

Hardscrabble

An essay by Sam Hilmer of Claverach Farm

Mid June on the farm is always overwhelming to me. It's known around here as the "go crazy time" because the landscape explodes with such unrelenting vigor that I invariably find myself questioning the sanity of farming in the Missouri Ozarks. And it's not just the rampant weeds but also the ravenous insects intent on chewing newly sprouted seedlings and shoots, plus the various blights, mildews, and rots that come along with the warm June rains. Why would any fool subject himself to this punishment year after year? Surely, after working this ground for nearly twenty years and perennially feeling the same way about foolishly trying to grow in this environment, I would by now be able to pull the plug and move on to a more sensible livelihood. Or at least find a kinder climate to farm in.

But alas I am an addict of farming in *this* place, a beautiful place, the place of my childhood. I am an addict to the challenge of farming here, on these soils, in this climate, in this *terroir*. Part of becoming a mature farmer, in my opinion, is not only becoming comfortable with the challenges and imperfections that exist within a given place, but also learning how to identify and then amplify the positive attributes as well. This knowledge can only come with time and observation, and that's not a business model for a quick monetary return on investment.

Missouri's unpredictable weather, troublesome bugs, weeds and plant diseases will always be a challenge. This reality has led most growers to believe that there is no other way to economic success other than employing a large arsenal of chemical products, many quite toxic. Unfortunately, the quality of the produce suffers from these strategies. Whether it's corn, wheat, tomatoes, chicken, peaches, or wine grapes, authentic quality can never be expressed when the cultivation of the biological component of the soil is ignored in favor of industrial chemical farming practices.

Typically, there is no *somewhereness*, no unique quality to GMO soybeans not because they possess inherently poor genetic potential, but rather because they are farmed in a manner which doesn't nurture the biological potential of the soil in which they grow. Add to this that there is no incentive for the commodity farmer other than maximizing bushels per acre and you have a recipe for *anywhere* food. Much like modern strip malls in fringe suburbs, there is no soul to this type of produce, and the implications of this modern condition have long troubled me. What has resulted is a convergence of cultural forces which has destroyed the vibrancy of rural America and its soils, polluted our waters, dumbed down and sickened the masses who subsist on "food" of questionable integrity.

Interestingly, the patriarch of modern biological farming was a University of Missouri soil scientist in the 1930s by the name of William Albrecht, who discovered through rigorous research that animal health and human health is inextricably tied to the nutritional composition of the produce consumed; plants growing on minerally unbalanced, depleted soils will lead to animal and human sickness over time. Albrecht's most poignant teaching was that correcting a

soil's deficiencies through proper soil testing and remineralization could literally allow a farmer to craft a higher quality product than if he simply proceeding in a blind manner. Although Albrecht never used the word *terroir* to describe his methods, he was teaching how to awaken the innate biological qualities of the soil that allow food and wine to taste of a place, something that meticulous French *vignerons* and *fromageres* have long known.

So therein lays my inspiration for working the diverse array of soils on this rugged piece of land for the last twenty years. Despite the difficulties of trying to farm for quality in this harsh environment, focusing on Albrecht's guiding principles offers some sanity. The more I understand soil chemistry and soil ecology, the more success I have – victories that keep me hooked to farming here, in this challenging, economically foolhardy place. But at times (such as this June evening as I write these words, when this place is downright Amazonian, with tropical downpours, tree frogs chirping in chorus at dusk, and fire flies floating in the valley fog), I'm vividly reminded once again of the latent life forms indigenous to this place that are just waiting for the right conditions to explode into action. Some of these life forms may be 'pests' while others may be 'beneficials.' I've come to realize that this juxtaposition, this balancing act between life forms, occurs naturally whether I'm growing crops here or not.

Agriculture as I know it here on this hardscrabble piece of Ozark land is all about the tension between the wild and the cultivated, the untamed and the tamed, the insanity and the sanity, and the special quality of produce that grows at the margin of these oppositions. June is emblematic of my constant struggle to beat back the encroaching bush and also harness the inherent vitality of this landscape to grow food that tastes of *this* place, food that tastes of the land's want, its desire, to spring forth with such unrelenting, overwhelming vigor.