

# The Vegetable Growers News

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## There is Not Much Food in the Forest

By Dick Lehnert



It'll be 35 years next spring since I made my biggest haul ever collecting morel mushrooms.

I remember because my oldest son, who just turned 35, was about nine months old and I was carrying him in a backpack and trying to pick mushrooms. Ordinarily that wouldn't have been difficult, but this time we got a half-dozen grocery bags full. Even now, I can close my eyes and see those distinctive mushrooms on the lightly leaf-covered rolling hills of the still-dormant aspen woods in northern Michigan.

It was one of those rare times in my life when Mother Nature delivered up bounty without much effort expended by anybody.

Generally, forests are not good places to find food. My normal harvest of morels is a couple handfuls after hours of searching. Fencerows aren't much better. They yield a few blackberries. Mulberries appear for a week or so in July. Unknown variety wild apples are sometimes edible. Even hunting and fishing seem to take a lot of effort to gather supposedly "free" food.

I find, generally, that making food abundant takes quite a lot of work. We've managed to make the process somewhat less laborious in much of the developed world, but worldwide, billions of people still farm and work hard to get enough to eat.

If this sounds like the introduction to a tirade, you're right. I get really tired of people who think farmers have messed up the world so badly that now it's hard to get food when once you could, apparently, just wander into the woods and find all you wanted. In fact, hunting and gathering were apparently so successful we have to wonder what perversity led us to invent managed crop and livestock production in the first place.

I read an op-ed piece recently on sustainable agriculture in which the writer said: "The sustainable model operates on one basic premise: Mother Nature has a better idea. If we simply give her a chance, she will produce our food and regenerate herself without all of these modern additives (chemical fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, antibiotics)."

A few paragraphs later, the writer reiterates: "Practitioners of sustainable agriculture are willing to step back and observe nature instead of trying to change her. Think about that for just a second and you realize that nature was doing quite well before we intervened. Woods and grasses thrived, the air and water was clean, wildlife and plants were abundant."

This sounds naïve and wacky to me, but it was actually written by a farmer who sells produce at a farm market in Texas.

Perhaps I eat the wrong kind of mushrooms, but this kind of mush drives me nuts. I was around when the concept of sustainable agriculture was invented and for about 10 years was highly involved writing about it.

The idea behind sustainable agriculture wasn't that we could eat for free if we'd just quit meddling.

It's not hard to understand the message behind the words, "sustainable agriculture." We want to develop an agriculture that will last forever, reliably turning out food year after year, and do it profitably for farmers without so

disrupting the natural world it's no longer fun to live in.

But the idea that it would be that way naturally if we didn't try so hard is goofy.

There is no doubt that, during and after World War II, new technologies were applied to agriculture that didn't work as well as envisioned. It took less than 20 years for people to realize that there were downsides to chemistry and agricultural industrialization that needed to be addressed. By the 1970s, agricultural scientists were searching for ways to improve the system. One result was the concept of Integrated Pest Management, and the concept of sustainable agriculture born in the late 1980s incorporates that.

But it never meant abandoning scientific approaches and trying to "restore" something that never existed – the world of a benign and nurturing Mother Nature.

One of the great disappointments of my life was this "veering off" into la-la land that started just as we were beginning to learn enough to really build a sustainable agriculture. Unfortunately, it's not just agriculture that's been affected. Science and scientific thinking have been largely abandoned by an entire generation of people who were given access to superior education and should have known better. On tests of scientific acumen, Americans rate "quite stupid" compared with other people in the world.

Not only are we naïve about farming, we have failed to address important science-based issues like a national energy policy to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, health care, urban sprawl and the wastage of good land needed for future food production, global warming, the burgeoning problem of obesity and associated diseases, destruction of the nuclear family, use of mass media for educational purposes – and science education in schools, which might have helped address all of the above.

The idea that, if humans want to stay around for a few more millennia we ought to quit paving paradise and putting up parking lots, is a good one. Having respect for the natural world and trying to understand and work within natural rules rather than trying to overwhelm them makes sense to me.

But let's not create some kind of fantasy. There's not much food in the forest.