

PEOPLE

BY DORSEY BARGER

THE GOSPEL OF LIVING SOIL



When I first saw the non-flag-making Betsy Ross on PBS's *Central Texas Gardener*, I was transfixed by her strong face and woman-cattle-rancher disposition. She smiled as if she knew a secret and might even share it with you, but she also looked tough as hell, a bit as if the hairstyle and earrings she wore were intended for this television appearance alone.

As she talked of her journey from chemical-spraying rancher to loving nurturer of underground protozoa and fungi, I thought, "oh my God, I have *got* to meet this woman."

As co-owner of the Eastside Café, I've spent nearly 20 years gardening organically, recycling everything that can be recycled, and composting all vegetable prep scrap, not just at home, but at my restaurant. For me, conserving resources is a matter of business and personal responsibility. Frankly, I'm kind of a freak about this. So I get *really* excited when I meet people as nutso as I am.

That's why I was ecstatic when a friend invited me to be part of a small group outing to meet Betsy Ross and see her Ross Farm in Granger, Texas, an hour northeast of Austin.

As we reach the ranch, the rain that has poured down on us all the way up I-35 graciously stops. Soon, we've escaped the damp, gray chill and are sitting in the kitchen of the farmhouse Betsy uses as both home and office, warmed by a stew my friend made from Ross Farm's grassfed beef. Betsy sits at the head of the table, telling the story I've been so anxious to hear.

In her pre-ranching life, Betsy had been an athletic coach and teacher, gotten an MBA, sold real estate, and worked for the Texas Department of Insurance. All that time, she says, "I missed all of the grasses I'd loved so much growing up on my family's ranch in West Texas. We raised Angora goats and sheep and cattle, and we never did use insecticides or chemical fertilizers. Everywhere we went, Daddy was always throwing

Photography: Dorsey Barger

“Dirt is dead...but soil is alive.” —Betsy Ross

out grass seeds. It was those grasses that really were my first love growing up.”

Betsy returned to her ranching roots in 1992, when her brother asked her to fill in for a Ross Farm manager who had recently passed away. Missing the ranching life as she had, she quickly accepted. But she soon began to challenge the status quo—in particular, the practice of spraying chemicals on pasture land. *It’s just the way things are done*, she was told. *Those organic people are freaks and radicals. Birkenstock-wearers!*

“We didn’t know at that time that when you spray with chemicals, you’re destroying the life in the soil,” Betsy concedes. “So we did things conventionally for about eight years after I took over.” But when she moved from Austin to the farm full time in 2000, she began to listen to the nagging voice in her head that wondered if all that spraying *wasn’t* the way things *should be done*. She had a grandson who was born prematurely and she worried about how the chemicals used on the ranch would affect his health. She wondered about allowing him to eat farm-raised food sprayed with even more pesticides and fertilizers.

And that wasn’t all—her steers weren’t gaining the normal amount of weight, and her pastures were taking longer to recover after grazing. “I said to my brother, Joe David, ‘this is ridiculous, let’s try something else,’” Betsy recalls. “His reply was, ‘that’s fine. Just, whatever you do, don’t go organic.’”

Putting that last suggestion on the shelf, Betsy began researching organic methods.

“Once I started asking questions, teachers just started showing up,” she says. The folks she’d been talking to at the USDA brought her a copy of Dr. Elaine Ingham’s *Soil Biology Primer*, a book that intrigued her enough to visit Corvallis, Oregon, to study with its author. Teachers closer to home included John Dromgoole of the Natural Gardener in Austin and Malcolm Beck of Garden-Ville in San Antonio. Before long, Betsy had entirely changed the way she ran her farm.

After lunch, Betsy, her son, J.R., and our group are loaded into a massive Suburban. We jostle wildly over rutted dirt roads leading to several pastures. During periodic stops, we pull our coats tight against the wind as we watch Betsy cut hunks of grass and soil out of the ground, using a knife Daniel Boone might have asked to borrow.

“You see this long white root here?” she asks. “And all of these horizontal white roots running off it? They’re a sign that the soil biology is doing its job. The fungi, protozoa, bacteria and nematodes—and all of the other microarthropods under the ground—keep the soil loose so these roots can spread out and get the air

and water that plants need to thrive. The same biology makes the soil able to retain water. It also makes calcium, amino acids and other nutrients available to the plant so that it can be healthy and provide healthy forage for our cattle who graze it.

“Healthy forage means healthy cows,” she says emphatically. “And healthy cattle won’t need antibiotics, hormones or steroids.”

We can see that Betsy’s new organic approach has succeeded. The evidence surrounds us—the family members she once worried about exposing to chemical fertilizers and pesticides are healthy as grassfed horses. Her pastures are green and healthy and recover from grazing quickly. Her steers are fat and content. She can’t keep up with the demand for Ross Farm Grass-fed Beef, especially since the Whole Foods flagship store began selling it.

As if that weren’t enough, she runs a second thriving business with her brother, Joe David. Sustainable Growth Texas makes and applies custom organic compost teas to area ranches, farms and homes—tangible proof that Joe David has conquered his organic phobia. With his sister, he now happily promulgates a favorite Ross message—that if you nurture the soil, *it* will take care of everything else.

“Dirt is dead,” Betsy likes to say, “but soil is alive.”

Ross Farm Grass-fed Beef is available in Austin at People’s Pharmacy and Whole Foods Market at 6th and Lamar. Sustainable Growth Texas sells and applies organic compost teas all over Texas. Online at rossfarm.com and sustainablegrowthtexas.com.



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