

Audrey Swanenberg
2012 Betty and Edgar Sweren Student Book Collecting Contest
The Green Thumb Collection

***The Green Thumb Collection:
A Future Farmer's Book Collection for Practical Knowledge***

I am a grower. I cultivate vegetables, but more important than the actual vegetables I harvest, I'm cultivating my knowledge of agriculture. To become a successful farmer you have to have a grasp on such disparate subjects as botany and marketing.

The road from suburbia to becoming an aspiring young farmer took me all around the world. But books provided the catalyst for turning a hobby into my future career.

I grew up in the northern suburbs of Chicago, where all is neat and immaculate. Lawns are for perfect carpets of grass and sprinklers. The names of trees are only familiar as street names.

Despite the sterile landscape of the suburbs, I developed a love for the outdoors at a young age. My parents encouraged this love for the outdoors by taking my older sister and I to many national parks during our childhood. I understood the city, the suburbs like my town, and the national parks...but farmland? It would take me until into my third decade to appreciate farmland and the importance of agriculture in all of our lives.

For my junior year last year, I went on a multiple country, comparative study abroad program that took me to India, Tanzania, New Zealand and Mexico. We were studying global environmental and social issues through the lens of local issues. We visited *countless* farms, hearing farmer after farmer preaching the gospel of sustainable agriculture.

During our time in India, I spent two weeks at a biodynamic farm in Maharashtra, India. The family practiced Gandhian principles in their daily life and during the week living with them I grew accustomed to their rhythm and the purposefulness of all of their actions. The father of the family allowed me to cultivate my own plot during my week there, and I got down in the soil planting garlic and spinach. In my final days on the farm, the seeds were already sprouting. Looking back, it really could be a metaphor for my sprouting interest in taking agriculture more closely to my heart.

Agriculture is the obvious interface between our social and environmental worlds. It's how we get our sustenance from the land we so often forget we live on. If you realize how countries like the United States have an obesity epidemic while other parts of the world face issues of malnourishment, you realize that something is amuck with the global trends

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in agriculture. We have more people incarcerated in the United States than farmers. And the average age of those few farmers is 57. It's time for young people like me to step up and devote our lives to growing food for others, and trying to make a living from it.

But you don't start by buying land. You start by reading books. During the New Zealand portion of my study abroad program, I would sneak away by myself to the public library of Wellington to read gardening books. Garden design books. Production books. Soil science books. Anything I could get my hands on to get started. But I was impatient. I didn't have my own space yet to cultivate.

When I returned home from study abroad, I proposed to my parents that I could grow vegetables in the front yard. My parents are good sports, and they let me take over approximately 200 square feet of our front lawn and turn it into my first vegetable garden. It could be called "full-frontal gardening" in the suburbs. *Finally*, I could begin applying some of the tricks and methods I had been reading about for months.

What so excites me about these books is that I can rarely read more than 10 pages without wanting to jump out of my seat and run outside to do a project. What's better than books leading to action? There is an obvious relationship between reading about a great new project to construct cold frames (ground-level green houses) and wanting to get outside and do it. So many of my readings in University cover abstract concepts and ideas, but gardening and farming is literally rooted in the ground, and that connection to the earth just feels right.

My interest in agriculture is both a reaction to feeling alienated from the living world around us, and a genuine passion for making my life work be towards tangibly creating a better world for both humans and the environment. Agriculture is not some romanticized lifestyle, as Eliot Coleman warns in his final chapter of *The New Organic Grower*. Each farmer must become a polymath, able to deftly swing from discipline to discipline.

This book collection may be only about one year old, but my career in agriculture is taking off just as there is a burgeoning movement of urban gardens and farms. Many young people are choosing to cultivate land for their livelihood. There are centuries worth of knowledge, and books provide the necessary leap pad to begin understanding all the various components of agriculture. I am currently in a Beginning Farmer Training Program, an apprenticeship through the Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture. I am apprenticing at a family farm in Joppa, Maryland called

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Flying Plow Farm, which utilizes horse-powered machinery to reduce fossil fuel use in food production. I am on a team helping establish the Blue Jay's Perch: Community Garden at Johns Hopkins Eastern, a quarter acre site right here in the city of Baltimore which will cultivate sustainable food and new relationships between Johns Hopkins affiliates and our Baltimore neighbors.

My book collection has allowed me to cultivate my initial knowledge of food production, and I look forward to a lifelong learning process of continually augmenting this practical knowledge through farming. I am certain my book collection will continue to grow as my practical knowledge and experience of farming does too.

Bibliography

1. Armitage, Allan. *Allan Armitage on Perennials*. New York: Prentice Hall Gardening, 1993.

The necessity for perennials in a farm ecosystem is often overlooked in our modern conception of productive food systems. Perennials provide the critical habitat creation for some of the most vital beneficial insects and pollinators for a healthy agro-ecosystem. One of the greatest parts of this book is its in-depth descriptions of the benefits of various cultivars (varieties of specific species best suited for various geographies).

2. Bales, Suzanne Frutig. *American Gardening Series: Container Gardening*. New York: Prentice Hill Gardening, 1993.

As a city-dweller and grower, I appreciate a gardening book dedicated to those of us with only limited square footage to play with. This book has vivid color photos depicting some very creative uses and re-uses of materials to provide very aesthetically pleasing growing mediums for a variety of plants.

3. Bartholomew, Mel. *All New Square Foot Gardening: Grow More in Less Space*. Brentwood, Tennessee: Cool Springs Press, 2005.

All gardeners know Mel Bartholomew. When his name comes up amongst gardeners, there is a sacred shared understanding for the importance of his concepts for home gardeners around the world. This best-selling book clearly and simply explains a gardening method that maximizes space by growing intensively. This is a must-have for any new gardener.

4. Bradley, Fern Marshall, Barbara W. Ellis and Deborah L. Martin, eds. *The Organic Gardener's Handbook of Natural Pest and Disease Control: A Complete Guide to Maintaining a Healthy Garden and Yard the Earth-Friendly Way*. New York: Rodale, Inc., 2009.

Is something wrong with your plants? This is the most trusted go-to guide for self-diagnosing issues in your garden. With four sections that explain how you should develop a healthy growing medium (soil) for your plants to prevent issues, to identifying disease symptoms and solutions, identifying pests and finally how to use organic pest and disease management strategies.

5. Brady, Nyle C. *The Nature and Properties of Soils*. Cornell University and the United States Agency for International Development. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Don't treat your soil like dirt! Soil is the base of all life, a living medium where our nutrients cycle through. This textbook from Cornell University (one of the Universities leading the way in promoting small-scale sustainable agriculture) highlights the importance of understanding your complex "canvas" for both farming and gardening.

6. Burns, Deborah, ed. *The Xerces Society Guide: Attracting Native Pollinators, Protecting North America's Bees and Butterflies*. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2011.

Honeybee populations in North America are suffering from 'Colony Collapse Disorder', a problem that colonies are dying off and beekeepers are not sure exactly why. We rely on pollinators for 1/3 of the vegetables, fruits and nuts that we consume, and our pollinator populations are in deep decline. This guide explains how homeowners and farmers can design habitats on their property to foster better habitats for the native pollinators, so that we do not have to keep our metaphorical eggs all in the honeybee basket.

7. Capon, Brian. *Botany for Gardeners: the Most Useful and Accessible Introduction to the Science of Plants*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2010.

As a Sociology major, I have steered clear of hard science courses during my undergraduate career. My mental biology muscles have not been used since high school. Yet as the title claims, this truly is the most accessible introduction to the science of plants that I have come across.

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8. Chandoha, Walter. *Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides: 100 Garden Tips and Time Savers*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Inc., 2005.

The Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides are some of the best guides out there for beginners. This book details different timesaving tips and tricks from a veteran gardener, Walter Chandoha.

9. Coleman, Eliot. *The New Organic Grower: A Master's Manual of Tools and Techniques for the Home and Market Gardener*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1995.

Without a doubt, this is my most treasured book in my collection. It is easily the book I refer to most when trouble-shooting in the garden. Eliot Coleman is arguably the most trusted name in small-scale, organic production circles, he has been at work for decades longer than most. This book distills his decades' worth of knowledge into one easy to read guide.

10. Cotler, Amy. *The Locavore Way, Discover and Enjoy the Pleasures of Locally Grown Food*. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2009.

While this book does not have nitty-gritty details for projects, it explains the importance of cultivating a lifestyle that incorporates local food. This narrative explains the ideological background for why we need more small-scale farmers, given the imperfections of our current food system.

11. *Country Wisdom and Know-how, Everything You Need to Know to Live Off the Land*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2004.

My mother gave me this book as a present, and this large volume is a compilation of many projects for homesteaders. One of the often-lacking components to these guidebooks is really good photography and graphics depicting the projects, yet this book has a remarkable collection of illustrated step-by-step instructions for everything from sowing curtains to sowing a bed of spinach seeds. I have used the instruction for constructing cold frames for the new community garden at Johns Hopkins Eastern.

12. Dunne, Niall, ed. *Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides: Great Natives for Tough Places*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Inc., 2009.

Native plants are some of the most resilient and beautiful plants around. Local nurseries, such as the Herring Run Nursery here in Baltimore, have a

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wide variety of locally sourced native plants that can add beauty and resiliency to a garden landscape. They also provide important habitat for native pollinators.

13. Dunne, Niall, ed. *Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides: Healthy Soils for Sustainable Gardens*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Inc., 2009.

One can never have enough books on soil. The best part of this book is its detailed description of composting methods, critical in any growing operation. Composting provides the opportunity to recycle our nutrients back into production.

14. Gilbertie, Sal and Larry Sheehan. *Small-plot, High-yield Gardening*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2010.

My favorite part of this book is the detailed design layouts and crop rotation descriptions; I have used aspects of these layouts in the garden design for the new community garden at Johns Hopkins Eastern. Sal Gilbertie clearly and directly explains production methods that utilize 'succession planting', so that you can cultivate two harvests of each crop per season by planting on coordinated dates.

15. Hemenway, Toby. *Gaia's Garden: A Guide to Home-scale Permaculture*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2009.

This is the bible of small-scale permaculturalists. This book describes a plethora of projects that can be implemented to create suburban landscapes that are more in tune with nature and less time/labor intensive.

16. Hill, Amelia Leavitt. *Gardens and Grounds that Take Care of Themselves*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958.

This is the oldest book in my collection. I was at 'The Book Thing' here in Baltimore, and came across this gem. Written in the 1950's, this book describes how already decades ago, homeowners were concerned about landscaping that was not time and labor intensive. Although the methods are more conventional (pesticides and fertilizers) than I am comfortable with, it's an interesting read for an understanding of how my grandparents understood suburban landscaping.

17. Kellogg, Scott and Stacy Pettigrew. *Toolbox for Sustainable City Living*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2008.

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I attended a weekend seminar by Scott Kellogg in Albany, New York at his RADIX Center for Sustainability. We learned everything from rainwater harvesting to aquaponics to beekeeping methods. This book provides the explanation for those projects and provides a great section for further reading.

18. Kirby, Ellen and Elizabeth Peters. *Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides: Community Gardening*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Inc., 2008.

I have been working with a team of undergraduates, faculty, staff and community members to bring a new community garden to the Johns Hopkins Eastern campus. We have been very successful, and this is just the beginning of our first growing season. This book provides narratives on multiple urban farming and community garden projects across the country, and I was able to glean ideas from many of these other projects for our own garden.

19. Kraska, Martha E. *American Gardening Series: Herbs*. New York: Prentice Hall Gardening, 1992.

Herbs are an excellent choice in a garden because they look great all the time and you can harvest them anytime. In the early spring and late fall when the vegetable beds are looking their worst, you can trust that the herb garden section will be looking vibrant. This book details the various herbs you may want to cultivate, explains their needs and even details some rare and obscure herbs.

20. Riotte, Louise. *Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening*. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 1998.

This classic by Louise Riotte outlines successful companion planting methods, incorporating multiple crops in one vegetable row so they can take advantage of one another. A classic example of companion planting is the 'Three Sisters': beans, corn and squash. The beans use the corn stalks as a climbing trellis and amend the soil by fixing nitrogen and the squash on the ground is a heavy feeder that benefits from the extra nitrogen and also reduces weed pressure for the corn.

21. Springer, Lauren. *American Gardening Series: Waterwise Gardening*. New York: Prentice Hall Gardening, 1994.

In the northeast we are blessed with large amounts of rain (occasionally, "over-blessed"), but nonetheless it is important to consider how to grow crops

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without having to rely too heavily on your sprinkler. It saves water, money and labor for the gardener. Planting a variety of native species is just one tactic to reduce the water needs in your garden.

22. Stein, Siegfried. *Originele Tuinideeën: Groente- en kruidentuinen*. Aartselaar, Belgium: Deltas, 2003.

My father is a native of the Netherlands, and I was visiting relatives in Holland this past summer and I came across this book in a store. I find it to be a very interesting juxtaposition between my “American” books, because this Western European attitude towards gardening is one very much about humans controlling every aspect of the garden. Most of my “American” books detail how to work with nature, and not against it as this book does.

Wishlist Bibliography

This wishlist tells you a lot about the type of farming operation I hope to have someday. There are elements in farming (livestock and orchard management for example) that I have very limited experience with. The first step is to read, the second step is to apprentice, and the third step is to do it yourself (most importantly in the third step: be sure to learn from your mistakes!). You will see that most of these books are from the past year or two; this kind of sustainable growing is growing in popularity!

1. Carpenter, Novella and Willow Rosenthal. *The Essential Urban Farmer*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

There was a buzz on the Internet among urban farmers when this book was published recently. Novella Carpenter and Willow Rosenthal are two established urban farmers who have been working on projects for years, and in this book they detail the trials and triumphs of specific urban agriculture production methods.

2. Lowenfels, Jeff and Wayne Lewis. *Teaming with Microbes: The Organic Gardener's Guide to the Soil Food Web*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2010.

The soil is a whole world unto itself, a living ecosystem that is our growing medium. Microbes form an important part of that ecosystem, and this book explains how growers can more effectively use the beneficial qualities of microbes.

3. Phillips, Michael. *The Holistic Orchard: Tree Fruits and Berries the Biological Way*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011.

Orchards. This book provides detail explanation of how to have a 'Holistic Orchard', including such tips as keeping your chickens fenced inside your established orchard for pest reduction (chickens are omnivores and will gobble up any insects they can find for protein) and increased fertilization.

4. Pitzer, Sara. *Homegrown Whole Grains*. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2009.

Grains are an excellent source of protein and other nutrients, but they are one of the most space-intensive crops to cultivate. This books details production methods for barley, buckwheat, corn, heirloom grains, millet, oats, rice, rye, and wheat.

5. Ussery, Harvey. *The Small-Scale Poultry Flock: An All-Natural Approach to Raising Chickens and Other Fowl for Home and Market Growers*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011.

Chickens are the next frontier. Incorporating livestock into an agricultural operation is critical for closing nutrient cycles (chickens eat scraps and produce both fertilizer and eggs, they're wonderful!). But animals involve a lot of maintenance and care.