ORGANIC Gardening

Suburban Gothic

Surrounded by malls, sprawl, and soccer moms, Michael Ableman makes his stand.

by James McCommons

On a mid-October morning in the kitchen of his century-old farmhouse, Michael Ableman seems like any farmer readying himself for a day in the fields. He boils water for tea and oatmeal on an ornate gas stove, slips on a flannel shirt, and tunes in the radio for a weather report.

A front moving off the Pacific brought rain overnight to the coastal counties north of Goleta, but not a drop has fallen on this farm in months. Such aridity is not uncommon in southern California, but Ableman hopes for a soaking rain that would save him thousands of dollars in irrigation costs.

The front brings with it a cool breeze that streams in the window, carrying the earthy odors of compost and manure along with the bawling of goats and trilling of chickens. It is a scene distinctly agricultural and rural, but also utterly surreal.

When Ableman steps outside, the sights and sounds of city life are all around. Airliners roar overhead, vectoring into the Santa Barbara airport; traffic buzzes up Highway 101; a jogger lopes by on Fairview Avenue. And, just below the goat pen, in the parking lot of the public library, mothers and children exit minivans on their way to story time. Past Ableman's lower fields, the view as far as the eye can see is of tract homes, pools, palm trees, and driveways with SUVs.

Michael Ableman is an urban farmer, and his farm, Fairview Gardens, is a rustic, agricultural Shangri-la located in the heart of suburbia. A farm here might seem out of context but not to Ableman. Although he opposes the sprawl that surrounds him, he does not believe suburbia makes a farm expendable or incompatible. "The people in these neighborhoods eat food, so why not grow food where they live?" he asks. "Don't assume land is no longer worth farming because it's small or because it's surrounded by malls and houses. Not only is it possible to grow food here, but you can do it profitably."

Preserving farmland and growing food for local distribution are at the core of Ableman's philosophy and activism. His fight to save Fairview from Santa Barbara's urban sprawl, which he chronicled in his book On Good Land: The Autobiography of an Urban Farm, transformed him into a national spokesperson for urban agriculture and farmland preservation.

These days, he spends as much time traveling, speaking, and writing as he does farming. The night before our visit, he'd driven an hour north to testify before a zoning board, which was considering rezoning a 19-acre livestock farm for high-density housing. Neighbors trying to save the farm had asked for Ableman's help. "I get calls to do this type of work all the time, and I respond when I can. But it's a struggle to balance the activist work with farming," he says. "I like being on the land."

"The land" for Ableman is Fairview Gardens, a 12.5-acre farm on which he and a staff of 26 raise 100 different types of organic fruits and vegetables, providing food to 500 families through its Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation, an on-site farm stand, and sales at farmers' markets in southern California. The farm produces fresh eggs from free-range hens, and milk and cheese from a handful of goats. And it ships fresh produce via Greyhound bus to several high-end restaurants up and down the coast.

Farm operations bring in more than $600,000 annually, according to Ableman, making Fairview Gardens a profitable, self-sustaining business—an example of small-scale organic agriculture thriving in an urban setting.

The staff consists of college students, aspiring organic farmers, educators, people with marketing backgrounds, interns from foreign countries, local laborers, and several immigrants from Mexico. But unlike many of California's large industrial farms, Fairview's success is not built upon cheap labor from south of the border. The Mexican workers receive competitive wages, health benefits, and housing. They are encouraged to pick and eat all the food they desire.

When Salvador Gomez, 40, first crossed the border, he worked the big chemical-drenched avocado and lemon groves of California's Central Valley. He has been at Fairview for 15 years. "I like no chemicals; it is safer for everybody," he says of the organic nature of the farm. "And with the chemicals, the taste is no good. I can tell. Our avocados have more flavor, more oil. They are more natural."

When Ableman first came to Fairview Gardens in 1981, it was a fruit farm and quasi-hippie commune. Workers went naked in the orchards, many fields were filled with weeds, and someone was growing a profitable crop of marijuana amid the brush.

Fairview, like many Goleta fruit farms, was owned by absentee landlords who were more interested in the property's water rights and future development potential than in what was actually happening on the land.

When Ableman took over as manager, he initially concentrated on peaches, capitalizing on his training as an orchardist. But markets for organic fruits were fickle. Appearance tended to matter more than taste with buyers, and profit margins were extremely low.

He didn't know much about row crops but decided to give them a try. He tore out some of the orchards and planted artichokes, beans, corn, melons, and other annual crops. He amended the overworked soils with horse, squab (ranch-raised pigeons), and goat manures and with cover crops such as Austrian peas, oats, and hairy vetch. He studied crop rotations, putting corn -- a heavy nitrogen feeder -- into fields previously filled with nitrogen-fixing beans. He took advantage of microclimates across the property and found that apple trees set fruit better in the lower fields where cool air settled.

The region's beneficent Mediterranean-type climate allowed for year-round cultivation and experimentation with subtropical fruits such as cherimoyas, kiwis, passion fruit, and Algerian

mandarins. "Because of the climate, we tried a little bit of everything," says Ableman.

But the same climate that so blessed farming also drew thousands of suburbanites chasing their own piece of the American dream. By the 1980s, the farms of the Goleta Valley began disappearing beneath parking lots, homes, and strip malls. Land values soared, and zoning changes favored developers, not farmers.

Many farmers chose to cash out their land and flee to more rural locations. But Ableman chose to stand and fight for Fairview's right to exist. He made his case before zoning boards, wrote letters to local newspapers, and gave media interviews, even as bulldozers tore into the land all around him and red-tile–roof homes crowded up to the farm's very edges. The new neighbors were not fond of having this last agricultural outpost in their midst. They complained about the smell of manure and the sounds of tractors and crowing roosters. Ableman changed his tractoring hours, but mostly he ignored the complaints and several "cease and desist" orders issued to him by the county.

"We felt under siege here, and there was a lot of hostility between us and the new neighbors," he recalls.

Gradually, both sides began to accept one another. The neighbors shopped at the farm stand; their children played in the avocado groves. Ableman hosted informational potluck dinners and opened the farm up to tours and workshops. Fairview went from suburban pariah to neighborhood asset.

The pressure to develop this prime piece of real estate continued to grow, and in 1994 Fairview's owners gave Ableman an ultimatum: Buy the land for $750,000 or stand aside as we sell it on the open market. Working with a local land trust and raising money through grants and private donations, Ableman and other activists formed a nonprofit operation -- the Center for Urban Agriculture -- that purchased the farm. Under conservation easements the group attached to the land's title, Fairview will remain in agriculture forever.

Today, the farm and its education center receive 5,000 visitors a year -- schoolchildren and their teachers, politicians, university professors, and farmers anxious to learn its secrets of success. Each year, the farm hosts special events, among them a three-day workshop on urban farming, for which participants from low-income communities are provided with scholarships and travel money to attend.

"Fairview became something greater. First, it was just me and a couple of others, but now there are lots of other folks to carry on the work," says Ableman. "We demonstrated all that can be done on a small plot of land."

Nearly every patch of Fairview Gardens supports some type of row crop or fruit tree. Leeks and celery grow in the alleyways of the apple orchard. Pomegranates along the perimeter do double duty as hedgerows. Crops may be harvested in the morning, and new seedlings planted that afternoon.

Compost, green-manure crops, rotations of nitrogen-fixing legumes, and several types of animal manures continually recondition the soil. When tests show the soil needs more minerals, Ableman applies slow-release rock dust obtained from local sources.

"We use the soil hard here because we have to, but we are very careful to replenish it," says Ableman, who drew inspiration from his travels to China and other third-world countries where he saw fields still productive after thousands of years of intensive farming. Take care of the soil, he learned, and the plants for the most part will take care of themselves. "I try not to buy a lot of soil amendments, but instead use inputs from the farm [such as manure from the goats and chickens]," he says. "Sometimes, we make mistakes and compromises, but we're always looking to do things better."

The farm built one of the first public restrooms in California with composting toilets and a solar-powered graywater recycling system. Staff and visitors use the restrooms, which also have showers, and the recycled graywater is channeled to the orchards to water and feed the trees.

Lately, Ableman's been exploring the possibility of working with nearby McDonald's restaurants to fuel the farm's tractor with recycled cookingoil instead of diesel.

"Because we're an urban farm surrounded by fast-food places, I thought, Why not use a product that's now being hauled away. For us, it made sense."

The sustainable ethic also extends to distribution. Fairview is an organic farm, but more important, it is a local farm, producing food for the surrounding communities. At the farm stand, the prices are higher than the chemically raised and often inferior crops sold in the local supermarkets but usually below the premium price that many people pay for organic food in health food stores. That higher price often reflects the cost of shipping the food long distances to market.

"We need to move beyond this notion of organic. This movement is much more than about substituting farming practices," he says. "It's about conserving resources, growing quality food, and distributing it locally."

While Ableman the activist is happy to sit up late into the night talking about land rights and local food systems, Ableman the farmer obsesses about quality. He's performed every job on the farm, and as he walks the fields, he's constantly assessing and correcting. On CSA pickup day, he kneels between the rows with the workers and demonstrates how best to pick and bunch the carrots. He fusses with the presentation of the produce at the farm stand and clucks his tongue at the positioning of drip hoses along the base of tomato plants. The farm is an orchestration of details, and there is always more to do, more to consider.

"I feel like I'm just starting to know this farm, and I don't have it all right yet -- I probably never will," he says. "Each year is like starting over."

Organic market farmer Michael Ableman offers these tips for the home gardeners.

Mulch, mulch, mulch: Mulching crops with organic matter, such as grass clippings or shredded leaves, conserves moisture and amends the soil. Mulching is especially important in hot, dry climates because heat and dryness drive earthworms and microbial life deep into the soil.

Apply rock dust: If a soil test indicates your soil is lacking minerals, use rock dust from local sources, which likely contains all the minerals your soil requires. Slow-release rock dust weathers naturally and is gentler on the soil than other mineral fertilizers.

Cultivate, don't weed: Cultivate early before weeds get a purchase in the soil. If you have to pull weeds by hand, you are too late and have created unnecessary work for yourself.

Put chickens to work: If you have big compost piles and you keep chickens, allow the birds access to the piles each day. They will scratch and mix up the matter and eat any fly larvae. Make sure chicken manure is thoroughly composted before applying it to your garden.

Resist spraying: Take a wait-and-see attitude with insect infestations. Don't immediately spray with an organic insecticide; you may kill beneficial bugs, too. In gardens with a diversity of insects, infestations usually take care of themselves without intervention.

Promote diversity: Plant a wide array of intermixed fruit and vegetables, cover crops, and flowers to keep soil healthy and attract beneficial insects.

Start small: When planting a garden or market farm for the first time, start small with easy-to-grow crops that will provide some early success.

Plant close to home: Always locate your garden where you can see it from your kitchen window or where you pass by it every day. Out-of-sight gardens suffer from attention provided too little and too late.

Observe: Walk the garden every day with a notebook, and jot down even the most subtle and seemingly insignificant details and changes. Observation is the most overlooked aspect of gardening and farming, says Ableman. "You don't begin to understand what's going on in the soil or with the plants or the entire system unless you are out in the garden every day -- looking and seeing," he says.

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