



## Let's grow a new crop of farmers by Lisa Hamilton - May 11, 2009

When the Agriculture Department released its 2007 census recently, the news appeared surprisingly good: For the first time since World War II, the United States did not lose farms, it gained them — 75,810, to be exact, for a total of 2.2 million.

But on closer inspection, the numbers aren't so hopeful. The discrepancy stems from this tricky question: What is a farm? The census has changed its definition nine times since 1850, most recently to "any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year."

This loose definition is meant to err on the side of inclusion, but ultimately it just errs. Take, for example, the four chickens I keep in my back yard. I sometimes sell eggs to neighbors, and at the going rate I could make \$500 a year. If I got four more hens, my suburban home could qualify as a farm.

Silly, right? But where do you place the lower limit — or the upper limit? The Cargill feedlot in Lockney, Texas, consists of 60,000 cattle kept in dirt yards and fattened on feed grown elsewhere. Is that a farm? While the census says yes, most Americans would say no.

So then, what is a farm? To answer that, we must first ask: Why do we care? Really, why is it good news when farms — and, more importantly, the farmers who run them — increase?

There are sentimental reasons, of course, but there is also a practical reason. Farmers are valuable because they bring human scale to our massive food system. Think of how many people, in the wake of each new salmonella scare, turn to the farmers market. We do so because we know that farmers bring oversight and ethics to food production, contributions that only individual humans can offer.

In the future, farmers' importance will only grow. Their intimate, human-scale knowledge of the land is what will allow agriculture to adapt to climate change. And as the cheap energy that industrial agriculture depends on disappears, it is farmers, with their small-scale innovation and sheer manual labor, who will feed us. Why do we care about having more farmers? Because deep down we know they are essential to a functioning food system.

So I offer this new definition of a farmer: someone who grows crops in sufficient quantity to be a true commercial

entity, yet is still close enough to the ground to bring human scale and values to the process. Not the backyard chicken enthusiast, nor the corporation behind the feedlot, but the individual human on the land, growing our food.

Revisit the census with this definition, and the good news vanishes. The USDA's reported increases occurred exclusively in farms with yearly sales of less than \$2,500 or more than \$500,000 — that is, the backyard operations and the corporate-scale businesses. In every other category, the numbers dropped or, in one case, stayed the same. Between 2002 and 2007, the United States actually lost 43,603 real farms.

To stop this hemorrhaging, we must shift from blindly encouraging production to investing in a system that values farmers and propagates them. We need to help new farmers obtain markets, land and credit. And we must inspire non-farmers to enter the profession. Imagine, for instance, a program that puts interns on farms — an AmeriCorps for agriculture. In this "AgriCorps," participants would learn the skills of farming and experience the lifestyle; hosts would receive valuable labor to bolster their businesses.

Such a program would face an obvious objection: AmeriCorps offers volunteers to public service organizations, but most farms are private businesses. Why should the rest of us help support them?

But maybe we need to reconsider that line of thinking. By defining farms and farmers as purely economic entities, we condemn them to a system that inevitably eliminates them. What if instead we began to see farmers as the public servants they are, and enabled them to be the public servants we need: stewards of our soil and water, pillars of our rural communities, and guardians of our food. Perhaps by redefining what farms mean to us, we can help their numbers grow — this time, for real.

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*California writer Lisa M. Hamilton is the author of the new book "Deeply Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness." She wrote this comment for the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle, Salina, Kan.*

### Volunteers Needed

We are still in need of helping hands on the Green Branch Farm and Calliope Farm. These are the farms closest to Salisbury. If anyone can spare a few hours a week for volunteering please contact Nancy Murphy at [murphyna2003@yahoo.com](mailto:murphyna2003@yahoo.com)

## In Your Share\* This Week

Asparagus - Sunrise Farm

Swiss Chard - Calliope Organic Farm

Lettuce - Calliope Organic Farm

Sugar Snap Peas - Greenbranch Organic Farm  
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\*Share makeup is best estimate at publication time.

Note: For preservation tips and additional recipes, visit the CSA website at <http://www.providentorganicfarm.com/>

## Sugar Snap Peas - Nutrition

Sugar Snap Peas are a cross between the Garden and Snow Pea, they have plump edible pods with a crisp, snappy texture; they are not shelled.

Sugar snap peas are an especially rich source of B vitamins, including B1, B2, B3, B6 and folate, which are essential for the proper metabolism of fats, proteins and carbohydrates. They are also rich in health-protective carotenoid phytonutrients, including lutein and zeaxanthin, which provide antioxidant protection against the oxidative damage to cellular structures that can be caused by free radicals.

**How to Store:** *sugar snap peas will remain fresh for up to 10 days when properly stored.*

1. Store fresh sugar snap peas in the refrigerator. The colder temperature will slow the respiration rate, helping to preserve vitamins and keeping sugar snap peas fresh for a longer period.
2. Place sugar snap peas in a plastic storage bag before refrigerating. It is best to wrap the bag tightly around the peas, squeezing out as much of the air from the bag as possible.
3. Do not wash sugar snap peas before refrigeration because exposure to water will encourage peas to spoil.

**How to Prepare:** Rinse sugar snap peas under cold running water before cooking. To preserve nutrients, do not soak peas or their water soluble nutrients will leach into the water. (*Note: sugar snap peas do not have strings.*)

**How to Cook:** One of the prime reasons sugar snap peas lose their flavor is because they are overcooked. For the best flavor, cook peas *al dentè*. Sugar snap peas cooked *al dentè* are tender and cooked just long enough to soften their cellulose and hemicellulose fiber; this makes them easier to digest and allows their health-promoting nutrients to become more readily available for absorption.

**Boiling, steaming or cooking with oil is not recommended for sugar snap peas.** These methods of cooking increase water absorption, causing them to become soggy and mushy. They will lose much of their flavor along with many of their nutrients including minerals, water-soluble vitamins and health-promoting phytonutrients. Cooking with oil is not recommended because the high temperature heat can damage delicate oils and potentially create harmful free radicals.



### 3-Minute "Sautéed" Sugar Snap Peas

#### Ingredients:

- 1 lb. sugar snap peas unshelled
- 1 Tbsp low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth

#### Mediterranean Dressing

- 2-3 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1-2 medium cloves garlic
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- sea salt and black pepper to taste

#### Directions:

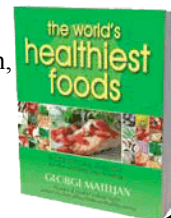
1. Chop or press garlic.
2. Prepare sugar snap peas as directed above.
3. Heat 1 tbsp broth over medium high heat until steam begins to rise.
4. Add sugar snap peas and stir frequently for 3 minutes. Peas will remain fresh and crisp. This method of cooking will concentrate both the flavor and nutrition of the peas.
5. Transfer to a bowl and toss with the mediterranean dressing while peas are still hot.
6. Optional: To mellow the flavor of garlic, add garlic to peas for the last 2 minutes of sautéing.
7. **Serves 2**

Sugar snap pea information and recipes (as well as the previous 2009 newsletter recipes) are from

**"the world's healthiest foods"**  
**essential guide for the healthiest way of eating** by George Mateljan, 2007 GNF Publishing.

Winner "National Best Books 2007 Awards. (US \$39.95)

<http://www.whfoods.com>



**Enjoy fresh sugar snap peas without cooking.** All peas can be eaten raw. Just rinse under cool water and enjoy. Fresh peas are a great addition to green salads.