

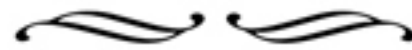


Fresh Prospects

The Prospect Heights CSA Newsletter

FARM NOTES

An excerpt from *On Good Land: The Autobiography of an Urban Farm* by Michael Ableman.



From 1981 to 2001, writer and photographer Michael Ableman farmed at Fairview Gardens, a one hundred year old farm in coastal southern California. Surrounded on all sides by tract homes, shopping malls, and suburban thoroughfares, Fairview Gardens is a highly visible agricultural parcel in a dense suburban environment. By providing its neighbors with food, educational and cultural events, open space and a connection to the land, the farm demonstrates the economic viability of small farm operations, and the potential of small, regional farms to feed their communities. In 1997, the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens (www.fairviewgardens.org) was established to preserve and operate the farm in perpetuity through an agricultural conservation easement. Michael Ableman now farms on the historic Foxglove Farm on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia.

For me, farming was like falling in love. Both are means of perpetuating the human species. My relationship with the land followed a classic course. Nature seduced me and I feel in love with the little farm on Fairview Avenue. I was in awe of the magic of emerging seeds, and enchanted by early morning harvest when beads of dew formed on taut, squeaky cabbages reflecting the light of the world.

At some point, like all lovers, I fell out of love in the purely romantic sense of the word. When that intoxicating, blinding draw faded, a deeper relationship began.

I came to farming without training, academic credentials, books, or expectations. My grandparents had farmed, but not my parents. I thought technique was important. I thought I should become masterful. Over time I discovered that it was more important to learn how to see.

My best agricultural practice was to walk the fields and orchards, observing, taking notes, poking, digging, smelling, and inspecting. Everyday was different, sometimes drastically so. Usually the changes were nearly imperceptible. But there were always changes. Some came directly from nature. A sudden heat made tiny little green beans grow to harvest size in a matter of hours. In the waxing cycle of the moon, seeds germinated almost over night; in the waning cycle, roots strengthened and took hold.

Sometimes the changes resulted directly from my own actions. If I cultivated the lettuce or brassicas, they seemed to double in size within days. Fruit trees responded to compost or pruning. By trial and error, I learned and relearned until the technique I aspired to was internalized and forgotten, as technique should be. I also learned its limits and how difficult it is to outsmart nature. Farmers are eternally optimistic in this respect, as we try to ripen pumpkins just in time for Halloween, have the first tomatoes at the farmers' market, or grow tender salad greens among much stronger native weeds.

Within a few years of arriving at Fairview Gardens, I went from

being a struggling peach farmer to a kind of ringmaster. When I decided to reduce the emphasis on peaches and turn Fairview Gardens into an all-purpose cornucopia, I couldn't stop. Soon Donna and I and the small crew were learning how to best irrigate peppers, sow corn, and hill up potatoes. The catalogs that came from Stokes or Johnny's or Abundant Life tempted me to experiment with nearly twenty-five different tomato varieties. The lettuce beds evolved into a mix of baby greens so diverse that when I described them to visitors I felt like a waiter at a fancy restaurant—Lacinto, Tres Fin Frisee, and Tango sounded more like exotic sauces than simple salad greens.

I discovered the treasure hunt pleasures of growing potatoes, and invisible crop that at harvest reveals multi-colored tubers of Yukon Gold, Red Pontiac, Sangre, and Yellow Finn. Peppers pushed me to the outer edges of sanity as I insisted on planting every color from golden yellow and lilac purple to chocolate, seeking the super sweet of the small red Lipstick and the dangerous hot of the golden orange Habanero.

When I came, the land was still a relatively empty canvas. Soon we colored in the various unplanted areas, taking advantage of the subtle micro-climates that naturally existed. Mandarin oranges filled in at the highest point in a warm frost-free area; figs and lemons thrived in one the hottest spots below the compost. Cold loving apples grew well along the bottom of the land where cool air settles. To create screens from the road and habitat for birds and insects, hedgerows of pomegranate and nectarine went in along the northern border. Blackberry and sycamore filled in along a creek overflow.

The landowner, Dr. Chapman, watched as the peach orchards gave way to a riot of new crops splashed around the land. He must have wondered what I was up to, though he never asked. Certainly this was as far from commercial agriculture as you could get. Instead of fields full of broccoli grown to supply supermarkets by the truck-full, Fairview was become a kind of supermarket in itself, diverse and ever changing like an agricultural botanic garden.