

Biodynamics In A Nutshell...

WHAT IS BIODYNAMIC AGRICULTURE? AN INTRODUCTION

Key concept

Conventional agriculture is always focused on increasing the yield of the plant. Biodynamic agriculture is more interested in the vitality of the plant, its flavour and quality.

In a nutshell...

Biodynamic practices don't necessarily promise bigger, larger pumpkins or higher yielding cows. It looks instead at the quality of the food we eat. The food we eat needs to support not just the physical body but a living, sensing and thinking human being - the whole human being.

If you consider the average broccoli, for example, it is quite easy to find out its nutritional value, how much carbohydrates, minerals, protein etc it contains. Conventional agriculture will make sure that these elements are in the plant. However the interest is always in higher and higher yields. Furthermore, the source of these elements is mineral – it is dead matter. In biodynamic (BD) growing we are interested in the vitality of the broccoli, its flavour and quality.

Because it is the vitality of the plant that is most important in terms of BD growing, two aspects are of particular concern. Firstly, the source of the elements that support the plant's growth come from the living realm, from compost. Secondly, the compost is enriched by special preparations which are a result of conscious spiritual human work. In biodynamic agriculture it can be said that in the growth of the broccoli the whole universe is involved... and this is not far from the truth.

Two other important concepts for biodynamic agriculture are those of expansion and contraction. Plants want to grow and essentially they will grow with the aim to flower, bear seed and die. Growth forces in the plant govern the quantity of the produce, that is the yield. Reproduction and bearing fruit (or any other edible part) is a force of contraction and will determine quality. In order for the plant to be healthy, these two forces need to be in balance. Expansion and contraction are introduced more fully in the article 'In a nutshell – Formative forces in plants' in this series.

The Essentials

What makes biodynamic practice unique? On the physical level you will see a biodynamic farmer using specific homeopathic remedies (called preparations) as sprays on the fields and in the compost. These help to enliven the soil and sensitise the compost to the subtle influences of the cosmos. In addition some farmers and growers use the sowing calendar to time specific cultivations or tasks around the farm.

From other points of view, in biodynamic agriculture the farm is considered as a whole organism, as an individuality. Rudolph Steiner, the founder of biodynamic agriculture said in one of his lectures

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"...a farm comes closest to its own essence when it can be conceived of as a kind of independent individuality, a self contained entity. In reality every farm ought to aspire to this state of being a self contained individuality". This concept is central to understanding the relationship a biodynamic farmer has with the land and consequently with the plants and animals on the farm.

Biodynamics - When? Why? And How? The organic and conventional movement

In 1924 Steiner gave 8 lectures on agriculture in Eastern Germany. He was pushed to speak on the subject as farmers had noticed a decline in the quality of seeds and a deterioration of plant and animal health due to chemical fertilization.

Now let's stop to see the historic background of that time;

- 1913 Haaber Bosch synthesis – this is the industrial way to make ammonia as an artificial fertiliser.
- 1867-1930 developments in farm machinery – this included the introduction of diesel and petrol engines, and the first tractors.
- The beginning of conventional agriculture – industrialisation of farms.
- 1930 Lady Eve Balfour – started conducting experiments comparing organic and conventional agriculture.

At that time agriculture and the world was going through many changes and industrial large size farms were beginning to form. As a reaction to that movement there was the biodynamic and organic movement. Some people at the beginning of the industrialisation era were seeing the dangers we are facing today.

Most conventional farming today is profit driven. More and more farmers are forced to look at ways to increase yields and decrease costs in order to make a living. For example a farmer will increase the amount of animals on his farm while reducing the living conditions of the animals. This results in distress to the animals and unhealthy conditions. Therefore in factory farming large amounts of antibiotics and hormones are being used in order to maintain the animals at a productive state. This is a short sighted solution as the real costs of these practices are overlooked. Factory farming results in large amounts of pollution both to the land and in the low quality food which is later served at shops and supermarkets.

Biodynamic farms tend to be smaller. Animal welfare is very important, animals have space and are encouraged to behave according to their natural rhythms, homeopathic remedies are used to treat and prevent illness. The farms are usually an integral part of the local community. They see it as one of their tasks in connecting people and the land.

If you would like to get Biodynamic produce look for the



Symbol on the food packages.

Anthroposophy – Rudolph Steiner

Biodynamic agriculture developed from Anthroposophy. Anthroposophy is a human oriented spiritual philosophy founded by Rudolf Steiner in the beginning of the 20th Century. Steiner was a philosopher and a spiritual researcher.

Like many spiritual teachers he tried to put in words his spiritual experiences. He developed a way to awaken our spiritual senses through observation and meditations. Being European I like to put it as Buddhism with a very structured path something like “Buddha in Lederhosen”.

During his life Steiner wrote four books and gave thousands of lectures on many subjects. His research touched on every aspect of human life, including development of an educational system (Waldorf Education), a medical system, and an agricultural system – biodynamic agriculture. His research and findings underpin the systems of biodynamic and organic farming that can be seen today in countries around the world.



About the author

Nir Halfon is one of the course leaders at the Biodynamic training at the Rachel Carson Centre. He has studied Anthroposophy in Israel and Biodynamics at Emerson College. Nir has completed an Msc in Energy and Environmental studies. Previously, he has taught gardening and sustainable development in schools and workshops on permaculture, gardening and biodynamics more broadly. His main interest is in the issues of sustainable farming and food production.