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## The Constant Gardeners

By HEIDI JULAVITS

Gardening on the coast of Maine, given the brusque climate and blink-of-an-eye growing season, is a challenge best met with imagination and with that staple of the region, Yankee self-deception. Katharine White, the wife of E.B., wore Ferragamo shoes and tweed suits to tramp through her beds and satisfied her penchant for gardening most of the year by reading bulb catalogs. Her book, “Onward and Upward in the Garden” (Beacon Press), describes Maine’s dormant period (from Oct. 15 to April 15) as “the season of lists and callow hopefulness.”

Since the Whites’ day, this same strip of coastline has become a mecca for a far less callow and Ferragamo-friendly set of year-round gardeners. Twenty miles from the Whites’ former house reside Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch, whose marriage in the organic-gardening world exists a few dimensions of awe beyond the Jolie-Pitt union. They first achieved renown as authors; “The New Organic Grower,” by Coleman, and “The Garden Primer,” by Damrosch, are the bibles of the vegetable and flower worlds, respectively. It was through the competition between their books that they heard of each other. “If you can’t beat them,” Coleman jokes, “marry them.”

This attitude — embrace the competition’s strengths — describes the Coleman-Damrosch approach to growing edible food during winters on the 44th parallel. We are, after all, talking about producing greens and vegetables on less than 10 hours of daylight from Nov. 10 to Feb. 5, in a place where the high temperature can be under 20 degrees for days and sometimes weeks on end. In Manhattan, fine diners have already benefited from the Coleman-Damrosch farm-to-restaurant movement: the pair have been visited by chefs like Jonathan Benno of Per Se and Peter Hoffman of Savoy. Recently, they developed the greenhouse operation and gardens at Stone Barns Center in Westchester, N.Y., which was anointed by Sam Hayward, the chef at Fore Street Restaurant in Portland, Me., as “the most impressive project in the food world of the Northeast.”

What their friend Alice Waters has done on the West Coast — facilitating sustainable and seasonal eating — Coleman and Damrosch are pioneering on the East Coast, even during months when “fresh local produce” is interchangeable with the phrase “grandmother’s turnip.”

On a March day of freezing rain, I drive the unpaved road down Cape Rosier to see how anyone grows anything in this place during the winter except dangerously bored. Four Season Farm is located on a property with a long history of guru-gardening. Coleman was first drawn to Harborside, Me., by Scott and Helen Nearing, the authors of the pre-eminent off-the-grid handbook “Living the Good Life.” Scott was an economics professor, Helen a musician, but this politically active couple left New York to homestead in Vermont in 1932, thereby rejecting “a society gripped by depression and unemployment, falling a prey to

fascism, and on the verge of another world-wide military free-for-all.” (No! America?) The Nearings moved to Maine in 1952 to convert another derelict New England farm into a self-sufficient rural community.

In 1968, Coleman, a self-described “semipro adventurer” with a graduate degree in Spanish literature, went to Cape Rosier, as many did, seeking the Nearings. “They made small farming sound like an adventure,” he says. He and Damrosch now live and farm on part of their property.

At first glance, the farm appears inactive. The rectangular dug beds are covered in seaweed and crab shells, lending the earth a pungent eau-de-low-tide odor. To the left of the drive stretches a series of greenhouses: metal frames covered with translucent sheets of plastic, what Coleman calls “some of the ugliest structures ever designed,” and he’s exaggerating only a little. The Coleman-Damrosch compound refuses to reward fussiness over function. Which isn’t to say that they are averse to pretty. When Damrosch, a whippetlike former New Yorker who is also a human search engine when it comes to questions about gardening and cooking, gives me a tour of the greenhouses and outbuildings, I’m struck by the kempt loveliness of their compost heap, girded by hay bales. Coleman recently developed a movable glass (i.e., attractive) greenhouse inspired by structures he saw in the Netherlands.

The innovative thrust behind Coleman’s greenhouse isn’t just aesthetics; it’s part of his push to reinstall the vegetable garden as a daily reality of every American family with a lawn. In less affluent parts of the country, Coleman says, life can be harder today than it was in the Depression, “because everyone back then had a garden.” Coleman shows me the carrots he’s growing in the ground. I don’t think I had quite understood that inside this attractive greenhouse, as well as inside the less attractive ones, lettuces and vegetables grow all winter in the actual ground — not in pots or raised beds, and not hydroponically. The glass greenhouses slide manually back and forth on runners so that the soil can be exposed directly to sun and rain (crucial if the soil is to remain healthy); the plastic ones are dragged like big sleds using tractors. Compost is the only fertilizer; the solar-friendly greenhouses require no heat other than the sun to keep the hardy plants alive. While some plants respond well to being grown in greenhouses — greenhouse spinach tastes better than outdoor spinach because “outside spinach is fighting the dry, cold wind and gets tough,” Coleman says — crops like strawberries are protected under straw mulch until the spring. “The system is beautiful and simple,” Coleman adds. “We extend the season enormously by choosing cold-hardy crops. It’s a very passive approach.” Among the winter crops they grow are tatsoi, bok choy, arugula, mâche, kale, claytonia and spinach.

Coleman and Damrosch sell only to restaurants and stores within a 25-mile radius of their farm, thus reducing fossil-fuel expenditure both in the growing and in the transport, an important factor in the “beyond organic” ethos that Coleman developed in response to the organic takeover by industry giants like Cascadian Farm and Horizon Organic (which Coleman dubs “chicken organics”). Sam Hayward, who has been working with local farmers since 1982, explains it with bumper-sticker precision: “Local trumps organic.” Currently, Four Season Farm produce is used in the kitchens of a number of restaurants near Cape Rosier, among them the Brooklin Inn, the Castine Inn and Cleonice in Ellsworth.

We break for a delightful lunch prepared by Damrosch from their ingredients. She doesn’t wear Ferragamos in her garden, nor is she a crunchy adherent to the Enchanted (and Inedible) Broccoli Forest manner of food preparation. She traces her love of food to her obsession, as a 7-year-old, with finding out

the secret to the hamburger at Brearley, the Upper East Side girls' school she attended. We eat a butternut-squash soup (made with stock from local chickens) and an arugula salad fresh from the greenhouse. Coleman and I each enjoy a beer. It's stopped raining, but the fog's come in, and while the mâche may grow year-round on Four Season Farm, I'm feeling pretty dormant at the moment. They send me home with a full stomach to take, like the majority of people and plants on a gray Maine day, a late-winter nap.

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