



The Subsistence Gardener

CEREAL HARVEST

This month, we will be starting our cereal harvest. One of the obstacles that we, as human beings, face when trying to make sense of our lives, is that it is all too easy for us to accept a distorted view of history, which places far too much importance on events that happened in one particular place for a relatively short period of time, to the detriment of the bigger picture.

We started growing cereals, on a very small scale, around fifteen years ago, and at the time, I shared many of the common misconceptions about the history of cereal growing. I was, of course, familiar with the modern combine harvester, and I had also seen the threshing machines that preceded them (in action at country fairs). I had also talked to people who remembered the days of horse-drawn ploughs, and horse-drawn cutting and binding machines; all this, combined with eighteenth and nineteenth-century paintings and descriptions of huge wheat fields and stacks of wheat waiting to be threshed, combined to give the impression that cereal production has always taken place on a semi-industrial scale.

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But if you set against this, the fairly-well-accepted idea that, up until the industrial revolution, at least eighty per cent of the European population was involved in farming, then, on average, every farming family must have been growing enough cereals to meet their own needs, plus a

small surplus that went towards supporting the non-farming twenty per cent. Most cereal production must have been on a very small scale, quite different from the image handed down to us from more recent centuries.

What is remarkable is that hardly anyone now living in a developed country knows how to grow a crop of cereal by hand, even though we are all descended from people for whom it was second nature. And most of us are unaware that this was a basic skill that all our ancestors possessed.

This is particularly unfortunate because we are all still dependent on cereals for our main source of sustenance – and because cereal production has gone down a track that no one with an ecological conscience wants to be associated with. Since people stopped growing cereals for themselves, they have struggled to find a sustainable model: as far as agriculture is concerned, ‘economic development’ has meant bigger and bigger machines, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides. Above all, however, agriculture has become dependent on fossil fuels, both to power its machines, and also to manufacture its chemicals.

The beauty of growing your own cereals, by hand, is that it completely restores ecological equilibrium - you work the ground, and plant the seeds, the sun provides the energy to make the plants grow and to ripen the grain, you harvest the grain and make your bread, and you then work the ground using the energy that you get from the bread. In essence, the whole cycle is solar powered, including yourself.

Having been growing cereals by hand for a few years, my advice would be that it is not as difficult as one might imagine. In physical terms, all one actually needs is a small area of land, a hoe, a sickle, and some seeds. On a more abstract level, one needs to know how to nourish the soil, when to plant, and when to harvest, and one needs to have

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a feeling for how the crop works - but all that comes from experience, which comes through making mistakes, and learning from them.

This year, it looks as though we will have a good rye harvest, and, maybe, spring wheat, but our winter wheat has not worked, and, in time-honoured fashion, we will be trying to work out what we did wrong, and what we can do better.

Something that would inspire me with hope for the future, would be for everyone to say that the little gesture that they would like to make for the planet would be to start growing a patch of cereals for themselves.

