

Organics: The New Business Model¹

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak before this distinguished group of “elite horticultural professionals,” as you were described in the publicity for this *OHBA Summit*. As Mike Serant can tell you, I was reluctant to accept his invitation to speak at this event. As Mike told me, the OHBA organization is “dedicated to the education of organic and sustainable lawn and garden practices in the Houston metro area.” Most of my education and experience has been in agriculture, specifically *sustainable* agriculture for the past 25 years. So I am quite familiar with the principles and practices of organics and sustainability. I have also spent a good bit of time with people in urban areas discussing organic and sustainable gardening, including speaking at the *American Community Gardening Association* annual meeting in 2001 and at the *Houston Conference on Food and Sustainable Prosperity* in 2008. However, I haven't had any meaningful education or professional experience related directly to organic or sustainable lawn care.

I decided to do a bit of research so I would at least have some idea of what people at this conference meant when they referred to organic and sustainable lawn care. One definition of *organic* lawn care that rang particularly true to me was: “Organic lawn care starts and ends with healthy soil, soil that is full of nutrients for both grass and the microorganisms that call your dirt their home; soil that is not compromised with toxins and synthetic chemicals that destroy those microorganisms.”ⁱ So organic lawns presumably are lawns on which no synthetic chemicals are used as they are managed to maintain healthy living soils. The sustainability of life on earth ultimately depends on healthy soils, including the soils under our lawns.

Sustainability is generally defined as the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future, at least by those who take the issue seriously. A University of Minnesota publication defines a sustainable lawn as “A lawn area requiring few outside inputs (e.g., water, fertilizer) to maintain healthy grass while having a positive impact on the environment (e.g., preventing soil erosion).”ⁱⁱ To me this more accurately defines a “low-input” lawn than a sustainable lawn. Some of the practices associated with sustainable or low-input lawn care include: adding compost, monitoring soil pH and managing for consistent soil fertility, preventing soil compaction, and reducing or eliminating the use of synthetic chemicals.ⁱⁱⁱ As with sustainable and organic agriculture, the definition of organic seems to be more precise than the definition of sustainable. I question whether the practices currently associated with either sustainable lawn care or sustainable agriculture are actually capable of meeting the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future.

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Authentic organic systems of production – lawns, gardens, or farms – in fact, would be sustainable. Healthy soils have the capacity to support healthy plants that are capable of capturing and storing solar energy to provide nourishment for healthy animals, including healthy humans. And, healthy humans are capable of maintaining healthy, productive soils by relying on the daily inflow of solar energy to maintain their health and productivity. Sustainability ultimately is about relying on renewable solar energy to create a permanent agriculture to support a permanent economy and society that can meet the needs of people of both current and future generations – indefinitely into the future. Sustainable systems of production must be managed as living, organic systems.

Most of the websites I found for organic and sustainable lawns and landscapes seemed to use organic and sustainable more or less interchangeably and tend to apply the less-demanding and less-precise “low-input” standards of sustainability. All of these sites stressed the negative impact the “perfect lawn” puts on the household budget as well as the natural environment. About 30 to 40 million acres of land in the U.S. are devoted to turf grass, and Americans spend \$40 billion annually on seed, sod and chemicals.^{iv} About 70 million *pounds* of pesticides and 70 million *tons* of fertilizers are applied to U.S. lawns each year. Overall pesticide application rates for lawns are ten times as great as for agricultural crops, acre for acre. This over-application of fertilizers and pesticides on lawns and turf grass obviously contributes to pollution of streams and groundwater. Some of the websites also pointed out the significant contribution of lawn care to fossil energy depletion and greenhouse gas emissions. So there apparently is a growing awareness of the need for organic and sustainable practices for lawns as well as gardens, farms, and food systems.

The current organic movement in the U.S. actually began with organic gardeners in the early 1900s. So, the concept of organic gardening is certainly not new. A 2009 article in *Mother Earth News* quoted a national survey indicating that 36 million Americans or 31% of all households participated in gardening in 2008.^v About 12 million or one-third of all home gardeners reported using “all natural” fertilizers and insect and weed control. These gardens might qualify as being “low-input/sustainable,” but it's doubtful that a very large percentage of home gardens in the U.S. are actually managed organically: Healthy soils, healthy crops, healthy people, forever; that's what authentic organic gardening is about. Nonetheless, the interest in organic gardening in the U.S. obviously is large and growing.

The movement toward organic and sustainable lawns and gardens seems to me to be at a stage of development similar to that of the organic food and farming movements in the early 1990s. People are naturally more urgently concerned about what they eat than what enters their bodies through their skin, as through lawn care and outdoor recreation on lawns. So it's logical that concern about organic/sustainable foods and farms would precede concerns about organic/sustainable lawns. While the concept of organic and sustainable lawns and gardens appears to be generally understood among their advocates, *authentic* organic and sustainable production methods do not appear to be widely practiced. Sustainability is still a nebulous or imprecisely defined concept that is often misused and intentionally abused to create an illusion of superiority. Some see organic and sustainable lawns and gardens as a means to increase the health and well-being of people, of both current and future generations, others see organic and sustainable as a means of increasing their profits and individual wealth. All of these conditions were common in the organic/sustainable food and farming movements during the 1990s.

The point of this comparison: Given the difference in timing, perhaps the organic and sustainable lawn and garden movements can learn from food and farming movements. The growing popularity of organic foods is frequently cited as the major success story of the sustainable agriculture movement. The growth in sales of organic foods has been quite impressive. The *Organic Trade Association* (OTA) estimates that U.S. sales of organic food and beverages have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to \$29.2 billion in 2011.^{vi} Organic sales have continued to grow at near double digit rates even during the economic recession. Organic foods still account for about 4 percent of overall food and beverage sales, but organic fruits and vegetables now represent more than 11 percent of all U.S. fruit and vegetable sales; A significant accomplishment for 20 years.

However, the growing popularity of organics brought about fundamental changes in systems of production and distribution of organic foods. During the early phases of the movement, organic farms were small and independently operated and the natural food stores were mostly small cooperatives. However by 2010, OTA estimated that mass market retailers sold 54 percent of organic foods – including mainstream supermarkets, club/warehouse stores, and other mass merchandisers. Natural food chain retailers, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, accounted for 39 percent of total organic food sales. The remaining 7 percent was left for farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), specialty stores, mail order, Internet sales, and exports.

Changes in marketing and distribution brought about changes in organic farming. As was pointed out in a recent *New York Times* article, “as more Americans buy foods with the organic label, the products are increasingly removed from the traditional organic ideal: produce that is not only free of chemicals and pesticides but also grown locally on small farms in a way that protects the environment.^{vii}” The article dealt specifically with the increasing reliance of mass retailers on large, ecologically and socially exploitative organic farming operations in Mexico. The lack of sustainability in organics is not limited to foreign production. A statistical review of California's organic agriculture gives some indication of the growing industrialization of organic production in the U.S. In 2009, eight percent of California organic farming operations with sales of over \$1 million a year, about 185 producers, represented 72 percent of total organic production in the state.^{viii} These are not the types of farms that America's organic consumers typically associate with organic foods, but they are all “USDA certified organic.”

Those who are concerned with the sustainability of our food system need to understand that current USDA organic standards for food and farming are fundamentally incapable of protecting the ecological and social integrity of the organic movement. Jim Riddle, who has been intimately involved in the organic movement, including the USDA National Organic Program, has made numerous presentations around the country explaining what he calls the *Organic Constellation of Values*.^{ix} In his presentations he identifies 23 values which characterize true organic food production. He openly admits that only about one-third of these organic values are “clearly included” in the national standards. Another one-third of the values are “somewhat included.” This means about one-third of the values traditionally associated with organic farming are “not

included” in the USDA organic standards. In general, the USDA organic standards leave out the critical social and ethical values that are essential for agricultural sustainability.

Authentic organic production is about far more than production and profits. Organic pioneer and publisher, J. I. Rodale, wrote, “The *organiculturist* farmer must realize that in him is placed a sacred trust, the task of producing food that will impart health to the people who consume it. As a patriotic duty, he assumes an obligation to preserve the fertility of the soil, a precious heritage that he must pass on, undefiled and even enriched, to subsequent generations.”^x Sir Albert Howard began his classic organic agriculture book, *An Agricultural Testament*, with the assertion, “The maintenance of the fertility of the soil is the first condition of any permanent system of agriculture,” which is the foundation of any permanent society.^{xi} He wrote, “The agriculture of ancient Rome failed because it was unable to maintain the soil in a fertile condition.” He concluded, “The farmers of the West are repeating the mistakes made by Imperial Rome.” Organic farming was not just an occupation, it was a sacred trust.

Historically, organic farming had been as much a philosophy of life as a means of producing food. Organic farming has its philosophical roots in the values of biodynamic farming, first articulated in 1924 by philosopher Rudolph Steiner in a series of lectures.^{xii} “Central to biodynamics is the concept that a farm is healthy only as much as it becomes an organism in itself – an individualized, diverse ecosystem guided by the farmer, standing in living interaction with the larger ecological, social, economic, and spiritual realities of which it is part.”^{xiii} Organic farming was social and spiritual as well as ecological and economic. The term *organic* referred to the organization and management of the farm as a living *organism*. This is the new organic business model for the future: A healthy, holistic, diverse, interdependent living organism.

The industrial business model still dominates the large corporate businesses that provide more than 90% of our food is not sustainable. It is degrading and destroying the health and productivity of the natural and human resources from which it ultimately must derive its productivity. Everything of any use to us, including everything of economic value, is ultimately derived from nature by way of society. There is simply no place for us to get anything other than from the earth, and beyond self-sufficiency, we must rely on others, as well as ourselves, to access the bounty of nature. Industrial organizations are very efficient in extracting economic value from natural and human resources. The fundamental problem is that there is no purely economic value in making the long-term investments in nature and society that are essential to maintain their productivity.

The economy places a priority on the present relative to the future because economic value is inherently individual and instrumental, a means to an end. Most important with regard to sustainability, it makes no economic sense to invest in anything if the payoffs or returns will not be realized until after we are dead. Authentic organic/sustainable production, a system that gives equal consideration to the present and future generations, does not make economic sense.

Real people don't make purely economic decisions; we express our social values as well as our economic values in our choices. However, the corporations that increasingly control our food system and our economy are not real people; they are purely economic entities that base their decisions of economic value. That's why we have seen the transition in organic food and farming

systems from authentic organics to industrial organics. The large food corporations are committed to organic production only because it has been the most profitable sector of the food economy as well as the fastest growing. These corporations have no economic incentives to make the social and ethical investments that are essential to sustainable permanent, organic food and farming systems. An industrial food system, organic or otherwise, is not sustainable.

Organic lawns and gardens may appear to be less critical to the overall sustainability of humanity than are organic food and farming systems. However, as we move toward authentic sustainability, more of the foods we eat will be grown at home and in community gardens. Furthermore, eating healthy foods, while necessary, is not enough; we must also live in a healthy environment. Home lawns are perhaps our most continuing and intimate connection with our natural environment. In addition, conventional lawn care represents significant risks to the caregiver as well as those who are exposed to chemically-treated lawns.

If we are not vigilant, we will see the same basic trends in the organic lawn and garden movements as we saw for organic foods and farming. We will see “industrial organic” lawns that rely on “organic inputs” but are not sustainable: Unhealthy lawns, unhealthy people. We will see the development of an organic lawn care *industry* controlled by large corporate businesses that are motivated by the economic bottom-line. They will continue to exploit and extract to maximize profits and growth. Those of you committed to organic and sustainable lawns and gardens must learn from the past mistakes of organic food and farming. *Industrial organic is not sustainable.*

Authentic organic/sustainable production systems – farms, food firms, lawns, gardens – require a business model that is fundamentally different from the industrial model of business management. Contemporary industrial organizations are designed, organized, and function as nonliving, mechanistic systems. All organizations must have a purpose, and the purpose of an industrial organization is operational efficiency. This purpose is embodied in the structure of an industrial organization. Industrial *business* organizations are structured so their specialized, standardized, centrally-controlled functions can be performed efficiently thus ensuring profits and growth. Each job or position in the organization, from the chief executive on down, represents a specialized cog in the machine. If each person performs his or her standardized function efficiently, the organization will fulfill its purpose. As with other types of machines, if an industrial organization becomes obsolete it must be reorganized, restructured, or redesigned.

The management paradigm for a sustainable organization, on the other hand, is that of a living organism rather than an inanimate mechanism. Dee Hock, the founder of Visa Corporation, provides an example of an appropriate management paradigm for sustainable organizations, which he refers to as *chaordic organizations*.^{xiv} The purpose of the chaordic organization is *sustainable* productivity. A chaordic organization is dynamic, evolving, living system, and thus its purpose plays a continuing role in organizational management. The purpose of a living organization is defined by its principles of operation rather than its organizational structure. Principles are the conceptual DNA, which allows the organization to grow and evolve without losing its sense of purpose. The organizational principles must be engrained in the hearts and minds of the people of the organization. In living, chaordic organizations, the focus is on the

people who fill the positions, rather than specific jobs or position descriptions, and the people must remain personally committed to the purpose and principles of the organization.

Thus, the structures of living organizations are dynamic and flexible rather than static or fixed. Positions, departments, divisions, organizational units, change over time. They are continually evolving, forming, and dissolving, as the organization transforms and renews itself to meet the ever-changing demands of a dynamic marketplace in an ever-changing economic, social, and natural environment. This is the *chaotic* part of Hock's chaordic organizational model. The *order* part of chaordic is embodied in the principles, which guides its processes or functions. As with DNA, the purpose and principles of the organization remain unchanging, allowing the structure to evolve as needed to maintain both the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization. Management of sustainable organizations is focused on purpose, principles, and people rather than planning, directing, and controlling.

Sustainable business organizations are further distinguished from industrial organization by the principles that ensure their longevity as well as their productivity. For example, sustainable organizations are *holistic* rather than specialized. They are managed as wholes; not as separate individuals, divisions, or departments. Relationships among the various individuals and functions within a sustainable organization are just as important as the individuals and functions. Sustainable organizations are *diverse* rather than standardized or homogenized. The individuals and components within the organization have different capabilities, aptitudes, and aspirations. Diversity gives sustainable organizations the resilience and regenerative capacity necessary for sustainability. Sustainable organizations are *interdependent*. Relationships among individuals and departments, divisions, or components are mutually beneficial, not extractive or exploitative. Interdependent relationships make sustainable organizations something more than the sum of their parts, rather than something less.

Relationships among individuals in sustainable organizations must be based on *trust*, rather than rules, regulations, or contracts. People within the organization recognize that principles or characteristics such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility are necessary for sustainability of the organization, as well as essential for their personal integrity. Rules and regulations are necessary only to identify those who are unwilling or unable to respect an organizational consensus of trust. A sustainable organization must be guided by the principle of *kindness*, which is based on the core principles of empathy, respect, and compassion. We humans are inherently fallible beings and sometimes need mercy or forgiveness rather than justice. Finally, those who manage sustainable organizations must have the *courage* to create an organizational culture of trust and kindness in a world that generally considers such relationships to be naïve or idealistic. It takes courage to manage a sustainable organization.

Finally, a sustainable business organization must respect the basic principles of economics. Economic principles are not the creations of economists but instead basic characteristics of individual human behavior. A sustainable organization must produce things that are scarce and thus have economic value. It must use its natural and human resources efficiently to reduce the costs of producing things that are economically valuable. Sustainable organizations also must maintain their sovereignty, or freedom to make wise economic choices. If an organization

sacrifices its sovereignty to gain some short-run benefit, it will lose its economic efficiency as well as its sustainability.

This is the new business model for organics and sustainability – whether in lawn care, home gardening, farming, food production, or in the overall economy. The future potential for organic and sustainable lawns and gardens is unlimited for those who practice authentic sustainability. When Wendell Berry was asked if he thought we could feed the world with sustainable agriculture; he reportedly replied: “We eventually are going to find out.” The only question is how long we can continue to rely on unsustainable businesses, unsustainable government policies, and unsustainable lifestyles? We eventually will find out. Those who lead the transition from industrialization to sustainability will be those who realize that it is not a sacrifice to live sustainably or to be a part of a sustainable organization.

The ecological, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability are essentially the same as the ethical, social, and individual dimensions of human well-being or happiness. Certainly, we are material beings and we need some of the basic economic things of life. But we are also social beings; we need relationships with other people: relationships based on trust and kindness. And we are ethical and moral beings; we need the sense of purpose and meaning that comes from caring for others and caring for the earth. We need balance and harmony among the economic, social, and ethical dimensions of our life to sustain a desirable quality of life. The new organic business model for sustainability represents a better way to work, a better way to live, and the key to a better world both now and in the future.

End Notes

- ⁱ Bill Kohlhaase, "Organic Lawns, Healthy Soils," *Planet Natural.com*, <http://www.planetnatural.com/site/organic-lawns.html> .
- ⁱⁱ University of Minnesota, The Sustainable Urban Lawn Care Information Series (SULIS) <http://www.sustland.umn.edu/maint/maint.htm> .
- ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Bellows, "Sustainable Turf Care, National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service," <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/viewhtml.php?id=80> .
- ^{iv} Kate Gardner, "The Grass is Greener... and Safer," Organic Lawn Care 101, <http://www.organiclawncare101.com/>
- ^v Jennifer Kongs, "US Households Grow Home Food Gardens," *Mother Earth News*, <http://www.motherearthnews.com/grow-it/home-food-gardens-zb0z10zkon.aspx>
- ^{vi} *Organic Trade Association 2012 Press Release*, "Consumer-driven U.S. organic market surpasses \$31 billion in 2011," http://www.organicnewsroom.com/2012/04/us_consumerdriven_organic_mark.html
- ^{vii} Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Organic Agriculture May be Outgrowing its Ideals," *New York Times*, December 31, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/31/science/earth/questions-about-organic-produce-and-sustainability.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=th2.
- ^{viii} Karen Klonsky and Kurt Richter, "Statistical Review of California's Organic Agriculture, 2005-2011," Agriculture Issues Center, University of California, May 2007.
- ^{ix} Jim Riddle "Organic Constellation of Values," The New Farm -- Regenerative Agriculture Worldwide, Rodale Institute, <http://www.newfarm.org/features/2005/1105/constellation/riddle.shtml>.
- ^x J. I. Rodale, The Organiculturist's Creed, Chapter 8. *The organic front*. Rodale press: Emmaus, PA, USA, 1948. < <http://www.soilandhealth.org/copyform.asp?bookcode=010133>>
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- ^{xiii} Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association, USA (2004) *Biennial Report*. Junction City, OR, USA. < <http://www.biodynamics.com/index.html>>
- ^{xiv} Dee Hock, *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 1999).