

When it is dry and the hay crop is short, we worry. When it rains every couple of days, making it nearly impossible to get a big hay crop cut and cured, we worry. When pasture is short, we worry. When there is such growth that the electric fence is less efficient, we worry. When it is too hot for animal comfort, we worry. When it is so chilly, as it was last night, we worry that it will freeze and affect the garden vegetable plants.

So, I guess worrying is the default state of most people who depend on Nature for their comfort, livelihood, lifestyle, or well-being. This, if one is at all perceptive, means that all of us should harbor some anxiety about the state of the natural world.

It is increasingly obvious to me that this is not the case. People do worry, of course, but it seems that their reasons for concern are often unimportant for their own well-being. It makes me wonder how much Americans, at least, in this period of time, have much concern for the necessities of food and shelter. Huge houses stocked with food from supermarket shelves in neighborhoods far from workplaces seem to me to be voracious gluttons of nonrenewable energy sources.

Most of that food on supermarket shelves, much of it ultraprocessed, has traveled long distances before appearing, attractively packaged, in grocery stores. I wonder how long it would be, if that pipeline from field to factory to supermarket were slowed or halted, before we would be a country of hungry people. I do not think it would take long.

Those of us who garden, have livestock, and do some canning and freezing are in better shape in this regard than most Americans. But, we, too, have a long way to go to live truly sustainable lives. And, a lot of the solution starts with changing expectations. Every Mason jar lid we buy, every kilowatt of electricity used to run the freezer, every bit of fossil fuel that heats the pressure canner—none of these are truly sustainable. Whatever we can do to live in our own “foodshed,” of course, is an improvement, but few of us really have any reason to pat ourselves on the back for our diligence, care, and environmental excellence.

There are a few things many of us could do to lessen the enormous toll modern life has taken of the environment. If we live in a rural or semi-rural area, most of us could have substantial gardens. And, in keeping as much of the produce of those gardens for off-season consumption, we could concentrate on different ways of preservation. A root cellar of some kind is essential. It can be an unheated walled-off area in a basement or garage, or it could be a traditional root cellar. There could be storage for root crops and other foods that can be kept for long periods.

And the most important crop, in my view, is a good supply of potatoes. Americans do eat a lot of potatoes, but, according to 2014 statistics, 28 percent of potatoes eaten in homes are in the form of potato chips, and in commercial eating places, 59 percent are French fries.

There are entire cookbooks devoted to potatoes. This nutritious vegetable can be used in so many ways, and it is one of those foods one can eat day after day without boredom. And, potatoes can be stored all winter. Having a good supply of potatoes in the root cellar—in our case, several bushels—means we will not have to worry about hunger for the coming winter.

So, if you have enough to worry about without contemplating what you are going to eat if the transportation system breaks down, plant a potato patch. It isn't too late in the season even now.