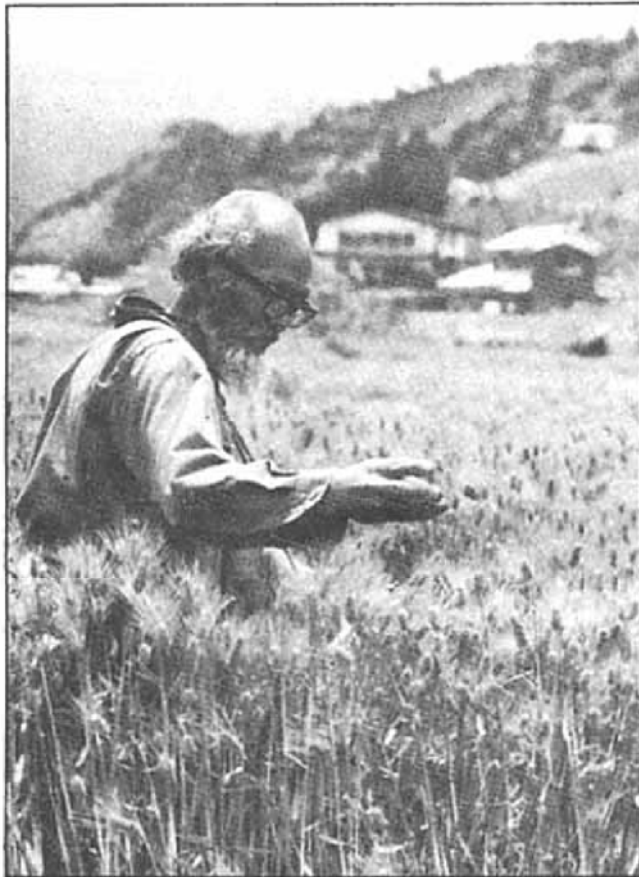


The Master of Natural Farming Visits North America

By: Peter Giffen

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Each summer at the end of July the George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation has a summer camp in the Tahoe National Forest high in the Sierras. The camp brings together many teachers and students of oriental medicine, philosophy, and food preparation and use as part of various ancient and modern healing arts.

This year plant uses and identification was an important part of the gathering and the highlight was the first visit to this country of master farmer! teacher Masanobu Fukuoka, author of *The One Straw Revolution* Fukuoka-san gave five "lectures" to groups of 75-100 of us at the camp, speaking on his philosophy of natural farming and the methods he has developed over the 30 or so years he has been farming in southern Japan.

Fukuoka-san had no fixed plan for his talks. Each time he began rather loosely and the

discussion evolved into an easy flow of ideas and answers to our questions about his methods of no tilling, no fertilizing, no weeding, and no dependence on any chemical control.” He was quite at ease at all times and presented a gentle warmth and delight—especially when our questions were more searching or helped to more clearly sharpen problems unique to our situation over here.

It soon became clear we were learning and sharing with an extraordinary person who met us in a calm, eloquent, and yet simple and completely open manner. I walked away from his first talk my head buzzing with delight and a smile from one ear to the other that I was afraid would burst off my face. The power of Fukuoka-san’s vision creeps into you in a wonderfully disturbing way.

HALTING DESERTIFICATION

What he spoke about that most sharply hit me was his firm judgment and deep concern about California’s impending “desertification,” how serious this is and how rapidly the “defoliation and dehydration of the landscape” is moving northward. This dangerous reality became even more dramatic when we saw an enormous rattlesnake in a rocky gorge in the mountains of northeastern California. We later learned that this species of rattler was one normally found ONLY in much harsher and drier areas in Baja, California. Its presence that far north was a very frightening and rather ominous sign.

Fukuoka-san also spoke at length on his philosophic and religious view of natural farming as being based on an intuitive and non-intellectual understanding of nature. He suggested that our role should eventually be as non-manipulative as possible, especially after a more natural and diverse flora has been re-introduced and has become firmly re-established.

His talks on the practical aspects strongly stressed that the soil should never be left exposed—“If the green dies then everything dies—it should be green all year round.” With proper sowings and care the soil is always protected and its microlife not scorched and devitalized.

While in California, Fukuoka-san visited with the Director of Conservation for the State of California and representatives of other resources departments, including Forestry, Food and Agriculture, Appropriate Technology, Water Resources, and Fish and Game. He learned of the early geologic and botanical history of California and the subsequent settling by Indians from an old Yurok Indian of the Clamath River who escorted Mr. Fukuoka through the Muir Woods Redwood Grove in Mann County.

After these visits, Fukuoka-san spoke of how the Spanish and their cattle brought the weedy short season grasses such as foxtail and wild oats which now cover most of the hillsides and are responsible for the widespread summer “brown-out.” Some of these very competitive grasses were originally brought over for cattle feed and, with their early maturity, they leave no effective insulation, shading or protection for the rest of the season after they have ripened. This was compounded by the practice of heavy grazing. Then it was not long before the original, longer season native grasses and forbs that used to stay green well into late summer were forced out and could no longer protect the existing ground moisture.

To eliminate these competitive grasses, Fukuoka-san suggested they could be “pre-maturely” sprouted in early summer (after the seeds have matured) by watering regularly just enough to germinate the seeds and get new seedlings established. Then pull off all water and let the sun cook them so they “burn out” again before they can get near the stage of setting seed again.

With no vital seed left around for the normal season of fall and winter rains there will be very few of the foxtails and wild oats coming up to be in the way as long as no new seed is stirred up by cultivation. Then, with reduced competition, we can sow our legumes (clovers, vetches, etc.) and plant vegetable seeds, especially the ground shading and rich humus building cabbage/radish family, either alone or in combination with a seasonally appropriate grain.



Last July, Larry Korn hosted Oyako and Masanobu Fukuoka on their first visit to North America. Larry had spent several years in Japan as a student of Masanobu Fukuoka, learning the philosophy and techniques of natural farming. While in California, Mr. and Mrs. Fukuoka had an opportunity to visit Larry's parents' home in Los Angeles. "In the city," Fukuoka—san observed, "grass and concrete are the same. They both obliterate the natural world."

GRAINS

Fukuoka-san spoke at length on growing rice and alternating it with various grains so that there is always a succession of different grass family plants coming up well before the last one is harvested. This is very important where any disease could be carried over.

Having a different genus following each crop pretty much avoids the risk of continuing or re-infecting with the inoculum from any disease that might have

just gotten started—"nips 'em in the bud" so they can't build up to a problem level. Their normal host disappears long enough for exposure to the elements to kill most of the potential disease pathogens.

Sowing into standing grain and then waiting until the new seed has germinated and is somewhat established before harvesting the previous crop keeps the young sprouts naturally well shaded and protected. Then, following threshing, it is very important to scatter the chaf right back over the reviving seedlings to maintain their insulative mulch.

For drier regions, such as much of Northern California and Southwest Oregon, Fukuoka-san suggested that we try millet, sorghum, and especially buckwheat to compete with our native grasses and alternate with winter and spring grown grain crops.

Here in Southwest Oregon we have a very serious problem with star thistle on dryland farms and pastures. Eliminating this pest may require a lot more ingenuity and possibly some different techniques if there isn't an adequate source of water to get good competitors well established. He suggested, at the very least, mowing very close several times before any thistle flowers even begin to form. Then (and this was the one exception he made) in very obstinate cases perhaps harrow and then sow clovers (such as Ladino or subterranean) that do fairly well on dryland sites. Ask the old-timers in your area or the Extension Service what other possible varieties there are

to experiment with; ones they've used locally for ground covers on dryland pastures.

One legume that was discussed is kudzu. Kudzu has become a pest in the South, but here in the Northwest our seasonal cycle should work very well to keep it in bounds. It's a fantastic soil builder and in Japan (with climate, geology, and soils very similar to ours) kudzu is considered one of the most favorable signs when found on soils being considered for farming. Land with kudzu on it is often land that sells for the best prices in Japan.

TREE CROPS

Our native alders are excellent nitrogen fixers and, with a little water, can get started on some sites. Fukuoka-san suggested that we plant lots of trees, even if for the short range, because of the enormous value they have in protecting and rebuilding weakened soils. Then, as the areas become more effectively naturalized and productive again, we can gradually thin out and if necessary eliminate the overstory that has cooled and protected the now productive "dryland" fields and orchards.

Persimmons are one of the toughest and most pest-free trees I know of. They could be of enormous value used in this manner, as would our mulberries which are extremely fast growing, fruit abundantly, and are a great haven for helpful insect devouring birds. Even leguminous trees such as locust or Acacia where hardier varieties can be grown make prolific short term cover and shade that can be removed or thinned later if they get too competitive.

Fukuoka-san spent five days with us in the high Sierras. His talks covered much much more than I've been able to touch on here in this brief, impressionistic fashion. After those intense days, a couple of us were invited to travel with Mr. and Mrs. Fukuoka and Larry Korn to a very different, almost contrasting situation. At Seika's farm north of Clear Lake, in the mountains at about 3,000 feet, we encountered a very different aspect of Fukuoka-san's teaching, but that will have to wait for another issue of Tilth. The next part of this article will discuss the way Fukuoka-san's approach and teachings can be applied in one of the toughest, most rugged terrains I've ever seen considered for "farming." •

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Reflections on a Week with Masanobu Fukuoka

By Ron Woolsey

After hearing Masanobu Fukuoka speak at French Meadows and then accompanying him to a community in Lake County, and again to Chico to consult with organic rice growers, I found myself seriously questioning everything I had previously learned of agriculture. Mr. Fukuoka has a refreshing way of enticing you to question your convictions without ever directly challenging you.

Looking back on my two years in Covelo, studying Bio-Dynamic, French Intensive horticulture under Plan Chadwick, I remember hearing of a number of people promising a "Do Nothing Fanning." I then looked on those claims as being based on laziness and an unwillingness to accept responsibility to return energy to the soil.

My first reaction to Fukuoka-san was not that he was lazy, but "Ah, here is a more simple and natural system to live by." Now, having read his book, I find that he is also asking us to question our whole approach to life and especially our desire for systems and scientific or analytical thinking. "Nature, as grasped by scientific knowledge," he says, "is a nature which has been destroyed; it is a ghost possessing a skeleton, but no soul." In reading the book I watched my resistance and saw how my desire to control nature came from wanting a sense of self-importance and, even deeper, a fear or lack of faith in nature.

After hearing Fukuoka-san I believe I also hear Plan Chadwick much more clearly. They both speak of the soil as alive and the importance of never exposing it to harsh elements or treatment. Both men look to nature before acting and have an extreme reverence for its laws. So where is the difference? I now believe that one wishes to celebrate humanity's relationship with nature as a channel for God and His art, while the other quietly takes his place in that work of art.

At this point I am still questioning. But I do see a very subtle difference in my approach. If we insist on living in over-crowded cities with a shortage of land and water, perhaps intensive gardening is necessary. But then I have very serious questions about living in our cities in general. I also see how intensive cultivation could be a step toward natural fanning on badly abused land. My hope is that in the future I will be interfering less and enjoying more.

I heartily encourage you to explore "The One Straw Revolution." Our future may depend on it.

RON WOOLSEY spent two years working with Alan Chadwick's Covelo Garden Project. Currently living in Ashland, Oregon, he has been very involved with classes and workshops offered through the Ashland Horticulture Training Project.