

A FINE BALANCE: MIDORI FARM **Or love, gratitude and fermented burdock**

WILL O'DONNELL, PT Farmers Market Director

Originally printed in *The Co-op Commons* (April/May 2010)

They might not agree with my assessment, to them it's an awful lot of hard work with not lot of security. But I see Midori as a model small farm business.

Marko Colby and Hanako Myers have listened to the experts. They have diversified (mixed vegetables, plant starts, kraut) and specialized (an emphasis on Asian vegetables), they have added value (Kim-chi and Kraut variations), they have a variety of sales outlets both wholesale and direct, local and out of county. And they have done it all so well, on less than 3 leased acres.

I wanted to know how, how are they able to do it so well?

Hanako, being modest and reserved, was a little reluctant to comment, but said, "If it's true, it's because we love the work we do, and we are grateful: to spend our days outside, working with plants, and with each other. And I think because we love to learn, and farming gives us that opportunity, to keep learning about things we love."

That sense of love and gratitude carries through to all their products. When I asked about why they felt it was important to have a value-added component to their farm business, Hanako gave a number of well reasoned answers (use of surplus crops, better return on labor, etc.) but then added, "I think Marko just has a touch for making it (kimchi and kraut). And we wanted to grow on that."

I see it at their PT Farmers Market stand, which is clean and well organized, yet abundant and beautiful. Their produce is immaculate. When discussing why they specialize in Asian vegetables, she replied that it was partly because she is Asian, and that she and Marko tend toward a more Asian diet, but also because the Asian varieties "are more delicate." She said they can be more sweet, or mild, or even stronger in flavor, but what I was hearing was an appreciation of varieties whose flavors are more complex, elusive, and maybe refined.

The challenge in growing unique varieties is education. Marko and Hanako enjoy sharing recipes and ideas with customers at the Farmers Market, which is essential when trying to sell crops like burdock, one of their favorites. Marko also teaches classes on fermented foods at The Food Co-op.

Quality is a major focus for Midori. Higher quality can also bring a higher return—essential when farming a smaller acreage. But when Hanako spoke of quality, she talked about their relationship with The Food Coop, which accounts for almost half their income. Hanako is grateful to the Co-op for placing a higher value on quality and education and factoring that into payment to their local suppliers.

"The Co-op staff is really kind and helpful," Hanako explained. "They have been really generous about giving us space, especially for our plant starts. And they are great with educating the customer and giving planting info."