

metamorphosis of bud to flower to fruit and seed, but rather, some continuum of pansies becoming petunias becoming chrysanthemums; that's the only reality they witness as landscapers come to campuses and city parks and surreptitiously yank out one flower before it fades from its prime, replacing it with another. (My biology-professor brother pointed this out to me.) The same disconnection from natural processes may be at the heart of our country's shift away from believing in evolution. In the past, principles of natural selection and change over time made sense to kids who'd watched it all unfold. Whether or not they knew the terms, farm families understood the processes well enough to imitate them: culling, selecting, and improving their herds and crops. For modern kids who intuitively believe in the spontaneous generation of fruits and vegetables in the produce section, trying to get their minds around the slow speciation of the plant kingdom may be a stretch.

Steven [the author's husband], also a biology professor, grew up in the corn belt of Iowa but has encountered his share of agricultural agnostics in the world. As a graduate student he lived in an urban neighborhood where his little backyard vegetable garden was a howling curiosity for the boys who ran wild in the alley. He befriended these kids, especially Malcolm, known throughout the neighborhood as "Malcolm-get-your-backside-in-here-now-or-you-won't-be-having-no-dinner!" Malcolm liked hanging around when Steven was working in the garden, but predictably enough, had a love-hate thing with the idea of the vegetables touching the dirt. The first time he watched Steven pull long, orange carrots out of the ground, he demanded: "How'd you get them *in* there?"

Steven held forth with condensed Intro Botany. Starts with a seed, grows into a plant. Water, sunlight, leaves, roots. "A carrot," Steven concluded, "is actually a root."

"Uh-huh . . .," said Malcolm doubtfully.

A crowd had gathered now. Steven engaged his audience by asking, "Can you guys think of other foods that might be root vegetables?"

Malcolm checked with his pals, using a lifeline before confidently submitting his final answer: "Spaghetti?"

We can't know what we haven't been taught. Steven couldn't recognize tobacco in vivo before moving in his twenties to southwestern Virginia, where the tobacco leaf might as well be the state flag. One Saturday morning soon after he'd moved, he was standing on a farmer's porch at a country yard sale when a field of giant, pale leaves and tall pink flower spikes caught his eye. He asked the farmer the name of this gorgeous plant. The man grinned hugely and asked, "You're not *from* here, are you, son?"

That farmer is probably still telling this story; Steven is his Malcolm. Every one of us is somebody's Malcolm. Country folks can be as food-chain-challenged as the city mice, in our own ways. Rural southern cooking is famous for processed-ingredient recipes like Coca-Cola cake, and plenty of rural kids harbor a potent dread of compost and earthworms. What we all don't know about farming could keep the farmers laughing until the cows come home. Except that they are barely making a living, while the rest of us play make-believe about the important part being the grocery store.