

# NEIGHBORHOOD DIRT

## GETTING THE SCOOP FROM JIM SLAMA

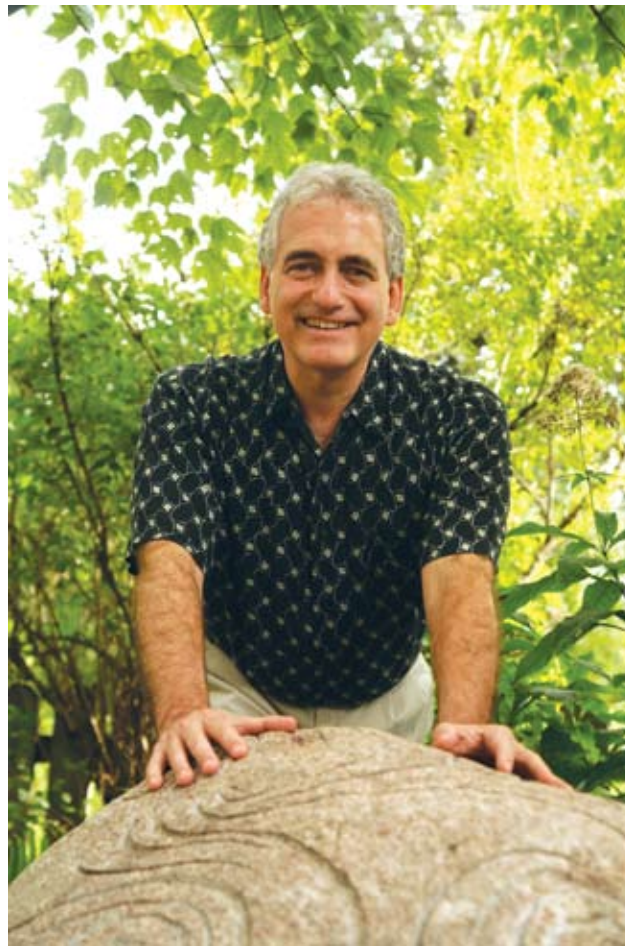
Jim Slama is president of Family Farmed; a non-profit with a mission to expand the production, marketing and distribution of locally grown and responsibly produced foods and goods. We asked Jim a few questions about local food in Chicago and the upcoming Family Farmed EXPO in November, which is a three-day gathering of farmers, producers and consumers, who will meet, learn and shop together.

*EC: From a historic and economic perspective, what have been some of the challenges that the family farmer has faced?*

JS: After World War II, the message that the family farmers got was “get big or get out” and so then the major focus of all the institutions around agriculture was about larger scale agricultural production. For the last 50 years, agriculture in Illinois has been about promoting large scale commodities—primarily corn, soy beans, some pork and beef—very little vegetable and fruit production. So now that local is a major focus, we are rebuilding the infrastructure to allow local farmers, who tend to be smaller scale, to sell their food to consumers directly, through a farmers market, CSA memberships or farm stands, and through wholesale channels—supermarkets, restaurants—larger scale institutions.

*EC: How do you feel about the “new” farmer and the second career farmer?*

JS: It's very exciting. Many people are realizing that they would like to find their inner farmer and start growing food. And so they are. There are a couple of programs in Illinois that are helping them do just that. One is called the Family Farm Beginnings Program (The Land Connection and the Angelic Organics Learning Center) that teaches certain business skills as well as farming skills to new farmers. And Prairie Crossing (Conservation Community in Grayslake) has developed an incubator where people can actually get access to a



couple of acres of land and then get technical assistance, access to equipment, and learn skills to grow the food and get it into the marketplace. For the past five years, we have been partners with Whole Foods in its efforts to secure local food. One of the coolest things they do is offer low interest loans to regional food producers. This helps farmers and artisan food producers get access to capital so that they can grow their business when capital might not be available from banks or other financial institutions.

*EC: Is “local” the new “organic”?*

JS: I think they are both extremely important. I think that local is the hottest movement in food right now. And organic has been the hottest movement in food for the last 20 years with 20 percent annual growth. And there are reasons for both. My

sense is that the key to local vs. organic ultimately comes down to your personal values. For some people, they just want to know their farmer, and they really want to trust their food. And local not only gives them that opportunity best because they can build those kinds of connections—they can visit the farmer if they want. With organic, you've got a very different set of values that are also extremely important. You've got the avoidance of chemicals that are sometimes used in conventional production, so you have to make choices. And I think the better informed you are about your food, the better you are at making choices.

*EC: Tell us about the Family Farmed website.*

JS: The website ([familyfarmed.org](http://familyfarmed.org)) is all about the food stories of the producers. So you can go there and see pictures of the farmers, purveyors and food producers – their story and what they grow, in some cases where they sell it, their philosophy. We want people to understand where their food comes from and what the energy behind it is – it's a real powerful tool to promote more of that kind of (local) food

being produced. There is also more information about why to buy local, and information on supporting producers and for the consumers who are looking for better ways to buy.

*EC: The annual Family Farmed EXPO is coming up on November 21-23. How can we benefit by attending?*

JS: This is going to be our fifth year producing a major food event in Chicago. And on the first day (Friday the 21<sup>st</sup>), it is geared toward the trade, so we will have trade buyers from across the region coming to meet farmers, and food producers that are capable of selling to wholesale markets: restaurants, supermarkets, institutions and distributors. On Saturday and Sunday, it's the fall harvest festival. We're expecting thousands of people, over a hundred vendors, many of whom are family farmers. Folks can buy products for their Thanksgiving meal

from a huge assortment of unique farmers and food artisans. They also can find holiday gifts, meet CSA farmers and they can sign up for shares, and attend demos with chefs like Rick Bayless, Gale Gand, and Paul Kahan. We've also got educational workshops and seminars with some of the best leaders here in Chicago and across the country. For example, Will Allen is doing an urban agricultural workshop on Sunday moderated by his daughter, Erika—how fun! So it's a great place to learn, shop and connect.

*EC: What is the long-range plan for both Family Farmed and the Family Farmed EXPO?*

JS: We think we've created something special here. Our goal is to continue to expand. We will do that by continuing our work particularly with the market development—how do we build the supply and supply chain of responsibly produced food in the Midwest and make sure that it gets in the hands of both trade buyers and consumers? We are also going to continue to work in public policy. I'm a member of the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force, so we are coming up with recommendations now that next year will go to the state legislature, and then to the governor, and we hope to get some very strong, new policies for local food production. And of course we will continue with our EXPO and we think we have created something that's a model that can go to other markets. Our goal is to figure out how we can do that... .. and do just that.

LINKS: [www.familyfarmed.org](http://www.familyfarmed.org); [www.thelandconnection.org](http://www.thelandconnection.org); [www.prairiecrossing.com](http://www.prairiecrossing.com); [www.learnrowconnect.org](http://www.learnrowconnect.org)



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