BOOK REVIEW

Women and Sustainable Agriculture presents 14 interviews with farmers, researchers, and entrepreneurs who have embraced sustainable agriculture. The author, Anna Anderson, notes that over the past 40 years, food production in the United States has soared, and farmers are feeding more people than ever before. Yet the environmental and social consequences of industrial-scale agriculture, including environmental pollution from agricultural chemicals, depletion of aquifers, and the displacement of small farmers and communities, are increasingly evident.

Anderson explores how farmers and consumers can change the way food is grown and distributed to protect our health and the natural environment. She interviews academics, policymakers, and farmer advocates who explain how they’ve established farmers markets, food cooperatives, and local food initiatives that benefit farmers and their communities.

But most importantly she asks, “Why do we know so little about the hands that feed us?” and “What will become of the people who have spent their lives on the land?” Of the 14 interviews, two stand out for their honest and heartfelt answers to that last question.

La Rhea Pepper’s family farm in West Texas has raised cotton since 1926 without chemicals. But Pepper says that conventional markets are no longer an economically viable way to support a farm family. So she chose a new direction, moving the farm toward organic certification and value-added production in 1992 by having the farm’s first certified organic cotton crop woven into 4,000 yards of denim fabric. The Pepper’s brand, Cotton Plus, now includes over 40 fabrics. The Peppers also manufacture one of the few organic cotton tampon brands, Organic Essentials. As well, they’ve enlisted other growers in a successful organic cooperative that bucks the idea that cotton production requires high levels of pesticides and fertilizers (a pound of chemicals is used for every three pounds of cotton produced in conventional operations).

Pepper concedes that farmers need advocates. Nevertheless, farmers hold the key to their own future. “For agriculture to change, the first thing that has to change is the mindset of the people,” she says. “They’re going to have to decide to take an active role in their futures—and that may mean painful changes.” Pepper cites her grandfather’s maxim: “Truth goes through three stages. First it’s ridiculed, second it’s violently opposed, and third it’s accepted as being self-evident.” When making change, farmers have to be willing to first accept ridicule and opposition.

The Peppers have weathered the transition. Now, she says, “the farm is taking care of the farm, and it’s taking care of the families, and we are making a difference in O’Donnell, Texas.”

Another interview with farmer advocate Mona Brock underscores the risk involved for farmers selling in the global marketplace. Brock and her husband farmed most of their lives in Oklahoma before their farm mortgage was accelerated and foreclosed in the 1980s, completely without warning. Explaining her bewilderment over their dire situation, Brock said, “We only knew that we were plowing our fields and doing our work. We were farming the land and contributing to feeding the people of our community, our state, our nation, our world. We had no idea that someone somewhere was making decisions that would affect our work, our investments, even our lives.”

After she weathered her personal crisis, Brock began to serve phone duty on the suicide hotline at Oklahoma’s Farm Crisis Center, where she continues to field calls from distraught farmers who sometimes call with a loaded gun in hand.

We have to change policies that result in this kind of desperation, Brock says. “The very thing that the farmer has devoted his whole life to is being taken away with pen and paper, a twist of the wrist, NAFTA. What the farmer really wants is to be left alone, to produce food to feed hungry people, and pay his bills.”

Brock concurs that the best hope of that may lie in small-scale production. “If there is an independent farmer left in existence, it will have to be on that basis.”

Few books have investigated women’s specific connection to the sustainable agriculture movement, why they feel compelled to change the world and how they’re going about it. Anderson’s work offers a unique opportunity to hear from women on the frontlines.

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