

Agriculture

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Learning from Prairies How to Grow Food Sustainably

Take a look at any natural ecosystem, such as a prairie, and you will see a remarkable system of food production: productive, resilient, self-enriching, and ultimately sustainable. The modern agricultural practices of humankind are also enormously productive, but only in the short term: the irrigation, fertilizer, and pesticide inputs upon which modern food crops depend both deplete and pollute increasingly rare water and soil resources. The Land Institute has been working successfully to revolutionize the conceptual foundations of modern agriculture by using natural prairies as a model: they have been demonstrating that using deep-rooted plants which survive year-to-year (perennials) in agricultural systems which mimic stable natural ecosystems – rather than the weedy crops common to many modern agricultural systems – can produce equivalent yields of grain and maintain and even improve the water and soil resources upon which all future agriculture depends.