

Book Review

The New Organic Grower.

Elliot Coleman. Published by Chelsea Green, U.S.A. (\$19.95 U.S. and by Old Bridge Press, Camden, Ontario, Canada (\$25 Can.) 1989. 257 p. illus. ISBN 0-921820-10-0

Reviewed by David Wees, Faculty Lecturer, Plant Science Department, Macdonald College, Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec

There are many books on organic farming and gardening. Unfortunately, most of them have one or more of the following problems: a "mystical" approach to farming, promotion of techniques that are not applicable on a commercial scale, a tendency to re-invent the wheel (ignorance of past and present research), neglect of marketing and management concepts.

Elliot Coleman's book avoids these problems. He has written a practical, no-nonsense manual that discusses growing vegetables on a commercial scale without the use of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. The book is aimed at small operations, 5 acres or less (metric, please!), but some of the suggested techniques could be applied on a larger scale.

The book evolved out of an intensive course on organic vegetable production given by the author. It is largely based on Coleman's several years of experience in growing organic vegetables in New England. He also draws upon his extensive reading. I was pleasantly surprised to see many old texts from the 1920's and 1930's as well as some standard modern references on soils and plants listed in an interesting annotated bibliography. This is no new-fangled nonsense about organics.

There are very interesting chapters on crop rotations, green manuring (including undersowing) and soil fertility. There are also chapters on marketing, labour and season extension: definitely not "organic" topics but certainly relevant to any grower. Throughout the book, the author stresses the importance of observation and sustainability.

There are a few weak points in the text. Several otherwise excellent drawings are poorly labelled, making it difficult to relate them to the text. In the chapter called "Pests?", the author says that when using his techniques, pests aren't a problem. This seems to be a bit of an oversimplification. There's no discussion of big-control, traps, scouting, catch crops, etc... Most of the information on pest control is hidden in the "chapter notes" at the end of the book. Coleman also claims that weeds are not a problem with clear plastic mulch (p. 184): this statement may surprise many growers using mulches. Finally, some readers may be annoyed by the lack of scientific rigor and by the conversational tone of the text.

Despite these short-comings, I would strongly recommend this book to growers (organic or not), students of horticulture, extension agents and even researchers who may discover some interesting topics in need of scientific investigation.

Fertile Soil, A grower's guide to organic and inorganic fertilizers

Robert Parnes. Published by agAccess, Davis, California 1990. (\$29.95 U.S.)

Reviewed by Roger Samson

In the preface of the first edition of the book, the author provides his own criticism of the book which is worth repeating here. It not only gives an insight to criticisms which I share with the author's own analysis but provides an opportunity to see the authors writing style.

"This book was begun as a response to criticisms of workshops on fertilizers which I have given occasionally in New England because of my association with Woods End Laboratory, an agricultural testing laboratory. Many of the workshops were considered too technical, and I decided to prepare a monograph in order to establish a unified foundation for future presentations. The intent was to isolate the essence from the irrelevant and to simplify technical discussions as much as possible. Unfortunately as may happen to many amateur authors, the subject seemed to assert its own individuality and demands, and it refused to yield to any effort of control. No sooner was one question answered than another of equal importance emerged; no sooner was one topic completed when another related one popped up. Furthermore, a determination of what is important and what is not is rather arbitrary, especially in view of the wide range in education and experience of farmers and gardeners. So the result differs substantially from the original intent, and many people see no improvement over the workshops".

I never attended one of the authors workshops but H this book is any indication they probably suffered not from being too technical but rather from lacking presentation. The key phrase of the authors preface is "it refused to yield to any effort of control". In particular uncontrolled use of comma's, colons and long sentences make it a tiring read:

``Also, with the exception of soybeans, legumes do not have a good leaf coverage, and they are poor smother crops; in fact they encourage weeds, owing to the nitrogen sloughed off their roots".

Robert Parnes operated a soil testing service for ten years, yet there is minimal discussion on this subject and only one paragraph on tissue testing. If it was a growers guide to organic and inorganic fertilizers then there should be emphasis on testing techniques to determine the need for, or effect of, various fertilizers (particularly H you can devote 5 pages to food quality). MOST FARMERS TODAY STILL CAN'T READ A SOIL TEST and a few examples of interpreting soil tests and recommendations for fertilizer use would have been most welcome. Some accurate tables on interpreting tissue tests would also be valuable.

Overall the book is probably most valuable to consultants as a reference manual on organic fertilizers. Interesting comparisons are made between conventional and organic fertilizer sources for phosphorus and potassium fertilizers. It is also valuable for its tables which give quick references to the nutrient contents of plants, manure and organic fertilizers. There are some chapters which are quite informative including the compost chapter which was supplemented with material for the second edition. This chapter is interesting because the author presents an opinion on the benefits of cold versus hot composting. It isn't written in a way that he is a slave to join together all the information at hand.

Additional suggestions for a third edition would be to expand the chapters on cover crops and potassium. The author should go back to his original objectives "to isolate the essence from the irrelevant" and not so much to simplify as to better present his technical discussions.

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