

Working With Nature, Shifting Paradigms: *The Science and Practice of Organic Horticulture*
Review by Barga Otrysko
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This book is a primer on working with Nature and fills the gap between textbook and cookbook. It offered me a wonderful review and update of nearly all my university courses in ecology, agriculture, soils and plant biology in a readable and easily accessible fashion. The author possesses an incredible capacity to synthesize whole areas of specialization into easily understood concepts, which underlie what we try to do in organic gardening and horticulture.

The first section is about relationships and interdependencies in Nature, between living organisms (plants, animals bacteria, fungi etc.) and their environment (air, light temperature, water). The chapter on soils is particularly rich in the basic information about the physics and chemistry of soils (structure, water-holding capacity, nutrient-holding capacity etc.) and how all this relates to living organisms, a connection which is often omitted in a regular curriculum.

In the remaining chapter, the author tells us how to work with the various elements. For example, she addresses the question of soil fertility and provides an excellent synopsis of fertilizers, both synthetic and organic, as well as the type of organic matter appropriate for soil organisms. Once we understand how each of these work, we can make suitable choices. In fact, the chapter “Diagnosing Ecosystem Needs” offer just that: how to decide what is appropriate in a particular situation.

I particularly appreciated the chapter on energy flow and relationships. The author is not afraid to broach the areas that are more marginal (from a strictly academic conventional point of view), such as the use of Kirlian photography, dowsing, radionics, applied kinesiology, etc.

The last chapter deals with health management and looks at pest, disease and weed problems from a “population management” angle – balancing the populations of plants, bacteria and fungi and animals, so all can flourish. She examines the conditions that cause population imbalances and what we can do to restore balance.

In the foreword, the author states, “Our research has become so fragmented into different specialties that we have a million puzzle pieces of a multi-dimensional picture without an image of the whole’. She has dared to try to “paint the big picture.” Without doubt, there are still many gaps that need to be filled, much research that needs to be done, but Hermery has succeeded remarkably well in synthesizing the most important elements from many disciplines into a coherent and easily understood whole which greatly enhances our understanding of how to practice organic ideals.

After reading this book from cover to cover, I am going to buy it, as it is brimming with lots of information that I know I will want to refer to for many years to come.

Barga Otrysko holds a Ph.D. in plant biology. She and her partner run a certified organic U-pick in northeastern Quebec where they grow small fruits in accordance with permaculture principles.