



## Organic Farming is a Relationship with the Land: Interview with Myra Goodman, Part II

Saturday, February 21, 2009 by: Jim Dee, citizen journalist

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(NaturalNews) *This is part two of a three-part interview with Myra Goodman, co-founder, along with her husband Drew, of Earthbound Farm, which is perhaps the most well-known name in organic produce in America. With this article, we kick off an exciting, ongoing "Know the Growers" series, in which we will be interviewing organic farmers around the world.*

**JIM:** That reminds me, treating farms as holistic units and thinking about the whole "big picture"...

**MYRA:** Yes, I think there's a lot of planning. One thing that Earthbound Farm is really proud of is that most of the acreage we farm has been transitioned from conventional agriculture. We work with farmers who've farmed conventionally for generations who wanted to grow a little bit of organic - make sure they didn't miss a strong market. After a while, they saw that it was actually possible and it actually could be profitable, and that, wow, look, my soil is healthier; I have fewer issues with diseases. Pretty soon, they start wanting to transition more and grow more. So, that's been very gratifying for us.

Here's something really enlightening that one of these conventional growers that is now farming a lot of organic said to us: He realized that what he had to drop with the switch to organic was the macho idea that he should be able to grow whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted to. Conventional growers had grown accustomed to using this arsenal of chemicals to fight off all the weeds, fight off the diseases, make something grow faster, whatever they needed to do to get whatever they wanted, when they wanted, where they wanted. With organic, it's more like a real relationship where you have to learn about your partner and work in harmony. It's a give and a take. And it's acknowledging the way something works and working within that system and trying to nurture that system so that it stays healthy and you can grow a crop. But you're not growing the crop when you want, where you want, [what] you want all the time, you know? You're having to compromise and plan, and do a lot of nurturing versus a lot of conquering.

**JIM:** In terms of the state of the art right now, in terms of whatever the metric is for what yield you get per crop for an organic farm, is there R&D going on trying to push that yield up, or are you at a place where you're satisfied with the yields?

**MYRA:** If you talk to Organic Farming Research Foundation or any of these organizations that are really trying to get research dollars for organic, you will hear how frustrated they are that organic doesn't get its fair share of any of the [agricultural] research money - that most of the advances are made through trial and error on individual farms. But, I think in terms of the yield question there's an important point: one reason why we talk about organic farming as sustainable farming and why it's such a healthy system is that, over time, organic land becomes more and more productive. The soil gets richer; the microorganisms are flourishing. It's easier over time to get a healthy crop, and it starts costing less to farm that crop.

If you look at the conventional system, the soil gets more and more depleted over time; the pests get more resistant to pesticides. You need more pesticides; you need more expensive pesticides. So, if you charted it, you would see conventional getting more expensive and less productive, and you'd see organic getting more affordable and more productive over time. So, we're finding that the land we've been farming the longest is having the best yields and is producing organic more affordably; the land that has been transitioned more recently has more problems.

It's also the crop... I was telling you about how a lot of our success had to do with the fact that we started with these baby greens and we put them in a bag. I think the other part of our success with these baby greens is that, because we harvest them when they're so young, we have less issues with pest damage. We found that we can grow most of these baby greens really pretty profitably year round. We do have problems with mildew and certain issues with certain crops, and then of course you have weather problems that every farmer faces. But, on the crops that are in for a longer period of time [...] most of our crop loss has to do with loss to pests that we just can't control and we don't have these heavy-duty insecticides that are going to control them effectively. So, we do have a lot more crop loss on the longer-lead crops. And that's really what impacts our yields, our total yields, for the year - more than how much we're actually harvesting per acre, if all of it was harvestable.

**JIM:** You know, it's fascinating about the fields getting healthier. I was wondering, do you see on the scientific end, as a farm matures and the fields become healthier, have there been any tests on whether, for example, the mineral content of the produce actually increases?

**MYRA:** There have been a lot of tests that show that; with certain nutrients, organic is more nutritious - and that conventional food over time has gotten less nutritious for certain nutrients. And so I think part of that is reflected in that cycle of the organic soil getting healthier over time and the conventional soil getting more depleted. And there have been studies that document that.

[\*Note: Earthbound's staff subsequently recommended visiting the Organic Center's web site for further information on this topic. In particular, they recommended reading two articles:

<http://www.organic-center.org/scien...>

<http://www.organic-center.org/scien...> ]

**JIM:** When you're starting, year after year, do you produce your own seed stock for everything?

**MYRA:** No, we don't. I have a whole supply department, and I have a senior VP of supply. Things have changed so much from the old days when I did every job and I knew what

was happening in every department. But, one of our partners has a whole R&D department, and they do seed development, trying to get varieties that are more resistant to things like mildew and different diseases.

[\*Note: Earthbound's staff later clarified: "In terms of seeds, we do breed some of our own seeds, but not all of them. Organic seed production on a commercial scale is very limited right now."]

**JIM:** What are your thoughts on GMO?

**MYRA:** Well, you know that they're outlawed in organic and that there's no labeling requirements for products that have been genetically modified. So, right now, for consumers in the United States, the only way you can be sure you're getting products that weren't genetically modified is if you buy organic. And, the way that I feel about it is I do not see a reason to play around with nature.

So much of the justification for a lot of the genetic modification was the promise that farmers could reduce the amount of pesticides used because the GMO variety is going to be a pest-resistant variety, or we're going to increase the nutrition of something. All of those arguments that these seed companies had talked about from the beginning, about how they were going to revolutionize the food system... As far as I'm concerned, from everything that I've understood, it's all fallen flat on its face. I think a lot of the motivation is really from seed companies looking for something to differentiate themselves and something they can charge more for and own a patent for, more than the farmer's need for something different.

**JIM:** I think that some of that stuff is kind of scary, how they own the patent for the seed and also the pesticide that goes with it-

**MYRA:** Oh yeah, like the Roundup Ready Crops... I think it's also really scary how they're trying to grow these pharmaceutical products out in open fields. And, who knows what's going to happen.

**JIM:** For an individual like yourself, who's ultimately responsible for tens of thousands of acres of agriculture, it must be even more scary because, for example, there's contamination concerns, right?

**MYRA:** Oh yeah, yeah. And so many of the reassurances that the genetically modified seeds were contained, and then they find that they've spread into all the corn. In any corn chip bag you buy you can find traces of GMOs. Yeah, it is scary. I think there's potential impact on organic integrity and I think there's potential impact on people's health and the health of the environment. It is very scary.

**JIM:** Are there any things that you have to do at Earthbound-

**MYRA:** Well, the crops that we're growing at Earthbound right now are not any of the major crops that have been genetically modified like corn and soybeans. I don't even know if anybody has done a genetically modified lettuce or broccoli or cauliflower. It hasn't kind of gotten to the row crops at this point, so it's not as much of an issue to us as it would be for someone who grew those other crops.

**JIM:** Oh I see...

**MYRA:** Because we're really vegetable farmers.

**JIM:** Okay. But not cucumbers, right? You don't grow those?

**MYRA:** No, we don't.

**JIM:** What do you have against cucumbers? [laughs]

**MYRA:** We just haven't grown them.

**JIM:** You know, they're really expensive - the organic cucumbers, at least where I live.

**MYRA:** Yeah, we've never done cucumbers. I don't know whether there's just a perfect climate for it and we don't have it or what.

**JIM:** Well, let me ask you about some of the other things in the news. I know you guys grow spinach, for example. I buy your bagged spinach myself. But that was one of these... there's all these hypes lately, these "scares." I know there was a spinach one and a tomato one. And they seem to get all the press whenever somebody gets e coli or salmonella or something, versus when you compare that with similar threats in the meat or dairy industry. It seems like there's this war on vegetables. I don't know why that is, but how have you been affected by this?

**MYRA:** I think it's very scary as a consumer when you're eating something that you expect to be really healthful and something you can't see can make it very unhealthy. I definitely understand people being worried about that. At Earthbound Farm, we take food safety incredibly seriously and we have a very intensive food safety program. Since the outbreak in 2006, we've actually started testing our raw product for e coli, salmonella and shigella, some of the major food-borne bacteria, before we process our salad. And then we also randomly test our salad once it's been packaged to make sure that it also tests negative. We also have a whole food safety program in our fields. We test our water; we test our inputs. We make sure there's boundaries from cattle farms. But, even so, there's no guarantees, when you grow product in an open field, that you can protect it from these invisible organisms that can travel in the wind or any which way. So, we do this testing program that we trust to catch any widespread contamination and it makes us feel a lot better, as well.

**JIM:** There's been talk in health communities about how some of these outbreaks have occurred in the first place. I'm not talking about Earthbound; I'm talking about agriculture in general. A lot of people believe, for example, that conditions on farms weren't necessarily sanitary. For example, people who were picking the crops didn't have adequate facilities. That sort of thing... Is that a valid point - those sorts of things - as a contributor to the problem?

**MYRA:** You know, I think it really depends on what you're talking about. I think concerns about worker hygiene is a lot of the reason why there's been prejudice against product from Mexico. People believe the water's dirtier and they don't have as many hygiene procedures in place. In terms of the packaged salads, if you go out into any of those fields, you'll see all the workers have hair nets and they're all wearing gloves. And [their] band-aids have metal in them so that they'd be detected when the salads go through a metal detector. They all have bathrooms with hand-washing facilities in the field... So, I don't think that is an issue. Some people are concerned about stuff south of the border [but] I think there's so much more awareness about food safety in recent years that I think poor worker hygiene is a much more rare thing to see.

### **About the author**

Active members of the raw and living foods community, Wendi and Jim Dee founded Pure Jeevan in 2006 to help raise awareness of this optimally nutritious and health-giving lifestyle. Since launching Pure Jeevan (see <http://www.PureJeevan.com>), they have organized retreats, given public presentations, hosted raw food meetups, and maintained an extensive online presence through their blog (<http://www.PureJeevan.com/blog>) and through considerable community involvement both online and in person.

In 2008, Wendi and Jim launched the All Raw Directory (<http://www.AllRawDirectory.com>), a free, community-run web site with the goal of organizing and cataloguing every known online resource related to raw and living foods. They're currently involved in launching several new projects for this community. For a free download of Pure Jeevan's informative eBooks, "Raw Foods 101" and "Raw Food Recipes," simply visit <http://www.PureJeevan.com/blog>.