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IN THE GARDEN

The Land That Keeps Giving



Stacey Cramp for The New York Times

Barbara Damrosch harvests tatsoi, a hardy Asian green that has grown through the winter in an unheated greenhouse attached to her family's home in Maine. [More Photos](#) »

By ANNE RAVER
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Mr. Coleman and other back-to-the-landers with their 1954 book, "Living the Good Life."

By then, the Nearings had fled the tourists and skiers pouring into Vermont and moved to Maine, where they built a garden walled with stone that collected heat in a climate where

IT was early February, when the 10-hour day returns here on the 44th parallel, and Barbara Damrosch could see it in the brighter green leaves of her tatsoi and spinach growing in the unheated greenhouse attached to the house she shares with her husband, Eliot Coleman, at Four Season Farm.

Mr. Coleman, 73, began farming here on Cape Rosier, a rocky peninsula in Penobscot Bay, in 1968, on 60 acres of forested land he bought from Scott and Helen Nearing for \$33 an acre.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them," said Mr. Coleman, who is a wiry 5-foot-8 and can still swing himself into his apple trees like a boy. "I can't tell you how much I owe them."

The Nearings, socialists and free thinkers who built their first house out of stone with their own hands and started growing their food at the foot of Stratton Mountain in southern Vermont during the Depression, inspired young

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winter temperatures can still fall to 20 below zero. Their greenhouse, nestled against the stone wall, absorbed its stored heat at night. Such techniques, as well as a root cellar beneath the house, helped them live off the land year-round.

Mr. Coleman cleared his first acre with an ax and bow-saw, built a one-room cabin for his first wife, Sue, and two daughters, and started to improve the soil with seaweed pulled from the rocks by the bay along with loads of horse manure and soiled hay. His [compost](#) piles, which are now huge rectangles walled in by bales of straw, also fed the soil. That's how three inches of thin topsoil have grown to the foot of black gold in these intensively cropped beds.

He and Ms. Damrosch, who is now 69, met in 1990 in the Nearings' greenhouse, where he was tying up tomatoes. Both had been twice married and divorced, and they had children from previous marriages. Mr. Coleman's oldest child, Melissa, writes about her parents' homesteading, which was both idyllic and impossibly hard, and the loss of her sister, Heidi, who drowned accidentally in a pond at age 3, in "This Life Is in Your Hands: One Dream, Sixty Acres and a Family Undone," published last year by HarperCollins. After that tragedy, Mr. Coleman spent 10 years running experimental farms in Vermont and Massachusetts, returning here in 1990 to work his own land again.

Mr. Coleman and Ms. Damrosch, who married in 1991, had much in common, including near-endless energy.

He had grown up in Rumson, N.J., the privileged child of a stockbroker. She had grown up in Manhattan, the daughter of a pediatrician.

He had earned a master's degree in Spanish literature at Williams College and roamed the Americas, teaching at various schools while skiing and rock climbing and whitewater kayak racing.

She had worked on a doctorate in medieval literature from Columbia University (she never finished her dissertation) and had taught college and written for The Village Voice and The Nation before moving to Connecticut to raise her son, Christopher, and to start a garden design business.

By the time they eyed each other over the tomatoes, Mr. Coleman had already published his first book, "The New Organic Grower," and taken delegations of scientists to Europe to observe the success of intensive organic farming. Ms. Damrosch had appeared on "The Victory Garden," the popular WGBH public television series that promoted composting and intensive gardening, and she had published a book, "Theme Gardens." Over the years, they have both continued to write: Ms. Damrosch's book "A Garden Primer" is a bible for gardeners; Mr. Coleman's "Four Season Harvest" and "The Winter Harvest Handbook" explain his organic methods in detail.

Close attention to soil health and the different needs of each plant are crucial.

"We're growing 35 to 40 different crops, in greenhouses and in the field, with no pesticides, because we don't need pesticides," Mr. Coleman said. "Basically, we have no pests."

That's because pests attack sick plants, he said. "They're like the wolves eating the sick caribou," he said. "They can't catch the healthy ones. When you grow plants correctly, insects can't maintain a population on them."

And Four Season Farm grossed \$120,000 last year from crops grown on 1.5 acres of land.

"So anybody who tells you organic farming can't feed the world hasn't been paying attention," Mr. Coleman said.

The movable greenhouses here — or hoop houses, as they are called for their high metal hoops, covered with plastic — either have wheels that run along rails or are small enough to be picked up and moved by two people. Most are unheated and keep winter crops like onions, leeks, carrots, spinach and cold-loving greens thriving with row covers laid over sturdy hoops, which adds a second layer of protection.

"Look at these leeks," Mr. Coleman said, pulling back the cover in an unheated hoop house to reveal the raggedy leaves of his most sought-after winter vegetable. "They look beat up,

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but the minute you pull one out of the ground and peel it back, you have about as nice a leek as you'd want to have." The leek, about two inches in diameter, was gleaming white, blanched from being buried in the soil a good 8 inches up its 14-inch shank.

As soon as the leeks are pulled from these beds, Mr. Coleman said, the soil is improved with compost and replanted with another crop like carrots.

By May, when temperatures rise, he and Ms. Damrosch will roll this movable greenhouse off the beds, exposing the carrots and other summer crops to air and light.

This time of year, there is a mad race to seed all kinds of crops. Spinach, salad greens, arugula, cabbages, beets and many other hardy crops are grown in the unheated greenhouses. Seeds of heat-loving tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers are started in flats in the one heated greenhouse. As early crops are harvested, the transplants of heat-loving crops will take their place, remaining under the protection of the hoop houses, which can be vented front and back.

Just as Four Season Farm has proved that organic farming can be profitable, Mr. Coleman and Ms. Damrosch have fired the imaginations of the current wave of locavores.

Dan Barber, an owner and executive chef of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, in Pocantico Hills, N.Y., said: "Eliot is the reason I'm cooking. I read his books when I was graduating from college and trying to figure out what to do."

Mr. Barber had envisioned turning his grandparents' old dairy farm in Great Barrington, Mass., into an organic vegetable farm.

"But what tripped me up was the shortness of the growing season," he said, "that you couldn't really be profitable."

Then he read Mr. Coleman's books. "Somebody figured out how to do it not only profitably, but deliciously," Mr. Barber said. "I've followed that path because Eliot made it possible, and exciting, to farm in the four seasons."

His words curiously echo Mr. Coleman's about the Nearings: "Just the whole way they described growing their own food, building their own house, they made it sound like an adventure, and I was an adventurer," Mr. Coleman said. Farming is still the greatest adventure of his life, he said.

"This mountain doesn't have a top, and getting there is the fun," Mr. Coleman said. "Standing on the top is boring as hell, so this has been some 44 years trying to figure out how to get there."

Though Four Season Farm is thriving, all but \$25,000 of its earnings go back into the business, paying for maintenance and the four apprentices. They work 10 months of the year, for \$8 an hour, and receive free living quarters (a loft in the cow barn, the onion storage house, the log cabin built years ago) before going on to start farms of their own.

A few are now farming on land Mr. Coleman sold them from his 60 acres, at the same \$33 an acre he paid the Nearings years ago.

"Because I thought that was a gift that I should share with other people," Mr. Coleman said.

As the sun warmed the hoop houses, he and Ms. Damrosch opened the one containing overwintering onions, big sweet Walla Wallas.

"We'll come through here in March and pull all the extras as spring onions," he said. "We sell everything."

Yet another crop of Walla Wallas was growing under low hoops, no more than 30 inches high, covered with two layers of protection: a spun-plastic material called Agribon 19, which is sturdy but lets in light, with a layer of 6-mil plastic covering it.

"By the middle of March, when it's too hot for plastic, we take it off, but the row cover is still there," Mr. Coleman said.

These low covered hoops are a good solution for home gardeners who want to grow food in winter, at a fraction of the cost of a larger hoop house.

Four-season organic growing may be a lot of work, but its pleasures are deep.

“This spinach is fantastic,” Mr. Coleman said over lunch that day, his eyes closed as he savored the just-picked leaves, which Ms. Damrosch, an accomplished cook, had tossed in a hot pan with olive oil. It was a favorite variety, called Space.

Ms. Damrosch, who finds time to write a weekly garden column for The Washington Post, had prepared a simple lunch fit for the gods: a chowder with fresh wild Maine shrimp, made with their own potatoes and onions, and cream and butter from a Maine dairy. Golden Russets, an heirloom apple, were dessert.

Living off the land is a near-revolutionary act in a world of industrial chemical farming, [genetically modified crops](#) and pharmaceuticals. (Like their plants, Mr. Coleman and Ms. Damrosch don't need drugs; working outside and eating fresh food keeps them healthy.)

“What we do here is the most subversive activity we could possibly engage in,” Mr. Coleman said, pouring a little Chateau Cape Rosier Reserve 2009, the white wine made from the Swensen red grapes that climb a trellis outside the window. “We are feeding ourselves, number one.”

He added: “Mother Nature is supplying my inputs” — like sunlight, compost, water — “for free, because I've taken the time to study how it works.”

And that means he's not consuming, which is the American way.

“The people selling pesticides don't want to hear me saying you don't need pesticides,” Mr. Coleman said. “No industry is interested in what we do, because there's nothing to sell.”

Except the good life, which is what most people want.

Hoop Houses

HOME gardeners can grow vegetables year-round in a small unheated hoop house with the added protection of row covers laid over the sturdy “quick hoops” that Eliot Coleman uses at Four Season Farm. These hoops are curved

1 3/8-inch-diameter metal poles, the kind made for chain-link fences and sold at stores like Home Depot. But to shape them, you will need a pipe bender, available at Johnny's Selected Seeds, in Winslow, Me., for \$59 (877-564-6697; johnnyseeds.com); a video on the store's Web site shows how it can be done.

The basic materials, including 6-mil plastic and Agribon 19, a sturdy spun plastic that allows light through, are also sold at Johnny's. The company, started in 1973 by another back-to-the land advocate, Rob Johnston Jr., carries many of the tools Mr. Coleman has invented for low-cost, intensive gardening or farming, including a tilter, or lightweight tiller that mixes soil and compost in the top two inches of planting beds without disturbing the soil structure. It is powered by a regular rechargeable drill.

Though Mr. Coleman makes most of his own hoop houses, some of his designs for movable greenhouses are sold by Four Season Tools in Kansas City, Mo. (816-444-7330; smallfarmtools.com).

As for spring crops, it's time to start the seeds indoors, or in an unheated cold frame or hoop house, if you love leeks.

Once the leeks are about the size of a pencil, Mr. Coleman uses a dibble, a 10-inch-long pointed shaft made out of hardwood, to poke uniform holes down the rows of an outdoor growing bed. “We drop the leeks into 10-inch-deep holes, and only about an inch sticks out the top,” he said. Wind and rain fill in each of the holes gradually. And, he said, as the leek grows, “We have this beautiful 10-inch shaft of blanched shank at the bottom.”

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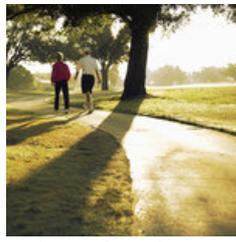


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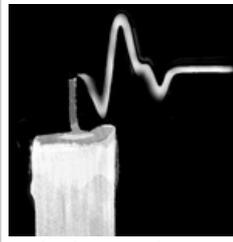
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