

REVIEW-*Fruit and Vegetables: Opportunities and Challenges for Small-scale Sustainable Farming*

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ABSTRACT

The book on *Fruit and Vegetables: Opportunities and Challenges for Small-scale Sustainable Farming* spelled out the central purpose of the global *Year of Fruit and Vegetables* in 2021. The book focuses on the economic value of fruit and vegetables for their producers. Pursuing the goal of increasing the incomes of small-scale farmers might lead them into serving more consumers with high incomes rather than those who are most needy. Perhaps the agencies involved could examine that issue in future projects.

BACKGROUND

This book, produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Agricultural Research Centre for International Development, is a centerpiece of the global International Year of Fruit and Vegetables (FAO, CIRAD. 2021a). It was launched at a webinar by a panel of experts on the topic (FAO, CIRAD 2021b). The book describes fruit and vegetables and their production and surveys relevant policy issues. It focuses on one primary purpose:

Empowering small-scale farmers in low-middle-income countries to increase their production of fresh fruit and vegetables in environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable ways is a priority if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. (p. VIII)

Chapter 3, on Value Chains, says:

The overarching goal is to create sustainable food systems in which small-scale farmers can earn a livelihood in a way that is environmentally friendly, and for all consumers, no matter where they live or what their level of income, to have access to a reliable supply of safe and nutritious fresh fruit and vegetables. (p. 98)

The book is mainly about the economic value of fruit and vegetables for their producers, not the health impact on consumers. It does not discuss systematic use of the produce for reducing malnutrition in ways other than passively, via promotion of fruit and vegetables in the marketplace.

In the section about links between this study and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the book says, “Increasing the sustainable production of fruit and vegetables is necessary because

the current supply does not meet global nutrition requirements” (p. 13). However, increasing production would not ensure delivery of the products to those who need them most, nor their being able to afford to buy them. Whether in domestic markets or in international trade, fruit and vegetables are more likely to be shipped in the opposite direction, away from those who are most needy.

This is especially clear for contract farms. The book discusses contract farming for the export market and for niche markets such as hotels and restaurants (pp. 103-104). It recognizes that the blurring distinction between rural and urban areas “creates new opportunities for producers in rural areas to cater to the needs of urban populations” (p. 97). Focusing on exports, niche markets, and neighboring urban areas is likely to benefit the farmers but do little to achieve the SDGs.

FOOD GARDENS

This book on small-scale farming gives little attention to what they call *home gardens* and *family farms* that are established primarily to provide food for the producers (pp. 89-92). Helen Keller International calls this *homestead food production* (Keeton 2015; Meyer 2016). The practice has a long and honorable history (Niñez 1984; FAO 2001). I prefer the term *food gardens* to identify gardens that produce food mainly for consumption by the gardeners’ families and friends. They are different from the market-oriented small-scale farms discussed in this book. Food gardens are also different from ornamental gardens. The name *food garden* is more informative than *home garden*.

Food gardens contribute only indirectly to the money-based economy, but they can substantially improve the well-being of people with low incomes. Food gardening keeps many poor people alive. Some manage to survive by gardening even in extremely difficult settings such as mountainous or dry terrain, prisons, and during wars (Helphand 2006; also see Defiant Gardens website at <http://www.defiantgardens.com/>).

GLOBAL, NATIONAL, LOCAL

The global agencies that deal with food issues should give more attention to food gardening and its role in preventing malnutrition around the world, especially in the poorest places. The agencies could promote food gardening in many ways, such as providing brochures, videos and other resources that would help beginners start up their own food gardens.

As the book’s Preface says, “it is unrealistic to prepare a ‘users guide’ that could be useful for all small-scale fruit and vegetable production systems” (p. XII). There is no reason to expect any specific bit of guidance would be useful for all. However, local teaching/learning arrangements could be designed to support small-scale production of specific food items of high nutritive value in a way that fits in with local circumstances. It is not difficult to imagine ways to support production of specific types of beans or potatoes, for example. Local schools already well informed about the local culture and physical environment, could become centers for teaching about these things to students and their parents, and school grounds could be used to demonstrate how food gardening can be done. Global agencies could facilitate the work of agencies at national and sub-national levels.

This book on small-scale farming could be followed by another book devoted to food gardens. However, setting up a permanent and constantly updated website would be a better investment. It could serve as a central library of publications and videos on food gardening. It could provide interested organizations and families advice on how to set up and maintain food gardens in various circumstances. It could connect gardeners with experts in their communities and elsewhere. It could create spaces for discussions on topics of interest. The Internet could be used to create local, national, and global Food Gardeners Networks.

The website could be hosted by FAO, a university, or some other agency, and it could be partially funded by organizations that support food gardening. A website that supports food gardening would be welcomed by many people who could benefit from, and contribute to, the project. As I wrote elsewhere:

Many skilled gardeners produce more food than they need so they share or sell some to others. Sharing food is a good way to use it up. In contrast, the supply of information, ideas, and enthusiasm *increases* as they are shared. In that sense, the Food Gardeners Networks could be very productive. If networking is done systematically, the information, ideas, and enthusiasm it produces would increase and it would reach more of the people who need it most. (Kent 2020, 6)

The availability of the Internet opens new opportunities for tapping into this resource. There is already a good start on this at <https://dgroups.org/fao/home-gardening/> People who do not have direct access to the Internet could benefit from the website through local food gardening organizations.

The book reviewed here covers market-oriented farming and the potential economic benefit to small farmers. That is very different from food gardening that is designed to provide important nutritional benefits for the producers at low cost. The practice can also encourage community-building interactions among those who share interest in it. Food gardening deserves its own platform and support from governmental and nongovernmental agencies at all levels.

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