

Spring Warren's *The Quarter-Acre Farm: How I Kept the Patio, Lost the Lawn, and Fed My Family for A Year*

Completed 13 February, 2012

Emma Reisinger

13 February, 2012

In brief: Spring Warren decides to do what she says in the subtitle—keep the patio, lose the lawn, feed the family. Actually, she begins with a personal commitment only—spouse and child involvement optional. She is motivated, I think, by concerns about food safety and a desire to garden. Her garden is modeled on victory gardens and older (diversified) family farms. Unlike Kingsolver, however, the motivation behind this undertaking is not as important as the undertaking itself. Or rather, the motivation practically becomes irrelevant after the first chapter or so.

*The Quarter-Acre Farm* is a fun read. It is slightly practical, and gives some good tips on what to *avoid* doing. There is no economic analysis of her project, but that wasn't the point. She didn't care whether she saved money growing her own food (though, most likely, she probably did)—she wanted to circumvent the big ag system, though she does not say that in so many words, and provide for herself. Ultimately, her husband and sons get involved as well, helping out a bit in the garden and sharing in the fruits of her labors.

I was not terribly impressed by this book, but I was encouraged by it. I also got some useful information about how plants grow. She delves into the specifics of plant germination and plants' water uptake; I feel slightly like I have a slightly better idea of how to get things started than I did before I read this book.

There are two reasons, however, why I really grooved with this book: urban agriculture, and the near irrelevance of morality in Warren's garden. I'll get to urban agriculture in a moment. On the morality: Thoreau is all about ethics, philosophy, morality. Thoreau doesn't go out in the woods to live pleasantly, he goes out to live *deliberately*. Warren hangs around in her bathrobe fiddling with ineffective watering systems. Sustainability? Neither talk about it, but both address it indirectly—"it"?

The term "sustainable" is now synonymous with "eco-friendly" or "green" or "environmentally conscious." Yet sustainable is a way more specific term than the others, and I hate to see that specificity getting lost in the muck of green-washing and big companies trying to profit from a compelling concept (without actually taking that concept to heart). Breaking it down a little bit, 'sustainable' is something which is able to be sustained. It is not necessarily self-perpetuating, but it has a net-neutral effect. It can continue, perhaps with assistance, but it can continue.

And there are different kinds of sustainability. There's environmental sustainability, which is the big one we think of today. But there is also emotional sustainability, economic sustainability, and more. I tend to think of emotional and economic sustainability more than environmental sustainability on an everyday basis. Emotional sustainability: can I keep this up (whatever it is—an activity, a relationship) and still feel like a whole person? Economic sustainability: am I going to recoup an investment? Or am I just pouring money down the drain?

Warren does a very similar thing to Kingsolver—takes part of her property, turns it into a garden, and eats out of it. This is weirdly revolutionary to our contemporary society. Yet I think it is one of the keys to environmental sustainability, and can contribute positively to emotional and economic sustainability as well.

What's exciting about Warren's take on this matter is that she's in an urban (or at least suburban) area. At home, my family has 1.08 acres—just enough to keep chickens without a

permit—and we garden in a few raised beds. We compost, yada yada. But we also have a lawn. Everything we do could really fit in a rowhouse lot, if very intelligently and carefully managed. Farming *with* the land takes creativity and knowledge; using the products of that harvest takes additional creativity and knowledge.

This all can be accomplished in urban areas, however. There may need to be more co-operation and some plants (like wheat) are always going to make a little more sense in larger growing areas. I can't see a time in the future when we will have cattle browsing behind the red brick rowhouses of Baltimore City. But I *can* see a time when families raise rabbits in their basements for meat, chickens in the backyard for eggs, and everyone has a little garden. While reading Warren's book, I realized that this was something I want to make possible for more people. I've always lived in suburban areas, so I'm excited to spend a summer living a very rural lifestyle. But I also want to see how some of that rural existence could be brought into the city to reach "the masses" as it were.