

Pathways to Local Food Systems

A presentation by Robert Waldrop to the 2nd US Conference on Peak Oil and Community Solutions,
This list it is not a cookie-cutter recipe but rather a map of pathways and routes towards creating a local food system.

FORM AND FUNCTION FOLLOW THE FOOD

What's important about this is the food – where does it come from? How is it produced? How does it get from producer to consumer? Everything depends on that. In the agribusiness system, food follows form and function. Tomato varieties are selected not because they taste good, but rather because they can be harvested while still green by machines, shipped long distances, and then gassed to turn red. Taste and nutrition are secondary issues. That's why supermarket tomatoes taste like watery moosh.

LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS GROW OUT OF PERSONAL CHOICES

The place to start is with your own kitchen, your own food choices, your own diet. Personal and household choices about where and how we spend our grocery money and kitchen time are fundamental to the design of the local food system.

WE START SMALL OR WE DON'T START AT ALL.

Nobody can revolutionize their household diet and local food economy overnight. But everybody can find someplace to start. Where that starting point is is less important than the fact that a person get started.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.

Supermarkets gather knowledge for customers. You don't have to research what is available, you just look on the shelf. Thus, one of the most important local food structures is an information directory. The Oklahoma Food Cooperative began initially as a simple directory on the internet. That directory grew out of my own personal research into local sources for basic foods.

BE WILLING TO EMBRACE CHANGE.

A local food system is about distributing basic foods; it does not look like Wal Mart. Don't expect the "convenience" offered by manufactured foods. While the process is not always easy, the change that the "permacultured kitchen" brings to your household is uniformly positive. The food will be more nutritious, it will taste better, and you will feel better about your work in the kitchen.

EAT WITH THE SEASON.

Real life has rhythms and seasons, and so does food. We have learned by sad experience that by extravagant expenditures of energy and oppression we could have summer salads in winter, but what does this willingness to oppress third world farmers say about our personal and social moralities? As the seasons change, winter food from the local food economy will be different from summer food.

BE TEMPERATE IN YOUR SELECTION OF FOODS.

The virtue of temperance is the practice of balance – not too much, not too little, just the right amount. A local food system offers a wealth of regional tastes and food delights, but without lusting for the gluttony of the on-demand agribusiness food system. Be wary of eating foods that are unsustainably harvested, such as ocean fish, and products with a high degree of environmental degradation and social injustice in their production, such as non-fair trade certified coffee and chocolate.

PREPARE YOUR MEALS FROM BASIC INGREDIENTS.

The permacultured kitchen in a local food system offers meals prepared from basic ingredients. Not everybody has these skills in the beginning, but people can develop better food preparation practices so that using basic ingredients fits into the urban lifestyle. I once complained to my grandmother that I couldn't make a decent pie crust. She said, "Bobby Max, the problem is you haven't made enough pies. When you have made 100 pie crusts, then you will be able to make a great pie crust as quick as a whistle."

DEVELOP THE ORGANIZATION AND SYSTEMS OF YOUR KITCHEN.

Look at the whole system, and see it as an organic whole rather than just a jumble of disparate elements. The question isn't "what do I have for dinner tonight", but rather, "what am I eating this season? Where does the food come from?" People with a lot of experience in permacultured kitchens might be able to get by without planning their meals, but that doesn't describe most of us, especially in the beginning. Planning menus and the acquisition and preparation of the ingredients are necessary design opportunities.

USE ENERGY AND RESOURCES FRUGALLY. WASTE NOT, WANT NOT!

Never use a garbage disposal, compost all kitchen waste. Get some worms, they will eat your garbage! Install a demand water heater and/or solar water heating. Ditch the dishwasher machine, electric can opener, and garbage compactor. Buy wind power electricity if it is available from your utility. Get a manual defrost refrigerator and a separate chest freezer. Never buy paper towels, paper napkins, or disposable plates and utensils, use cloth towels and rags and natural sponges like luffas. . Make your own non-toxic kitchen cleaners or buy all-natural products made in your local area. Install grey water recycling and rainwater harvesting systems.

LEARN HOW TO PRESERVE AND PROCESS FOODS AT HOME OR IN COMMUNITY KITCHENS.

Our household likes "cheese whiz", but we don't buy it, we make it from real cheese we buy from a farmer. We like roasted peanuts, so we buy peanuts in season from farmers and then roast them all year long. We don't buy cut-up chicken, we buy whole chickens from farmers and cut them up ourselves. We grow our own fruit, and make jams, jellies, salsas, pickles, condiments. During produce season, you can often find good buys on large quantities of produce. Buy extra and preserve it for winter eating. Tools and equipment can be owned by individual households, but community and religious organizations can also purchase such equipment and make it available in community kitchens. Many food preservation and processing tasks are easier when done by a group.

BUY LOCALLY PRODUCED FOODS.

Stay out of supermarkets as much as possible. Buying foods from local farmers is the urban permaculture equivalent of Zones 3 and 4. To facilitate this in our area, we helped organize the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, whose producer members sell Oklahoma foods. Our household gets 80% of its food either from local farmers or from the gardens on our former yards. Locally produced foods tend to cost more than the manufactured foods of the supermarkets, but overall we aren't spending any more for food now than we were back when we bought everything at the grocery store. Then we bought prepared & packaged foods, now we buy basic ingredients. For items simply not available from a local market, seek out organic sources, and if imported, look for fair trade certification. If this increases your costs, then use less of these imported foods (coffee, tea, bananas, chocolate, citrus fruit, etc.)

NEVER BUY MEATS FROM CONFINED ANIMAL FEEDING OPERATIONS.

With a very few exceptions in certain regions, all meats in supermarkets originate in Confined Animal Feeding Operations, and every dollar spent for them subsidizes a terrible food production system that creates much social and environmental evil. Access to local and natural meats and poultry is a major challenge for urban residents. One solution to the higher cost of locally produced meats is to "eat less meat" – set limits to your personal consumption. Eat less expensive cuts – more ground meat than roast or steaks. With farmer-direct meats, the more you buy, the better the price. This is an incentive to build community. Four households could go together and buy a whole beef from a farmer, or a whole pig. Where would you find someone willing to sell a whole beef? Start by asking at the farmers market, look for phone listings for "custom butchers" in rural towns (they usually keep a list of farmers willing to sell meat directly to the public). Look for red meats that are 100% forage fed and free ranging. People who can't access natural meats raised in the local area should consider vegetarianism. People who buy eggs, meats and poultry from grocery stores should not kid themselves about the animal cruelty and environmental degradation made profitable by those food choices.

PRACTICE FOOD STORAGE AND DESIGN FOR ECONOMY.

Every household should design for catastrophe. There are a hundred things that could happen in a heartbeat that would disrupt the steady flow of trucks to and from warehouses and grocery stores that feed our urban areas. A well-stocked home pantry is an essential aspect of family and community food security in the event of disruptions to the food distribution system. A well-stocked home pantry is also an enormous convenience in today's busy world. It can easily take an hour to drive to the store, park, hike across a 40 acre parking lot, navigate a crowded and poorly organized store, stand in line at the checkout, hike back across the acreage to the automobile, and then drive home – just to get "a few things for dinner". Store what you eat – and eat what you store.

GROW AT LEAST SOME OF YOUR OWN FOOD.

We live in an urban central city, we have about 1/7th of an acre with a duplex, small house, sidewalks and driveway. Even so we manage to cultivate more than 100 different varieties of useful or edible plants on our former lawns, 2/3rds of which are perennials. We do not aim for self-sufficiency on our property, instead, we grow foods that (in our opinion) produce a lot of value for the space they need – 23 different organic fruits, 28 varieties of herbs, hot peppers (6 varieties), cooking greens (mustard, kale, chard, spinach, collards), and lots of alliums (garlic, onion and garlic chives, walking onions, multiplying onions, Welsh onions). This year we designed and planted tomato guilds of basil, chives, petunias, marigolds, pansies, horehound, asparagus, bee balm, hot peppers, and borage with our tomatoes. We don't raise wheat or corn because of space constraints and our easy access to these products through the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. People without land can join community gardens, and it is entirely possible to raise food on concrete using containers. This year we are growing potatoes in buckets!

LOOK FOR A VARIETY OF STRUCTURES

A local food system produces a variety of foods, and thus we expect that there will be a variety of structures that produce and distribute that food. A short-list includes: on-farm or in-town vegetable stands operated by individual farmers, farmers' markets, fairs, Community Supported Agriculture/subscription programs, cooperatives, and other forms of direct sales from farmers to customers. Minimize extra costs by embracing direct relationships between farmers and urban residents.

DON'T LET THE PERFECT BECOME THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD.

Nobody goes from 100% bad food choices to 100% good, better, or best choices overnight. But procrastination is equally problematic. Wholes are made from parts, and if you can't see the total solution in the beginning, step back and pick one thing that you can understand and do that. Then look at your situation again and do something else. Everyone can find something to start with and that's where each person should begin. One thing leads to another, and before a person realizes that time is passing, permaculture has been transformed from an esoteric science to a lived reality in their kitchen.