

## **Where Does Our Food Come From**

Vegetable gardening has been a valuable livelihood for most people for thousands of years. Until the past 50 years, or so, we have been an agricultural society, dependent on ourselves, or those nearby, to provide our food. With transportation and refrigeration improvements, since the 1950's, we have lost the interest in the origins of our food until recently.

### **A Little Historical perspective:**

Native Americans had been gardening here in this land long before the colonists and had discovered which crops and herbs to grow to meet the needs of their families. Part of what they had discovered was the processes of companion planting to reduce pests and other problems from bothering their crops, while allowing them to plant in small spaces. One such grouping is called "The Three Sisters". This is comprised of some truly native plants of corn, beans and squash. The beans climb up the stalks of the corn and are harvested first; the squash covers the ground to scare the raccoons before the corn is harvested; then the squash is harvested last. In harmony with nature, this garden was often planted in a natural clearing, rather than cutting down the trees to suit their needs. All three of these crops are well suited to be stored and budgeted over the winter months to feed their families.

Many more valuable plants were here before the arrival of the colonists such as the beech tree for nuts; bayberries for wax, an astringent and a tonic; cat-tails for thatching, weaving and a spring vegetable; columbine, Echinacea, fox grapes, jerusalem artichoke as a food source; milkweed as a spring vegetable; raspberries, strawberries, violets, rose mallow, oak leaf hydrangea and of course our mountain laurel! These are but a few of the valuable sources of beauty and sustenance that were found in this land by the early gardeners who came to live in what we now call Connecticut.

The first established town in Connecticut was Wethersfield in 1634, followed by Hartford in 1635. These towns were established along a river, as most towns were, to provide a form of transportation and security. Most towns only had a church and a general store to begin with, leaving the residents to grow most of what they needed on their own land. In the 1600's and 1700's gardening was for survival, rather than beauty, as the general store only carried the basics of necessities. The "kitchen garden" would have gotten the majority of attention by the lady of the house to provide food, clothing and medicine for the family. This garden was often as much as 2 acres to provide for a family of 5 people. The man of the house would be concerned with the feed crops and money crops, caring for the stock and the buildings.

Many plants and trees had been transported to this new world from Europe with these new residents, as they did not know what they would find here. Many of these seeds of vegetables for food, herbs for medicine, trees for fruit and flowers would have been carried in the hems of garments, headbands of hats and bonnets, and in precious envelopes of paper and cloth because of the lack of space when traveling. It took years

to discover what fruit, nuts, berries and herbs were available in this land, but as they learned, the ladies incorporated their discoveries into their gardens and root cellars.

It was after the industrial revolution in the late 1800's that we started being an urban society, but farmers and the average person as well, kept growing their food. If they did not grow it themselves, they knew who did and bought it directly from the grower. This continued through the late 1940's, when the soldiers came home from the war and left the farms to move into the new "suburbs" to raise a family and live the "American Dream".

Up until the early 1950's, we *knew* where our food came from, how to grow it, store it and use it... There were no chemical fertilizers or herbicides to contaminate our food. All farming was organic and many farmers still used horses and oxen to plow with. Until this time, all food was *naturally* organic! But it was the beginning of the invention of the *self-service "grocery store"* with isles of caned and boxed foods!

In the 1950's, more inventions and innovations changed our food system; refrigeration *and transportation* became available, so food could come from longer distances. Cellophane *wrap* was invented so fresh produce could be wrapped on cardboard dishes, and would appear to be "untouched by human hands". Shopping *carts* were invented to make it easier to carry more groceries to the check-out counter. The price of food was on the rise as packaging, refrigeration and transportation costs were added. Food producers and farmers started using the new *chemical fertilizers* for the first time to grow bigger, faster produce with less flavor and less nutritional value, so vitamin tablets started to become popular by the 1970's.

In the late 1970's and 80's vegetables and fruit growers started to see their farms as factories, rather than food producers. Their "food" had become a product that needed to be shipped long distances, so it needed to be a variety that could be picked green, then gassed at the destination to turn the necessary color for sale. This is how the "cardboard tomatoes" started in the late 1950's and have been modified to what we have today in our huge grocery stores produce departments. One current example is the "tomatoes on the vine"... They do not grow that way! In the garden they ripen two at a time, not all at once! They are gassed in a factory to make them that way.

### **Now for today's news about our food:**

- Most food we buy at the store comes thousands of miles from our home, or another country.
- What do "GMO", "organic" and "natural" really mean?
- Where has food historically come from?
- What changed in the past 60 years, and why?

These and other questions will be answered as we discuss the details of the food we are choosing to eat and learn to make wiser choices to save money and be more healthy in the future.

### **Thousands of miles from our home:**

Have you noticed the little stickers on the fruits and vegetables in the produce section? Connecticut has a law that requires the store to tell what state, or country that the produce was produced. Bananas and oranges do not grow in Connecticut. Blueberries are in season here only in June and early July. We are spoiled into thinking we should be able to have any fruit or vegetable in any season we want... Only in America!

Check the stickers and the signs in the produce department. It is a good geography lesson! For freshness, choose local produce in season.

### **What do GMO, organic and natural really mean?**

These new terms, among others, have confused the general eating population, with good reason. Long ago, food was food. Now with all of the processing of food, chemical additives, preservatives, and foreign matter in our processed food and “fresh” food; it is harder to know what is healthy to eat anymore!

#### ➤ **GMO:**

Genetically Modified Organism (GMO), are plants or animals that have been genetically engineered with DNA from bacteria, viruses or other plants and animals. These experimental combinations of genes from different species cannot occur in nature or in traditional crossbreeding. These genetically modified plants and animals will only continue in their modified state for very few generations and then revert back to their natural state.

**GMO food** is modified to be sprayed with the herbicide “Round-up”, produced by Monsanto, so food producers do not need to be so careful about weeding and can just spray the whole field at once. This means, the food that is GMO has Round-Up on it, has been genetically modified and will impact our own human genes and is a mass produced food with less nutritional value on top of that. (See [ctnofa.org](http://ctnofa.org) for links to current GMO activity)

Most other countries today *do not allow* GMO food in their countries and will not import our food anymore. As more people are becoming aware of the GMO issues, pressure is being put on our “food providers” to find alternatives.

#### ➤ **Organic:**

Simply stated, organic produce and other ingredients are grown without the use of pesticides, herbicides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetically modified organisms or ionizing radiation. Animals that produce meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products do not take antibiotics or growth hormones and are treated humanely.

In other words, Organic means no commercial chemicals or additives, in the soil, in the plants or in the animals.

There are a few forms of “organic” these days. “USDA Organic” label was once trusted, but the government has loosened its regulations to accept a percentage of other ingredients in food. ***Read the labels and signs.*** Know your grower to be sure!

➤ **Natural:**

I have built my gardening business on “helping people to relax in the natural world around you”. What I mean is to be comfortable with the trees, the flowers, the forest, the birds, air and sky. This is the “*natural* world” I talk about, rather than “man’s world” of buildings, electronics, air conditioning and little screens.

The word “natural” on packaging is used on almost everything these days and means almost nothing... The following is from a Google search February 2, 2016:

**So what can we eat for a healthy diet? Where do we get our food? Who can we trust??**

These are questions many of us have been asking in the recent years. Even Whole Foods has been getting in trouble for misleading the public to believe anything they carried in their stores was organic and safe to eat.

Basically, we need to turn back the clock a bit to have more control over what we eat and how. Check off the things you are already doing and feel good about that and then, choose just ***one thing at a time*** to change in your lifestyle!

- Take responsibility for your own choices
- Know your local farmer,
  - go to farmer’s markets all year long
  - join a CSA (consumer supported agriculture)
- Buy local
- Buy in season
- Limit processed foods
- Read the labels!
- Stay informed, but do not panic
- Learn to relax more and enjoy the natural world around you
- Learn to grow your own fruits and vegetables

As I showed in my historical perspective, people have always grown their own food or know the person who did. There are so many opportunities in our area to learn how to grow our own food again. We can grow in containers, or framed raised beds, or window boxes. Start or join a community garden in your neighborhood.

***Change just one thing at a time***, don't panic and try to do it all at once. Just be aware and make a difference with your food choices. As each of us does these things, big business notices and adapts to healthier production.

With this knowledge, I hope you will be healthier and the environment will slowly heal. Once we learn to take responsibility for our own lives, rather than trusting the government to do the right thing, we will have more energy and a better focus to live a better life.

***Visit the following, either in person, or on Facebook:***

- **Spruce Street Community Garden** at 153 Spruce Street Manchester, Ct., to see people growing their own food “in community”.
- **The Cheney Homestead** “Multicultural Kitchen Garden”, at 106 Hartford Rd. Manchester, Ct, showing food grown by the three major peoples’ represented in Manchester 200 years ago: Agriculture of European, Native American and African origin.
  - Or Google Historical Agriculture in your area