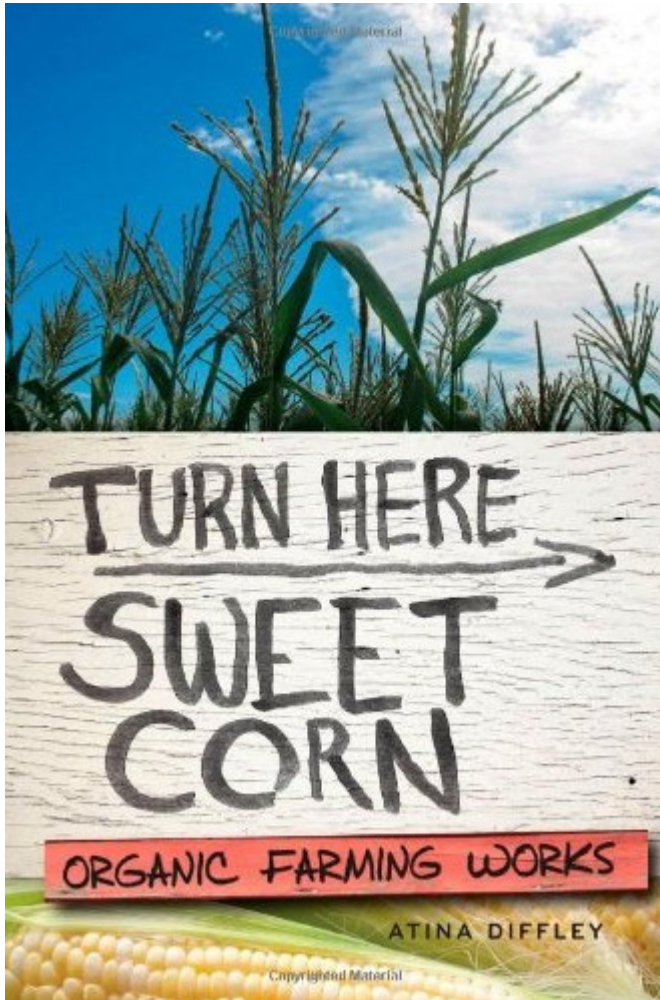


Life on the land

By [Debra Bendis](#)

August 22, 2012

In Review



Turn Here Sweet Corn

by Atina Diffley

University of Minnesota Press

My favorite book of the summer is *Turn Here Sweet Corn*, a memoir by organic farmer Atina Diffley. Her husband Martin started delivering vegetables from his

family's land to co-ops in Minneapolis in the early '70s, when co-ops were a new idea in Minnesota and few outside resources existed. Martin's vocation, soon to be shared by Atina, depended on what they knew from their families' experiences with farming, on what they learned on their own, and of course on the weather.

The book opens with "an explosion of light" that "rips me out of deep sleep." It's a hail storm in June 2005, one that costs the Diffeys 200,000 plants, or \$150,000. (To begin to understand the scope of their farm, realize that this is only two crops out of 50 acres of vegetables.) The next morning, new members of the farm crew join the Diffeys and all weave their way through damaged fields, shocked at what they see.

But for Atina and Martin, this is not the first hailstorm. They assess the losses and adjust the day's work accordingly. As Atina says,

I always say after we finish planting a field, 'It will be a gorgeous crop—if it makes it'. . . I don't think [the crew] understood until now. It's not a joke. It isn't real until the food is on the table.

The book contains three stories in one. First comes the most lyrical account of the life of soil that I've ever read—yes, that's right: an intriguing read about *dirt*. While I knew that soil is a resource and a sometimes abused treasure, I didn't know that soil has resources to restore itself and increase its fecundity—weeds loosen the soil, for example, before a plant like vetch adds nutrients to it. I read with admiration as the Diffeys learn how to coax the soil back to organic health (it takes three years to get certified as organic) by using the soil's own process of enrichment.

A second story is about the family that lives on the land: the Diffley children making their hideouts in the fields and woods; the coyotes that gather around their house when they move in; the marriage that's woven in and out of a mutual love for sun, rain and soil. Atina Diffley is enamored of the land, the seasons, the weather and the very best food. She's up before the sun to kneel, dig and plant, or to harvest, carry and pack. Fortunately, along the way she also finds time to write.

The final story begins with a mailed notice from the MinnCan Project, operated by Koch Pipeline Company (yes, those Koch brothers), announcing that the company has filed applications to install a crude oil pipeline through the Diffley fields. The adventure of Atina Diffley's efforts to fight this pipeline and of the longterm repercussions is as well-written as the rest of the book. By this point I had a vested interest in the farm and its food, and I needed to know how this case would be

resolved.

Read *Turn Here Sweet Corn* for any one of the separate stories, or just because it's the season for home-grown sweet corn. As you read you'll long for a Diffley ear of corn to eat raw off the cob, or for a melon to eat right from your hand.