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EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Cultivating A New Agricultural Revolution:
An Interview With Michael Ableman

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Cutting into a vine-ripened ambrosia melon on a cloudless summer day, Michael Ableman beams. He is about to finish yet another tour of his twelve-and-a-half-acre farm, Fairview Gardens, as he often does: with a taste. The group of Malaysian government officials who are taking the tour thought they were going to learn about modern agricultural techniques. Instead they are leaving with a vision of how to feed people using small farms and traditional methods that have been around for thousands of years. Ending with the melon is part of Ableman's unique activist strategy. Far more powerful than the harangue, he says, is the taste — a delicious sensory experience that speaks volumes.

As executive director of the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens in Goleta, California, Ableman is an expert at extolling the benefits of small-scale community farms and gardens. Small farms, Ableman says, are fifteen to twenty times more productive than their large-scale counterparts. They can yield a greater variety of produce and are closer to the consumer, eliminating the costs of interstate transportation. Even more important, he says, "grower and eater can meet face to face. I can explain why the melons are late, how we keep our asparagus white, and the best way to prepare green garlic. They can tell me how they liked last week's potatoes, what's growing in their gardens at home, and their favorite recipe for butternut squash. Knowing something of each other's lives makes for a real exchange and brings humanity and responsibility back into the food system."

Ableman didn't originally set out to become a farmer; he wanted to be a photographer. But in 1972, before he came to Fairview, he joined an agrarian commune in a high-desert valley east of Ojai, California. Though only eighteen years old, he was made responsible for the management of a hundred acres of pear and apple orchards and a crew of thirty people. "It was repetitive work," he says, "but at the end of each day, instead of feeling as if I had been chained to some mind-numbing drudgery, I felt as if I had attended an all-day party."

Next came a stint developing and managing a nursery that raised avocado and citrus trees on the coast north of Santa Barbara. "This was a point in my life when I was wondering what one could possibly do to support oneself without sucking the life out of the world. Farming just seemed to keep coming back to me. It met my need for a livelihood, a platform, and a way to serve my community and the earth." Ableman then took a job grafting orange trees at Fairview Gardens in 1981. When the former manager left, Ableman was asked to "farm-sit." He ended up staying for more than twenty years.

Although Fairview Gardens is considered one of the oldest organic farms in southern California, Ableman believes the meaning of the word organic has been lost. He prefers to call his methods "beyond organic," a phrase that served as the title



MICHAEL ABLEMAN

for the PBS documentary about the fight to save Fairview Gardens. Ableman tells that story himself in his book *On Good Land* (Chronicle Books, 1998).

Founded in 1895, Fairview Gardens once stretched from the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains all the way to the ocean. By the time Ableman began working there, it was a postage stamp of green surrounded by endless suburban tract homes. Real-estate development would have done away with the farm completely, but in 1994 Ableman launched a campaign to save it. He formed a nonprofit organization, and within a year he and the local community had raised a million dollars to buy the farm from its owners.

Ableman never gave up on his lifelong interest in photography, and in 1983, while he was traveling through China on his way to the Himalayas, his two life paths converged. Cresting a hill, Ableman came upon a vast network of small fields of vegetables surrounded by waterways and paths. Each field was worked by a family, with several generations hoeing and planting side by side. "I found myself photographing like crazy," Ableman says. He was even more amazed when he learned that these fertile, productive farms had been there for more than four thousand years.

That experience set the stage for ten years of winter trips to explore, photograph, and meet with the residents of traditional farming communities, not only in China, but also in Africa, Europe, South America, and in Arizona, with the Hopi Indians. Ableman's travels served as the inspiration for his first book, *From the Good Earth* (Abrams, 1993). They also helped to inform what he refers to as the "art and craft" of farming as it is now practiced at Fairview Gardens.

Today Fairview Gardens employs about two dozen people and helps feed more than five hundred families through its community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, an on-site retail store, and local farmers' markets. Anyone can take a workshop, a tour, or a cooking or gardening class. The center also offers outreach programs and consultation to schools and communities nationwide.

These days, Ableman is busy farming a small piece of land on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Canada, and working on a new book, *The Hands That Feed Us*, about small-farming successes around the country. We spoke in his old living room at Fairview's farmhouse, where he still spends a good bit of his time, spreading the word about the growing agricultural revolution he helped to start.

Cooper: You say we've become disconnected from the procuring and consuming of food. How did we let this happen?

Ableman: You really don't have to look back very far in this country — just a couple of generations — to see that we were once a society based on agrarian principles. Thomas Jef-

People will tell you that the organic-farming revolution that's taking place is about food safety or ecological concerns, but I think that if you dig down deep, you'll find that the revolution is really about what people are missing in their lives: good food and a connection to the land, both of which put us in touch with basic spiritual values.

erson put forth the idea that the health of a democracy was inextricably connected to the health of its agriculture. The society that he envisioned was one in which every family had its own agricultural holding. That has all but disappeared, and the reasons for it are both simple and complex.

We came out of World Wars I and II with some new technologies that became the basis for the industrial agricultural machine. The "green revolution," which proposed to solve the problem of world hunger through the use of hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers and pesticides, was probably based on good intentions, but the means its founders chose to achieve their goal had serious flaws. After the Second World War, nitrate factories that had been set up to build bombs were converted to fertilizer production; hybrid seeds were introduced, tripling yields; and new tractor technology was brought forth. At first, all of the changes appeared miraculous, but the ultimate result of this industrialization was that people were no longer necessary to do the work of food production. They were freed from what was viewed as a form of drudgery.

Cooper: So what's wrong with the industrialization of agriculture? Most people still do see farm work as drudgery.

Ableman: Industrialization resulted in reduced quality and safety of food, degradation and depletion of soil and water, and a whole range of cultural and social ills tied to our disconnection from the land and from nature. I'm not suggesting that somehow, before the industrialization of our food system, everything was wonderful. But it wasn't all drudgery, either. What many of us are now doing on small organic farms is incorporating innovative techniques and ideas and creating a sense that farming is not a lowly job but an honorable profession, an art, a craft. This new generation of farmers are artisans. We're not only changing the way people eat; we're shifting the value they place on the land and on the people who grow their food.

Cooper: Why didn't people question the industrialization

of agriculture at the time?

Ableman: I don't think the drawbacks were readily apparent, and government and corporations pushed hard for industrialization. The new technology merged with the "get big or get out" message of U.S. secretary of agriculture Earl Butz in the sixties and early seventies. Government policies sped the disintegration of family farms and the consolidation of the food-production system. In a relatively short amount of time — say, seventy-five years — we've seen a complete shift away from a mainly rural, family-farm economy. Now farmers have become simply cogs in the machine. In some cases, they don't even own the land, the crops, or the animals. Multinational corporations control every aspect of food production, from ownership of the land to distribution and sale of the food. And the government has played an integral role in this whole process.

What interests me is not so much why this happened, but rather the backlash and the response that some of us have had. What we're doing here at Fairview Gardens is trying to bring back a local food mentality. None of what we're doing is new, but the way we're going about it is certainly different. Today, for example, I spoke with forty or fifty government officials and corporate representatives from Malaysia who came here to learn how to modernize their agricultural systems and introduce their products to the American market. I said to them, "I went to *your* part of the world to rediscover traditional systems of agriculture. I wanted to find out what had made it possible to farm the same piece of land for four or five thousand years, because that could show us a way out of the problems of our modern industrial food-production system."

Cooper: How ironic.

Ableman: Yes, but I also told them that I have no interest in romanticizing traditional agriculture or adopting it wholesale. I do have an interest in incorporating the wisdom of those systems with some appropriate technologies.

Cooper: What technologies are appropriate?

Ableman: We need to find ways to grow food that do not require incredible amounts of energy, fuel, and water. For example, we can reconfigure diesel tractors to operate on biodiesel or, even better, spent French-fry oil. One of our tractors here operates on spent fryer oil from local Japanese restaurants. Replacing the four-wheel tractor with what we call a "walking tractor" can also be an appropriate choice, especially where field sizes are very small. The wheel hoe is a wonderfully designed implement. I could spend an hour setting up cultivation implements on a tractor just to cultivate six or seven hundred feet of lettuce, but by that time I could have finished the whole job with a wheel hoe. Much of the smaller-scale equipment is coming to us from Europe, where field sizes tend to be smaller. The U.S. market for farm technology is geared exclusively toward large-scale producers.

It is estimated that agriculture currently uses 80 percent of the world's freshwater resources. Only about 20 percent of that actually reaches the intended plants or animals, due to inefficient transport and application methods. As populations increase and aquifers decrease, farmers are going to have to

incorporate new technologies and techniques for reducing water use. Drip tapes and hoses, precise planting depths and timely cultivation, ancient dry-farming techniques and increased crop variety will all allow us to grow food with much less water. In some cases, crops even taste better.

The amount of energy spent cooling, storing, and transporting crops to market is enormous. Incorporating solar and wind as sources of electricity, using superinsulated cooling units, and, most important, growing and selling for a regional market are all ways to address this issue.

Cooper: Did the Malaysian group show much interest in these ideas?

Ableman: Well, at first there was uncertainty, like “Who is this guy?” But when they started to walk around and see what was happening, their interest grew. They wanted to know how we could possibly provide food for five hundred families on just twelve and a half acres. They came away with some sense that this small-scale system, using an intensive approach based on sound soil-building principles, is considerably more productive than the large-scale alternative.

Cooper: What are a few of those “sound principles”?

Ableman: They are nothing new. Not very long ago, the Chinese were feeding large populations using ancient intensive systems of agriculture, raising eight or ten crops on the same field in a single year. It’s about paying attention to soil

fertility, making efficient use of time and space, and planting crops simultaneously that support each other. When a crop is finishing up in a field, the new crop that will replace it is already growing in flats or in the understory of that crop.

At Fairview Gardens we see a farm not as a factory but as a living organism, and we work with it that way. We see our fields and orchards not as battlegrounds where farmers are pitted against a host of alien forces, but as part of a system that can be symbiotic and cooperative. If we can meld into the diverse natural life and traffic of the farm, we can satisfy the needs of the land as well as those of the marketplace.

Cooper: Speaking of the marketplace, why do so many people in our country seem satisfied with such poor-quality, tasteless produce?

Ableman: Oh, I don’t think they’re satisfied with it. They just haven’t had the opportunity to experience anything else. About eight years ago, I had a group of fatherless boys here from an organization called Rites of Passage. The first thing we did was give them a “grazing tour.” We let them loose among the cherry-tomato vines. We split watermelons in the field and let them eat the hearts of them. I watched as they tasted fresh food for the first time in their lives, their brain cells exploding with new information. I didn’t need to tell them about the principles behind what we’re doing. I didn’t need to say anything.

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