

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Focused on a Sustainable Future

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With the push for local produce, why are North American groceries stores full of imported produce? This is one question that baffles Ken Taylor, owner of Green Barn Farm in Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot, Quebec, so he strives to educate and influence farmers to stray away from traditional crops and try something new.

Born on a farm, Ken saw the benefits of healthy, homegrown food from an early age. One of 10 siblings, Ken learned the significance of living off the land, paying attention to what could grow and feed his family.

Pictured: Ken Taylor uses his scientific background to develop his own varieties of fruit and nut trees for Green Barn Farm, include Asian pears.

"We weren't very well-off, so you learned how to grow things very quickly," said Ken. "I really connected with both our wild food supply that was on the farm, plus the orchard, which had all kinds of mixed fruit and bushes and berries."

With a passion for science, Ken left the farm for a higher education that would not only build his professional career, but also help with his yet unknown future in genetic produce. With grocery stores full of imports, Ken's yearning for really good-tasting food stayed with him, so with his wife Lorraine and his children, Ken decided to try living off the land to see if they could grow food to feed their own family.

Located just outside of Montreal, the farm wasn't intended to be a source of revenue—or at least not the primary one. With 70 acres of fairly unsettled wilderness, Lorraine and Ken knew that the path to fresh produce wouldn't be an easy one. However, Ken was determined to grow seeds and products in tune with the natural environment.

From the beginning, Ken believed that the food production had to be 100% organic, allowing Mother Nature to do her job. He deliberately chose produce that required very little inputs and zero to no pesticides, opting to

use nothing but beneficial insects to combat potential infestations.

“At first, you wanted to get out the spray gun and kill things, but we decided that we would lose the crop rather than try to save it,” said Ken.

Soon, the visitors to the farm started to arrive, wanting to take home some of the healthy produce for their own family. Suddenly, the home farm evolved into a food production farm, creating food for both their own family and the local community. This was the 1980s and organic CSAs were still a fairly new term. But the Taylor's ventured outside the box and delivered healthy organic food to their region, spreading Ken's love of healthy produce to the Montreal community.

But Ken didn't stop there. With his scientific background in tow, Ken started to develop his own varieties of fruits and vegetables. The commercial ones, shared Ken, weren't able to resist Mother Nature, and so Ken developed his own seeds.

“We developed all these seed varieties and so I got into a lot of the genetic development, using my scientific background and open pollination,” said Ken. “This process produces new open-pollinated, regionally-adapted genetics and that's how we've been able to develop all these different food crops. It's really diversity that we grow and not the traditional stuff.”

Green Barn Farm expanded into fruit and nuts and a full-fledged permaculture nursery. The key to harvesting a larger crop, said Ken is to have the right combination of plants sharing the same space. Describing his farm, as “out of the mold,” Ken doesn't stop at traditional fare. Instead, he's discovered hardy exotic seeds that thrive in the cold Montreal climate, including persimmons, walnuts, seedless table grapes, Asian pears and the paw-paw. So much so, that his farm has attracted interest from Montreal's Lufa Farms, a rooftop greenhouse nursery with an organic online marketplace.

In addition to selling products, Green Barn Farm uses the farm as an education tool, demonstrating that there are fruit and nuts that thrive in the Canadian climate that require very little inputs.

Growing produce that the community wants

“In Canada, we import way more food than we export abroad, which is crazy because we're so small. We should be able to feed ourselves,” said Ken. But Canadians aren't growing it because they believe it won't grow here. “Did you know that seedless grapes in general are the largest single food item imported into Canada every year? All is imported,” said Ken. “Can we grow grapes in Canada? Sure we do. We've got vineyards all across Canada and that's the wine grape, which is more fragile than the table grape. So why are we not growing the \$400 million worth of table grapes that Canadians want to eat?”

Ken believes that one of the challenges is the farmers are under a lot of pressure. Pair this with the demand of the consumer and the farmers tend to stay with the more conservative crops that have a history of success. However, it's Ken's mission to see this change. He urges farmers to try out new crops, to see the success and the potential increased revenue.

“We had one farmer who planted 100 Asian pears two years ago, two and a half years ago. Everybody wanted his pears this fall near Toronto and they gave him two dollars a pear and he couldn’t believe it,” said Ken. “Now he ordered another hundred.”

The key, said Ken, is to get other farmers to look outside the box with a long-term vision, and not just focus on quick sells like tomato and lettuce. Ken encourages others to see the potential value of investing in both their farm’s future with higher-value crops, like walnuts, and the environment.

“The only sustainable future I see in food production is if people understand the concept that you’ve got to plant something that’s self-sustainable,” said Ken.

The bottom line, he added, is that we have to get the Canadian farmer or the American farmer to grow what the consumer’s buying in the supermarket. Today, Green Barn Farm continues to create genetics with their breeding program, unveiling fruit and nuts that will thrive in the Canadian climate. Their intent is to sell these hardy trees or their seeds to other farmers in Canada and have the Canadian consumer eating produce grown from their own community. **GT**

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