

Environment

Rebersburg farmer puts a face on agriculture

by Peter Buckland

Lyn Garling thrives on authenticity. "I like places run by humans, where they have something personally invested—not just money," Garling said.

A serious woman with no pretenses, but quick to smile, she is the owner of Over the Moon Farm in Rebersburg. The modest five-acre plot she started with in the windswept valley west of Centre Hall has grown to 21 acres of ecologically sound and ethically used farmland.

In a world that has become increasingly automated and homogenized, she brings a real face back to agriculture.

Garling arrived in Pennsylvania in 1992, after leaving her post at the Apprenticeship and Ecological Horticulture program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She rented a farm near Woodward where she raised heifers and then chickens.

After a few years, she moved and started Over the Moon, where she raises cattle, pigs, turkeys and chickens; boards heifers for other local farmers; and maintains a small apiary. She also maintains a few polycultural plots where she gardens sweet potatoes, brussels sprouts, garlic, pumpkins, leeks and other vegetables.

Annually, she produces from 800 to 1,200 chickens and 50 to 80 turkeys, along with as many as 12 pigs and six cattle. Her chickens are processed by local butchers and her cattle and pigs at a facility certified by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The turkeys are housed in a special shed that can be moved around the farm for optimal grazing. Meat chickens, raised separately from the turkeys because of the risk of disease, are treated similarly, while the egg-laying hens live in a henhouse close to the farmhouse.

During a tour of the pigpen, empty for the winter, she explained the pleasures and perils of raising pigs.

"Everything you do with pigs you have to be really careful, because they're really smart," Garling said. "They can figure out how to open latches and get out of their pens."

"You can throw them a rotting pumpkin and they go 'woo hoo!' They'll totally devour it," she said.

Garling also farms hay, most of which is organic, that she sells to other local farmers.

"If you're a female farmer, you are the husband and the wife. The wife works, gets health insurance. It's more than two full-time jobs."

--Lyn Garling, Over the Moon Farm

Some of it, she said, can't be certified organic because a neighboring farmer has refused to not spray pesticides near the boundary with her farm.

Volunteers can work during the summer, living in a cottage on the farm, to learn the ropes of sustainable and organic farming. All of her animals are free-range and organically fed. She uses no pesticides or commercial fertilizers.

In the world of industrialized agriculture, Garling is something of a maverick in this regard. As an example, she cited the archetypal American corn farmer who plants row after row of corn to be processed into scores of products, from corn syrup to ethanol. The huge expected yields up the ante for cheap pesticides, insecticides, fertilizers and genetically modified seeds designed by companies like Monsanto, Cargill or ADM.

But Garling doesn't look for easy solutions.

"I do the stuff that I can do with my constellation of strengths and weaknesses," she said.

Her strengths are considerable. Garling, who holds graduate degrees in both zoology and entomology, also works at the Penn State College of Agriculture's Integrated Pest Management program, where she studies the life cycle of pests, their evolved niches and the natural limits in their ecologies. IPM is concerned with preventing pest outbreaks without resorting to chemical pesticides.

Maintaining an ecologically balanced farm is time-consuming. But she has found support in the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, which held its annual conference in early February at the Penn State Conference Center in State College. PASA is one of the best sustainable agriculture organizations in the country, she said, adding that the organization does a good job bringing in different perspectives.

"It's a diverse coalition of folks—Amish to Birkenstocked hippies to professional farmers," she said.

As a farmer and university employee,

farmers' wives must take on the usual nine-to-five jobs. Garling does both.

"If you're a female farmer, you are the husband and the wife. The wife works, gets health insurance, while tax subsidies fix the tractor," Garling said. "It's more than two full-time jobs."

Garling said she feels a very deep con-

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Garling embodies that diversity. She also fulfills two different gender roles. Typically, male farmers do the hard labor on the farm. But since many make very little money, the

Shiitake shtick



Photo by Suzan Erem

Paul Goland, owner of Hardscrabble, a West Virginia company, illustrates the man-made wooden plugs he places in logs to help generate the production of shiitake mushrooms. He sold the logs at the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture's annual conference on the Penn State campus in February. The conference drew more than 1,900 participants from 39 states and four countries.

State College: Vegetable Garden City?

by Christopher Uhl

When I was a little kid, my family had a vegetable garden. One day, I took it upon myself to add a big helping of fertilizer around the base of all the tomato plants.

When I returned to the garden the next day, I was shocked to see that those tomato plants had died. I had over-fertilized them. Later, when my father asked me if I knew what had happened to those dead plants, I shook my head, but I think my dad knew.

Now, almost 50 years later, I am having a second try at vegetable gardening, and I am going at it with gusto. For example, just this past weekend, my partner, Dana, and I ordered 50 different types of seeds from a vegetable catalogue. We will be planting some of the seeds—the cold-hardy ones—next month, as soon as the soil thaws. I can hardly wait! It may sound crazy, but I can't get vegetables off my mind. In part, this is because I love food, and I have come to see that the very best foods for me to eat are locally grown, fresh vegetables.

But there is more: I am discovering the joy and deep satisfaction that comes from growing my own food, and I want to share this joy with others by helping to create a vision of Central Pennsylvania as a vegetable gardening hotspot, with State College as the "Garden City." So fast forward with me five years into the future and imagine State College with vegetable gardens everywhere—on school and church grounds, in municipal parks, on office park

Our
World

land, in backyards and front yards.

Imagine, too, vegetables growing in the winter in scores of hoop houses located all throughout town. Imagine people coming together to eat wholesome, homegrown, fresh food all year long. Far-fetched? I don't think so. For starters, note that there is no shortage of potential arable land for the enactment of this vision. Indeed, many schools have tracts of land that are not in use. Easterly Parkway Elementary, located right across from where Dana and I live in State College, has a playground that covers about one acre and another two or three acres of land that are simply mowed.

The mowed land could be converted into a school minifarm or food laboratory that could provide food for both the school cafeteria and the families of the school children. Teachers could use the food laboratory to teach students about health, soil science, insect biology, horticulture, sales, geometry, cooking, physical fitness and much more.

Aside from schools, substantial tracts of idle land are under the control of businesses. In State College, there are many acres of mowed lawn associated with the enterprises off of Science Park Road. With a bit of entrepreneurial chutzpah, those lawns could

be stitched together into one or more urban minifarms.

The land itself could be leased at a nominal fee to young, aspiring farmers who lack the capital to purchase farmland of their own. The vegetables produced in such minifarms could be made available, in the form of a weekly food basket, to the employees of the companies leasing the land. It would be a win-win-win situation.

Companies would no longer need to spend money maintaining and mowing large expanses of lawn, and they would maybe even save on health care costs because their employees would be eating fresh, healthy food. Meanwhile, job opportunities would open up for aspiring farmers. Lastly, the local economy would benefit because food dollars would be channeled directly to local producers, rather than



going to food producers in far-off places.

There is one final option for urban agriculture that is easy to overlook. I was alerted to it when a friend who lives on a one-third-acre lot in State College said that she would be delighted if someone wanted to grow vegetables on her property.

This leads me to wonder if there might be many folks who don't want to garden themselves but who would be willing to lease a portion of their yards in exchange for a basket of vegetables each week.

And maybe, just maybe, there are some young folks among us who would like to get their hands dirty doing real and ennobling work. Just think of it: dozens of young, itinerant farmers, moving from plot to plot throughout State College, turning lawns into verdant vegetable gardens and making food available throughout our neighborhoods.

These are my thoughts and dreams amidst February snow. Maybe there are other folks with similar visions. If so, let's talk! You can find Dana and me in our front-yard vegetable garden.

from Farmer, pg. 19

nection to the animals she raises, the earth she farms and the community she serves.

Garling currently has about 120 regular clients to whom she markets directly through e-mail, and she has no plans to increase production. She said her farm is too small and she doesn't want to introduce a middleman. Additionally, expanding the operation would decrease the farm's diversity and force her to sell outside the local market.

"What's the point in eating local food if you're putting it on an airplane?" she said.

Garling encourages would-be customers from outside of the Centre Region to search for their own local, organic or sustainable growers by contacting groups like PASA. She also encourages people to think critically about all of the information they receive about food.

"We are all so affected by what goes into our eyes that it's analogous to what we eat," she said, citing the "Certified Angus" labels as an example.

"What does it mean?" she asked skeptically. "It's a marketing caché. Certified Angus beef doesn't have to come from an Angus cow. It just has to be black. You think you have choice when you go into the supermarket, but it's just packaging of the same stuff."

"Labels come from companies who have psychologists who play on desires," she said. "It has nothing to do with the actual quality of the product."

Garling hopes that she, and farmers like her, can be an antidote.

"People can come here, see my farm, they can work here if they want to, see a physical place with a physical person who is invested in this process," she said. "There are no smoke and mirrors here."

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Red-winged blackbirds herald spring's approach

by Alice Fuller

BIRD Watch

“O-ka-leeeee!”

What a wonderful salute to spring! This throaty sound is the song of the male red-winged blackbird. You can almost hear it pouring out of the wide-open mouth of the red-wing in Dorothy Bordner's drawing. As March begins, soon the solos of the male red-wings will be accompanied by the piping of spring peepers, the rumbling chorus of frogs and the trill of lovesick toads.

One of the first signs of spring is the large blackbird flocks, which may include grackles, cowbirds and rusty blackbirds. We saw many such flocks back in late February in Maryland, and now they are turning up around many places in central Pennsylvania.

The male red-wings are a familiar sight, for they are zealous landlords and claim vast stretches of land all across the state. They flash their pairs of red badges as proof of ownership. Plots of land possessed by individual red-wings may be small, but there are so many that a large portion of the Commonwealth is red-wing territory.

According to the Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania, the red-winged blackbird is one of the state's most widespread and abundant breeding birds. The distribution map for red-wings in the Atlas is almost solid red. The few scattered white spaces indicate forested Atlas blocks where there is little primary red-wing habitat.

Once, the red-wing was the baron of swamps, marshes and slough, areas that were thick with cattails, bulrushes, sedges and reeds that served as excellent places for concealing nests. Nowadays, one can travel almost any country road edged by fields or meadows and find red-winged blackbirds

perched along miles of overhead wires, often evenly spaced along the wires. Each male oversees his plot of ground from this vantage point and will vigorously defend it.

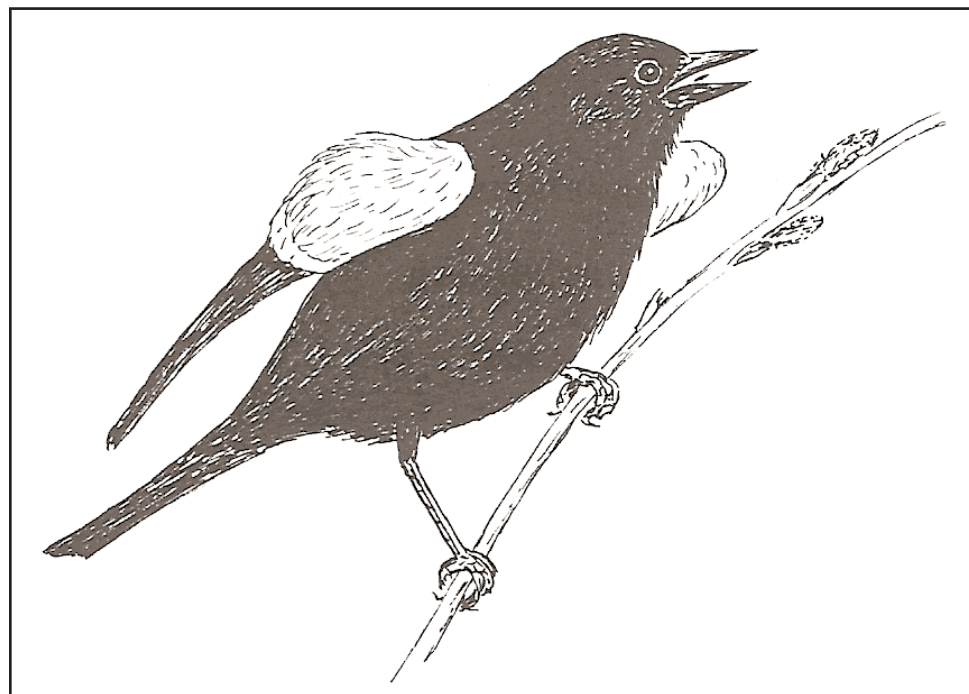
Like their songs, the red-wings' striking scarlet epaulets that contrast with the jet-black uniform are not just meaningless ornaments; they are warnings to intruders: “This is my property. Keep out!”

Studies have been carried out in which some red-winged males were captured, had their epaulets dyed black and were then released. Researchers discovered that males with blackened epaulets had trouble keeping their territories and sometimes lost them altogether. The studies also showed that females preferred males with showy epaulets to those with plain black shoulders.

Ornithologists have learned that in open country, the epaulets were more important than the song in helping birds hold territories; however, in wooded or bushy habitat thick with vegetation, the song topped the epaulets in importance.

In his book *Birds of Western Pennsylvania*, W. E. Clyde Todd gives this interesting description of the territorial male red-wing:

“Enter a cattail or an elderberry meadow in early spring, and immediately, from here, there, and everywhere, you will hear the staccato chack, chack, chack of the male, who perches sentinel-like upon a cattail top or other convenient station. One is tempted to believe that he is fully conscious of the impression he conveys as a dark-skinned scout in full uniform, whose diverse duties



as sentry and buffoon compel him at times to occupy a curious but interesting dual role.”

After the males have finally settled their territorial disputes, the females will begin to arrive. I recall feeling quite humiliated once long ago when I asked a fellow birder to help with an identification, only to find that the bird in question was a female red-winged blackbird—a bird I ought to have recognized. While I am not excusing my ignominious error, female red-wings are hardly as distinctive as their spouses. They are plain, brownish birds, heavily streaked with dark brown. This plumage helps to camouflage them in the grasses and sedges where they build their nests.

According to Todd, the first nests are built in May. June and July nestlings indicate second broods. Todd continues: “Like

their oriole cousins, the red-wings are skillful builders; they weave their nests of grasses and sedges into the upright forks of willow trees or of elder shrubs, or between the cattail rushes in the marsh. So securely is the fabric lashed to its support that the nest cannot be collected without the framework.”

Perhaps many folks tend to ignore red-winged blackbirds—or even think of them as a nuisance—because they are so common. However, when I'm traveling, I always look for them on the telephone or power lines, observing how they have spaced themselves through the countryside.

Instead of thinking of red-wings in a bad light, consider them as miniature black knights bearing bright red coats-of-arms, and remember that their sprightly songs truly herald the arrival of spring.

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