

Workshop Title: Biodynamic Basics and Composting

Speaker(s) & their titles: Rosemary Taylor and Kathryn Aunger (Earth Haven Farm)

Executive Summary: This workshop offered an introduction to some of the principles of biodynamic farming. Each farm is unique and whole, and farmers strive to keep them balanced. The cosmic forces and astrological positions of the Moon, Sun, and Planets are taken into account. Proper composting is very important. Biodynamics also involves the use of six special flower preparations which lend a balanced energy to the farm.

The goal of this workshop is to take us to the next level of understanding. This is an open session, and questions are welcome during the presentation.

Kathryn Aunger of Earth Haven Farm in southeastern Ontario

Kathryn has Highland cattle, which they selected because they are good for forest pastures. They eat leaves and underbrush in sectioned off pastures. They are also raised as beef and are registered as biodynamic producers. Her cows are allowed to wean naturally, and they are kept until fully grown. They are a rare breed and take longer to go to market. This costs a bit more economically. She is also a market gardener, but cows are a mainstay. They sell at a market in Toronto. They also have a greenhouse, with an external furnace that heats it for season extension.

Rosemary Taylor has a community garden in downtown Ottawa, which is 15 years old and has grown to contain 111 plots. The garden has a market, where they sell produce from outlying areas. It's at the corner of Bronsen and Laurier.

Biodynamics

The concept was introduced by Rudolph Steiner about 100 years ago, but it comes from older ideas. The spiritual energies from the universe influence the energy on earth and this connection is the root of biodynamics. The philosophical approaches apply to medicine as well as agriculture. One of the main principles of biodynamic farming is that each farm is unique, has its own energy, and unique properties. This uniqueness and wholeness is part of the biodynamic principles.

Farms can't be totally self-sustaining – she needs to rely on other people. This interdependence between farms, like bringing in manure or straw, for example, is an important consideration. The role of the farmer is to ensure there's balance; that a farm doesn't need to rely too much on other farms for hay, for example. Self-reliance is also an important principle.

A century ago, Rudolph Steiner gave eight lectures, but died shortly after. His legacy has been picked up by others, who moved it forward, evolved it.

All farmers in all cultures would look to the moon to determine when it was the right time to do certain kinds of activities such as harvest, planting, etc. Steiner reignited this knowledge. The moon moves through the astrological constellations, and the location of the moon, the sun, and other astrological cycles are things to consider in choosing when to do farm activities.

The twelve astrological constellations are divided into four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Taurus is earth, Gemini is air, Aries is fire, Cancer is water. This comes from Greek mythology and philosophy. This is also an underlying teaching in biodynamics.

When the moon is in a water sign, it creates a certain energy for the plants. Mostly associated with leaf crops.

Air is associated with flower crops.

Fire is associated with fruits, including seeds and grains, representing regeneration. Planting these things when the moon is in the right sign is one aspect of biodynamic farming and gardening.

Rosemary and Kathryn have made a Celestial planning calendar, which helps farmers better understand cosmic influences and plan out the year. Also listening to your gut is very important.

The farm is like a living organism, so think about where the heart of your farm is. Look at where the energy is in your farm, and think about the bones, the skin, think about the energy in the whole farm, and how all the pieces work together. The role of the farmer is to bring balance, life, and individuality to the farm. Be aware of the needs. Be aware of the meaning.

Emotions of farmers are critical; bring good energy to your farm. Have inner spiritual nourishment as a farmer, and this will contribute to the health and vitality of your farm.

Composting

Rosemary's compost bins at the community garden are made out of skids and chicken wire. These let air in, are untreated, and last about ten years. She will build up the pile in the spring when the bacteria wakes up. The bins go to sleep around summer solstice, that's about three months. When the compost is ready, she hand sifts it with a screen, by putting the screen on the wheelbarrow. This removes the sticks.

Layer your compost with wet and dry. Dry would be leaves or straw, wet would be scraps from the kitchen. Layers prevents anaerobic bacteria. She also adds horse manure, which brings happy playful horse energy into the mix. Manure is all very useful, but can take awhile to compost. Also, the wood chips from the horse manure add carbon, but take awhile to break down.

She piles it high in the spring and lets it settle. Then she remakes the pile in September/October and lets it settle again.

It is best to make compost with no meat and no diseased plants. If you can get the temperature up enough to kill any plant diseases, that's ideal. The fungi in the pile make sure that the right bacteria are in the soil. There are different levels of temperature and pH at different times, based on which bugs (micro-organisms) are predominant at the time. She's not worried about starting a fire with the heat, although she has seen a pile of sheep manure removed from a barn that could have started a fire.

Don't leave the compost pile so long that it becomes dead soil.

What about the hormones in the horse poop? Yes, also there are also non-organic food scraps. The fungi cut the petroleum-based products and eat and split apart all of those compounds. But people of all ages come every winter to bring their food scraps, so she doesn't worry about whether they are organic. She does have concerns about the hormones in the horse manure, and maybe will look to another source.

Many mushrooms also cut petrochemical bonds. Sometimes she will bring mushrooms from the forest, and adds a layer of that to the compost. Oyster mushrooms are especially good to breakdown petroleum.

Soil that is alive is black and brown, and you can squeeze out a bit of moisture. Dead soil is like sand.

In northern areas with longer winters the timing of compost making is much different. Talk to the compost, tell it you love it, feel the soil in the spring, and feel it's alive. Dead soil is more grey, live soil is more brown or black.

Compost soil holds onto the water molecules. All of the minerals are 'parked' in the soil, and will feed your veggies. If you put compost on the rows over the winter, instead of in the pile, it will still be a bit more ready in the spring. Transplant into it when the soil is ready in the spring.

Farm compost

Like with garden compost, it's important to layer the compost, wet and dry. Adding starter compost to your pile gives you a jump start by inoculating it with the right microbes.

Animal manure is full of bacteria, just like our own gut. Chicken manure has its own special qualities. We also add some ashes from the external furnace (only a little in small quantities), and also leaves, straw, wood chips. We use a backhoe to make a big long pile.

Special flower preparations

Biodynamics uses six different plants to create special flower preparations. These preparations are a main distinction between regular organic and biodynamic farming.

Yarrow is picked in the springtime – just the flowers. They're dried over the summer and stuffed into a male deer's bladder. It's buried in the ground for a whole year. A tiny smidgen of the resulting dark substance is stuffed into a hole in the compost.

One or two biodynamic farmers in each region make these preparations.

Chamomile is stuffed into the small intestines of a cow. We do it on a cold day, making little sausages. Working with animals and plants makes a balance. This goes into another corner of the compost.

It's an energy message that you're putting into the compost bin. In Virginia, the Josephine Porter Institute will sell you the finished preparations.

Nettle is just put in the ground with peatmoss.

The oak bark is stuffed into an animal's skull and then pulled out.

There are two more as well, but there isn't time to discuss them. The flowers are the spirit of the plant, and this practice increases balance, brings in cosmic forces, and enlivens the soil.

We like to bring art into our garden as well.