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Organic Farming

Barnet's Grace Gershuny to speak March 1 and 31

Real food, planetary healing and human liberation

By Beth Champagne Feb 26, 2017 Updated Feb 26, 2017



Grace Gershuny, of Barnet, didn't like it at all when her fifth-grade teacher—having asked what she'd like to be when she grew up—told her she couldn't be “a scientist of all sciences,” that she'd have to pick one, and specialize.

She didn't—and she's succeeded, in ways neither she nor her teacher may ever have envisioned, back in New York City in the '60s. Scrappy, brilliant, and passionate, this city girl went back to the land. She put in her first garden, in West Charleston in 1973, started a farmers market that 40 years later is going strong in Newport, and had made a name, and a place, for herself in organics by the time she moved to Barnet in 1984.

She and Stewart Hoyt married outdoors, on his family's land, and were market gardeners and mainstays of the St. Johnsbury and Danville farmers markets for years. Their daughter, Opal, is a Barnet School—and Columbia University—grad, living in New York City.

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Gershuny, whom the Barnet Library hosts March 1, will also speak Friday, March 31 at the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum. She will address the urgent need to bring much more land into organic management—and will share stories from the movement for “real food, planetary healing, and human liberation” that she chronicles in her memoir.

Her commitment to organics—to creating healthy soil and clean water—took her to Washington, D.C., when she joined the team writing national organic standards at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as a lead writer. Even then, she hung on to her back-to-the-land, vegetable-gardening, composting life, arranging after two years to work from home—“my Vermont paradise,” as she calls it.

Internationally recognized in the movement for eco-agriculture, Gershuny writes, consults, teaches graduate students (in the online master's program in sustainable agriculture at Green Mountain College) and serves on the board of the Institute for Social Ecology, based in central Vermont, where she began teaching in 1986. She blogs, maintains a web page, and engages with organic farmers on current issues—recently, the question of permitting hydroponics (water-based growing) to be certified organic.

Gershuny's memoir “Organic Revolutionary,” tells the intertwined stories of her unconventional, pioneering, and focused life, and of the movement for “real food” and organic agriculture in this country. Her insider's account of the challenges of establishing organics within the United States Department of Agriculture—and bringing the round, green-and-white, “USDA Organic” label into America's supermarkets—leads to today's challenge: Restoring soil, and reversing climate change.

That's right—harvesting solar energy, using photosynthesis, plants accomplish, for free, what technology can only attempt at a staggering price. The grass, the trees, all the green plants have been doing this for aeons: taking in carbon dioxide, sending oxygen out into the air, and sending carbon deep underground to form humus.

Not hummus, the chickpea spread, but “hugh-muss,” that good black soil that's as closely related to our own name, “human,” as it sounds. As Gershuny demonstrates, the challenge now is to embrace our belonging to the earth, and to work with nature, keeping the plants on the soil and roots in the ground, year-round, and keeping chemicals off the land—releasing the power of bacteria, fungi, and all the other soil microorganisms to nourish life.

It is no accident that Gershuny's 2016 book launch party was put on by the Shambala Center in St. Johnsbury. Her youthful vision of becoming “a scientist of all sciences” presaged the journey that would carry Gershuny into both social ecology and Shambala Buddhism. Her teachers would be Murray Bookchin and Ane Pema Chodron, among many others—and “all sciences” would lead into ancient wisdom traditions, into a visionary sociology that embraced ecological awareness.

“I resonated strongly with the urge toward inner development and self-knowledge...tending toward the ‘chop wood, carry water’ approach to spiritual practice, which I understood as taking care of simple necessities and living close to the land,” Gershuny writes in her book. “The importance of this kind of inner work for healthier interpersonal relationships and more effective organizations always seemed obvious to me.”

In a recent interview, Gershuny shared her view of the challenges ahead:

“My big campaign right now is for solidarity. The whole concept of helping the environment in any way is under attack right now. Organic agriculture is not supported in any way by the new administration in Washington. So, to be taking pot shots at the Organic Trade Association, among others, for being big bad bureaucratic organizations is in my opinion foolish, not to mention self-destructive.”

We need to strengthen the organic industry, not try to undermine it, Gershuny asserts: Organic farming can help heal the planet.

In a cartoon she really likes, a few people stand at the back of the room, at a climate change conference. One says, “What if we were to get rid of toxins, clean up land and water, produce good food for everybody, improve health, and increase biodiversity—and climate change was actually a hoax?”

Organic farming, Gershuny said, can do a lot to fix all of those—and climate change, too: “Even if you don't believe it's human-caused, you can human-fix it—without draconian austerity, or expensive technology.”



That's why, she said, we need to expand organic acreage in this country—now only one percent—as quickly as we can: "It's the least expensive and most immediately available method of addressing climate change."

Even the most basic organic is better for climate change mitigation, she says, than conventional, since it keeps soil covered throughout the year, and uses no herbicides. And, she notes, just the fact that organic practices do not allow synthetic nitrogen makes them a plus for the climate!

Nitrous oxide, 310 times as potent a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide, enters the air when nitrogen fertilizer is spread on fields. Once the dentist's 'laughing gas,' an anaesthetic, nitrous oxide is no laughing matter today. Neither, Gershuny says, are public attacks on organic agriculture.

"There's a lot of concern about organics allowing conditions that people think are harmful, and too much like other concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). A great deal of those public attacks help to confuse people, and lead them to believe that organic isn't a trustworthy label," says Gershuny, "but the vast majority of organic operations are small-scale, animal and land-stewardship-centric."

"Even the very large ones like Pete and Jerry's in Monroe, N.H.—they've scaled up," she said, "but they're following the rules: good poultry health, humane conditions, outdoor access."

Gershuny still does annual internal audits for Vermont Organic Farmers, fulfilling a requirement for their accreditation by USDA. VOF is affiliated with NOFA-VT (the Vermont chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association). NOFA-VT, based in Richmond, boasts over 500 certified farms and food processors. Vermont, she notes, has the nation's highest per capita concentration of farms and acreage in organic production: "For the population, we are at the very top of organic farming."

And organic farming is, indeed, "a virtuous cycle," Gershuny said. Taking one step working with nature, and a cascade of benefits follows.

To keep up with what's happening in organics, Gershuny suggests, people can visit her website organic-revolutionary.com, check out her blog, and sign up for her mailing list. Her book, "Organic Revolutionary" is available at Green Mountain Books in Lyndonville and at Boxcar and Caboose in St. Johnsbury.

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