

June 25, 2015

Walker County Agriculture News Update

Greetings from the Walker County, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension office!

We had a great workshop on pond/lake weed identification and control options this week. I hope to schedule further topics later in the year. If you are interested in pond or lake management topics, keep in touch so you don't miss the announcement.



If you are interested in the July 16, **Homeowner Maintenance of Aerobic Treatment Units Class**, be sure to call in and place the date on your calendar. Cost for this class is \$100.00 per person (8:30 AM-3:30 PM with lunch provided) at the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension office, Walker County office.

This class will be for individuals wanting to manage and maintain their home waste treatment system. Directed to the homeowner, this session provides a basic training in proper evaluation of structures, equipment and operation of already installed aerobic septic systems in homes. A certificate of attendance will be provided.

These classes usually run for 6 Hours (will be a weekday/daytime class) and cost \$100.00 per participant which will include lunch. There will be a minimum number of participants for the class to make.

We would like to request that those wanting to attend, please contact the Extension Office at (936) 435-2426 so that we may place you on the class list.

In This Issue:

- **“FOODSHED” POTENTIAL**

Alternative crops and sustainable production systems are popular topics today. These were issues that came up during the AgriLife Extension, Texas Community Futures Forum back in April. A somewhat related topic that seems to be hot in the media is locally sourced agriculture.

While not exactly identical, these topics have connections and similarities amongst them within the overall concept of the ideas. I feel strongly enough about the importance of understanding these concepts, that I was compelled to write this down. Please keep in mind I am not opposed to any of the overall concepts of alternative agriculture, sustainable production **OR** locally sourced products. I recommend that we evaluate and then do what can realistically work for the agricultural community.

Before you buy into a concept, make sure you understand the issues that will come into play. I hear enough people both in person and on social media that it seems concept often becomes mindset without the individuals fully understanding the impact of what they may be promoting or saying.

A LITTLE FOOD FOR THOUGHT ON “FOODSHED” POTENTIAL?

I have been reading a few articles on the subject of local food sustainability and production. This is one of those topics that sound really good and makes you want to support the idea without hesitation. Like almost everybody, I really love and appreciate fresh produce straight from the garden. The issue for me is when we start thinking about the challenges of providing our own locally sustainable food supply through the entire year, things get complicated.

There are some parts to this issue that are intriguing and possibly very interesting from a practical aspect. I like to read about the rooftop gardening and greenhouse production systems being incorporated into some of the urban locations. We probably could use a few more of these. If you live in the city and can afford it, you may also appreciate the concept.

I don't really want to think about the economic side of the rooftop greenhouse systems too much; construction expense and infrastructure requirements, or labor. Then there is water use in already strained public systems to round out the initial list. Anybody else ever think about our cities wanting more water than they already have? And by the way, we are talking about greenhouse production so we are back to the old hothouse vs. farm grown issue. Regardless, it is still local.

Reducing the expenditures of shipping costs and carbon footprints of consumed fuel usually rise quickly to the top in the economic and environmental argument of how local food can be our saving grace. Then the added bonus, “Hey - fresh products just taste better.”

There are absolutely no arguments on taste and quality benefits of local produce from me. So if we want to promote these items as a reason to produce and consume locally sourced; no, let's say locally grown products to be a little more on the correct side, what are the issues?

Almost nobody specifically calls me to report what worked well during the growing season; I usually have to ask that question. As a professional in the agricultural sector that assists producers with educational information regarding their problems (many phone calls are related to “what is causing this

and what do I do about it”), I feel that I have a good understanding of our local challenges. At this point we need to look at the interaction of our challenges with the subject at hand.

The current US consumer is accustomed to:

- **Almost year round availability of fruits & vegetables** –won’t happen with only local production. We can’t grow/produce/harvest the same crop year round. So you like peaches and other stone fruit for example. If it was a good year with correct winter temps and no late freezes, you better learn to do your own canning. The harvest window is pretty tight even with a wide variety selection available. Don’t forget, vegetable production also has specific production and seasonal parameters as do the fruits. What just happened here, well you just moved back into a similar situation you were trying to get out of. In all fairness, home canned still tastes better but your time investment most likely just outpaced the purchase cost.
- **Almost unlimited fruit & vegetable selection** –won’t happen with only local production. We can’t grow everything you are accustomed to eating in our climate. Remember, some crops are cool or warm season producers then there are temperature windows within each season, some like less or more rainfall, some like higher or lower soil pH, and the list goes on.

In some cases, we may be able to grow similar crops, but not the exact one you are accustomed to at any particular time. Want a good baked potato? The one I just had for lunch wouldn’t have come from anywhere close to here.

You may be among the group of people who don’t like Southern Peas & Okra. Sorry to hear that, you are living in the wrong place because we can grow those consistently (during the summer) with a reasonable expectation of production yield with manageable pest or disease problems.

Those of you who come from rural backgrounds will probably remember the “old timers” talking about eating a lot of one or two things during a good year. In my case, I remember my grandmother telling stories about peas, collard greens and cornbread during the summer. She would also talk at length about carrying a syrup bucket to school with syrup and a biscuit, with a piece of sausage if she was lucky and times were good.

Are there any other conceptual issues with basing our production and consumption system heavily on local products?

The short answer is, yes. I am concerned that the people writing some of these media embraced and distributed articles don’t really understand the nature of local agriculture.

In the day of electronic informational distribution, you can read literally anything about anything at any time of the day or night. Just because information is out there, it may not necessarily fit your situation or location. It may not even be true. You have to evaluate your source carefully.

I regularly work with people who move to our area, purchase land and want to grow everything imaginable only to discover their expectations are not feasible.

In reviewing articles on local sourced Ag production, I have read references to similar statements of “calculations are formed on the basis of producible calories within an X mile radius of X city”, and so on. This thinking usually leads to a further statement such as; a city can provide X % of their annual food needs based on the surrounding countryside for whatever distance and so on.

So what’s the issue with this type of thinking?

If you are aware that not all land is suitable to grow all crops on, you already know this answer. Some land that produces agricultural products isn’t even fit to grow any “crops” on, which is why we raise livestock in a lot of places. Even the immense acreage of grain crops grown to support livestock feed is not always suitable either geographically or economically for production of similar human food species. This comes back to the windows of production seasons, inputs needed or costs based on the crop species, labor availability for harvest and so on.

There are reasons we grow some crops in amounts that exceed what we need for our consumption. We can grow, harvest and then export them at an economically positive level. Somebody else around the world needs these agricultural products. If we limited agricultural production to only what we need, you would probably at best use see a few livestock grazing on that cropland instead of an alternative crop.

Depending on where your city or town is fortunate to be located, reliance on local production could possibly be feasible to some extent. But this is not true for all individuals in all locations. Land type and environments in California, Texas, and New York aren’t all the same.

Will those who desire a locally grown, wide variety and extended season of availability, change their geographical location? If a large number of people do relocate to areas with higher production potential, what just happened to the surrounding farm land and their previous food supply?

Think about it, you can answer those questions.

Educational programs of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, genetic information or veteran status. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating