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I am often asked to recommend books for learning about organic agriculture. I appreciate the many good books put out by Rodale Press, Acres, USA and others over the last few decades, they are not my favorites. Farming is not about double-digging, plastic hoop houses and amendments to buy, it's about soil. The best books on agriculture that I have found are grade school textbooks written a hundred years ago.

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Elementary Agriculture, by Waterr, 1923 is a prime example. He we learn about grains, legumes, how soil is made, how it wears out, and how to keep it from wearing out. A simple set of pictures is worth a few thousand words. A wagon of hay leaving the farm has the caption "Hauling much fertility away." A wagon of milk leaving the farm has the caption "Hauling little fertility away." Pigs heading to market has the caption; "A system of farming in which the crops are sold as livestock and the manure returned to the soil saves soil."

Productive Farming, by Davis, 1911 is another grade school textbook. Here we start by putting. Here we start by putting corn seeds in soil in a jar wrapped with paper. After they sprout we take the paper away and look at the roots and root hairs. Next we cover a plant with a jar and notice moistures, thus learning about transpiration. Osmosis is shown with an egg, glass tube and a bottle of water.

This method of teaching with experiments and observation stimulates curiosity. The second chapter asks "How do you tell a good seed from a bad seed?" the answer is surprisingly simple. You look at the seed with a magnifying glass. Soon we learn how to graft fruit trees and the value of manures, cover crops and crop rotations. Humus, lime, and soil moisture are all covered, along with tillage techniques and system cropping. There are chapters on gardening, insects and on all of the domestic animals, teaching how farms exported crops without buying anything.

A hundred years ago, a seventh grader learned more about agriculture than 99% of the population knows today. A 1902 Encyclopedia Brittanica has a tremendous amount of knowledge about sustainable agriculture. "Organic" and "local" food production were not fads, they were the very life of humanity. In the late 1800's, people knew how to treat the land so it remained fertile. And they wanted there children o be smarter than them.

Unfortunately, practical training was forsaken in exchange for what students could learn abstractly. More unfortunate is the fact that the colleges received their funding from huge companies wanting to sell fertilizers, and the pesticides that are necessary after the fertilizers destroys soil humus.

I've been asked to help design a course for graduate students at Vanderbilt on food policy. I'm afraid I'll get the professor fired. I can do no better than to paint out how our country built it's strength on sustainable agriculture, and how the empire is crumbling under the community and soil destroying agricultural policies of Tyson's, Monsanto and other USDA-sponsored, multinational corporations. To learn about real agriculture, go back to the time when farming was done by people who loved and cared for the land.