

Oh, Those Resolutions!

Forget the ten pounds you were going to lose: that resolution has been on every list since you graduated from high school. The one resolution that can help you lose weight, get exercise, save money, improve your family's nutrition and lessen the hours the children spend dialing through an electronic wasteland is, "Plant a garden!"

You do not have to have a graduate degree in economics to have noticed that worldwide drought, soil erosion, and increasing population have put critical pressure on food sources and by extension, on food prices. The rise in price of the world's grains from mid-2006 to mid-2008 has been historic: world prices of wheat, rice, corn, and soybeans have roughly tripled. [source: Lester Brown's "Plan B 4.0"]

Among the causes of the pressure on grain prices is not only population growth but the increased use of grain in the production of animal protein. Seven pounds of grain is needed to produce one pound of beef. Additionally, there is a surge in the use of grain to power cars.

From time immemorial there have been cycles of feast and famine but today's situation is essentially different. Droughts, sandstorms, floods, monsoon failures were once singular events, even when catastrophic. The problem today is that these events have become trends – more temperatures are rising, more water tables are falling, more glaciers are melting.

Awareness of these significant changes is not new. Nearly thirty years ago, in 1979-80 the National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS) conducted by the USDA issued a warning that sounds downright 'recent': "In the last few years, rapid changes involving food, energy, inflation, and economic instability have created uncertainties about the management of the nations' resources. The public is both concerned and uncertain about the capacity of the US Agricultural land base to supply food and fiber at the high levels that are likely to be demanded in the coming years."

On the positive side, it takes very little land and water to produce a lot of food for a family. What it does take is a small investment in money and a certain amount of work. Would you be surprised to learn that worldwide about 700 million city people use food grown either inside the city or right next to it? Nothing as large as a football field probably, mostly vacant lots, rooftops, big pots. It is hard to believe 14% of London's residents produce some of their own food, easy to believe that 44% of the people in Vancouver, Canada do.

In our country urban farming is an unrealized potential. There are 70,000 vacant lots in Chicago, 31,000 in Philadelphia. Throughout the US there are 18 million acres of lovely green grass surrounding our homes. Dotted with fruit trees and graced with a grape arbor, time could be spent pruning and picking rather than mowing.

When you think about growing fruit trees you may be deterred by all the spraying required. If you are planning to sell the perfect apple without a dent or blemish, it is true that you have to have a spraying schedule. If you are planning to can quarts of applesauce and freeze heaps of apple pies, those spots and dents don't make a bit of difference. An apple does not have to be perfect if it is not going to sit for its portrait.

I doubt any one of us has enough nerve to plant a block of sweet corn in our front yards, but some food plants are handsome. Eggplant, green peppers, okra, Brussels sprouts would blend beautifully into a flower border. Containers of berries of all kinds would be attractive on a patio but you would have to have enough for both your family and the birds.

With a garden you are not only making your family healthier but you are making the planet healthier. If your diet is based on plants – fruits, vegetables, and grains rather than on heavy beef consumption, it is tantamount to shifting from an SUV to a Prius. This is not medieval Lent, just a modicum of moderation!

All parents want to feed their children well. When you see kid-lets scarfing down on chicken nuggets routinely, it is not because parents are trying to clog those tiny arteries. They just have not done their homework. Too many math courses and not enough nutrition. There is nothing very difficult about homemade chicken soup. I expect it has cured the common cold, tired blood, and broken hearts, especially if stuffed with homegrown carrots, freshly pulled baby onions, and pasta of choice.