

### **Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food**

**By Wendell Berry. 2009. Counterpoint Press, Berkeley, CA. Paper, 234 p, \$14.95, ISBN 978-1-58243-543-5.**

Perhaps the introduction by Michael Pollan, eminent contemporary environmental author, says it best: “I challenge you to find an idea or insight in my own recent writings on food and farming that isn't prefigured (to put it charitably) in Berry's essays on agriculture. There might be one or two in there somewhere, but I must say that reading and rereading these essays has been a deeply humbling experience.” Coming from an informed and expert journalist who is articulate and thoughtful, one of the most widely read authors on food and environment active today, this is extraordinary praise for the intellect and future vision of Wendell Berry.

Bringing it to the Table: on Farming and Food is a collection of essays, presentations, and reflections written by Berry over a period of four decades. Many have been published elsewhere, but here are collected in a flowing and logical sequence that will delight and stimulate the reader to look differently at our current path toward massive monocultures and narrow control of agriculture and the food system. Wendell tells it like it is, from the perspective of a small farmer and careful student of farming people and their communities. The picture he paints of present agriculture, and how he describes the loss of rural culture in the U.S., and the direction we pursue provides cause for reflection on how the system reached the current level of specialization. Berry also suggests that rural people and their quality of life has suffered greatly from this change, and provides some insight on how we could create a more sustainable rural farming landscape, one where people matter and the ownership and benefits are more dispersed.

Part I is focused on farming, the practices and systems that prevailed in a former, highly diverse agriculture in contrast to the current industrial, high-technology model that predominates across the U.S. Midwest. Although interesting in the way that farming systems are described, the greater value in this section is how Berry ties system to the people. He is respectful of intent but highly critical of application of the many government farm programs designed to help farmers and provide sustainable incomes from farming. In questing to maximize returns, including those from farm support programs, farmers have abandoned their traditional values on which biodiverse systems were based. He connects farming to rural culture, and laments the concentration of

land and wealth in a few hands and the consequent laundering of much of the value in farming as the majority flows to agribusiness ... not to farmers nor to rural communities. Wendell Berry knows this process first hand, as he returned to Kentucky and purchased a farm in 1965 that he has operated since then in a way that he considers sustainable ... and totally out of synch with the average industrial model farms in his state and elsewhere. His essays in this section reflect personal experience as well as that of farmers he has interviewed across the region.

The second part is focused on people – the farmers who are involved in alternative practices, enterprises, systems design and marketing. The seven chapters reflect a rich diversity of farmers and experiences, essentially a series of case studies that chronicle Berry's visits and interviews. The author is both a keen observer of practices and perceptive of human nature. What comes through is an amazing range of experiential wisdom that often reflects the world views of these farmers and how they put values into practice on their own farms. Interlaced with the activities and systems are down-to-earth farmer economics, described in terms that reflect a positive contribution to the bottom line as well as careful thought about how farm enterprises impact neighbors and community. One has the impression that these farmers clearly value nearby people in farming as well as in their rural communities, and the section underlines a famous Berry quote, “Would you rather have a neighbor's farm, or have a neighbor?”

Part III is perhaps the least coherent collection of vignettes, as the author warns in his introductory note. The chapters are stories about families, stories focused on food. They reflect the strong concerns rural families have for their food and nutrition, and provide a rich windows on food from the farm and nearby. They also provide insights into the robust food culture in rural areas that is fully entwined with family, friends, neighbors and community. The short chapters reveal a rich family culture closely connected to food and eating.

Similar to another recently published collection of essays, *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Wendell Berry, Counterpoint Press 2010), this book is a testament to the insight and articulate writing of one of our foremost authors. Berry is at once a critique of the current high-tech, concentrated-ownership food and farming systems, and a careful scholar of farms and farming. He expresses cautious optimism about our potential return to certain rural roots. Although he could be accused of portraying an idyllic older system, there are lessons to be learned from traditional systems,

and strong reasons to seek the blending of conventional farmer wisdom and new technologies. Wendell Berry is an exquisite wordsmith, a master of the language who can clearly turn a phrase and say many things with few words. This is a book recommended to any thoughtful person concerned about our present farming and food systems, and seeking viable alternatives for the future.

Charles Francis  
University of Nebraska – Lincoln

### **Sustainable Landscape Management: Design, Construction, and Maintenance**

**By T. W. Cook and A. M. VanDerZanden, 2011, Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons Inc., 232 pages, ISBN 978-0-470-48093-9 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-470-88039-5 (ebk).**

Thomas W. Cook and Ann Marie VanDerZanden are seasoned specialists and authors in the field of landscape design and construction. Both authors have extensive teaching experience and have each authored several publications in the field. In this textbook, the authors focus on sustainable landscape design, construction and management techniques applicable for both commercial and residential properties.

The book emphasizes that the development of a sustainable landscape design and construction goes beyond aesthetic satisfaction to involve the minimal use of new inputs. It encourages the reuse of existing and recycled materials in the design and construction of a landscape. Since landscape designs evolve overtime, this textbook provides relevant knowledge about how to retrofit an existing landscape in a sustainable manner to minimize environmental impacts. The authors do not lose sight of the fact that constructing a landscape has the ability to alter an existing ecosystem. This textbook therefore describes how a landscape can be developed as an ecosystem. The book recounts that in developing an ecological landscape, the landscape designer goes beyond recreation and aesthetic purposes to develop a design which provides ecosystem services such as air and water purification, pollination, and habitats for other organisms. The authors provide an in depth discussion about environmental concerns associated with landscape construction. This is important because of issues regarding sustainability and environmental justice. The textbook describes the potential human and wildlife risks associated with environmental pollution that could result from the use of fuels, fertilizers and pesticides. It also outlines a number of integrated management practices which will help curb pollution. In terms of constructing a landscape, the book outlines step-by-step how to prepare the soil, plant, fertilize, irrigate, prune, manage, and maintain a landscape in a sustainable manner.

The authors clearly outline a set of learning objectives to be achieved in each chapter. Following these set objectives, adequate information is provided to meet the learning objectives. Information is neatly organized into subsections to guide and better help readers to logically follow what the authors intend to portray. In addition, the book provides a set of questions and a summary at the end of each chapter to enhance the reader's understanding and to help assimilate important facts from the textbook. Even though the authors suggest other reading materials that may enable readers to compare and contrast information not enough reading materials are suggested. With the exception of chapters one, two, three and ten, the remaining six chapters do not provide suggested readings. There are no typographical errors in this textbook, but there are few formatting errors. Consider, for example, a default paragraphing in page 85 (last paragraph in column one).

The book is well-written using a "simple" language (not too technical). This will enable a reader without expertise in the field to read, follow, and apply some of the information. In addition, the authors did well by including many photos. This helps to further illustrate the concepts being discussed. However, a majority of the pictures are black and white; it would be useful if more colored photos were included. The colored pictures are located at the end of chapter four. In Figures 7-1 and 7-2 (pages 122 and 123) for instance, one cannot easily differentiate between earthworms and a growing lawn or a top soil and a subsoil, respectively. Although these pictures provide illustrations, it will be better appreciated if they are colored. In the preface of the text (page ix), the authors propose to describe in chapter two, cost-effective landscapes as part of a sustainable landscape design. However, no attempt is made to conduct any financial or benefit-cost analysis to further explain why a sustainable landscape will be more cost-effective than the conventional way of designing and constructing a landscape. The authors do well to raise awareness about the environment when constructing or managing a landscape and also provide insight about existing environmental laws such as the use phosphorus-free fertilizers in Minnesota. However, there is not much information provided about special environmental policy and pollution control models which will either deter pollution or provide incentives for landscape designers and contractors to minimize pollution.

Overall, I found the textbook informative and would recommend for teaching and learning purposes. However, evaluating and addressing some of the suggestions will enhance the quality of the textbook.

Paula E. Faulkner  
North Carolina A&T  
Greensboro, NC