

2.25 tons divided by 51 pounds

By Rick Burnette



Earlier in the year I had a pleasant morning devoted to harvesting produce. From my own carambola tree, a little over 40 lbs. of starfruit was picked to be shared with farmworker families at Misión Peniel (a ministry of the Peace River Presbytery of Southwest Florida) in Immokalee, Florida. A couple of hours later, I harvested another 11 lbs. of assorted vegetables from the new Misión Peniel Garden; mainly fresh greens such as mustard, cilantro, and lettuce, along with some eggplant and peppers. I felt pretty good knowing that the day's harvest of 51 lbs. of fresh nutritious produce would be distributed, along with other food, to farmworker families from Guatemala, Haiti, and Mexico.

But then again, I have a knack for completely shredding my own positivity. And that happened when I thought about how many tomatoes one farmworker in Immokalee needs to harvest in order to earn the minimum wage during a 10-hour day. The latest figure, provided by the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#), is 2.25 tons. That's right – 4,500 lbs. of tomatoes harvested by one worker each day. Fifty-one lbs. being my day's accomplishment, compared to the 4,500 lbs. being picked by one of the guys in the trailer next to the garden. If I got up every morning and collected 51 lbs. of fresh produce, it would take 88 days to match what he's doing daily.

Does 51 lbs. of fresh produce even matter in a nutrition-insecure farming community of approximately 20,000? With the produce I picked that day, the daughter of the two-ton-per-day guy might get one or two of those starfruit at Misión Peniel, and his wife could possibly receive a half pound bag of fresh mustard greens. By now I'm wondering why I'm even bothering to pull up nutsedge at the edge of the garden. Before completely spiraling out, some perspective begins to seep back in as I consider why I'm tending this four-month old garden in the middle of Immokalee, Florida.

I remind myself that we're here for a few reasons:

- Invitation - We were invited to help address the need for nutritious, local food. In the midst of serving hundreds of meals every Friday and sharing boxes of surplus from regional food banks, the Misión Peniel staff sensed the need for an on-site educational garden. We were honored and challenged by this invitation and accepted the call.
- Collaboration – Since the very beginning, representatives of local farmworker households have been advising and working beside us in planning and establishing this effort as well as their own doorstep container gardens. We've already spent considerable time learning and planning together as well as sowing seeds, transplanting seedlings, and harvesting the new produce.

- Transformation - Only six months prior, this 8,000 square foot plot was vacant and overgrown; the domain of semi-feral chickens. The ground was littered with just about anything you can imagine. In those days, a morning's harvest of 10 lbs. of greens would have been almost beyond imagination. And we're just getting started.

But this was comparing apples and oranges. Industrial farming and community gardening are vastly different. Both approaches have their own strengths and weakness. As a society we've become dependent upon the much larger system, but its inefficiencies and inequities should raise questions. For instance, why should anyone have to pick more than two tons of produce each day just to eke by? Why are there food deserts in a farming town? Is there a connection between a daily harvest in excess of two tons and why there's so much American farm "surplus" and food waste?

The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that approximately one third of all food is wasted or squandered before consumption. I find myself wondering, therefore, how much of that daily two tons of tomatoes is actually eaten.

Hopefully it's not as bad as what Australian researchers discovered after having followed two supply chains in one of the country's largest tomato growing regions. They determined that eighty-seven percent of undamaged, edible harvested tomatoes were rejected based on cosmetic appearance alone (Davey, Melissa. "Almost 90% of edible tomatoes thrown away based on appearance – research." *The Guardian*). Our tiny garden produces a minuscule amount of food when compared to that of an industrial operation, and yet I have a high degree of certainty that very little of its produce is going to waste. Additionally, some of the local produce recipients are voluntarily involved in the garden. Though small, it is a participatory food system that engenders trust in not only the garden products but among those who produce and/or consume the food.

There's another major difference between industrial farming and community gardening. One of these systems is not profit-driven to the point of commodifying labor in such a way that workers become comparable to tractors. At its best, without the need to continually aggrandize to maintain margins, a neighborhood garden can supplement local nutrition without compromising human dignity and health. While in some cases a community garden may expand to meet local needs, it is generally understood that bigger is not necessarily better.

But if not bigger, then what about more? I'm referring to more gardens in the community; more school gardens, more home gardens, and more church gardens, among others. Although "more" might lead to increased competition for space and funding, we may also see collaboration between gardeners. Somehow imagining the potential captures the depth, meaning, and potential of these spaces. The essence of community gardening is collaboration born out of the reality that one or two little gardens may not make much local difference. But what about 20 or 50 or 100 other small gardens?

Our lofty goals probably won't change the two-ton-per-day reality that our neighbor faces. And yet, we are grateful to know for certain that his family, and a growing number of those around him, are gaining access to some locally grown nutrition of their preference.

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