

## Building community through global farm visits.

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The middle of the summer always seems to bring us to our breaking point. Somewhere between the triple digit heat and the 16-hour workdays, we find ourselves longing for a change of pace, and place. Last July, while sorting through box upon box of heirloom tomatoes, we decided that we needed a vacation! The idea of winding up the season in the fall and hitting the road made the rest of the summer fly by.

In trying to figure out where to go, we had several inspirations that made the trip financially feasible. We wanted to make the journey a marriage of pleasure and learning. A friend working for the United Nations in Rome and a grandmother staying with her sister in Israel made a visit to the Middle East by way of Italy seem a likely choice. Eventually, we settled on stopping in Lebanon first, followed by Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Italy.

We have been farming for three seasons, but our backgrounds are in international agricultural development. We used our experiences interning with small-scale farm institutes to help us locate like-minded individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that we could call on. The internet was a terrific resource. Searching for organizations with an emphasis on sustainable agriculture, we discovered that it was easy to locate contact information and to make preparations for a visit. We arranged to meet with farmers and community groups in each country before leaving. Scheduling our plans in advance took an upfront investment of time and energy during our busy part of the year, but is also guaranteed us an appointment with the places we most wished to visit.

With summer coming to a close, we began to look forward to our trip with great anticipation. As growers, we are generally focused on the local nature of our day-to-day operations. It can be easy to forget that we all belong to an international community of farmers. Visiting with farmers in other parts of the world reminds us that despite cultural and geographic distances, we share common challenges and rewards. Although our climatic, cropping, and marketing conditions may vary, there are universal ties that connected us as market growers. We learned this lesson in each place we visited, as we exchanged farming tips, variety preferences, and marketing strategies. The emotional satisfaction we gained was equally matched by the pragmatic tools and techniques we acquired.

Our first stop was Lebanon. There we met with an organization called MECTAT, Middle East Center for the Transfer of Appropriate Technology, and took a field trip to several rural villages in the southern part of the country to observe home garden demonstrations of grey-water harvesting. MECTAT employs community leaders to design and implement irrigation systems using recycled kitchen and laundry waste water for home garden tree crops. In this dryland region, water conservation takes on a special significance during the summer months when rainfall is scarce or non-existent. The project was geared towards women since they are typically in charge of home garden production. It taught them how to safely utilize their waste water to increase fruit and nut yields by turning a liability into an asset.

Simple technology is used to deliver the irrigation water from the home to the fields. Water flows from pipes in the kitchen sink outside to a series of three plastic holding tanks. Here suspended particles settle and are digested. The

water passes through a filter before being discharged into the t-tape. Households must be careful about the types of cleaning solutions they use to avoid salt build-up in the soil. The women with whom we spoke were all satisfied with the yield increases they observed in their peaches, figs, apples, almonds, persimmons, grapes, and other fruit crops. Even though we have considered experimenting with gray water harvesting ourselves, seeing it action gave us the inspiration we needed to jumpstart our own design. Variations on this system have great potential for waste water from the packing shed and post-harvest cleaning.

Our next visit was to a watermelon/cucumber farm outside of Aleppo, Syria. Here we met Mahmoud whose father manages their farm for supplemental income. As we were taking a tour of the fields and sharing ideas on production methods, we noticed that they use t-tape for their irrigation system. They explained that rapidly sinking water tables due to unsustainable water harvesting for crops like cotton have heightened the need for more moderate water consumption. We asked them where they purchase their hose each season, curious about the businesses serving small-scale producers in his area. Mahmoud told us that they save it from one year to the next, and then showed us how they store it using a locally-produced t-tape winder. A center roll hangs between two wheels, upon which is attached a hand crank. The end of the t-tape is inserted into a notch in the roll and is quickly wound up. The tool is mounted on a small hand truck, allowing for easy movement between rows and fields.

We had long wondered how to improve our own t-tape recycling system, and this technique motivated us to make some key changes. Upon returned home, we screwed on a makeshift hand crank to the recycled electric wire spools we use to store our tape. In the past, we turned the wheel with our hands, relying on muscle power. Now we use the strategically placed hand crank to spin the spool, making for a faster and less strenuous task. Where we once suspended the spool on a pole held up between two saw horses, we now attach the spools to a pole mounted on the three-point hitch of the tractor. Like the winder in Syria, this makes it easy to move the spool from one bed to the next. We went to the farm expecting a standard appointment and left with a practical innovation that we successfully applied to our own operation.

In Israel, we stopped by a biodynamic kibbutz (a communal farm) to meet about their value-added marketing efforts. The kibbutz runs a therapeutic center for mentally challenged children. As part of their treatment, the children participate in the kibbutz's organic vegetable and herb farm. Products from the garden are sold at a market stand on the kibbutz. Leftovers are dehydrated into a soup mix which helps diversity the farm's business and finds a lucrative use for otherwise perishable commodities. We saw this product at several natural food stores throughout the country. Though not many small farms can afford value-added equipment, it suggests partnership opportunities with local universities, food banks, and community centers where farmers can borrow the facilities to make their own locally-grown, locally-produced food items.

After the kibbutz, we traveled to the Israeli Palestinian village of Sakhnin where a local university student has formed a community organization to preserve traditional farming methods. Laithi Gnaim of Arassid showed us around the organization's experimental field plots and nursery. We even had the opportunity to help his family with their annual olive harvest—not a crop we see a lot of in Oklahoma. He is researching drought tolerant field crops with a strong marketing potential that he can trial and introduce to village farmers. The town has no access to irrigation water, and many of the young people are abandoning farming. Laithi hopes to find a way to encourage new farmers by making agriculture profitable. A major obstacle has been locating unique, climatically-appropriate crops to test. Upon returning home, we contacted Native Seeds/SEARCH in Arizona, a non-profit specializing in protecting Native American crops of the desert Southwest. Although Israel and Arizona might seem an unlikely combination, they actually share numerous agroecological variables. Native Seeds/SEARCH generously agreed to send Arassid a

sampling of varieties, which Laithi eagerly planted this summer. We look forward to reading his progress report this winter.

Our most intensive and intimate farm stay was in Italy. After several days of sight seeing with our friend in Rome, we headed off to bucolic Tuscany to work with an organic farm family. Back in late summer we became members of Willing Workers On Organic Farms (WWOOF) Italy in hopes of finding a farmer with whom we could organize a farmer-to-farmer exchange. By joining WWOOF we received a listing of hundreds of farms across the country that swap seasonal farm help for room and board. Most WWOOF volunteers are not farmers; however, we wrote to farmers that expressed an interest in mutually beneficial learning experiences, optimistic that we would find someone who wanted more than just an extra pair of hands.

WWOOF provides detailed descriptions of the farms, and this made sorting through the directory straightforward. We identified the farm in Tuscany, contacted the farmer, and were delighted to receive his hearty welcome. He was interested in precisely the sort of exchange we sought. We traveled from Rome to his hamlet, Vicchio, where his wife picked us up and drove us up the mountains to their farm. There Saverio and Rosella cultivate, vegetables, herbs, fruit, olives, chestnuts, and firewood, living in the restored stone farmhouse that has been their home for the past thirty years.

Saverio and Rosella own a certified organic farm, and they sell their products at an all local, all organic farmers' market in nearby Florence. At this special market, a majority of the ingredients in all processed food items must be made with food grown and refined by the vendor. The spelt pasta I bought was made with grain grown and ground by the farmer/vendor. At this market, prepared foods are seen as a way for the farmer to capture more of the customer's dollar and to increase his/her sales. Selling value-added products can give the farmers income in the winter months and extend the shelf life of perishable items (for example, by turning tomatoes in to pasta sauce or strawberries into juice). Lessons learned from Florence have been instructive in evaluating the potential for more local ingredients at our own farmers' market.

Our friendship with Saverio and Rosella continues to flourish. Our customers enjoyed eating the broccoli rabe seed we learned to grow from Saverio. We regularly exchange thoughts on organic certification rules, inspection prices for small-scale growers, recipes, and unique crop varieties. This relationship has blossomed far beyond our expectations and now epitomizes on-going farmer-to-farmer exchange.

As wonderful as most of the visits were, not all of them worked out as we had hoped. Good planning cannot always prevent mistakes or undesirable outcomes. We went to a WWOOF farm in Sicily that proved to be a complete disaster. The farmers had not paid their workers in three months, people were poised to resign, and there was precious little time left to deal with us. While this certainly was not what we anticipated, we simply altered our plans and headed back to Rome early. We used the bonus time to visit a local farm cooperative, several farmers' markets, and various natural food stores. In the end, we realized the importance of maintaining back-up arrangements and a flexible attitude.

If you can afford the time and extra cash, visiting an international agricultural project is a valuable education in global farm networking. Linking with organizations such as WWOOF and traveling in the tourist off-season can make your trip more affordable.

Sharing your trip with farmers' market customers and CSA members through articles, photos, and brochures of the places you have visited extends the reach and impact of your experiences. In talking with other farmers, you are each the "experts"; you will find you have something to learn and to teach. Cultural exchange through travel unites us with the movement for sustainable agriculture beyond our home communities, and shows us the broader meaning of what we do.