

# American Profile

Celebrating Hometown Life

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Region



January 22 - 28, 2006

Editions : 9/10/2000 - 9/16/2000 : Northeast

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## Eliot Coleman's Taste for Growing

by Barbara Damrosh

"Work," says Eliot Coleman, spreading compost over a bed in his Harborside, Maine, greenhouse, "is what you're doing when you'd rather be doing something else."

"If that's true, I've never worked a day in my life."

As a matter of fact, he does seem to be having fun. Coleman is tanned, lean, and fit in a way most 61-year-olds would envy. And he's grinning.

"Look at the result!" he exclaims, pulling a perfectly shaped, bright orange carrot from the next bed over. "Have a bite." Pause. "Was there ever a sweeter carrot?" No.

I knew the answer beforehand; I've tasted his carrots. After all, I'm his co-worker, his partner in our coastal Maine farm—and his wife. This effusive partner of mine really does love to grow vegetables, and does it brilliantly. He has an inborn gift for making things grow, but what sets him a bit beyond those with similar gifts is an insatiable curiosity about why things work in the garden, and how they can work even better.

Over the course of some 30 years as a farmer, Eliot has become the champion of the small organic farm in an age of large-scale industrial agribusiness, because, he says, small farms and market gardens simply grow better food. His inspiration comes from experience, and from visiting traditional small farms in Europe, which are still respected for the exceptional quality of their produce.

The greenhouses where Eliot grows winter produce are examples of this back-to-the future approach. On a cold February day with snow swirling outside, a crop of vegetables is growing merrily in the soil of these unheated structures. The carrot Eliot just pulled out of the soft, rich earth has a bright green top; it was protected from winter only by the plastic greenhouse covering and a floating row cover (a thin translucent sheet used for frost protection). At our Four Season Farm we can now supply our northern



Eliot Coleman has been growing organically for 30 years, selling the tastiest produce around.

Barbara Damrosh

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community with tasty, fresh, organic food year-round. And because we're a family operation, supplying local stores and restaurants, it's both enjoyable and economically sound—just two rather lunatic, middle-aged people doing hard but satisfying work, making each other laugh, and dancing to the radio in the greenhouse as we wash produce on a dark winter evening.

And what might that winter produce be? Well, cold-hardy salad greens, our famous "candy" carrots, a mix of Asian stir-fry greens, spinach, baby turnips, radishes, scallions, and leeks, to name a few.

Techniques used in our commercial greenhouse operation also worked well in our small home garden. Eliot has a saying: "If you have \$30,000, you'll come up with a \$30,000 solution. If you have only 30 cents, you'll come up with a 30-cent solution. That's nature's way. If what you're doing in the garden is expensive or complicated, it's probably wrong." The simplest garden wisdom:

- Make compost, as much as you can. No fertilizer is better.
- Keep tools basic. Eliot made many of our garden tools. Some of his designs, such as the "collinear hoe" and the "wire weeder," are sold in the catalog from Johnny's Selected Seeds in Albion, Maine.
- Keep rows of newly sown seeds moist; especially carrots, which germinate slowly. Sprinkle them daily until they germinate.
- Alternate vegetables with green manures, such as red clover and buckwheat.
- Don't worry about pests. "Relax," says Eliot. "Bugs are indicators, not enemies. They tell us that something isn't quite right with our soil or growing conditions." If you keep the soil aerated and fertile (that means compost again, of course), your plants will be less stressed and they'll attract fewer pests.
- Pay attention to your garden and learn from what it has to teach you. Look and see how Mother Nature does things, and take your cue from her.
- Share what you learn. "Farmers and gardeners shouldn't hoard secrets. An idea expands when different growers try it out. Information is like compost; it does no good unless you spread it around."

Naturally, for Eliot Coleman, it all comes back to compost.

***Barbara Damrosh has written several books and numerous articles on home gardening.***

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