston, we breathe Evanston air, delivered free by the prevailing westerly winds, sometimes freshened by a northeastern storm, sometimes carrying a load of ozone from the southwest.

Living on one of the biggest lakes in the world, we drink Evanston water, also free. Water treatment is a different issue, and sales of bottled water suggest that Lake Michigan water is not of the quality people would wish. It is there, however, right at our doorstep.

And for food, we eat - Evanston food? Unless you know and like edible weeds, or are one of the few Evanstonians growing edible plants, it is not likely that you are eating food from Evanston land. In fact, land in Evanston is known as real estate, not as a natural resource.

It is not even likely that your food comes from anywhere near Illinois. With some of the richest soils, the Midwest now grows only about 3 percent of our food. Despite vast Illinois farmland (planted primarily to corn and soybeans, sold as animal feed or processed into a myriad of refined foods), our food travels 1,500 miles on average, from California, Florida, Mexico, etc. Indeed, most of us have no idea who produces the food we eat, nor do we have any way of being sure of its freshness, wholesomeness or quality.

Evanston Food Policy Council is asking the same questions being asked by communities around the country: Why can't we grow food closer to home? What does the freshest food taste like? Would our food supply be more nutritious and more reliable if it didn't travel long distances? Would fresh, nutritious food be more affordable without the inputs of gasoline, refrigeration, packaging? Can we know who grows our food and if they do so without harmful chemicals or petroleum products, and without damage to our diverse ecosystem?

And, like many other communities, we are dreaming about an easy and obvious answer: Grow and sell organic food in Evanston.

Right now, our vision is only that - an idea. But two or three acres of land can grow a lot of fresh food that can be sold directly to the public. Hoop houses can extend production to four seasons. As a community center with a kitchen and a classroom, the farm can be a year-round gathering place to celebrate food and culture. Its job-training program can teach a variety of marketable skills. Growing food within the City limits keeps our food dollars here.

For many Evanston residents, good food and health have long been an important personal concern. Evanston has a history of demanding healthy foods, including one of the oldest farmers markets in the area and some of the earliest retail outlets in the "natural foods" movement. Food and health are taking on importance in policy making globally. Independent people everywhere are realizing, on the one hand, how intimately health is tied to food, and on the other, how many of our food choices are controlled by faceless corporations.

Our group is seeking broad community support - partnerships with other community groups and government bodies, as well as with enthusiastic individuals to make this idea a reality. All manner of expertise and commitment will be needed in order to regain control of one of life's necessities and pleasures. Come salivate with us about creating something beautiful and basic: an Evanston Farm and Food Center.

For more information, contact Evanston Food Policy Council at 847/328-7175 or log onto Network for Evanston's Future website, <http://evanstonfuture.org>.

On Sept. 12 the Evanston Food Policy Council is hosting a community support meeting to share our vision of an Evanston urban farm. The meeting, from 6 to 9 p.m., will be at Dawes School and will showcase food that is growing in Evanston soil in the Dawes Edible Garden Project. After a garden tour, a panel of urban agriculture experts will share experiences on the vast benefits of growing food locally, along with practical advice on funding, implementation and operations.