

Year - Round Radicals

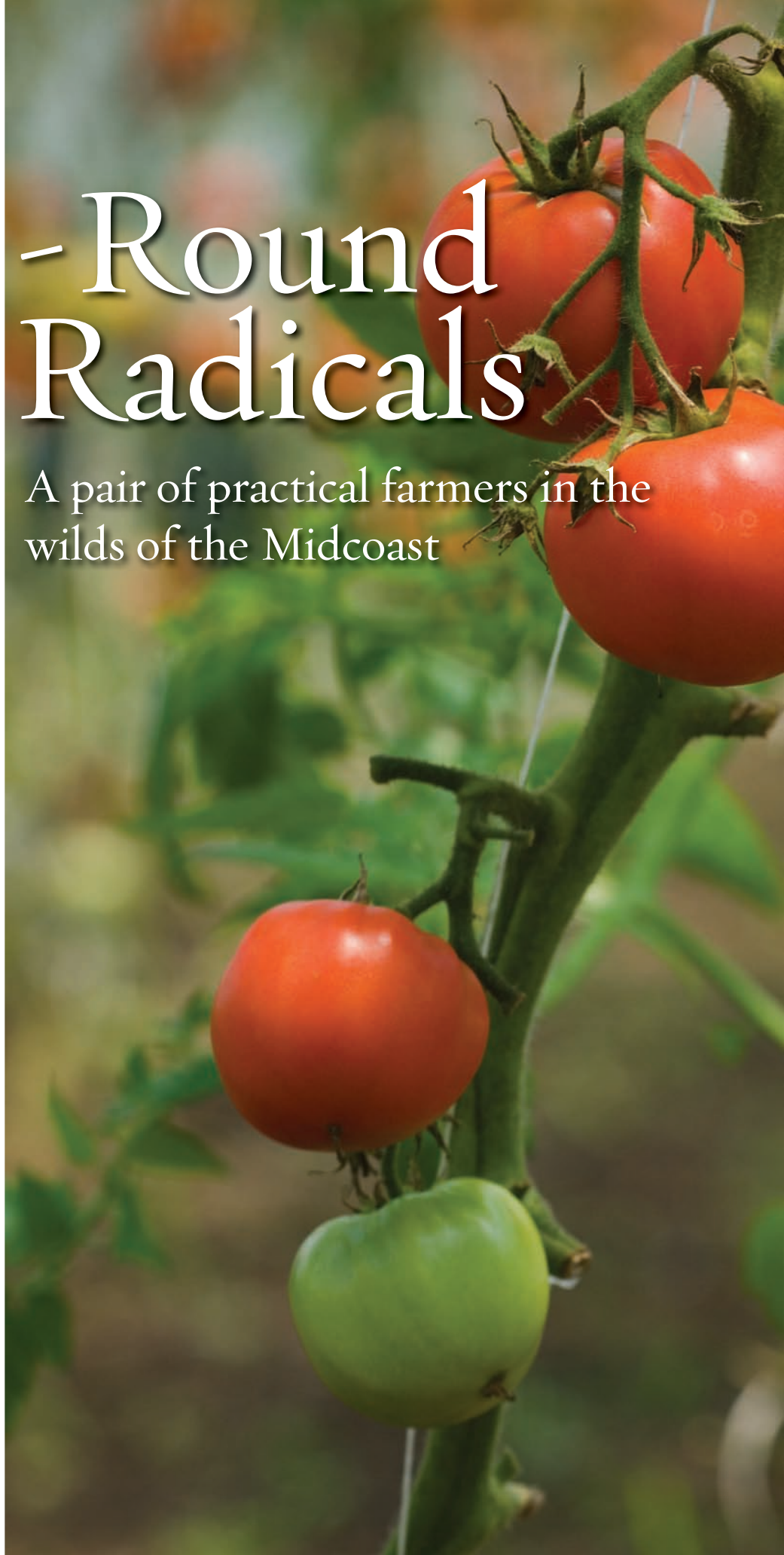
A pair of practical farmers in the
wilds of the Midcoast

PROFILE

Eliot Coleman &
Barbara Damrosch

By Joshua Bodwell

Photography Darren Setlow





“Earth is so kind—just tickle her with a hoe and she laughs with a harvest.” Douglas Jerold

Weir Cove Road wends and rolls along the water’s edge in Harborside. It is little more than a car-length wide, and for long stretches the dense evergreens on either side give the road a tunnel-like quality. Glimpses of Penobscot Bay appear through breaks in the tree line, and the air is ripe with the scent of salt.

After a sharp bend, which is punctuated by a small swath of sandy beach, Weir Cove Road gives up its humble attempt at hot-top and turns to gravel. Before long, the forest opens to fields, rows of plastic-covered hoop-style greenhouses, and a large round sign that proclaims, **FOUR SEASON FARM**. It’s down this far end of the winding road, in a place well off the beaten path, that organic-gardening gurus Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch have been creating their own version of the good life.

At Four Season Farm—which is, as the name implies, a year-round farm—there is an acre and a half of land under cultivation, one-quarter acre of which is covered by greenhouses. That seemingly diminutive acre and a half, however, yields enough produce to supply five to ten restaurants in the region (depending on the time of year), two markets (the Blue Hill Co-op and the Bucks Harbor Market), and an on-site farm stand. Run by the pragmatic and hard-working couple for the past 16 years, it is no wonder that Four Season Farm has become nationally recognized as a model of small-scale sustainable agriculture.

At ages 65 and 68 respectively, Coleman and Damrosch show no signs of resting on their international reputations in the world of sustainable organic farming. Even today, Damrosch’s bio refers to Four Season Farm as “an *experimental* market garden.” In other words, though their backgrounds include a combined 70 years of horticulture experience—plus involvement in federal studies of organic farming, the authoring of a handful of gardening books, the writing of a weekly column for the *Washington Post*, and stints with gardening shows on both PBS and the Learning Channel—Coleman and Damrosch are still tilling ahead in the fields of discovery, while learning new ways of doing old things.

Coleman opened the first incarnation of Four Season Farm in 1970. He had been drawn to Maine after reading Helen and Scott Nearing’s paean, *Living the Good Life*, a book that is credited with urging an entire generation to move “back to the land” and take up the self-sufficient homesteading lifestyle. While Coleman was a professor of Spanish literature in the 1960s, he also fancied himself something of a “semi-pro adventurer”; it wasn’t uncommon for

PROFILE

Coleman & Damrosch



A squash blossom rises up in one of Four Season Farm's many hoop-style greenhouses.

Barbara Damrosch gathers cut flowers in the shade of apple trees; her arrangements, cut fresh daily, are sold in the Four Season farm stand (right, top).

Eliot Coleman clutches his collinear hoe, one of the many hand tools he's designed and refined over the past 30 years (right, bottom).





Coleman and Damrosch worked with Brooksville-based architect Eric Chase on the design of their house in 2001. “We still have books of French farmhouses that Barbara brought us for inspiration,” says Chase. “In the end, what they have is truly a farmhouse. It is organized for farming—for feeding hands, for working with food, for running the business, and for dealing with dirt, as well as accommodating their active lives.”

Coleman to sojourn in Chile during summer breaks and take work as a ski instructor. “But eventually,” he says, “getting to the tops of mountains became the duller part of the adventure.” When Coleman read about the Nearings’ experiment, which embraced hard work and self-reliance, he says that it felt like the enterprise of farming had the potential to become a new mountain for him to surmount. Coleman made a pilgrimage to the Nearings’ Harborside farm in 1967. A year later he purchased 60 virgin acres from the couple for just \$33 an acre, the same price the Nearings had paid for it 1952. Two years later, he opened his own farm stand. “I felt like I was the only person in Maine growing and selling radicchio back then,” Coleman says with a laugh.

Just as the Nearings brought Coleman to Maine, it could also be said that the Nearings brought Damrosch to Coleman: the couple met for the first time when Damrosch made a pilgrimage of her own to meet Helen Nearing in the early 1990s. During her visit, Damrosch walked into Helen’s greenhouse and Coleman was standing there tying up tomato plants for his old friend.

By the time she met Coleman, Damrosch was not only an experienced gardener and landscaper, but she was also a well-known and respected writer. She began her professional career as a college English teacher but soon moved on to write about literature and politics as a freelancer for newspapers and magazines in and around New York. In the late 1970s, having grown up in a family that valued gardening, Damrosch decided to leap from the page to the soil and begin her own landscape-design firm

in Connecticut. Yet even as her reputation and success blossomed Damrosch remained connected to her background in writing. “I started writing about gardening almost immediately after I actually started doing it,” she remembers.

Damrosch went on to write several books, including *The Garden Primer* and *Theme Gardens*, as well as numerous columns for magazines such as *American Homestyle* and *Gardening*. She also landed television work as a correspondent for the PBS series *The Victory Garden*, and years later she and Coleman co-hosted *Gardening Naturally* on the Learning Channel.

Today, Damrosch continues to write about gardening—while mixing in bits of literature, humor, and politics, she says—in a weekly column for the *Washington Post* called “A Cook’s Garden.” Damrosch keeps her own cook’s garden just outside the kitchen door of the couple’s austere, French-influenced farmhouse. In her small garden, Damrosch often sows seeds from John Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds, a Connecticut-based company for which she serves as a special consultant. Coleman also keeps busy working as a consultant for the Maine-based Johnny’s Selected Seeds and designing farm and gardening tools. With his long-standing respect for European handtools, Coleman has been making practical yet ingenious refinements to traditional farm tools for the past 30 years. He can talk about the intricacies of tools the way Mozart might have explained a piece of music—in simple and understandable terms, but with an astounding authority on the most minute details. “I’m a strange tourist in Europe,” Coleman

PROFILE

Coleman & Damrosch

says. "I go to hardware stores more than I go to museums."

Coleman's collinear hoe, which is sold by Johnny's Selected Seeds, is such an obvious improvement on the traditional hoe design that one wonders why the refinements he has made weren't done years ago. Every detail, right down to the proper taper of the oiled ash handle, has been thoughtfully considered, but two innovations make the hoe exceptional. First, the blade hits the ground at a 70-degree angle, allowing you to stand up straight while you're working. Second, the blade is not a heavy metal square, but a sharp, roughly one-by-seven-inch sliver of light, hardened steel that can weave effortlessly around young seedlings. Coleman, however, is hesitant to take full credit for his tool refinements—in fact, he doesn't even patent them—and says that better tools come about when "farmers get together and bounce ideas around."

Gathering and researching tool designs was one of several things Coleman and Damrosch set out to accomplish in 1996, when the couple traveled across the 44th parallel from the Atlantic to the Adriatic Sea. In Europe, Coleman and Damrosch learned from others who were farming at the same latitude as they were back in Maine. Perhaps more than their innovative tool designs or strong advocacy of the organic lifestyle, experimenting with methods for lengthening the growing season in Maine has been one of Four Season Farm's greatest contributions to the cause of sustainable organic farming. Coleman is, not surprisingly, also humble about the farming techniques. "When I realized that every October I was turning my business over to people in California," he says, "I just started playing with things."

Without discounting his method for denser-than-usual plantings and soil enrichment, what Coleman has accomplished, in the simplest terms, is perfecting the use of hoop-style greenhouses in Maine. "I realized that under this thin piece of plastic," he says. "I could create a climate that was 500 miles to the south of Maine. Then I put very light spunbonded polyester fabric 12 inches off the ground, and under that is another 500 miles to the south—now we're talking



Lunch is served: fresh haddock braised in a saffron butter broth, with peas, potatoes, tomatoes, fennel, and leeks. The lunch hour at Four Season Farm is a well-adhered-to daily ritual. Coleman, Damrosch, and all the farmhands, interns, guests, and whoever else happens to wander in, drop what they're doing at noon and convene at the long table to eat food they've sown and reaped themselves. The words of Scott Nearing, who sold Coleman the farm land in 1968, likely echo in Coleman and Damrosch's ears some days: "No meal is as good as when you have your feet under your own table."

PROFILE

Coleman & Damrosch

about a climate that's down somewhere around Georgia," Coleman marvels. But at Four Season Farm they not only start crops very early in their greenhouses and then move them into the fields as the weather warms; they also do something like the opposite of that. Coleman and Damrosch sow cool-weather crops outdoors in the late summer and then slide the moveable hoop-style greenhouses over the crops for protection, therefore extending the harvest into the winter months. Through this system, the farm produces an incredible amount of vegetables—last year alone, Coleman estimates that the farm grossed \$120,000. "You'd have to be willfully ignorant to claim that organic farming can't feed the world," he asserts.

Even though the couple has accumulated two lifetime's worth of innovations, epiphanies, and professional successes, Coleman and Damrosch still toil daily at Four Season Farm with a seemingly endless supply of energy and no plans to retire anytime soon. These days, the two are planning to bring livestock into the mix, and the early stages of a barn and paddocks are already underway. "The livestock will provide manure to drive the gardens," Damrosch says. "They're the missing piece."

"I'm curious to see how much meat we can produce on 10 acres of grazing land," Coleman says with a grin, seemingly ever-ready for a new experiment.

"This property wasn't necessarily what I was looking for back in 1968," Coleman says of the rolling spread. "The soil was horrible, and it was covered with rocks and trees. But I knew that if I bought some established farm, I would have been buying someone else's dream."

"If you buy raw land," he says, "you can build your dream."

Nearly 40 years after Coleman first founded Four Season Farm, the cultural clashes of the 1960s still linger. Even today, there are people who perceive the two gardening and farming experts to be somewhat "radical." But in reality, Coleman and Damrosch may just be the most sensible radicals you'll ever meet. After all, what is radical about being practical? **MH+D**