



# the wisconsin foodshed

## Gardening at the Walworth County Jail

*Kitchen manager Steve Sylvester reflects on his experiences*

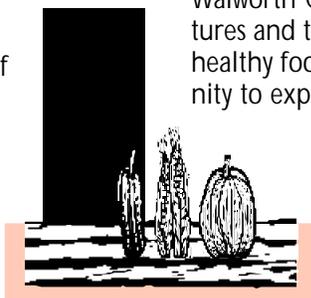
**H**ave you ever gone to work expecting to get a load of manure dumped on you? That can either be the start of a really bad week . . . or the beginning of a wonderful new kitchen experience.

In 1997, the Walworth County Jail experimented with growing some of its own food to be served in the facility's dining hall. As kitchen manager at the prison, I learned a lot from this project. The act of planting and watering our vegetable garden and letting nature take over, supervising the garden from ground-breaking to weighing the harvest, was extraordinary. Thanks to the efforts of the staff at the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI) in East Troy, Wisconsin, the kitchen staff was able to accomplish these tasks and still run the kitchen on schedule.

In addition to tending the garden, the trained cooking staff (including four people and myself) feeds 300 inmates three meals a day. We tend to special diets for people with diabetes, food allergies, religious restrictions, and for those under a doctor's care, and also run the employee cafeteria and handle the commissary needs for another inmate facility. Our fully equipped kitchen runs 12 hours a day, seven days a week. In our bakery, we make all our own cakes, cookies, bread, and buns in order to keep in line with our strict budget constraints.

With milk and juice included, we are allowed 78 cents per inmate meal. With that kind of budget, we are always looking for ways to cut costs and still follow mandatory dietary guidelines. Our menus are checked by a certified dietitian and reviewed by a national accreditation board. The use of fresh, organically grown produce helped us meet these high standards.

Because of the garden, we not only increased portion sizes, but also offered a variety of foods that were previously too costly to serve. With the continued



support of MFAI, we plan to increase the size of the garden by about 50 percent. We also plan to rehabilitate an old county-owned apple orchard. These are large undertakings, but well worth the effort. Walworth County benefits from lower prison expenditures and the inmates are exposed to a variety of healthy foods they may never have had the opportunity to experience. The inmates can use the gardening skills they learn after they are released. In addition, inmates working in the kitchen will be able to earn college credits from a local technical college.

MFAI staff and volunteers helped create the garden with the assistance of ten untrained but willing inmates. With shovels, string, manure, and elbows flying, together we planted twenty 50-foot-by-50-inch raised beds in one day. Months prior to this I had worked with MFAI to plan and map the garden based on our needs and resources at the prison.

The garden was directly in front of the administration offices of the sheriff's department, so it needed to be attractive as well as functional. Flowers bordered the garden and a large walkway was created down the middle with straw, creating a nice overall effect. Weeding the garden was an undertaking that proved at times to be more than our inmates could handle. The garden was to be organic—we wanted to provide healthy food to the inmates—so we did not use any pesticides. And since lawsuits come easily to county jails, we wanted to make sure our produce was wholesome and free of any synthetic pesticides.

With a desperate plea to MFAI one day, I explained that we had lost our radishes under a sea of weeds and were ready to take a mower to just chop them all down. The next day MFAI staff showed up with a crew

*continued on back page*

### Total harvest, Walworth Co. Jail garden

Zucchini	400 lbs.	Onions	125 lbs.
Lettuce	45 lbs.	Green peppers	75 lbs.
Radishes	25 lbs.	Cucumbers	190 lbs.
Cauliflower	27 heads	Carrots	280 lbs.
Cabbage	165 lbs.	Green beans	330 lbs.
Tomatoes	790 lbs.	Sweet corn	12,096 ears

# From Field to Table

research on the food system

## Lessons from local, organic meal at UW

The University of Wisconsin-Madison dining halls served an organic, "home-grown Wisconsin" meal on October 23, 1997 (featured in *the wisconsin foodshed*, volume 1, issue 3), using local, organic vegetables, apples, dairy products, and meat in addition to organic foods purchased through a national wholesaler. The dinner included roast tenderloin, grilled potato wedges and onions, vegetable stew, cheeseburgers, buttered beets, winter squash, pasta and pasta sauce, and cheesecake. Since the meal, we at CIAS have taken the opportunity to see what we've learned from this meal. CIAS is examining opportunities for and barriers to the increased use of local, sustainably raised foods at institutions like the UW.

The vegetables were purchased from Home Grown Wisconsin (HGW), a marketing cooperative made up of small-scale growers. The dairy and meat products were from the Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool (CROPP), which markets under the name "Organic Valley." All in all, the UW-Madison Food Service spent \$5,844.80 on organic products. Over 60 percent of this money (\$3,559.58) was spent on foods from Wisconsin farmers: \$852.10 for vegetables and apples, \$849.18 for dairy products, and \$1,858.30 for the hamburger and tenderloin.

UW-Madison Food Service administrators were very pleased with the quality of the food and the outcome of the meal. "Student comments were favorable," reports Bob Fessenden, associate director of housing. "More importantly, there were no negative comments and that is always pleasantly surprising when you change something or introduce something new to college students."

The prices for the food were, in most cases, higher than normal. Driving up costs for the vegetables was the labor needed for preparation. "The UW-Madison usually buys vegetables pre-processed, but for this meal the carrots, beets, and potatoes all had to be washed, peeled, and cut. A kitchen labor shortage made this a major undertaking for the UW Food Service," said Fessenden. In the future, farmers or another local business could perform value-added processing to make the vegetables ready for institutional sale.

Some items, such as the meats and some dairy products, had competitive prices and may become a regular part of what the dining halls serve. The UW-Madison plans to repeat this "home grown" organic meal in the future, although there are challenges on both the production and consumption sides.

On the production side are supply issues relating to local farmers' ability to deliver the volume and uniform quality the UW Food Service requires. Cooperatives like HGW,

CROPP, and Chequamegon Farms (see article on facing page) help meet this demand and give Wisconsin an advantage over states where farmers are less organized and acting independently. But even with these marketing systems in place, obstacles remain. With a state-mandated open bidding process, most UW purchases go through large distributors. Only a limited number of special purchases—such as those for the meal last October—can be made outside these contracts.

On the consumption side of the system, the main issues are education and changing habits. Both food service personnel and their customers—the students—are used to "food as usual." To create a market for local farm products, students will need to eat a few less pizzas and soft drinks and more entrées that feature seasonal produce—such as the winter squash last October.

Liability is another challenge for UW Food Service. Feeding several thousand students is a tremendous responsibility—made ever more demanding with each new food safety scare. In fact, it is UW policy to buy only U.S.-grown produce given concerns about pesticide residues and contamination of imported produce. Produce purchased directly from local farms often carries the stigma of being unsafe. Every vendor, farm, or co-op selling to the UW must carry \$1 million in liability insurance.

Even large institutions can overcome production, consumption, and liability challenges to incorporate locally produced organic food into their menus. But it takes a concerted effort on the part of food service officials and outspoken support on the part of eaters.

—contributed by John Hendrickson



**the wisconsin foodshed**

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CIAS, 1450 Linden Dr., Rm. 146, UW-Madison, Madison, WI 53706. **Phone:** (608) 262-5200 **Fax:** (608) 265-3020  
**Internet:** [jhendric@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:jhendric@facstaff.wisc.edu) **Web:** <http://www.wisc.edu/cias>

# Whats for Lunch?

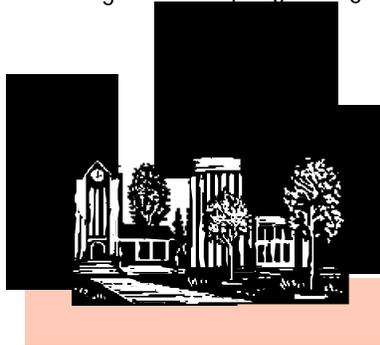
*news about the food system*

## Going local in northern Wisconsin

Sometimes the smallest interventions can have lasting impacts on institutional food buying. In 1995, four students in an environmental studies course at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin, decided to take a close look at the food they were eating in their college cafeteria. The students researched the geographic origins of various entrées and soon discovered that the farms producing their food were far from Wisconsin. This prompted them to contact local farms to try to find closer sources for some foods.

The students' initial goals were to help the college and environment by reducing energy and other costs in transporting food. A few calls led the students to Ken Raspotnik of Chequamegon Farms, a group of northern Wisconsin organic growers selling their produce cooperatively. After discovering this group of organic growers in their midst—Raspotnik's farm was only eight miles away—the students decided to encourage the college to buy local *and* organic food.

As a result of these students' efforts, today Northland College regularly purchases potatoes, squash, apples, applesauce, and onions from Chequamegon and other local farms. Apples and applesauce from Bayfield, Wisconsin, have proven to be very popular with students. The cost-saving goal was not realized because the available organic food was more expensive. For example, local, organic potatoes are 60 cents per pound compared to 19



cents per pound for potatoes from Idaho. So Northland adjusted the students' purchase price to cover the cost increase.

The college has also purchased local eggs, bakery and dairy products, and carrots. Unfortunately, both the bakery and egg producer went out of business, and the dairy did not want to deal with bulk bags. Jeff Spangenberg, Food Service Director, would like to

find replacements for these local businesses and products, a sentiment reinforced by many students. "Another local bakery would be welcome; having bread baked fresh daily was a real winner with the students," says Spangenberg.

New forms of cooperation are also being developed. The college purchased carrots from the Chequamegon growers, but the roots were bitter and usable only in soups, stews, and casseroles, forcing Spangenberg to switch to carrots from southern Wisconsin. Wanting to support local farms, however, Spangenberg urged the growers to try another variety of carrot. Although he is aware that local soils and climate affect flavor, Spangenberg is willing to try this new planting from local farmers first. Now, Spangenberg meets with area farmers each spring to discuss what will be planted for the college that year.

The initial efforts of four concerned students have paid off. Not only does Northland realize environmental benefits from its new food-buying approach, but the local economy also gets a boost.

*—contributed by Douglas Johnson*

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## Food power: central city program teaches food growing and life skills

Gardening can provide young people with opportunities to develop the positive self-esteem that comes from hard work and seeing projects completed. Farm City Link has been providing such opportunities in the Milwaukee area since 1995. Farm City Link is a non-profit group dedicated to the positive growth and development of low-income central city youth.

Farm City Link works to enhance young people's life skills, vocational opportunities, and civic responsibility through its organic agriculture education and experience programs. Horticultural and agricultural instruction is provided to young people through various public schools and community organizations.

In 1996-97, over 200 young people, ages 8 to 18, grew vegetables and flowers in four 30-by-100-foot greenhouses, in city gardens, and on nearby farm

land. One group planted five acres of organic vegetables and sold the produce at the River West Organic Farmers Market, where they learned about customer service, marketing, and banking. Participants donated 25 percent of the produce to meal programs and emergency food pantries.

Farm City Link's current priority is to renovate its greenhouses, allowing the program to involve more community organizations and youth. In the future, they will add food processing as a value-added component to extend the effectiveness of the program. With processed products come both entrepreneurial opportunities and a greatly expanded set of learnable skills for program participants.

Program organizers stress the importance of teaching young people the value of land stewardship while helping communities become more self-sufficient and promoting long-term food security in the Milwaukee area.

*—contributed by Will Allen, FCL Director and farmer*

## Walworth County *from page one*

of students eager to attack the weed patch. They found our lost radishes and gave us the morale boost we needed to finish the task. We never again let our garden get out of control.

I had always assumed that harvesting the vegetables would be the fun part and certainly not as time consuming as weeding. But picking produce is only one step in the process. The produce must also be inspected, transported, weighed, cleaned, and stored. Once again, we had to call on the experts at

### Table Settings

*Changes in the Wisconsin food system*

- g** Certified organic growers  
(through the Organic Crop Improvement Assoc.)  
1988 13  
1998 370
- g** Vegetable processors  
1949 117 companies owned 159 canneries  
1996 17 companies owned 43 processing plants
- g** Farmers markets  
1981 51 markets in 35 cities  
1994 112 markets in 86 cities
- g** Cheese plants  
1922 2,800  
1998 140

Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems  
1450 Linden Dr., Rm 146  
Madison, WI 53706

MFAI for advice. Picking, husking, blanching, and cutting the corn off 2,000 ears of corn in one day was a new experience to a kitchen staff that previously only had to open a can or go to the freezer for vegetables.

Was it worth it? From planting and weeding to harvesting, cleaning, preparation, and service, everyone seemed to take pride in the garden. Like any other project that is time consuming, there were times that we were ready to give it all up. But when we look at the amount of food we produced, its nutritional value, and the freshness of the salads, the garden brought tremendous benefits to everyone . . . even those who did not help.

*—contributed by Steve Sylvester*

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### What is a foodshed?

This term, borrowed from the concept of a watershed, was coined as early as 1929 to describe the flow of food from an area of supply into a given locality. Recently, the term has been revived as a way of looking at food systems and as a label for local, sustainable food systems.

The exact shape, components, food and resource flows, and interrelationships of foodsheds are complex issues that warrant serious discussion. We invite your ideas and comments.

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