



SPLENDID EARTH ACRES

Written by Chandler Joiner

Splendid Earth Acres is a small farm just down the road from Main Street in Berlin, Maryland. The farm only occupies one-sixth of an acre of Jeanne Vander Clute's backyard, however, this modest operation is built on a strong foundation of sustainability and eco-centric tactics. Jeanne began her farm as a garden in 2017 and decided to expand her enterprise in 2018 after discovering her passion for farming. This January, I spent an afternoon learning about the practices Jeanne uses on her farm, as well as the trials, tribulations, and successes she has experienced throughout the process of growing her business.



FARMER JEANNE VANDER CLUTE

Founder of Splendid Earth Acres

Jeanne started her backyard farm from the ground up, literally.

She began the transformation by using entirely no-till methods to convert the grass into fifteen thirty foot by thirty inch raised beds. Jeanne explained, “to get the beds prepped, I laid silage tarps over to kill the grass all winter and then in the springtime, once the grass and weeds were dead, I used a broadfork to get the beds ready, and to aerate the soil.” To a farming novice, the broadfork device may be unfamiliar, however, it is vital in small-scale farming. “The principal [of the broadfork] is to not disturb the microorganisms in the soil too much, but to aerate it enough to let the vegetable roots get down there. Especially if you have really dense soil or clay soil, it will help break it up.”

The broadfork (photo on right) is a powerful tool that efficiently loosens soil without flipping it upside down, which is vital in maintaining soil structure. Soil is composed of important layers filled with microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, protozoa, etc.), which are especially abundant in the area immediately surrounding plant roots (the rhizosphere). Microorganisms are what make soil “living”. They can provide nitrogen through fixation to help plant growth, suppress disease organisms, detoxify harmful toxins, and provide a variety of other beneficial stimulants for plant growth. Completely turning the soil disrupts this crucial ecology, detracting from the full potential of the soils’ inhabitants. The broadfork, when used correctly, will let water and air penetrate the soil while leaving the soil profile upright, creating an optimal environment for root growth. The broadfork requires minimal effort, the user must simply stand on the crossbar with their full body weight, causing the prongs to sink about a foot into the bed. Jeanne’s broadfork fits perfectly over her thirty inch beds, which according to Jeanne has become “the normal for no till methods”.



After bed preparation comes planting. Initially, Jeanne decided what to grow on her farm based on what she wanted to eat herself. "I really just tried a wide variety because I wanted to see the first year what I liked growing, so I did a mix of stuff that are longer season, like onions, and then some things that are much shorter, like arugula and lettuce because they come into maturity a lot quicker."

"I start all my plants from seeds; I don't buy any transplants. I don't have a greenhouse right now, but I would really like one. For right now I am starting things in my garage under grow lights." Transplanting seeds involves starting a plant from seed in optimal conditions, then replanting it in the growing location. Transplanting can help maximize yield by allowing seedlings to begin while the farmer is harvesting mature crops from the raised beds.

There are many other advantages to transplanting vegetables, including the ability to control the climate, easier management and monitoring of seedlings, emerging plants are protected from pests, and season extension. Throughout the winter, Jeanne has been growing microgreens and a brassica mix (cabbage, kale, brussels sprout) in her garage (photo on right). "That whole family [brassica] is cold tolerant so it has actually been doing really well in the garage all winter." Jeanne has discovered that she really enjoys growing root vegetables, however, she does not start root vegetables in her garage because they are not easily transplanted. Transplanting would cause the soil to be moved, which is where the actual part of the plant that would be eaten is contained and could be damaged.



After a crop has matured and it is time for the raised bed to be transitioned to a new vegetable. Jeanne utilizes a unique no till method for this turning of the beds. She cuts the plant at the base of the stem, leaving the roots in the ground where they contribute to the organic matter. "They start to break down and decompose and it creates pathways in the soil for earthworms and the next crop." When she turns over the beds after harvesting a crop, she will add more compost on top, often supplementing with Kelp and Alfalfa meal. Soil health is always at the forefront of Jeanne's mind. "I try, whenever I am doing something, to think about the soil. I think about the health and what is going to be best for the soil and the microorganisms in it and the plants that are going to be grown in that soil. There are a lot of things living in there and you need to take care of them and create an environment where they can survive. Dirt isn't a dead substance that is just sitting there."

A primary way Jeanne cares for her soil is through a technique called mulching. Mulching with leaves is a great way to maintain soil health and provide nutrients for varying strains of fungi found in soil, which are considered primary decomposers of dead plant biomass. Jeanne also adds wood chips in the pathways between her beds. These wood chips not only contribute organic matter, but they also suppress weeds and retain moisture. In the future, Jeanne would like to add cover crops to her farm to help maintain soil health.

DID YOU KNOW?

One tablespoon of healthy soil has more microorganisms than there are people on earth!

Jeanne also cares for the soil by doing some intercropping, such as planting basil among her tomatoes. "I want to become more intensive [with intercropping], where you plant closer together than you normally would to help the crops create their own mini-environment where moisture is held in and weeds can't grow; essentially all the plants working together." Intercropping is simply growing two or more crops of different varieties in the same field to encourage a complementary sharing of plant resources and making use of ecological processes that would normally be lost by the planting of just one crop. Successful intercropping requires crop planning, which was one of the biggest challenges Jeanne faced when beginning Splendid Earth Acres. "Crop planning is so hard... you're turning beds over, you're harvesting, and then you are going to plant again. How do you know when to time that so you have enough plants to fill your garden beds?"



A crop plan is considered by some to be the most important decision-making tool available to farmers. It is a farmer's guide to ensure everything stays on track and details out such things as crop sequences and the planning procedure for rotating crops. Developing an effective crop plan involves making decisions on things to fit your specific needs. Crop planning helps farmers avoid planting the wrong varieties in the wrong area and helps average a higher yield. When thinking of her own crop plan, Jeanne considers some advice she once received, "Someone once said to me, 'If you plant something everyday, you'll have something to harvest everyday.'" This idea of the higher frequency with which you plant, the more yield you will have may seem simple enough, however, the time and effort commitment of this sentiment must be considered.

Throughout my time learning from the small-scale farmers in the Coastal Bays watershed, I came to realize the sheer dedication and time they must commit to their enterprises, no matter the size. In season, Jeanne works a full-time restaurant industry job, while committing about thirty to forty hours a week to her farm all on her own. She makes this commitment because she cares about her community.

"I started out because I wanted to provide healthy food for the community, and it seemed like one of the most fulfilling things I could do with my life. I love to cook and eat and be outside." The biggest thing Jeanne can ask from the community is that they support local farmers. "You can choose to buy from a large-scale grocery store, or you can choose to buy from someone who cares about the food they are growing and cares about their community. Support all local farmers, especially ones who care about the environment and the health of the food you are eating."

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Jeanne Vander Clute

"I want to continue educating myself, because I see education as part of my role as a farmer. I like to tell people about what I am doing so they know where their food comes from and what they are feeding to their kids is healthy. I like providing food for people, but I get even more excited when people want to grow their own food in their own backyard. I know not everybody has the time or space to grow, but I genuinely think it is the most important thing you can do for yourself and the environment." While she never sees herself growing beyond a couple of acres, Jeanne does hope to continue expanding her own backyard enterprise.

Splendid Earth Acres is one of many growing small-scale farms in the Coastal Bays watershed and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to sit down with a handful of these inspiring farmers. During my time with Jeanne, I learned about the practices she is implementing to bring our community the best fresh vegetables possible, and I further learned about the importance of buying local. I encourage you all, when possible, to learn about and support the local farms that surround your communities.



Splendid Earth Acres products can be found this summer at the Berlin Farmers Market on Sundays from 9:00am to 1:00pm. If you have any questions for Jeanne feel free to contact her via instagram or email at splendidearthacres@gmail.com.



@splendidearthacres