

On Good Land

The Autobiography of an Urban Farm

Michael Ableman (Chronicle Books, San Francisco, CA, 1998)



Michael Ableman

In this stunningly photographed book which poetically tells the story of Fairview Gardens in Goleta, California, one of the oldest and most diverse organic farms in an urban environment, Michael Ableman raises many important issues on sustainable food production. *On Good Land* shows the reader the importance of the connection between the earth and the food we eat. Ableman, an organic farmer since 1973 and manager of Fairview Gardens,

has transformed the piece of land the 12-acre farm sits on into a highly productive organic community farm. He has



turned packed-down dirt and concrete into rich soil for cherimoyas and peaches, while at the same time educating the surrounding suburban community on what he is trying to do. After years of convincing neighbors of the importance of eating seasonal, local food that is pesticide-free,



Michael Ableman meeting with participants of the 17th National Pesticide Forum and 8th CA Organizing Conference, Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP and Pesticides Watch.

Ableman has nurtured many believers who cannot live without the vegetables and community functions his little farm provides. Ableman cites the astounding rate of the loss of family farmland at 46% per hour in our nation and has worried about the future of his own farm in his 19 years of managing and op-

erating Fairview Gardens. The farm's land became a public trust in 1994, which requires it to remain a working organic farm and perform educational programs in communities and schools under a non-profit organization status, called the Center for Urban Agriculture. Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP members saw Fairview Gardens on one of Ableman's many educational tours during their annual conference, *The National Pesticide Forum, Pollution Prevention Is the Cure* in May 1999. For a copy (\$18.95), contact the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens, 598 N. Fairview Avenue, Goleta, CA 93117, 805-967-0188, fairview@aol.com. Or purchase by contacting Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP or using our website www.ncamp.org, click on Join/Shopping.

— Hilary Melcan

On Good Land excerpts:

Fairview Gardens turned one hundred years old in 1995. One hundred years ago this valley boasted some of the richest topsoil on the West Coast, some thirty feet deep in places. Now shopping centers, gas stations, and fast food restaurants have replaced the family farms and ranches that once thrived here. At Fairview's centennial celebration I put forth the following question to an audience of eight hundred people: "What do we as a community want to see on this land for the next ten, twenty, fifty, or one hundred years?" Can we really survive without fertile soils, without fresh and unpoisoned food, without a place to teach our children about interconnections and context, or a place to gather on the land?

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One of the results of our disconnection from the land has been the modern phenomena that we need "experts," "consultants," "farm advisors," and books like this one to tell us how to relate to the world of soil and plants. In traditional agrarian societies a child learned from riding on its mother's back while she worked in the fields or from apprenticeships. If you eat, soil is your business. Learn what good soil looks, feels, and smells like. Take a piece of land or a garden that has been abused and rebuild it, discover how to grow soil while growing food for yourself and your family. Believe in yourself. You are only two or three generations removed from the land.

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Even at its best, farming is extractive. It consumes resources, both natural and human. Sustainable agriculture is often discussed in terms of the soils, air, and water. It rightfully addresses the distance food must travel and the impacts of farming on the environment. We must also look at how well it sustains the people who do the work. It is a struggle to provide good wages, quality housing, health benefits, and a sense of ownership from a business that earns its annual budget by the pound.