

SHARED GENERATIONS

By Dan Wiens



Coral Maloney was seven years old when she joined our farm.

In the spring of 1992, Coral's parents bought a "share" in our summer harvest of vegetables and herbs. They had become "sharers" in a brand new concept called "Shared Farming" (later renamed community shared agriculture or CSA).

Young Coral was likely unaware of the reasons her parents decided to pay for food that wasn't yet grown. But at some point she probably overheard them talking about how this new style of farming was supposed to bring more economic, environmental and social justice to the food system.

I remember the first time I met Coral and her family. It was on one of those magical prairie days when the early spring sun surprises you with its warmth. It was the kind of day that thaws the wintered

soul and makes one giddy with the hope of spring. Newness was in the air.

Coral's family had come to the farm to participate in a "spring planting bee." This was the first time the newly created Wiens Shared Farm had invited sharers to participate in "the joy of farming" by actually getting down and dirty in the garden. Together with several other families with children, the Maloneys listened carefully to my instructions on how to plant spring garlic. To increase the possibility that the cloves were placed in the ground the right way, I had the little ones repeat after me "pointy side up" several times.

After we got going, I remember being amazed at how fast a garlic patch can be planted when a dozen people work together. I realized on that day that CSA gardening is often more like a party than a chore. The rows were a little crooked, but that didn't matter too much because there were plenty of hands to do the weeding later on.

Perhaps my memories of Coral and her family on that day lodged firmly in my mind because that was the beginning of some long-lasting friendships. Or maybe it's because Coral is now one of a group of mostly young people who are collectively operating their own CSA in cooperation with Wilma and me. Coral represents a second generation of CSA farmers in Canada. The daughter of some of our original sharers is now a CSA farmer herself. How fun is that?

Life has a delightful way of renewing itself.

Coral is part of a generation of CSA kids who grew up with the notion of having their own farm. As a child, she understood that in some years, the lettuce is great and in others, it's bitter. She remembers when there was so much kale in her family's weekly veggie box that her parents ended up giving some to neighbours (who, by-the-way, had no idea what to do with it). She's a city girl who knows that broccoli doesn't grow on trees, onions grow in the dirt and green tomatoes ripen well in a brown paper bag. For Coral, going to "their farm" for a

The Wiens Shared Farm is twelve acres (five hectares) of Red River Valley, an assortment of sweat-of-the-brow farmers, a few cheerful chickens, and about ninety sharers who receive organic vegetables each week throughout the summer. The farm was started by Wilma and Dan Wiens and family near St. Adolphe, just south of Winnipeg, in 1992. The Wiens Farm operates on the community shared agriculture model whereby customers make a single advance payment in spring and receive weekly deliveries of fresh vegetables throughout the growing season. The farm also sells vegetables at farmers' markets and to restaurants in Winnipeg. Virtually all the food grown on the Wiens farm is eaten within 50 kilometres of the field.

Many of the farmers are involved in food security advocacy and other activism in the off-season. They believe activism should have some dirt under its fingernails and good, non-corporate food in its belly.

To learn more about the Wiens Shared Farm, see "The king of Swaziland" in the Spring 2007 issue of *The Canadian Organic Grower*.

potluck or a square dance was just as natural as visiting a relative. She was spared the indignity of growing up with an industrial food system that offers little for the human soul.

Coral is now part of a “collective” of young people that has evolved together with our farm over the last several years. Until this year, this group of about eight people (including Wilma and me) did all the farming at Wiens Farm. Starting this season, the collective will be operating its own new independent CSA. They will rent land and equipment from us, we will provide some mentoring—but they will be doing their own thing.

CSAs are unique expressions of the communities from which they arise.

It thrills me down to my farmer bones to know that some of the young people who grew up with our farm are now leading a new generation of food activists. I fully anticipate that Coral and her cohorts will take the food revolution (of which CSA is only a part) to new and exciting places well beyond the capacity of my imagination. This gives me hope for the future of CSA farming.

Over the years, some people have suggested that CSA is just a flash in the pan—another fad that will soon fade. Indeed one of the most critical times of any movement is the season of transfer from the first generation to the second. I think we are in that season right now. Young

people like Coral are smoothing the intergenerational transfer and bringing new life to the movement.

Coral’s story is only one of hundreds that could be told from 16 years of CSA at the Wiens Farm. But I think her story is most intriguing to me at this moment because she embodies something I dreamt about and hoped for from the very beginning. The dream was that the community around our farm would somehow keep the whole thing going when Wilma and I are done.

I hasten to add that Wilma and I are far from being done with farming. We’re only in our 40s and probably have 30 years of farming left in us. At least I hope so. I relish the notion of farming well into my “retirement years.” And what a joy and opportunity to have younger generations doing their thing very close at hand.

Wilma and I clearly have a lot to gain from working closely with these new farmers. For instance, they are much more committed to the elimination of fossil fuels in their farming practice than we are. In their own gentle and sometimes annoying way, they nudge us in the direction of their fossil fuel-free idealism. Without them, our farm would not have seen solar cooking, biofuel greenhouse heating and a summer-time ban on tractors in the garden. There is real goodness in having multiple generations farm in the same space.

There are also some challenges with proximity. Last year it became clear to me that operating a farm with a group of people doesn’t suit my personality. I admit that I’m a bit of a dictator

in the garden. My habit is to wander into the garden early in the morning to observe and then make decisions on what needs to be done. Maybe the broccoli needs watering, or the carrots need weeding, or that third batch of lettuce needs planting. Whatever it is, I prefer to simply go ahead and do it. The last thing on my mind is consultation. You can guess that this style of doing things caused some tension in our collective group of farmers. Fortunately, we worked through this in a constructive way and came up with the idea of two distinct farms working in collaboration with each other. Where there was one farm, now there are two. As I write this, I’m reminded of the little amoeba in the microscope that divides to become two individuals. Except in this case, the offspring are quite different from each other.

The beauty of the CSA farm is that it moulds and shapes itself around the character and personalities of its farmers and sharers.

Just like snowflakes, no two CSAs are created the same. They are by definition unique expressions of the communities from which they arise.

This diversity is a beautiful thing. I think of it as an antidote for the mind-numbing sameness of our age. The clothes we wear, the houses we live in and the food we eat are all products of monoculture. Consider the retail outlets that have recently popped up



Coral Maloney (orange shirt) with other young farmers at Wiens Farm in 1992.

(often on the best farmland) around our cities. These cookie cutter copies reflect nothing of the communities in which they're placed. Even in Beijing, China, where I was recently travelling, I passed by a Wal-Mart that could have been in suburban Winnipeg. The beauty of the CSA farm is that it moulds and shapes itself around the characters and personalities of its farmers and sharers. By definition, it is rooted and grounded in the local. This is why I think it's healthy for Coral to be a part of a new CSA that is free to make its own way in the world—together with its sharers.

In our first CSA year, we received a lot of media attention (CSA was a brand new concept back then). During a TV interview, a reporter asked me if I was planning to franchise the idea. That must have been quite the sight. I just stood there on national television staring blankly at the reporter. I was dumbstruck by what I considered an absurd question. I think I eventually said something about how the very idea of CSA defies the possibility

of anybody off the farm controlling how things are done.

In many ways, CSA farms are dependent on each other for good health (think of Coral's new CSA and the Wiens Farm). In other ways, they are free agents that can't be tied down to a formulaic way of doing things.

Local community ownership of our food system is a trust that must be nurtured and protected for the sake of both food security and our humanity. When I think about what we've accomplished on our farm over the last 16 years, I think about relationships—the unseen fibre that binds people together. This is the real stuff of our humanity, it's invisible, yet it's the thing that gives life meaning.

The true ledger sheet of any CSA farm is a calculus of relationships. Although it's not really about mathematics, it's more about art. Indeed, CSA farmers are artists of the invisible. Our canvas is the food



Coral is now a CSA farmer.

system and our paint is the invisible stuff between people. The artwork is unseen, yet very knowable and deeply felt.

And so it's with deep gratitude that I say, happy farming Coral!

Wilma and Dan Wiens have operated Wiens Shared Farm, one of Canada's first CSAs, since 1992.

Dan Wiens will be the keynote speaker at the Great Lakes Community Shared Agriculture Conference to be held Nov. 21–23 in Orillia, Ontario. This conference is a joint project of COG, Ignatius Jesuit Centre, the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario and Heifer International. There will be a CSA mini-school on November 21 to introduce the concepts and practices of CSA farming. For details, visit www.csaconference2008.ca.