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Samsara and the Circle of Life

Use of organics on a family farm

The gnaw of hunger descended and with it the knowledge that food is never to be taken for granted."

A long journey through many mostly poor countries resulted in an epiphany for JP Gural and his wife So Young, who own and operate Samsara Farms in Norfolk County, Ontario.

"We learned that garbage provides people with meagre incomes and even homes," Gural says.

Our society has so much that we don't allow scavenging at landfills.

"I got close to the crowd of pickers and photographed while they tore through the rubbish," Gural says. "Unable to stand the stench, I was forced to stop photographing and retched. Somehow these people remained face first in the filth, even eating food coming from the back of the truck."

In a question of relativism: Is it waste or is it food?

When we talk about managing organic waste we often talk about returning to our roots. The roots that we are talking about are related to food production. Many of our residential organics programs are invisible in some ways. That is, the waste is collected, is composted somewhere, and ends up being used somewhere. Most of the general public don't know where "somewhere" is.

Norfolk County is somewhere. Formerly part of Ontario's tobacco belt it is now also home to the Samsara Farms. (<https://sites.google.com/site/samsarafields/>)

Samsara is a small six-acre organic farm whose mission is the implementation of organic growing strategies as well as growing of heirloom fruits and vegetables. They focus on crop rotation and companion plantings to maintain both soil and plant health.

A few generations ago all of our food was grown organically. Obviously this has changed drastically but, like all pendulums, there has been a gradual and incremental swing back to growing food this way.

"We were inspired to farm after a year-long journey through the so-called developing world where we witnessed communities existing in garbage dumps, experienced food shortages and had a chance to meet farmers and discuss some of the issues they face," Gural says. The



So Young Gural dumping leaves into garlic.

Gurals visited open dumpsites in East Timor, Thailand, Cambodia and even in the open streets of Calcutta, India.

Gural has taken a very philosophical approach to Samsara's operation.

"Samsara refers to the cycle of birth-death-rebirth in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology," Gural continues. "It's an appropriate name to connote recycling, in this case organic matter rather than souls.

"After the shock and revulsion wore off, and we found ourselves in Canada, our approach to waste changed. Armed with composting knowledge and no longer afraid to gather trash ourselves, we began gathering leaves and pumpkins creating stockpiles for the spring."

Their farm is worked by hand with the assistance of two older model tractors.

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So Young Gural on snowy bags of leaves.

Growing food organically means using organic residuals to supply most if not all of required plant nutrients and organic matter.

We are often informed by simple and seemingly insignificant events from our youth about which we only develop understanding and a context when we're older.

"As a kid, I used to rake the neighbourhood leaves and green bag them for regular trash pick-up," Gural muses. "However at our house, my parents simply collected the leaves and put them on the flowerbeds where they decomposed."

With the wanderlust of some kind of shaman, every fall Gural and his wife make an annual trek from the country to the city in search of organic residuals... natural fertilizers. They gather leaves, pumpkins and other wastes and cart them back to their farm to let nature work its magic.

The farm takes a low tech approach to managing the organic wastes it collects. For instance the leaves are sometimes directly applied to and incorporated. Some of the organic wastes collected are piled into heaps and turned by hand.

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ORGANIC MATTERS



Mae Sot dump truck, a scene witnessed many times in many countries by the Gurals on their long journey to Canada.


They also gather other organic products such as mushroom compost and kitchen waste compost which are added to the fields. To further supply nutrients they also add fertilizers derived organically (corn gluten, seaweed, worm castings, chicken manure).

Finally a rye crop is used as a green manure on fields to help avoid disease and increase soil organic matter.

Most simply, the organic waste collected and processed turns directly into food.

They work closely with their urban customers who basically tell them what to grow. They also try to expand “people’s eating culture” by introducing them to vegetables that are not grown commercially. People purchase annual shares from the farm and receive vegetables weekly during the harvest season.

The value of seeing other parts of the world should never be underestimated. Many of us have gone through the almost rite of passage back-packing adventure and hopefully learned something along the way. What we learn on these trips is all the more valuable when we modify our way of thinking or, better yet, if we put something into practice.

Samsara Farms is the fruit borne of travel, adventure and tribulation. As it poignantly says on the farm’s website “...We wanted to be the change we wanted to see in the world.” 

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