Seaponic Farm & Beyond

Continuing the Legacy of Maynard Murray

by David Yarrow

In 1981, Maynard Murray, then retired in Florida, met Don Jansen, the son of a Mennonite farmer in western Nebraska. That year Jansen had spread sea solids on his wheat field. Surprised at the results, he contacted his fertilizer supplier, Dr. Murray.

After high school, Jansen had left his parents' farm to pursue a college degree and professional career. His elderly parents passed the wheat and buffalo farm on to Don's brother. But, after this brother's sudden death, Jansen left his urban career to return to the farm.

Wheat grew unevenly on the farm's rolling Nebraska hills. Fertilizer and topsoil washed off high spots and steep slopes to puddle in hollows. Wheat on upper slopes was thin and weak, while bottom soils grew sturdy stands.

Jansen spread Murray's sea solids on his wheat fields, uncertain what would happen. All of his wheat grew stronger, stouter, fuller heads, and matured earlier. Differences between upland and bottomland were gone, and former bare patches filled in and flourished.

The Jansen farm included a small herd of 35 buffalo. Jansen noticed right away that the buffalo preferred sea solids to regular salt blocks and that they chose sea-fed over chemically fertilized crops for feed.

Buffalo were a tourist attraction and a significant source of extra income, drawing steady streams of guests to observe this indigenous American herbivore. Visitors were frequently disappointed, however, because the herd stayed far from the fence and were hard to see. Tourists found it unrewarding to admire tiny brown specks half a mile away.

Remembering Murray's cattle experiences, Jansen devised a solution: he fertilized the fenceline with sea solids. Soon, the herd was congregating along the fence to munch the dark green, vigorous grass growing there. This made the herd happy, and tourists were delighted, as well.

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OCEAN-GROWN FOODS

In 1982, Murray invited Jansen to buy his 5.5 acre Seaponic Farm in Fort Myers, Florida. Jansen's acceptance was timely, for the doctor died soon afterwards, in 1983. In that last year, Murray paid Jansen steady visits to offer information and insight gathered over 45 years of research and medical practice.

Jansen found that sea solid dilutions gave the highest yields and made fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides unnecessary, since its nutrients are complete, allowing plants to resist disease and insects. Nutrients were measurably higher in sea solid-grown foods, and blind taste tests proved them favorites. Fruit trees responded enthusiastically to sea solid feedings.

Since it grows without synthetic chemicals, Jansen's produce is certified organic, and his few intensive acres supply international organic wholesalers. However, Jansen believes that seaponics is beyond organic, since organic methods alone do not insure all the essential elements. Seaponics is ideal for areas where soils are rain-leached and depleted, such as in south Florida.

AMERICA DOESN'T GET IT

Jansen tried to tell others about the tremendous success that sea solids gave him, but found that almost no one cared to listen.

One grower asked for help with his dying citrus orchard. Jansen delivered a series of sea solid soil treatments over the next year, and the citrus decline vanished. But Jansen heard nothing further from other farmers.

"America just doesn't get it," lamented Jansen. "I've tried for 25 years to make the case for sea solid fertilizers and more natural, balanced methods. But Americans aren't ready to hear the truth, because the chemical-pharmaceutical-petroleum industry has too tight a grip on all the markets and on everyone's thinking."

Determined to pursue his work with sea solids, Jansen decided to look elsewhere for collaborators in research. He decided to go where the need is greatest, and began negotiations with Haiti to transfer his sea solid hydroponics to this Caribbean island nation. With overpopulation, widespread poverty and unemployment, limited arable farmland, and significant hunger and malnutrition, Haiti was in desperate need of an intensive food growing system.

Jansen was able to negotiate with Gulf Coast University to collaborate on his Haiti hydroponics project. The university agreed to provide technical support, training, scientific design, research protocols, and documentation and publishing support.

IMAGINE . . .

Imagine that seawater — a resource so abundant that it's nearly free — is just what soils need to grow healthy plants. Three-quarters of Earth's surface is ocean. Something so ordinary, so freely available, is also so effective as a balanced fertilizer, and so fundamental and essential for health.

Such a simple idea — yet it seems to work. Wonderfully.

But how can money be made from a resource so cheap and available? Unless a business can control its product and price, survival in the marketplace is short-lived. Enterprise can't turn a profit selling a natural resource beyond the ownership boundaries of any nation, yet an industry is needed to convert seawater into a agricultural product usable on a large scale.

In the 1980s, the reality was that American markets for farm supplies were already owned and controlled by a few companies that manufacture chemicals for fertilizers, and most of these, in turn, are owned or controlled by oil companies and their subsidiaries. The result of this extreme level of concentrated corporate control and vertical consolidation is that farmers sometimes seem to have no

alternatives to buying bags and tanks of synthetic chemicals. Research and education services are usually financed to investigate and encourage chemical industry approaches.

Such well-established, deeply entrenched companies have too many vested interests to give up their control of consensus over farm technology, training and extension. Any idea or effort for alternatives to the chemical mindset is lost or smothered by the weight of consensus to keep doing things the same sure way. Innovative ideas are weeded out and ridiculed without trial or investigation.

Today, this chemical mindset is being supplanted by ideas embracing biological, ecological and social dimensions of farm technology. Farmers are now accountable for the impact of their practices on the biosphere. "Cost effectiveness" is giving ground to "sustainability" as a research priority, policy guide and sales slogan. Alternative techniques and products are available to any grower motivated to search for them. Volumes of information are clicks away on the Internet, in every agriculture library, from any bookseller.

For an update on the work of Don Jansen, see "Feeding the Hidden Hunger" (September 2003). Jansen can be contacted at OceanGrown, phone (239) 334-6490, website <www.oceangrown.com>.

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