

We have not disturbed the soil of our fields and meadows by plow or other tillage machinery for decades. Years ago, an old farmer in the neighborhood said to Runo, “You’re no farmer. You don’t raise corn.” Such is still the mentality of most farmers in our area. Depletion of soil by monoculture, lowering the level of the aquifer by irrigating cropland—that should never be an option in our region—and baring the soil to the ravages both of sun and of rain-driven erosion, all these are the accepted marks of most of the people who proudly claim the designation of “farmer.”

This does not have to be. Regenerative agriculture has shown, and is continuing to show, that we can treat the soil like the living being, full of untold numbers of microorganisms, that it is instead of like an inert substance to hold the roots of annual plants while they are “fed” with chemical fertilizers and watered with liquid from deep within the earth. And this way of farming in concert with Nature instead of in a battle with her is becoming more and more accepted across the planet. Making this way of conducting agriculture universal is absolutely necessary in slowing climate change and in producing healthful food for the world’s population.

It is funny the things that come to mind while one is performing the routine tasks of a day. We farm in a very old way. Our small herd of beef cows stand in tie stalls in the old barn during the winter. Their young calves, housed in their own boxstall on the other side of the barn, are let out twice a day to do the milking. We clean and feed by hand. And, it was in this process of feeding this morning that I thought about some of these issues.

We feed the 4X4 round bales. We roll them out in the alleyway that goes the length of the 100 year old barn that my grandfather built in 1919. Then, we pitch the hay to the cows and calves. So, it is “loose hay,” the kind that everybody used before the advent of balers. When I was rolling out a bale of hay, it suddenly occurred to me that I always smell each bale as I roll it down the alleyway. I smell it in many places. It might be that I started doing this to catch an aroma of summer. I am not sure. But, I realized this morning that the diversity that is present in our fields and meadows is very evident in the hay that we feed the cattle, sheep, and horses.

It isn’t just in the looks of the bales, though that varies, too. But, the smell of the hay is different from field to field, even from bale to bale. And within each bale, one can perceive the aroma of any number of plants.

Some of these I can identify with my nose. Others, I can spot by their leaves, flowers, or stems, now all dried into a bouquet of goodness for the cows and calves. And, it seems to me, that just as we would choose a variety of foods from a salad bar instead of trying to sustain ourselves on iceberg lettuce, the animals also both need and enjoy the variety of plants they consume.

In the industrial agricultural mode, cattle are fattened and milk produced on just a few products—corn, soy, maybe alfalfa. And, in our supermarket-purchased foods, the same rule applies. Corn, soybeans, wheat, rice—these are the staples most people depend on for their continued existence and are ingredients in a large percentage of all kinds of foods. But, our bodies weren’t meant to live this way. We want and need variety in nutrients, just as

our animals do.

So, when I came back into the cabin after morning chores, I dug out a notebook I'd used a few summers ago when I had become curious about just what plants I could find in our pastures and fields. I didn't check every paddock, but I did go through several of them, just before we turned in the sheep to eat that "first bite" before moving them to a new salad bar.

I am no botanist, and I'm sorry to say that there were many plants in the paddocks that defied my ability to identify. But, it was interesting to see how far we were from maintaining a monoculture in our fields. And, these are the plants I could name in one of the plots, although there were countless others that were just "unidentified." So, I found: bird'sfoot trefoil, red clover, timothy, orchard grass, bull thistle, white clover, heal-all, oxeye daisy, Queen Anne's lace, alsike clover, June grass, curly dock, white yarrow, dandelion, alfalfa, goldenrod, St. John's wort, common plantain, strawberry, quack grass, Canada thistle, sulfur cinquefoil, goat's beard, common milkweed, brome grass, fleabane, wild mint, two or three kinds of marsh grass, Canada anemone, bindweed, chicory, and hop clover. And, the paddock was full of honeybees.

When the sheep were turned into this pasture, they didn't eat only one, two, or even a half dozen kinds of plants. Instead, they grazed like they were in a restaurant with a good salad bar, taking a bit from everything in their path. After a day, when they moved eagerly to another "new" plot, it was clear that they had eaten all of these plants instead of only trefoil and alfalfa. And, the ground they left was still dense with plants, now ready to grow again, to recover, so that in a month to six weeks, the sheep flock could make another pass through the paddock.

So, is "farming" sitting in a behemoth tractor with air conditioning and music blaring, ripping plants from the depleted soil so that more seeds could be put into the ground to be chemically fed to produce inferior food for our people, or is it working with Nature that sustains all of us to grow healthy animals and plants to feed a healthy population?