

## Of Apple Orchards and Michael Phillips, Part 1 – By Ezra Sullivan

My relationship with growing apples began in 2011, in Tunuyan, Argentina, right at the base of the Andes Mountains. On a bitterly cold late fall day, I joined a crew of WWOOF volunteers to harvest the last of the Granny Smiths. The orchard was primarily Red Delicious, but Granny Smiths were planted every so often for pollination. The Red Delicious apples were used for pressing apple juice and fermenting vinegar, and the Granny Smith were stored in the root cellar for winter's eating. See, if you let a few good frosts fall on the Granny Smith, the green changes in places to slight pink, and the flavor expands from sour to sweet.

I was eighteen years old, and I had a strong trust that my guiding spirit was leading me towards an unfolding biography that would integrate agriculture with spirituality. I knew immediately that this farm held keys for my future. Here I met the orchard. Here I met Maria Thun's calendar, natural building, romance, gardening, dancing, and here I met community. An agrarian community founded to host new ideas.

But back to the apples. There were roughly twelve acres planted into apple trees. Half the orchard was 40 years old, and was kept in relatively standard organic practice. Cover crops, regular irrigation during the growing season, annual pruning to an open vase system, composted manure applications, understory mowing, occasional soil cultivation and the thinning of fruit. This was the most productive part of the apple orchard. The open vase pruning system lends itself well to three ladder position harvesting, which enabled speed of harvest. The rows and understory were neatly maintained with mowing and cultivation, enabling ease of access for the orchardists to work. In this system, the input and output were both high, and it drove a small business. The work was accomplished with volunteers and extended family, which enabled other, more spiritual, cultural projects to exist in the surrounding time.

The other half of the apple orchard was roughly one hundred years old. This half was cared for in an entirely different manner, inspired by the natural farming writings of Masanobu Fukuoka. The only input into this orchard system was flood irrigation. Meaning, the trees were never pruned, no compost or other fertilizers were applied, fruit was not thinned, the soil was never disturbed and the under story was never mowed.

The trees in the second half of the orchard, or what we can call the old orchard, were tall. All the trees were grafted onto a standard, probably seedling, rootstock. Which means that the trees could grow to their full height and were not inhibited in growth and form by the rootstock.

Since this old orchard had been abandoned for decades before the family bought the farm, about one third of the original old trees had died back. In their places, the seedling rootstock



had thrown up new trees. As you may know, every apple seed is a genetic individual. Plant every seed in an apple and you will have that many entirely unique apple cultivars! Each of these seedling trees were unique, and most were delicious. Red, green, yellow, keepers, saucers, juicers, cider apples and dessert apples. The diversity these apples brought was starkly evident amidst the panorama of the Red Delicious and scattered Granny Smith orchard.

The understory of the old orchard was an important feature; here too, diversity was widely noted. Grass, small shrubs, vines, large swaths of herbaceous biennials claimed their territories, and so on. The insects and animal life abounded as well! Here the native bees could be found, foxes and local honey bees thronged to this rewilded patch of orchard.

When we worked in the young orchard, tasks were clear, like the lines of the trees. Work was quick and effective. The crew dutifully felt like cogs in a well-oiled system, moving the apples to the juicing room, and there was purpose in this work. But once we experienced the old orchard, its quality engrossed us, and we knew something was missing in the young orchard.

The entire system interacted with us in a more complex way. Harvesting was a rewilding experience, and a lesson in the cultivation of patience. Longer, heavy ladders were used, and finding their feet amidst the thick underbrush was exhausting. You could barely walk a straight line through it. One had to traverse fallen trees, ant hills, dense undergrowth and uneven ground. Many apples were lost to the underbrush; perhaps these "lost" apples were an important part of the fertility cycle of the old orchard. Accompanying the lack of thinning the fruit, harvest was strongly biennial in nature, leading to boom-and-bust years of production. In the old orchard, the apples were fewer and smaller, yet their flavors were far more interesting. This complexity held a warmth of heart, which matched our humanity in a certain way.

These two different systems of management were employed for a variety of reasons. Originally, the farm family did not have enough time, energy or capital to "restore" or replant the old half of the orchard. So leaving it be was a decision made from necessity. Over time, the "old" orchard became a place of philosophical discourse. What is the relationship between humanity and nature? How do our actions affect outcome? How can outcome be measured? When can humanity reach into nature and make a medicine, and when does humanity's reach into nature make a poison? This discourse was a guiding stream in our lives during this time. It was an open question that this farm hosted, and around thirty or so volunteers every year visited to experience it.

## Of Apple Orchards and Michael Phillips, Part 2 – By Ezra Sullivan

After living in South America for three years, I discovered that my task had to be fulfilled back in North America. Quickly after coming home, Michael Phillips' work entered my life. I arrived home in the late fall, and spent my first winter pruning orchards outside of Yosemite in Sonora, California. Here I found *The Apple Grower* in a farmer's library, and I devoured it immediately.

Michael Phillips' first work was an important experience for me. I was full of questions on how culture in the US was meeting this question of agriculture for the future, and in *The Apple Grower* I found resonance. The book covered the gamut of siting, selecting, planting, care and harvest for the organic orchardist. I resonated with the cultural impulse shown through the depiction of the apple orchard and cider house as a community meeting place.

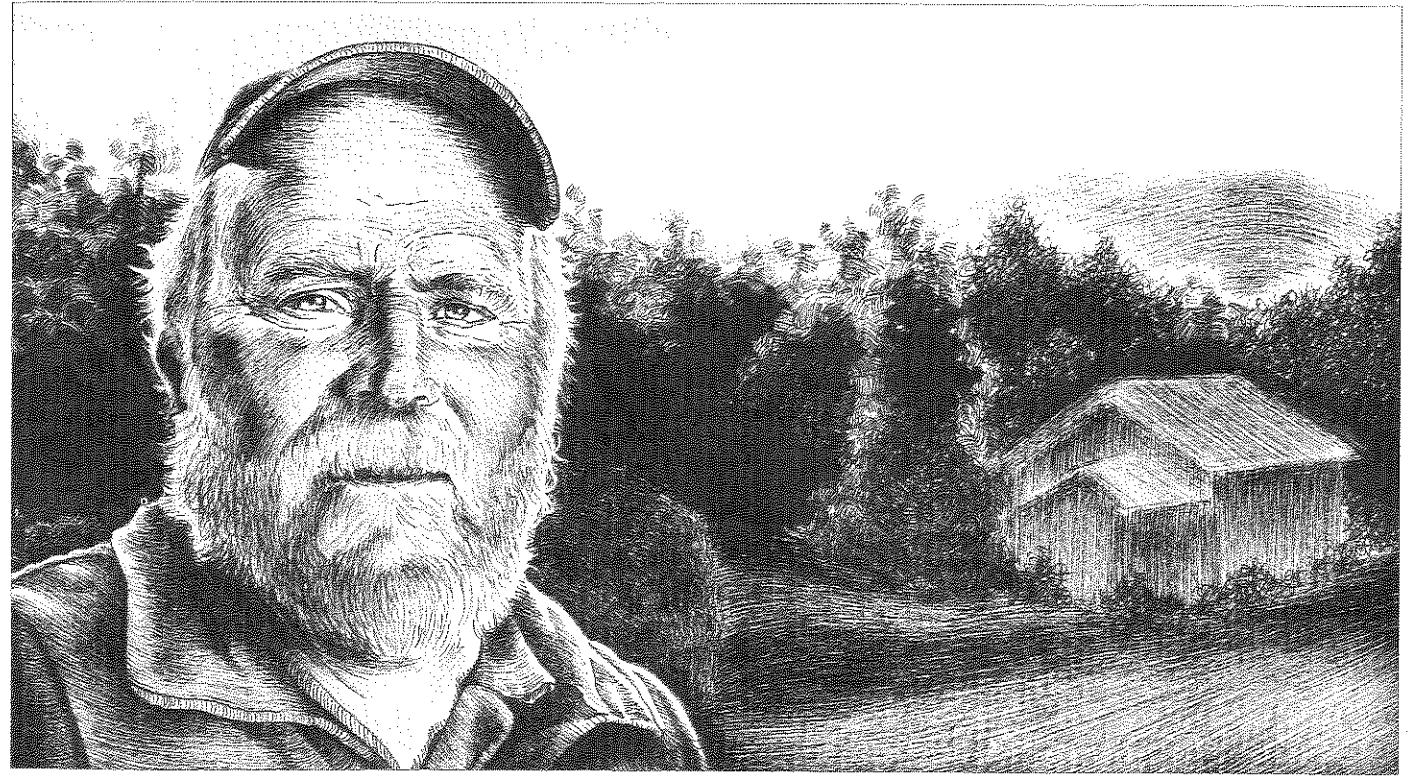
*The Apple Grower's* explanation of spraying protocol was not so appealing to me. I had seen conventional organic spraying done in South America and Northern California, and I had an immediate distaste for it. The products were far too foreign for me, and the ideology of it worked too strongly against the natural forces present in the orchard. I was searching for a more homegrown, gentler solution.

A couple of months later, I saw Michael Phillips speak, for the first and only time, at the Eco-Farm Conference in January of 2014. At this time, I was testing the waters of the organic movement, and I couldn't quite locate the agrarian soulfulness that I had come to know and love in South American village life. For me, Michael Phillips' keynote, and especially the invocation he closed with, was my agrarian homecoming to the US.

Then I read the *Holistic Orchard*, and I was captivated by how the content became alive in his writing. There was so much evolution from the first to second book, which inspired me about the potential of a human being to transform and innovate. He started with a conventional organic approach in *The Apple Grower*, to really present a future direction for organic agriculture in *The Holistic Orchard*. Phillips showcased an in-depth, scientific research-based, deeply poetic and yet accessible window into the soul of the orchard. His writing enabled me to see with much greater depth what was happening on so many levels. *The Holistic Orchard* expanded my framework so that I could develop new, broader questions.

Still, I couldn't quite get on board with the spray regime. Phillips' new approach moved towards infusing the orchard with life, rather than killing the bad guys. This I liked, but I still had an instinctive aversion towards these sprays. In South America, I had experienced an agriculture largely without the use of products foreign to the farm organism, and I remained devoted to this perspective.

In this same period, I was deepening my relationship



with Biodynamics. Through procuring ingredients for the Biodynamic Preparations and observing the transformations of substance, I was able to fully participate in the elemental processes of the medicine I was applying to the farm. This was deeply meaningful.

It was important for me to build a bridge between Phillips' spray regime and my own Biodynamic sprays and compost preparations. Thus, I felt deeply touched when, towards the end of his life, Phillips increasingly spoke and wrote about Biodynamics. Especially in the content that he produced for *Stella Natura* over the past few years. Michael built the bridge too. He brought his deep wisdom, penetrating curiosity, and pleasing poetry to understanding Rudolf Steiner's *Agriculture Course*, and regularly referred to the deep relevance of this contribution toward the holistic agriculture movement.

In 2014, I used Michael Phillips' online community orchard network to connect with two amazing homesteaders outside of Eugene, Oregon. They have become second parents to me, my Pacific Northwest homesteader parents. Michael's online community provided me with the opportunity to fulfill important destiny connections. Together with my new friends, I sought out scionwood and grafted hundreds of apple trees,

culminating in many new orchards for their homestead, but also my first orchard in Washington State. In 2018, I planted about one and a half acres of sandy gravelly ground with apples, 70 trees comprising 50 different cultivars. A very eclectic orchard, including all types, colors and shapes of apples, all planted on seedling rootstock, which necessitates large spacing between plants. The orchard is laid out on clear and straight rows for ease of access. Every tree has a shrub planted in between, within the row, as well as herbs and flowers in the surrounding tree ring to boost diversity.

Only planted four years ago, the orchard is in its beginning. After having worked, witnessed and conceptualized many orchards in various systems and periods of development, it feels exciting to be starting a new story. What will this orchard tell us? Waiting for the apples to produce feels like I have friends living in these trees, and they are eagerly waiting to present themselves to me as well. We are intimate with each other. I am in these apples to come, and they too are within me, as I eagerly wait, patiently making this orchard sacred. From the rosy pink wood, we will cast our buds in the spring. And I know Michael Phillips, who died in January of 2022, will be there too—thank you.