Local Food: Success is 100% Possible

Contributed by Tim of New Brunswick
01 March 2009

This is a guest post from Tim, a city planner from sunny Moncton, New Brunswick. Tim has spent some time looking into the viability of local, small-scale agriculture, and has come up with some results that give us every reason to be optimistic regarding our ability to feed ourselves through our individual and neighborhood-scale efforts
, even as the systems of large-scale, industrial agriculture and food delivery unravel due to a combination of high input costs, epic droughts brought on by accelerating climate change, and a shortage of credit caused by the financial collapse. The remaining challenge is start doing it quickly enough: this summer, that is.

Russian households (inclusive of both urban and rural) collectively grow 92% of country's potatoes on their garden-plots, the size of which is typically 600 square meters [0.15 acres] for urban households, and typically no more than 2500 square meters [0.62 acres] for rural households," tells me Dr. Leonid Sharashkin, whose dissertation, "THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD GARDENING IN THE VLADIMIR REGION OF RUSSIA" contains a wealth of specifics, based on original field research as well as Russian government data. For instance, he writes:
"In 2003, 34.8 million families (66% of all households in the country) owned gardening plots (subsidiary plot, allotment, garden, or dacha) and were involved in growing crops for subsistence (Rosstat 2005b). By 2005, 53% (by value) of the country’s total agricultural output was coming from household plots (which in 2006 occupied only 2.9% of agricultural land), while the remaining 47% (by value -- Rosstat 2006) came from the agricultural enterprises (often the former kolkhozes and sovkhozes) and individual farmers, requiring 97.1% of agricultural lands (Rosstat 2007b)." [Sharahkin, p.12]

Elsewhere in his disseration, he details how much food was being produced in household plots, and its figures were on the order of 90% of all the potatoes in Russia, 80% of all the vegetables, 50% of the meat and milk etc. In other words, very high proportions of certain products, including at least one calorie staple (potato).

Dr. Sharashkin quotes the previous figures from Russian government publications, but his dissertation also contains the results from his primary field research (and therefore are isolated from the usual concerns one might have about the reliability of government statistics): on page 162, Figure 24 indicates that, of the gardening households in the study area:

• 39% were cultivating under 0.05 hectares (i.e. 500 sq.m.);

• another 36% were cultivating between 0.05 and 0.1 hectares; and

• none of them were cultivating more than half a hectare.

In other words, 3/4 of gardening households were gardening the equivalent of two suburban house lots. (At least based on the typical house lots we have around here, which are 50-60 feet by 100 feet.)

Considering that Russia has just 110 days of growing season per year, while most of America has much longer growing season and significantly more sunshine, this is all quite encouraging from the standpoint of what Americans and Canadians could do with their tiny suburban house lots, assuming they all learn to garden quickly enough.

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