

Conferences in CA 2014

Agrarian Elders

Take 22 veteran organic farmers from both coasts of the US and Canada, put them in one of the most beautiful resorts on the California coast, add great food, good wine and excellent weather, stir gently, and what do you get? Lots of profound thoughts, amazing ideas, spontaneous bursts of wit and wild humor, radical political thinking, a true sense of history, hope for the future, and lots of mutual respect and admiration.

The gathering called “Agrarian Elders” took place from January 12 to 17, 2014, at the Esalen Institute on California’s central coast. It was the brain child of Michael Ableman, a farmer and social activist from Foxglove Farm, British Columbia, and Eliot Coleman of Four Season Farm in Maine. They were concerned that the original “back-to-the-land” movement of the 1960s and 70s had been co-opted by industry and that most of the organic farmers who were prominent in founding the movement were getting ready to retire and pass their farms on to a new generation that may have very different ideas about how to continue. Michael and Eliot’s idea was to collect the wisdom and perspectives of as many “elders” in the movement as they reasonably could in writing and on film, as a basis and a reference point.



The Agrarian Elders (yes, the phrase “organic geezers” frequently popped up) who came to Esalen were kneeling, from left: Barbara Coleman, Anne Lazar, Bob Cannard (Green Strings Farm, CA), Eliot Coleman (Four Season Farm, ME), Nash Huber (Nash’s Organic Produce, WA), Frank Morton (Wild Garden Seed, OR), and Steve Decatar (Live Power Community Farm, CA). Standing, front row, from left: Deborah Koons-Garcia (filmmaker), Shirley Ward (Manager, Esalen garden and farm), Hiu Newcomb (Potomac Vegetable Farm, VA), Jack Lazar (Butterworks Farm, VT), Tom Willey (T&D Willey Farms, CA), Susan Tyler (French Village Farm, New Brunswick), Jake Guest (Killdeer Farm, VT), Michael Ableman (Foxglove Farm, British Columbia), Dru Rivers (Full Belly Farm, CA), and Gloria Decatar. Standing, back row, from left: Jim Gerritson (Wood Prairie Farm, ME), Betsy Hitt (Peregrine Farm, NC), Norbert Kungl (Norbert’s Good Food, Nova Scotia), Don Bustos (Espanola, NM), Warren Weber (Star Route Farm, CA), Jean-Paul Courtens (Roxbury Farm, NY), Amigo Bob Cantisano (Heaven and Earth Farm, CA), Michael Murphy (Esalen Institute founder), and Jim Crawford (New Morning Farm, PA).

It was noted more than once that the conference didn’t include any farmers from the Midwest. The organizers evidently tried to include some, but the criteria they used to choose participants narrowed their possibilities and the ones they invited were not able to come.

The criteria included farming organically and/or biodynamically for at least 30 years, working to improve community through healthy food and social justice, farmland preservation, passing on knowledge to a new generation, and a record of activism. Many had worked for years to set fair organic standards in their state or province, and almost all were involved in the fight against GMOs. Participants were leaders of organic farming in their region and all were making their living by farming.



Among the Americans, it is amazing how the Vietnam War and the politics of the 1960s affected their life choices. Several had served in the war, most had protested it, and they chose to devote their lives to “something meaningful” as a way to stand up to the military-industrial complex. Providing healthy food for their families and communities, building soil health, and protecting the earth’s environment gave these pioneers and visionaries inspiration and determination to fight the industrial-agricultural complex for decades. “Everyone told me it couldn’t be done,” was an oft-repeated phrase. “So I did it anyway.”

The participants are distinct from conventional farmers in that they work with plants and soil not as a commodity, product, or an assemblage of genes, but as living, breathing organisms with whom they collaborate and share vital life forces. Farming is not a science but a biological process.



The beautiful Murphy House at the Esalen Institute was the perfect place to have this conference. Started in the 1960s by another visionary, Michael Murphy (who attended every session!), Esalen has blazed trails in the human potential movement for over 50 years. Its location and fantastic organic farm and garden provided just the right ambience.



The monarch butterflies were everywhere and whales passed along the coast every day.



Just south of the institute, Nash and Patty photographed California condors resting in the trees.

Michael and Eliot created a loose structure for the week. Each day started with 5 or 6 of the farmers telling their unique history, and about their farms today. The following topics were addressed throughout the week:

- Where are we as farmers and as a movement?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- What can we do about GMOs, climate change and government regulations? The discussion about GMOs got so involved and intense that there was not time to talk about the other two equally-important topics!
- Special techniques, tools and other ideas used on each farm.
- Can organic farming feed the world?
- The Plant Stress Hypothesis
- Succession, transition, mentoring and retiring
- Scale and quality—how large can “organic” be?
- Is the movement being co-opted?
- Sustainable practices
- Where to go from here?

Esalen's notetaker Noel Vietor summarized the gathering on the last day as a movement from “The Great Unraveling,” or the era when old unsustainable systems fall apart, towards “The Great Turning,” or the creation of new sustainable systems that are aligned with natural systems. It was agreed that the original organic movement offers a viable alternative to the damages the industrial agricultural system is doing to the earth and our health, and it is a harbinger for “The Great Turning.”

It was made clear time and time again that these veteran organic farmers carried on their work not just for the money, but for the love of the land, of growing things, and their communities. As Carol Pogash of the *New York Times* who covered the conference said, “The bottom line has never been their bottom line.”



It was also plain that each farmer was very concerned about who will step up to carry on the work. Some lucky ones had children who were raised on their farms and were already prepared to pick up the mantle. Others were concerned that their business would end when they retire. There was considerable discussion about the new young generation and its interest in organic farming, whether or not it will stand the test of time. Most thought it would, some had doubts.

For most, this conference gave them affirmation that they had fought the good fight, and they did not fight alone. They are fonts of wisdom and experience, and are ready to pass that on to new standard bearers. The entire week was filmed by renowned filmmaker Deborah Koons-Garcia (who made “The Future of Food” and “Symphony of the Soil”) and perhaps it will provide inspiration to a new generation, some of whom will sit down 35 years from now and talk about their amazing journey in organic and sustainable agriculture.

EcoFarm 2014

Nash and Patty did not participate fully in the EcoFarm Conference at Asilomar in Monterey the following week, but Nash sometimes attends conferences to network with fellow farmers and some of the farm's most important customers, like PCC Natural Markets and Organically Grown Company, both of whom send staff to EcoFarm every year. There was an additional high point in the three-day event: Anne Schwartz (below), of Blue Heron Farm in Skagit Valley, a founder and past president of Washington Tilth Producers, and a good friend of Nash's for over 30 years, was the recipient of the Sustainable Farming Award, or “Sustie,” this year. It was an honor to sit at her table and applaud her award.



OSA 7th Organic Seed Growers Conference

At the end of the month, Organic Seed Alliance held its semi-annual conference on developing and propagating organic seed at Oregon State University in Corvallis. Nash sat on a couple of panels at this conference and Sam McCullough (below), the farm's grain/soil/machine manager gave a presentation. This conference was very inspiring and educational for all concerned. The farm was happy to send vegetable production manager Chris Tipton and a new employee, Susan Strom, who will be a greenhouse technician for the upcoming season, to this conference.



In between conferences, Nash and Patty did some mountain biking and enjoyed the unseasonably warm weather in central California. It was a selfish enjoyment—CA is suffering through the worst drought in recorded history. Grass is parched and dry, reservoirs are empty, and there is little to no snow on the mountains. We hope that the spring will bring some moisture to this besieged state!

Patty McManus-Huber