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**Fearless Fruit:  
Time to De-‘cide’**  
Review by Keith Johnson

**MICHAEL PHILLIPS**  
***The Holistic Orchard:***  
*Tree fruits and berries*  
*the biological way*

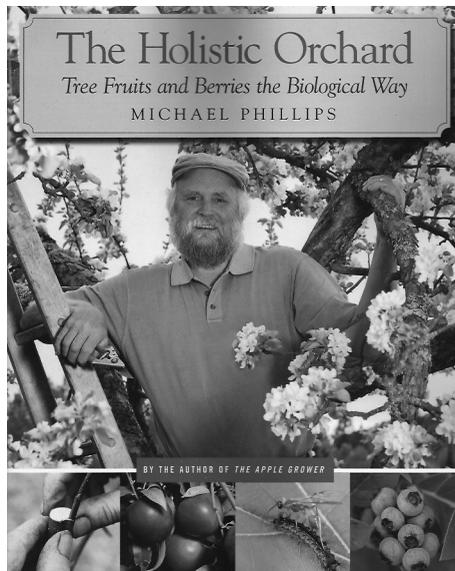
Chelsea Green Publishing.  
White River Jct. VT. 2012.  
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A CONVENTIONAL ORCHARD is a war zone. Terrorizing enemies abound in the forms of insects, viruses, and fungi (oh, my) which threaten to ruin yields and all must be prevented (by killing them) from carrying out their agenda of destruction and economic sabotage. A witch’s brew of pesticides, herbicides, rodenticides, nematocides, bactericides, and fungicides are used in most commercial orchards as growers struggle to produce blemish-free (and nearly nutrient- and flavor-free) fruit-like objects for market. The EPA reports that the national total for pesticide use in the US is a billion lbs/year.

Poorly-informed people, trained by corporate-dominated media, assume that if a fruit looks good it must be good. But, in ever greater numbers, smart citizen shoppers are beginning to question the safety of their foods and the environmentally pernicious practices used to beget the deluge

of monocropped commodities once known as food.

Folks who want to grow their own fruit are often told that it’s impossible to get a decent crop without poisons and that they’d be better off leaving it to the “experts.” Well, the so-called experts are mostly idiots when it comes to ecological



understanding of complex systems, so it’s with deep and grateful relief that I opened the pages of Michael Phillips’ latest book in which he begs to differ with the assertions of the chem-addicts (his previous book *The Apple Grower* should definitely be included as a must-have addition to your library). Not only is it possible to grow fruit organically but doing so opens

up relationships with a mesmerizing macro- and microcosm of benevolent friends and allies dedicated to our mutual fulfillment.

I tell everyone who wants to garden to grow healthy soil as their first, and perpetual, crop and that by doing so success is inevitable. I say, it’s not a ‘green thumb’ you’re looking for but a black thumb, one that mirrors the ever-deepening dark of humic carbon-rich earth, teeming with life in a dazzling array of diversity...and Michael offers a similar message.

He tells us that you’ll “discover a core part of your being, that place where humans find happiness and meaning as we embrace our rootedness on this precious planet.” That works for me, and it’s what I regularly recognize in our home forest-garden-of-Eden where biodiversity is the rule. I don’t garden to make a couple people feel contented and well-fed but to satisfy, also, the needs of TRILLIONS of supportive organisms. If they’re happy, I’m happy and all the plants and animals share the sentiment.

In the late 80s, I had the delightful opportunity to live for a few years in the “Lost Valley” region of northern New Hampshire as a neighbor and joined Michael in the orchard care, pruning, and finally pressing of the apples into a nectar of juice made all the more ambrosia-like by the inclusion of some wild apples which are ubiquitous in the region. Many communal meals with Michael, his wife Nancy, family, and friends made my time

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there rich in fond memories, though I now yearn to see it all again in its current, undoubtedly much evolved, condition. It must be glorious.

The orchard ecosystem is, in all its mind-boggling complexity, the principal subject in this very practical and useful book and it's the main focus of chapter 1. Here he addresses the soil food-web sub-stratum that gives the entire orchard architecture a secure and cooperative underpinning. I was particularly pleased with Michael's treatment of ramial wood chip mulch as an essential part of building healthy soil (addressed here years ago in *PcA* #32, "Ramial Woodchip Mulch" by Celine Caron).

What soon becomes clear is that the organisms identified by the toxic chemical growers as pests, are in fact, simply food for some other set of organisms which we support by providing fodder and habitat in the form of other companion plants and guild associates. Biological, or ecological, orcharding becomes less about the crops, per se, and a lot more about their nearby associates. It's not surprising that much of this is echoed in Dave Jacke's *Edible Forest Gardening* books (for which *The Holistic Orchard* is a great companion text).

Michael's understanding of permacul-

ture design is plainly visible throughout the entire book as he address soil ecology, compost, companion plant guilds, feeding/fertilizing, minerals, pruning, grafting, pollination, beneficial and competing insects, foliar feeding, root inoculation,

elderberries.

The book wraps up with a compendium offering a detailed look into the rhythms and tasks of the orchard year, clearly identifying the specific jobs associated with each season in the life of

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herbal teas, cycles of maintenance, dealing with the challenges of large predators, and so much more.

The subsequent chapters address fruits by type and cultivar, pruning strategies, maintenance support, and fruit-specific "pest" species, starting with a review of the pome fruits; apples (for those who don't have his first book, *The Apple Grower*), pears (Asian and European), and quince. This is followed by further in-depth coverage of stone fruits; cherries, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, and pluots (plum/apricot crosses). From there he moves on into berries including raspberries, blackberries (thorny and not), blueberries, gooseberries, currants, and

both the grower and the orchard. This is followed by appendices that provide lists of resources for trees, scionwood and rootstocks, fungal/mycorrhizal inoculants, insect monitoring and trapping, soil amendments, orchard equipment, helpful websites, organizations, and recommended books.

With the lessons of this book firmly implanted you can fearlessly create your own holistic orchard free of biocides and full of quality fruit. Whether you're a beginner or have years of experience you will find inspiration, encouragement, and practical guidance from a man who has walked his talk for decades. Enjoy.     Δ