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the COOPERATIVE spirit

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Something Familiar: Harvest Days

2020 has been full of surprises and changes, but one thing that won't be changing at the Co-op are our favorite days of the year- Harvest Days! For the entire month of October you get 10% off all bulk items in the store. This includes bulk herbs and spices, coffee, and tea, as well. Use the opportunity to try something new or stock up on your favorites before we get stuck inside for the half year white-out we call Winter. We have everything from raw almonds to freeze-dried mushrooms, allspice to yarrow root, light to dark roast coffee, maple syrup to honey, and everything in between. Well, not everything, but we have one of the largest bulk selections you'll find in Central Wisconsin. As always, we encourage you to bring in your own bulk containers to get the $.05 credit to take off your final total or donate to our 1% Friday organization for October, the Portage County Breastfeeding Coalition.

Here's something even more exciting, we're still giving a discount on our Bulk Pantry Essentials program! That means that we'll be doing discounts on discounts on discounts on your favorite bulk necessities. We will also be giving a 5% discount on select items for a volume purchase.

Fall is an exciting time at the Co-op and Harvest Days is only one of many reasons. Our Produce cooler is going to be bursting at the seams with the local harvest, we'll be congregating as a cooperative for our Fall General Membership Meeting, and we're only going to continue to do our best to serve you as your Co-op staff and Board. See you in the aisles!

UPCOMING EVENTS

09/07	Labor Day - Regular hours (online orders only)
09/22	Board of Directors Meeting - 5:30 PM
09/30	Quarterly Inventory
10/25	Fall General Membership Meeting - 6 PM
10/27	Board of Directors Meeting - 5:30 PM

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Monday 7AM-6PM
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Sustainable Forms of Farming

Chances are when you think of farming, you picture huge fields with sprinkler systems and heavy machinery, but have you ever thought about the other ways to farm?

Permaculture

Permaculture is farming designed to work with nature as opposed to regular agriculture which works against nature. In agriculture, the farmer tears up the ground to begin with a blank slate to begin planting crops or raising livestock. In permaculture, the farmer lets nature do the work for them. There are 3 main tenants to permaculture: care for the Earth, care for the people, and fair share. These tenants help create a self maintaining ecosystem that requires fewer inputs from off-site sources. Everything can be reused in permaculture- it is the height of land conservation. Companion planting is also common in permaculture, highlighting the idea that crops can support each other and work together and we can take advantage of the relationships they develop with each other.

Agroforestry

Agroforestry is a subcategory of permaculture. In this farming technique, farmers intentionally combine agriculture and forestry by allowing trees and shrubs to grow alongside their crops or livestock. Just as in natural ecosystems, the trees help protect the crops from high winds or intense rains and also provide some separation. Planting trees alongside crops helps boost water retention levels which can help produce a more bountiful harvest. Farmers without access to irrigation are particularly benefited from agroforestry. The tops of the trees cover large portions from getting direct sunlight which decreases evaporation. Soils remain moist for a longer period of time, allowing the crops shallow roots better access to the water. Trees are also more efficient at extracting nutrients from deep in the soil and help build up organic matter in the soil. Agroforestry reduces agriculture's contribution to climate change by eliminating deforestation, making it a very sustainable farming form.

Biodynamic

In biodynamic farming animals, plants, and the solar system are considered to be interrelated living systems. The founder of biodynamics, Rudolf Steiner, created a complex stellar calendar to chart the influences of the moon and other planets for farmers and gardeners. He believed that the moon affects the growing phases of planting and harvesting much like it affects the tides. The moon phase, the zodiacal constellations, as well as specifics on the plant itself all are considered when choosing to plant, cultivate or harvest. Another requirement is diversity in crop rotation- no annual crop can be planted in the same field for more than two years in succession. This helps heal the Earth by replenishing the soil and in turn creating healthier plants. Biodynamic farming shares many characteristics with organic farming but is considered a more holistic and homeopathic form.

Microfarms

Microfarms are perfect for densely populated urban areas with little land to spare. Generally, microfarming is done on 5 acres of land or less and focuses on high value specialty crops such as mushrooms, flowers, or microgreens. Farmers are able to catch and solve a multitude of issues quickly because of the "hands on" aspect of microfarming. No machines are used for harvesting and planting. Despite their small size, these farms have the potential to lead to big profits with short season crops that can be resown several times throughout the season. Many people consider microfarms to be the future of farming. The small scale, high yield, and sustainably-minded farming can help alleviate food deserts and help bring food closer to the populations they feed.

Vertical Urban Farms

Vertical farming is generally used in urban areas where space and land can be scarce or expensive. It refers to multi-level farms where the plants grow on stacked shelves where vertical strips of plants hang under artificial light. Because of this, vertical farming is generally done indoors. Artificial light is necessary for this type of farming because otherwise the bottom row of plants would not receive enough sunlight. Hydroponics, aquaponics, and aquaponics are all compatible growing techniques for vertical farming, as they do not need soil. Like microfarms, vertical farming is extremely useful to densely populated areas .and can also help reduce food deserts in urban areas.

Is Organic Good Enough?

In the July/August 2020 edition of the Cooperative Spirit, we talked about the idea of greenwashing in our Fair Trade article. Our goal was to highlight the way that larger businesses profiteer off of hip trends and bastardize ideas of honesty and ethicacy. Fair Trade greenwashing is an enormous issue, and one that we at the Co-op feel strongly about: it has to do directly with whether or not we are exploiting people so we can enjoy a certain convenience in our lives. Another issue, and the one we want to highlight here, is how large agricultural businesses have co-opted the ideas of organic farming to help them make more and more money. Just as we should ask "is fair trade good enough," we should also ask "is organic good enough?"

Instead of focusing on all of the bad things that large organic agricultural businesses do, we want to focus on the good things that small scale farmers do. We sat down with Lee B. from Rising Sand Organics Cooperative Farm to talk about his experience as a farmer and what he appreciates about the practices they've established. This is the farm's third season and, while they have grown in many interesting ways over the years, it's clear that they are holding true to their intentions for beginning: "fostering bountiful life… while exemplifying cooperative management values, fostering healthful relationships, and engaging productively with the surrounding community."

They also hold true to a more pure form of what it means to be organic. Boiled down, to grow produce organically is to do so in a way that protects the environment, decreases pollution, maintains biological diversity, and stewards the soil to prevent erosion and increase the life found in it. While talking to Lee, he shared that this stewardship of life brings him satisfaction and joy while out on the farm. For him, any action that creates a larger disconnect between the farmer and the life of the land breaks down what it means to be an organic farmer.

If you're on a tractor then you miss seeing what's going on in the soil. If you cover your fields with plastic, you're decreasing the diversity of life. For Lee, moving through the fields and pulling the weeds between the carrot greens or lifting up the mulch to reveal the worms and other visceral lifeforms is about more than just crop yield. It's about putting energy and work into the land and collaborating with it to craft a healthful and sustainable future.

It would be an overstepping generalization to say that this is true of all farmers, but it's our opinion that certain farming practices overemphasize productivity and can miss this connection that Lee has with Rising Sand's land. When the purpose of farming shifts from producing enough to feed a community and instead focuses on producing to feed our industrialized economy, stewardship of soil health and biodiversity falls to the wayside. Sadly, this is not just a trend in conventional agriculture. Organic farming can be just as disconnected and have lost sight of the same recognition that land isn't just here for us to ravage it until it loses all life. We at the Co-op are not immune to this disconnect. We carry a lot of organic products, and are very proud to do so, but we do it knowing that not all organic is created equal.

There is a wide spectrum of practices, including herbicide and pesticide application, that still allows a farm to be considered organic. There are also other concerns, such as water diversion in California farming and the exploitation and slave-labor conditions of farmworkers throughout organic farms that force us to pause and consider what is possibly the most important question when it comes to our food: is organic good enough?

We'd bet that if you spend any time at Rising Sand Organics, or Whitefeather Organics, or Cattail Organics, or Growing Earth Farm, or Lonely Oak Farm, or Black Rabbit Farm, or Liberation Farm, or any of the other local farms and farmers we're blessed to have, you'll begin to form some conclusions about this question. Go to our Farmers Markets and talk to the farmers, look at their produce, and compare its life to the life of produce you may get from organic farms out of state. True, some products may not be organic, but this might be because the farmers can't afford to get the certification. True, the organic products from California are certified organic, but they may use more pesticides and herbicides, more exploited labor, and definitely more in fuel to get to your pantry. Really think about it: is this product you're going to buy good enough?

We ask ourselves this every time we see a new product we might want to carry, or are told that a product we carry may not have the most reputable sourcing. We ask that you begin to do the same. Keep asking, keep pushing yourself to expect better out of our food system, and keep connecting with those local farmers that depend on our support.

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A BROADER LOOK AT WATER

The year is 2018. Nelsonville resident and then village board member Rubina filed a formal complaint with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources against Gordondale Farms, a registered Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO), for concerns relating to how their farming practices affect the water quality and quantity of the surrounding area. CAFOs are regulated farms that have over 1000 "animal units" and are required to follow certain practices to ensure that operations of these sizes do not negatively impact the land and water. To sum it up simply, CAFOs are large amounts of land, with large amounts of animals (usually kept in a small area), creating large amounts of waste. The primary concern for water protectors and land advocates have to do with how well (or not) CAFOs collect, dispose of, and distribute this waste.

It was Rubina's charge, and the charge of many other communities in rural Wisconsin, that CAFOs lack the oversight and proper practices to ensure that the waste produced does not pollute the land, water, and air surrounding the farm. The proof, for them, is in the wells; the quality of the water for many Nelsonville households have dropped to unsafe drinking levels while the quantity of water dropped so low that well levels were affected, as well as nearby rivers and streams. This comes after many farms were approved by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to increase the quantity of water that they could use starting in 2016.

It is now 2020, two and a half years after the initial complaint. Rubina forwarded me the official release from the DNR saying that all of the concerns are either outside of their jurisdiction or were at a satisfactory level of contamination. Sadly, the Nelsonville residents may consider themselves lucky: at least the CAFO near them had their license reviewed. Other CAFOs around Wisconsin are operating with an expired license because the DNR does not have the resources, staff, and prioritization to put towards inspecting and issuing new licenses. Instead, the DNR relies on the farms themselves to self-regulate and report any violations.

Gordondale Farms is just one of over 300 CAFOs in Wisconsin, many of whom face intense pushback from the rural communities they are affecting. These 300+ CAFOs are also only one form of farming found to negatively impact water quality, with another notable one being preservation farming. Each community and each farm have different stories, but they share a common thread: a community, often lower income and with fewer resources, fighting tooth and nail against these larger farms, some with connections to out-of-state businesses and many with conflicts of interest on boards and committees, to protect the water supply and their health. To understand why we have found ourselves at such a seemingly nonsensical fork in the road, with one path leading us towards industrialization of agriculture by any means necessary and the other towards a regenerative, sustainable, and necessary future, we need to understand the history that led us here. Once we understand the journey, we can begin to understand how to correct our course.

Our first step is to travel back in time: we'll stop in the mid-20th century, but before that we're heading to the late 19th century, and actually began in the 18th century. Before non-indigenous people came to this land we call North America and brought with them, among other things like plague and destruction, a different view of what it meant to productively "own" land, there were various people already living here and practicing various forms of agriculture.

Lush forests were cultivated and worked with to produce an incredibly biodiverse harvest that did not require the trees to be clear cut and the land stripped. The colonizers had a different view; they saw wild, seemingly unkempt forests and jumped to the conclusion that the people living there were unable to properly steward the land towards optimum production.

With this false narrative in mind and through the destructive ideology of Manifest Destiny, the early colonizers of various nations in the 18th century and then the later "Americans" of the 19th century moved West and met many different groups of people and, again, a form of agriculture that was completely at odds with their own. And, again, they saw a land that was seemingly underutilized, underdeveloped, and underexploited. Luckily for the indigenous people, these Americans were there to save the day and show them how it's done. People whose family had lived on the land for generations upon generations were forcibly removed and entire communities were wiped out so Americans could occupy the land and use it as they saw best.

Now let's jump forward again to the mid-20th century. After almost 100 years of expansion and growth, we have many family farms that have been passed down through a few generations and have begun to build a legacy. These farms are facing some tough decisions, similar to what we see many farmers facing right now in 2020: jump on the industrialization bandwagon, take out large and unsustainable loans from banks, and produce more and more and more. The alternative if the farm can't keep up with this cycle of overextendion is going bankrupt or being absorbed into the larger farms who could keep up. What this does is concentrate where the production of food occurs and, if that food is animal, where the production of waste occurs.

This article only begins the story. Consider reading books on farming history to learn more. Let's keep this discussion about the culture of consumption alive. Since the first issuance of a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit in 1972, CAFOs have been under the watchful eye of the Departments of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Well, at least they are supposed to be, if these departments received the proper funding and resources to correctly do their job as a governmental office. Instead, in Wisconsin, the DNR may rely on the farms to monitor themselves which has led to issues of improper documentation and reporting. What this means, beyond that we need to have a hard think about where we're putting our money, is that some farms may be toeing or crossing the line into polluting the waterways near their farm.

Where the DNR has fallen behind, individuals in the rural communities primarily affected by large-scale farming have stepped up to fight for protection and oversight. Organizations have formed, including Know CAFOs in Burnett County, to help spread awareness of this important issue and push for farming practices that support the health of the land and the people who live on it. However, in their opposition, these communities have found a new obstacle to face: elected and appointed officials with ties to CAFOs and other large agricultural businesses. These officials have been known to block resolutions in support of more sustainable agriculture and cleaner water while also being potentially tied to the land deals that give CAFOS access to land.

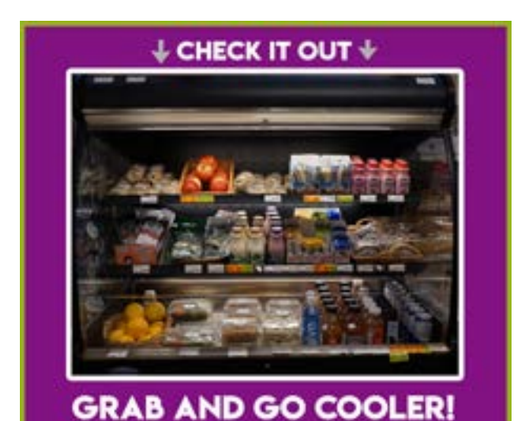
This hasn't deterred water protectors from standing up and fighting for what they believe in. One great example is the Midwest Environmental Advocates, who help communities stay informed on what they can do in their fights while also fighting for larger statewide changes in enforcing the rules of the NPDES permit and its Wisconsin specific counterpart. They have been working to defend public rights, protect natural resources, and ensure transparency and accountability in government since their inception in 1999. They also work to keep our lands free of mines, pipelines, and other environmental pollutants.

But we can look even closer to home. In addition to Rubina we have a plethora of advocates in our county that we could dedicate an entire newsletter to. Instead, we'll highlight the actions of two officials in county government: Jen McNelly and Gary Garske. McNelly is the Water Resource Specialist and Garske is the Public Health Manager and Health Officer for Portage county, both of whom have worked to bring funding, awareness, and priority to water protection. McNelly has helped people get their well water tested to make sure it was not contaminated, which is important for our area; 20% of Wisconsin wells exceed the drinking level standards, Portage county is sitting at 24% of wells, and Nelsonville is at 47% of their wells. In conjunction with this information, Garske and the offices and commissions he works with received almost $10,000 in funding from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to improve environmental health through improved private well water testing in rural communities.

These steps are only the beginning of the long journey back to a sustainable use of our lands, one that requires every one of us to walk along. It may seem insurmountable, but there are ways that we can start to make a difference. The first is an easy one: make sure you are buying your food from local farmers who you know are using sustainable and healthy farming practices. This can be as simple as going to a farmers market, signing up for a CSA, or even just grabbing some fresh local produce at your Co-op. Other, more direct actions could include volunteering your time or donating money to organizations like the Midwest Environmental Advocates, the Central Sands Water Action Coalition, or other groups advocating for better farming practices.

Or, you can make sure you know who your elected officials are, from village board or city council, to county board and committees, all the way to state and federal government. Know who they are, who they are connected to, and know what their record is when it comes to the issues around water quality.

It's not enough for us to say that we need to be hopeful for change. We must demand it, and we have to fight for it. Fight against the culture of endless consumption of food, land, and water, and instead fight for sustainable, community focused agriculture. Fight against our legacy of over-industrialization and monopolizing, and fight for diverse and resilient communities. Fight against governmental neglect and fight for proper oversight. Most importantly, fight for your neighbors, and our future generations, and to leave this place we call Wisconsin a little better than how we came to it.



Featured Products

Showcasing local products that we love because sometimes knowing the connection is more important than certified organic.

Potters Crackers: Their production plant is located in Madison, WI. They have been a part of our SPAC since they started making crackers in 2006 and it has been fun to see the way their packaging and product line has evolved. They source their ingredients from local producers and their products are certified organic. We carry 3 flavors of oyster crackers, and their full line of flavors of crackers and crisps. Their mission stems from a need for Wisconsin to produce a local cracker that complements the plethora of cheeses the state has to offer. We hope you can showcase them with your next cheese or charcuterie platter.

Good Earth Soaps: Made on the shores of Lake Michigan in Kewaunee, WI, these soaps are handcrafted and biodegradable! Each soap is made with it's own unique blend of aromatherapy grade essential oils as well as organic herbs. Keep your eyes peeled- your favorite Good Earth products will soon have a fresh look with all new packaging. This company cares deeply about the environment and they are working towards using more sustainable packaging and will now be offering zero-waste options. Still the same great product, made from the goodness of the Earth!

One Basket Co-op: A hip new egg co-op that's bringing us local eggs! Three local folks came together and said "enough is enough; our Co-op has to have local eggs." They partnered with Rising Sand Organics Cooperative Farm to source eggs from chickens that are fed organic feed, then they head over to Central Rivers Farmshed to process and package these eggs; they make their way to our Co-op, your shopping cart and finally, your home. Some extra good news: they accept carton returns! Bring back your clean cartons and we'll make sure they get back to One Basket.

Meuer Farms, LLC: located in Chilton, WI. While not certified Organic we trust their sustainable growing methods and have built meaningful relationships with Leslie and David over the years. We currently sell their Rye Berries, Spelt Berries, and Wheat Berries in the bulk section. During the shortage of flour from larger mills we brought in some of their milled-to-order Bread Flour and Stone Ground Wheat flours. Their farm has been in the family since 1969 and their website shares stories about all of the wildlife you can find on their 150 acre farm. There's something really unique about the products they sell to us and we hope to keep their super fresh flours on our shelves as long as customers are willing to pay a little extra for the care they put into because as David and Leslie mention, "It takes patience to allow the lands to show you its resilience and beauty."

Have a suggestion? Have an idea?
Feel free to email one of our board members with your thoughts!

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IT'S TIME FOR THE FALL GMM:

Fall is upon us and that means it's time for one of our two yearly General Membership Meetings (GMM)! You probably have heard this before, but do you know what it means, or why they're important? The General Membership Meetings are an integral part of our Co-op, as a meeting put aside specifically for the entire membership to convene. We have two GMMs per year: one in the spring and one in the fall. These meetings are used for Board updates and elections (in the spring), sharing financial information and other presentations by staff, Board, and members, approving or denying any bylaw changes by the membership as a whole, and giving our membership a forum space to bring any issues, concerns, feedback, or support they wish to voice. As a co-op, we place a high value on sharing information widely with our membership, and the GMM is a great opportunity to truly keep everyone abreast of what progress is being made at the Co-op. As we host our fall GMM, we want to again reach out and encourage all of our members to attend. Is there a burning question you have? Is there something you would like to commend or see changed? This is your time! We understand that with the uncertainty of the times, some of our members may not feel comfortable attending in person, do not fret, we will be providing a virtual link so those members can still be involved! Our Co-op is our community, which is the biggest reason why the GMM matters: We want to meet you, get to know you, hear your opinions, and continue to work toward creating a great experience for everyone who enters our doors. So, please, won't you join us at the Fall GMM on October 25th?

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