

Reflections of a Revolutionary

Grace Gershuny on the Past, Future of Organics

by MARK KEATING

Grace Gershuny is widely known as an author, educator and organic consultant. A back-to-the-land Vermonter since 1973, she began her longtime involvement with the organic grassroots movement by organizing regional conferences and developing an early certification program for the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA).

In 1994, USDA recruited Gershuny to serve as its lead organic standards specialist where over the following five years she helped lay the foundations of the National Organic Program. Co-author of *The Soul of Soil*, a seminal work

on practical organic soil management, her new book is entitled *Organic Revolutionary: A Memoir of the Movement for Real Food, Planetary Healing and Human Liberation*. Still raising her own vegetables and chickens, Gershuny currently teaches in the Green Mountain College online Masters in Sustainable Food Systems program and serves on the board of the Institute for Social Ecology.

First of all, thank you for writing such an informative, insightful and highly personal narrative about your more than 40 years in the organic movement. I think this sentence from the book's prologue, "This is the story behind the evolution of the USDA organic standards, what happened to derail them from reflecting organic principles and what it will take to lead the American food system along a more organic path" – would make the perfect blurb for the back cover of your own book.



Grace Gershuny gardening in 1989.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRACE GERSHUNY

Author, educator and organic pioneer Grace Gershuny.

Thank you. *Acres U.S.A.* has been such a valuable resource for organic farmers over the years – I'm delighted to talk with you and its readership. It has taken endless soul-searching for me to write this story. Many of today's young food activists and aspiring farmers often accept as a given that the organic label, now that it has been taken over by its former enemy, has lost its meaning. They believe that 'industrial organic' is no better than conventional chemical intensive agriculture, and that 'local is the new organic.' At the same time, my great dream has come to pass: No longer are organic farmers greeted by laughter or hostility when they walk into a USDA-affiliated agricultural research or extension office. How did these two circumstances come to co-exist, and what can be done to keep moving the organic revolution forward? Those are the questions that kept me determined to tell this story. Now that there's increasing awareness about the value of organic farming as an antidote to climate chaos, the need to get as many farmers as possible to convert as many acres to organic management as possible as quickly as possible is also a critical imperative for me.

“My time in Washington allowed me to directly experience both the ineffectiveness and the corrosive, soul-crushing impact of this top-heavy bureaucracy.”

You were a prototype for the back-to-the-land movement – young, urban, idealistic – yet unlike many of your peers you quickly figured out that growing vegetables wasn’t enough – you had to sell them, too. Tell us about your earliest experiences with creating markets for organic food.

It’s important to remember that this whole thing did not spring out of the mind of Michael Pollan in the 2000s, though he deserves considerable credit for galvanizing widespread awareness about the benefits of a more ecologically sound food system. A lot of us were working on making organic and local food available in a lot of places, and my experience was in northeastern Vermont, where I began by organizing a farmers’ market in 1975 in the town of Newport. Early NOFA organizers aimed to distribute produce from organic farms in Vermont and New Hampshire to activists and co-ops in northeastern cities. This entailed costly and time-consuming truck routes to pick up a case of broccoli here and some carrots there and barely paid the cost of delivery for products of very questionable quality – when payment was even involved. It didn’t take too many truck breakdowns to convince the guys (and it was primarily guys then) that this was not exactly sustainable. A change of strategy was clearly called for, and the group quickly adopted a new mission of ‘local food for local markets.’ A lot of research and analysis went into thinking about eating more locally and seasonally.

Most students of organic history are familiar with the names F.H. King and Sir Albert Howard, but your book identifies the sources of traditional wisdom which inspired them.

All of the early organic agriculture theorists derived their inspiration from indigenous peoples of the world. Rudolph Steiner worked with European-based indigenous practices. Sir Albert Howard learned much of what

he wrote about from the Indian peasantry. The same thing is true about King when he travelled through China, Korea and Japan and wrote about *Farmers of Forty Centuries*. A number of early organic pioneers in America, including Paul Keene who founded Walnut Acres, and Helen and Scott Nearing were strongly influenced by Gandhi’s ideas. My own particular Buddhist practice has helped me on a personal level to withstand what I’ve had to work with in my public life and continue to walk my own talk as much as I can in the real world. To a certain extent we’re talking about the difference between the holistic, cyclical, systems-thinking viewpoint and the reductionist, black-and-white viewpoint. Organic really relates to a true systems understanding, which is why I think organic agriculture is connected to the revolutionary changes we are experiencing in many aspects of life today.

One significant influence you cite whom we haven’t heard a lot about elsewhere is Murray Bookchin.

Murray Bookchin was the founder of an organization called the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE) and an important mentor to me. He was a self-taught radical leftist scholar and one of the first of the left to insist that ecology and food production in particular were important subjects. In 1962 he wrote a book called *Our Synthetic Environment* which preceded Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* by several months and really laid out the whole story about the problems with our food system. We invited him to speak at a NOFA Summer Conference in the 1980s after the ISE was established at Goddard College. He delivered an amazing address entitled “Market Economy of Moral Economy,” saying that we had to change the whole economics of the food system for it to be equitable and

feed everybody and be ecologically sound as well.

Your book is unique among the growing library of works on organic agriculture in that it provides an insider’s account of how the USDA organic standards came into being. You were very engaged in the nationwide organizing campaign that led to the passage of the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990. Describe why the organic community went to Washington, D.C. and said, “Please regulate us.”

The idea that the organic community went to Washington, D.C. and said, “Please regulate us” is a little bit of a misconception, because first of all a lot of the organic farming community was dragged kicking and screaming into accepting that we needed regulation. At the time there were a couple dozen regional certification programs which were fiercely competitive and argued that their standards were the best. It was a mess for farmers, and consumers didn’t know who to trust. What really came to pass was that in 1989 the show *60 Minutes* covered the NRDC’s findings about Alar residues on apples. It caused a huge uproar among parents who realized that their children were taking in a lot more residues for their body weight than were considered safe. It became known as “Alar Sunday” because the next week a lot of grocery stores had organic apples on display. The consumer groups knew that this was not possible so they demanded that it be regulated to protect them from fraud. The organic processing sector and merchants, the industry as it had recently arisen, really wanted consistency with labeling and standards as well. That’s eventually how the organic law came about. The organic farmers, many of them still believe that it was a mistake, and that they lost control of organic and to a certain extent they are right. My book tells my perspective on what I think they didn’t get about what happened.

Tell us about being recruited by the National Organic Program (NOP) in 1994 to bring your organic expertise into the labyrinthine process of writing federal certification standards.

When I started working for USDA in September 1994 there were more people working at its headquarters than lived in my entire county in Vermont. The people who worked at the NOP were very welcoming, especially Michael Hankin, the second-in-command, who had made it possible for me to become a federal employee. It was all very low-profile with very few resources, and the lawyers would not teach me how to write federal regulations. The way they worked, they said, “You figure it out, and we’ll tell you if it’s wrong.” I had worked on a lot of iterations of organic standards, principles and philosophy, and this was a whole different kettle of fish. Challenges to my sanity came from all directions. My time in Washington allowed me to directly experience both the ineffectiveness and the corrosive, soul-crushing impact of this top-heavy bureaucracy.

After your decades of experience writing and enforcing organic standards, elaborate on the “myth of higher standards” sinkhole you address in the book.

This is one of the major things that people don’t understand, and in particular the activist community doesn’t understand. The push for higher standards has actually made it easier for the large, professional business organizations than for the smaller owner-operators. They are simply better equipped to deal with the increasingly finicky and paperwork-heavy demands of organic certification. So the demand for higher standards has helped create the very situation that organic activists feared most. Organic certification is not a health and safety standard, it is not an environmental standard; it is a lot of information about how the product is produced. It is a process standard, not a product quality standard.

As my own experience in organic certification has grown over the years, I’ve become averse to regulating organic production, which is inherently systems-based, by trying to break a farm down into good and bad molecules. What are your thoughts on the most appropriate and effective way to handle material use in the organic standards?

The tension between the people who are concerned about whether something is synthetic or natural and

those who are concerned about its effect on agroecosystem health has been going on for a long time in the organic world. The increasing domination of the concerns for the market and consumer perceptions have tilted things way too far toward concerns about synthetics in food. Materials have come to dominate the conversation too much, because the basis of organic agriculture is reducing use of off-farm inputs in general, whatever their origins. That, and choosing production practices that enhance agroecosystem health and biological diversity. From my perspective, many of the problems to which the organic industry has fallen prey can be attributed to basing the definition of “organic” on the distinction between “natural” and “synthetic.” In the book I tell the story of the narrow victory by advocates of the “origin of materials” approach to organic standards over those of us who wanted standards based on the principle of “agronomic responsibility.”

Many tributaries of the organic movement, including 19th century Populism, the back-to-the-land ethic embodied by Scott and Helen Nearing and the Social Ecology espoused by one of your mentors, Murray Bookchin, expressly rejected capitalism. Acknowledging that we live in a capitalist economy, how do you feel about the strong influence that agribusiness corporations now exert over the organic food marketplace?

Common concern and reasonable concern, especially among the left-leaning. The organic label isn’t the solution to all of the problems in the food system, and it certainly isn’t the solution to all the problems in capitalism. So the fact that these big corporations are getting into organic and consolidating as Phil Howard’s wonderful graphic shows us – I agree that consolidation of any part of the food system is a problem. It’s just not a problem that can be addressed through tightening organic standards – in fact, the drumbeat for stricter standards only makes it worse. But what has come about is that more and more people are able to get organic products through these familiar brands. They can get organic at Walmart, Costco and any local supermarket. More people now realize that it’s possible to produce everything

they are accustomed to, everything that they want without having to use toxins, GMOs or destroy the land. The marketplace is the number one educator in this country, and it is saying that now you don’t need any of that stuff. That whole story about how if we didn’t have GMOs and pesticides that we’d starve – no we wouldn’t; we would have a cleaner environment and as much healthy food as we need. I think as more and more people realize this it will make the food system the leading edge of social change.

Tell us about the work you are doing currently and the different ways in which you share your experiences with the next generation of organic.

Since 2012 I have been teaching an online course called Theory & Practice of Sustainable Agriculture for the Green Mountain College MS program in Sustainable Food Systems. We have amazingly accomplished students all over the country, and it is a very rigorous program.

The course runs for six weeks at a time, twice a year, not on a semester system. I also helped design and am participating in teaching a new online course for the Institute for Social Ecology, called Ecology,

Democracy, Utopia. We have a new partnership with Goddard College that will allow matriculating Goddard students to take the course for credit through that institution. We plan to run it again in the fall. I enjoy getting out and talking about my book, especially with students and young food system and farming activists.

To contact Grace Gershuny, or if you would like to sponsor her to speak to your school or organization, email organicrevolutionary@gmail.com.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

For more on Grace Gershuny’s courses through Green Mountain College and the Institute for Social Ecology, visit greenmtn.edu/academics/graduate/msfs and social-ecology.org/wp/2016/02/new-online-course-starting-in-april-ecology-democracy-utopia.