

How Much Food Can One Acre of Land Produce in Piedmont NC

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We have a lot of experience with Small-scale intensive Gardening.

At Sustenance Farm we had between 1 1/2 acres and 2 acres of raised bed gardens, depending on the year of production and how many interns we had in a given year. Overseeing the garden was my primary paid work for 8 years. During that time I also homeschooled our three children with Nancy, was the at home caretaker for the children along with Nancy, started the Sustainable Farming Program at Central Carolina Community College and taught a lot of the original classes in the program, organized and got the Sanford Farmer's Market going, served in different capacities with Carolina Farm Stewardship Association being the Fundraising Committee Chairperson for many years, wrote radio scripts for distribution through the Farm Radio Network, and did many other activities around Sustainable Agriculture. In that time we trained over 50 interns, who lived with us from one month to three years. We had interns from Great Britain, Germany, Chad, Ghana, Laos, Panama, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Lesotho, and many parts of the United States. Those interns have gone on to do many things--write books, start community gardens, work for the United Nations to solve food shortage problems around the world, raise children, teach others, start faith communities, grow their own food, etc.

Based on our experience doing a commercial market garden at Sustenance Farm on permanent raised beds we have the following production numbers.

--10,000 to 12,000 lbs. of vegetables and herbs per acre

--We used only simple hand tools in the gardens (wheelbarrow, shovel, rake, hoe, etc.) based on our experience in Africa where the main resource

people had was their labor not money for machinery.

--On permanent raised bed gardens we felt like one person working an average of 40 hours per week per year (maybe 50 hrs per week in the busy times and

30 hours a week in the winter) could maintain, plant, weed, mulch, and harvest approximately 2/3 an acre of garden once the initial beds were built

--We used systems that made the garden maintain its own fertility and minimized the need for additional inputs (raised beds on the contour for water catchment, high organic matter, lots of mulch, nutrient recycling, dry land chinampas methods, feed the soil rather than feed the plant mentality, beneficial insect encouragement, eat the weeds also if they were edible, green manures, ponds next to the gardens, animals integrated with the gardens, creative ways to control pests, etc.)

We supplied vegetables and Herbs to the following places:

--a 40 member CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) cooperative where folks got a paper grocery bag of vegetables and herbs every week for 30 weeks.

We grew over 50 different vegetables as part of the CSA.

--two farmers markets weekly for 30 weeks

--Wholesale greens, herbs, and hot peppers to Whole Foods Market, Weaver Street Market, and some restaurants.

Learnings.

1) It is doable, but still a lot of work

2) As a source of income, one can make a living being a Small-scale farmer, but it is still a lot of work for the pay.

3) The market is constantly changing, and the market gives higher financial rewards to growing specialty crops over staple food crops

Learnings that may be valuable for Living Well Community:

1) Farming/Gardening is more fun when done with others. Traditionally Farming/Gardening was always done in the context of community

2) Eating in season is a lifestyle. Growing your own food is also a lifestyle choice and has lifestyle implications

3) We have three growing seasons here: spring, summer, and fall. Also we can overwinter onions, carrots, and some greens. Overwintering can

be further extended with hoop houses, greenhouses, and other season extension alternatives.

4) Additional parts of vegetable plants are edible than the ones we normally eat (e.g. bean leaves, squash leaves, garlic tops, green stems, growing tips of sweet potatoes, pea shoots, flowers of many vegetables and herbs, etc.)

5) Wildharvesting is something worth attention. Over the years we have started wild harvesting more foods. Common items we wild harvest are chickweed, other greens, lambs quarters, amaranth, persimmons, hickory nuts, walnuts, mushrooms, sorrel, blackberries, redbud flowers and pods, black locust flowers, poke, Elderberry, trifoliolate orange, saffron, etc.

6) Eating in season might mean we change our diet more to what grows well here rather than what we like the most or have most traditionally eaten. For example, what grows here well in the summer (our hardest season to grow things in in my opinion) are traditional southern foods like corn, black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, okra, etc.

7) The permaculture principle of figuring out a way to let the garden take care of itself seems worth more attention.

8) Low maintenance crops seem important

9) Shared fun with the garden, and harvest celebrations are important.

10) Sustainable sources of nutrient regeneration is helpful.