

## CULTURE AND HORTICULTURE

When I sat down with Wolf D. Storl's *Culture and Horticulture: The Classic Guide to Biodynamic and Organic Gardening* (revised 2013), I wanted to be convinced that Rudolf Steiner's biodynamics was more than a 21<sup>st</sup> century carryover of Medieval alchemy.

Two of my granddaughters seem to love their engagement with Steiner's philosophy - one in a California Waldorf school, the other on a biodynamic farm in British Columbia. I already knew there were hundreds of flourishing biodynamic farms and wineries worldwide, and that the standards of its international certifying agency, The Demeter Trade Association, are beyond organic in their stringency. So, my hopes were high – and at least partly fulfilled.

Alchemy there is aplenty. According to Steiner, Spirit created life which created matter – astrality and soul forces are more and more taking hold as we evolve. The Earth is open and receptive to cosmic influences. The arrangement of leaves around plant stems mimics the ratios of planetary movements. Planets control the quantity and quality of agricultural products through the medium of quartz (silica). The macrocosm (nature) mirrors the microcosm (humans). The womb is an inner, micro-ocean; the sun, moon and planets are internalized as the body's organs. Plant and animal rhythms are synchronized with cosmic rhythms – spirals, vortices, radial and bilateral symmetries.

To encourage etheric influences, Steinerians time garden activities with star charts, and “seed” compost with special preparations – cow manure aged in a buried cow horn, and others.

So much is beyond the range of my own gardening philosophy. (I'm a Master Gardener, and hence committed to following University of California vetted advice.)

But when Storl compares biodynamics with contemporary physics – the appearance and disappearance of matter, matter as non-material, matter becoming energy and vice-versa – rejection of the etheric becomes more difficult. Then Steiner's call to bring back the soulful, intuitive and imaginative and to combine it with science, suggests a kind of truth. We can know the ancient four elements – air, earth, fire and water – with our senses; the periodic table we cannot. Also, consider a geocentric gardening universe: for plants, the sun really does come up in the east and sink in the west.

Storl's stress on keen observation and lifelong study even to begin seeing the garden's intricate ecological connections, seems to me accurate. Biodynamic farmers are more interested in processes and forces than in substances. Their focus is on the holistic, the comprehensive and the macrocosmic. We need all our senses to be aware of interrelationships in the garden and beyond.

Storl sees industrial agriculture as having caused the demise of the family farm. We're moving, he says, toward a food dictatorship and a return to (corporate controlled) feudalism. He praises allotment gardens for city dwellers, now so common in Europe, and small farms generally.

Mostly his practical garden advice seems sound, with a heavy emphasis on compost as crucial, obtaining most garden inputs on one's own land, companion and succession planting. And, wherever soil is poor, double-digging as a solution.

Weeds, like insects, are to be worked with, not automatically destroyed – though I would never introduce bindweed as a companion plant, as he suggests, or bring horsetail (*Equisetum*) onto the property, no matter how wonderful its effusions may be. It reproduces by spores, and has survived since the time of the dinosaurs.

Is Storl's the best introduction to biodynamic gardening? I can't say, but he is a serious and knowledgeable student of organic horticultural science, as well as of Steiner's "spiritual science."

Will I buy a star chart? Probably not, but I'm glad to be reminded that my garden is itself an organism, and that I'm the essential "fifth element" – a conscious human.