

## Half-way Around the World

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This past spring I took a leave of absence from my job here at the Extension office and traveled to Nepal, that small landlocked country muscled in between India and China. It was a month of marvel, with nothing familiar except that people had two eyes, two hands, and usually two feet. And they ate food. And they *grew* food. And that somehow, both in Nepal and here in the States, community sprouted up out of these two simple, basic actions like a weed grows up through cracked concrete.

Nepal has an extremely varied landscape—its lowest point is only 328 ft above sea level and highest point, that acclaimed Mt. Everest, has an elevation of 29, 029 ft. As you would expect, this leads to a greatly varied growing season and a variety of methods of agriculture. I won't pretend that I understood all—or even half of what I saw but the basics were this: In the steep hills that rose out of the Kathmandu Valley the land was heavily terraced. Rice was an occasional crop, but because of its greedy water demands, barley was more common. As we rose in elevation, the terracing continued, though the further we got from the markets of Kathmandu, the amount of terracing diminished to fit the needs of single families. We saw acre upon acre of potatoes, lots of greens and radishes, moderate amounts of corn, an occasional tomato plant, and never an eggplant or a pepper. We saw pesky monkeys furtively digging up potatoes, and fields being plowed with water buffalo. We saw groups of women wielding huge baskets of grain, and squatting to sort through piles of potatoes. It was local food, community agriculture, and sustainability at its best. Or so it appeared to me, safely towered by language barriers, foreigner status, and my small fortune of American dollars turned into rupees.

Though there is no denying the spotty understanding of cross-cultural understanding, there is also no denying the sense of community that flourishes when groups of people—be they families, schools, churches, co-workers, or community garden participants—grow food together. In Nepal this agricultural community was less a choice and more a necessity of life. If given the choice, many high altitude farmers would trade in their scythes for solar showers and kerosene cook stoves, the appliances of the thriving guest house. Here in the states, with many of our towns and counties having abandoned their agricultural core two or three generations back, this sense of the agricultural community is beginning to re-bloom. Community gardens are sprouting up everywhere, restaurants are toying with the idea of growing gardens for their entrees and their employees, and many weekly local farmers' markets are having issues with parking. People are choosing to spend hours kneeling in the dirt and lugging water alongside others who are choosing to do the same.

Are Nepal and New Hampshire traveling in opposite directions—Nepal shunning the agriculture that sustains them and New Hampshire uncovering the buried roots of its own? Is this the inevitable course of things? I'm not exactly sure. I do know, however, through watching the communities around me, and even my own family, that even when the traditions of farming seem a forgotten history, something of them remains. With the persistence of a perennial, preserved in the buried bit of one tiny root, they may be brought to the surface again.

I hope Nepal does not have to make the same painful mistakes that we have made in the US—the trading in of prime farmland for generous real estate revenue, the dangerous crop monocultures, the expectation of constant availability. I also hope that we continue on this path towards growing our own food when we can and supporting the farmers in our communities if we can't.

To find out more about farmers' markets or community gardens in your area, call the UNH Cooperative Extension office at (603) 787-6944 or view our Community Agriculture web page at: <http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/Grafton/CommunityAgGC.htm>