

Book reviews

***Back to Earth. UK Organic Horticulture through the Lifetime of a Grower* by Iain Tolhurst**

£24.99 plus postage from:

www.tolhurstorganic.co.uk/back-to-earth/

Back to Earth is the title of Iain Tolhurst's new book, which to me is a surprising title because I hadn't realised he'd ever left it. Although you can never really tell with a guy who seems to conjure up out of nowhere enough time to do stuff like building boats and writing articles while working more than full time on growing vegetables and other ancillary activities.

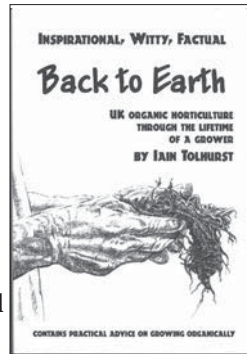
I was thinking how to sum up the book when these words flashed in front of me; "Has wit, verve and swagger to spare". Unfortunately, they're not my words. I saw them from a train on a poster advertising a film, but they are so apt I thought I'd use them and hope the Observer's film critic isn't averse to recycling.

The film is called *The Preacher*, which isn't apt because there is nothing preachy about the book or about Tolly for that matter. He does have a touch of 'guru' about him though and the book is full of hard won wisdom and insight, but it's held together by the down to earth muck and sweat of practicality that's a long way from preachiness.

Everyone who knows him – and more than a few who don't – know this about Tolly; he has a huge amount of knowledge of organic growing and he has always been willing to share it. That was and is the hallmark of the OGA – both the first version (Organic Growers Association) and the second one (Organic Growers Alliance) – self help, helping each other and sharing experiences and information.

It's one of the few surviving traits of the organic movement – although I'm not sure that enough people tap into it – but it is here in this collection of articles going back over decades but which are as vibrant and pertinent as they were when they were first written. They also tell the story of how one grower learnt his trade and shared that learning with others. It's also the story of a number of growers who weren't born with easy access to land and money, who didn't have farming and growing backgrounds or training but who wanted to go 'back to the land' and build a life and livelihood out of growing – mainly growing vegetables – organically. Which they did and they succeeded and in doing so they gave substance to the organic movement.

The book starts with 'how to grow' type articles – guidance in enough detail to be followed by budding and existing organic growers and gardeners. As Tolly masters those things, the articles move on and cover things such as 'systems approaches', soil tests, standards issues and how organic practices need to change to be more sustainable. The ups and downs of growing are here in the articles, the failures as well as the successes; technical insights and personal insights; and flashes of inspiration which make this book far more than a 'how to technical guide' or an almanac for organic growing; it is also a kind of journal of the nitty-gritty side of the organic movement.



Tolly and his generation of organic growers and farmers do what they do, and do it properly because it's right for them and it's right for their land and holdings; and they have found a way to do it that is right for their livelihoods. This is a symbiotic relationship not a dependent one. If Tolly was told that to have organic certification he would have to use some animal manure, would he abandon his stockless approach? Not at all; if his soil told him he needed to use some animal manure, would he? No question.

The nitty-gritty side of the organic movement – where principles guide practice and markets are vehicles for principled practice – is what is represented in this book. Oh and it does have "wit, verve and swagger to spare."

Lawrence Woodward

***Organic Revolutionary: A memoir of the movement for real food, planetary healing and human liberation* By Grace Gershuny.**

Joes Brook Press.

ISBN 978-0-9972327-2-1.

www.organic-revolutionary.com

Grace Gershuny works in the US as an author, educator and organic consultant. She has been involved with the organic movement at the grassroots levels including developing an early organic certification programme for the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA). In the 1990s, when organic farming became more noticed by the regulators, she served on the staff of USDA's National Organic Program, where she helped write the organic regulations, bringing in her considerable experience.

The book is a personal account of the journey of organic farming from a grassroots movement to a regulated and global industry. She relates the difficulty encountered in finding the right words to express in the standards concepts that many of us believe are the founding principles of organic agriculture. I liked in particular her reflections on the 'material or practice' conundrum, whether organic farming should be understood as way of farming that uses only "organic(ally) approved non-synthetic materials" or as one of "best agronomical practises". The other conundrum that I found very relevant is her reflection that the aim to make organic 'pure' can have many unintended consequences, including damaging the farmer's willingness to go organic. Her personal journey is characterised by gaining deeper insights but also of losing some friends in the organic movement through her involvement with the USDA and her growing frustration about "absurd arguments over what constituted a real threat to organic integrity." Much of the book centres on the American organic movement but it contains a lot that is highly relevant to the ongoing debates in the UK to better understand how we can improve organic standards, moving forward, without destroying what it is we want to protect.

Susanne Padel



Grace Gershuny
reading from her book
at Elm Farm in July