

ONE STRAW REVOLUTION

Among the great pioneers of organic gardening perhaps the least well known, in this country anyway, is Masanobu Fukuoka, author of *The One-Straw Revolution* (181pp, Rodale Press, 1978), though his influence has spread worldwide, and his ideas continue to inspire farmers and gardeners today.

A microbiologist, Fukuoka worked as an agricultural customs inspector until at twenty-five he experienced a crisis of faith. “I felt that I understood nothing.” He had realized the limitations of science, of intellectual thought: so he quit his job, became a wanderer, and in 1938 returned to his father’s farm to test his new insight hands-on. For 40 years he grew Mandarin oranges, rice, winter grains and vegetables, imitating nature as closely as he could. Do-nothing farming, he called it.

He admits to many early failures, including killing 400 of his father’s beloved Mandarin trees, not sufficiently prepared for wild unintended growth. But as he began to recognize and work with the complex living organisms that shaped his land, he learned to grow crops equal in production and superior in taste to his conventionally farming neighbors. Out of this grew four principles: no plowing or tilling, no fertilizer or compost, no weeding, herbicides or pesticides, and no fruit tree pruning.

After cutting the rice in the fall, he sowed new seeds of rice, winter grain and white clover onto the stubble, afterward strewing the rice straw haphazardly over the fields and sprinkling it with poultry manure. In spring, having cut and threshed the barley and rye, he would again

strew the straw and manure onto the stubble. He would hold water in the fields briefly during the Monsoon rains in June, to weaken the clover and weeds and give the rice a chance to sprout, then drain the fields to let the clover recover, and the rice to grow up through it.

In the Mandarin orchards Fukuoka let the trees take natural shapes, convinced they could thus better combat pests. He grew Acacias to fix nitrogen deep and clover to improve the soil's surface; he allowed the weeds to compete as they could. Onto these he scattered vegetable seeds, many of which eventually grew wild.

The results? Over decades, almost no pollution, minimal cost, harvests per acre as good as any in Japan, soil enriched with every season, and organically grown fruit and grains of the highest quality.

As much philosopher as farmer, Fukuoka declares that agriculture should not be for profit, that *all* citizens should be farmers, that we should strive toward zero population growth. Consumers, because they want perfect fruit and vegetables in every season, become ultimately responsible for cheap tasteless food. Our first and greatest enemy, he says, is the self, which makes us short-sighted and allows us to try to split the physical and the spiritual – an impossibility. We must be natural farmers and eaters, able to participate in and savor the daily life and death of a rice plant.

Apart from Fukuoka's having farmed on wet, subtropical Shikoku Island in southern Japan, a climate few of us enjoy, the choice he offers between vast, complex, expensive, destructive, mechanized and chemically dependent farming, and small, simple, cheap, sustainable,

manual farming, may not seem realistic. But consider that organic is now the fastest growing agricultural sector, or that, as he tells us, plowing was introduced in Japan only 300-400 years ago, whereas his family has lived in the same village for 1400 years.

At least one organic farmer in our area already plants directly into untilled cover crops. Maybe that's the beginning of *our* one-straw revolution. (598 words)