

Thirteen Paces by Four: Backyard Biophilia and the Emerging Earth Ethic



Joe Gray



The Voice of the New Age



Chapter 5:

Food sparing and land sharing

*Oh it's the sweet cycle of life
Oh yes, it's the sweet cycle of life
Well who am I to complain?
Are we not one and the same?*

Lyrics from the Tito & Tarantula song *Sweet Cycle* (1997)

Among the numerous edible delights that grow in the garden, it is the Sun-sweetened wild strawberries that give me the greatest pleasure (see Figure 5.1). What really sets these apart from the backyard's other consumables is their unmatched sensory exquisiteness. This begins with the aesthetic charm of all those achenes embedded in the flesh's carmine-hued surface; it continues with the delicate satisfaction of plucking fruit from stem; it builds as the potent aroma passes under my nostrils; and it climaxes as I carefully spread the ambrosial flesh across my tongue with my teeth. (Some time ago, in writing a short story, I illustrated the verbal ostentatiousness of an unlikeable character by having him describe various food items as being 'ambrosial', but here I find myself struggling for a better word.)



Figure 5.1: A wild strawberry growing in the garden.

There is another contributor to the joy that I derive from the wild strawberries, and this lies in the plants' self-willed presence in the garden. Introduced years ago, in a 'container', the species has since explored the surrounding terrain with its above-ground runners and now thrives, without intervention, in the cracks between paving stones. In this way, the species exudes potential for the 'future primitive' agriculture that has been envisioned by the writer Gary Snyder, in which food-cultivating practices "go *with* rather than against nature's tendency." As a headline writer might quip: Strawberry yields forever. (Another plant with edible parts that has departed its original container in the garden—in this case by self-seeding—is chives, which I will return to a little later.)

Because of the strawberry plants' self-willed establishment, the pleasure inherent in consuming their fruits is more primal than that mixture of pride and satisfaction that comes from eating something over which one has laboured. The fruits say nothing about me and everything about the Sun, the rain, their evolution, and the soil in which they are rooted. The word in the German language for strawberries, fittingly, is *Erdbeeren*—a literal translation of which is 'berries of the earth'. Only serving to accentuate the earth-given gratification is the greater and more consistent delectability that

the undoctored 'wild type' offers over its cross-bred, commercially favoured cousins.

Wild strawberries, for me, are an exemplar of what the nature writer Richard Mabey has described as the "mysterious quality of 'gatheredness' that [clings] like a savour to foraged wildings." This is a quality whose celebration he associates most strongly with the nineteenth century New Englander Henry Thoreau, a philosopher and nature-lover of whom I have already made mention. Appropriate to the present discussion is the following passage of Thoreau's:

The bitter-sweet of a white-oak acorn which you nibble in a bleak November walk over the tawny earth is more to me than a slice of imported pine-apple. The South may keep her pine-apples, and we will be content with our strawberries, which are, as it were, a pine-apple with "going-a-strawberrying" stirred into them, infinitely enhancing their flavor. What are all the oranges imported into England to the hips and haws in her hedges?

Away from my garden, other local wildings that I especially relish—even more so, Mr Thoreau, than a good home-made hedgerow ketchup—include the intoxicatingly sweet flesh of wild plums on the glorious cusp of over-ripeness, as well as an assortment of leafy flavours, from the citrus tang of beech's spring flush to the bitter garlic hit of Jack-by-hedge. This latter ingredient, I have found, makes a delightful addition to peanut-butter sandwiches (see Figure 5.2). This is a trick that I adapted from Oliver Rackham's suggestion to add ramsons, another plant with garlic-flavoured foliage, to enhance such a lunch. For all Rackham's many great contributions to historical ecology, I am not convinced that any top the importance of this culinary discovery.

For Thoreau, the wild strawberry was a forageable fruit from his home patch that could match the sweet goodness of the more exotic pineapple, even though the precise flavours were not at all similar. The owners of a pub near where I live, in order to offer a more comparable local analogue, sold a syrup that they made from distilled pineappleweed—a species in the camomile tribe of plants that is not



Figure 5.2: Jack-by-the-hedge leaves added to a peanut-butter roll.

native to Britain but that thrives in compacted soils and even sprouts out of cracks in the pavement. I have always adored the tropical scent of this plant and once sniffed a flower head so vigorously that I got it stuck high up inside my nose. Being able to enjoy the aroma in liquid form was thus quite a blessing.

On the subject of drinks, the preferred draught of Thoreau, as a proponent of simple living, was plain water. Yet, if he was still around today and was gifted a bottle of pineappleweed syrup, I suspect that he might have been tempted to add a dash to his glass while no one was looking—and to have sipped it with a broad smile.

One other thing that I will mention about the Thoreau passage quoted above is his use of the word ‘strawberry’ as a verb, in his phrase “going-a-strawberrying.” This usage survives in the English language to this day, especially in the States, but it is certainly no longer in common circulation, which illustrates just one of the innumerable connections we had with the wider world around us that have been eroded in the Age of Technology. To my knowledge,

'blackberry' is the only name of a fruit that is commonly used today as a verb in Britain: people still regularly speak of 'going blackberrying'. This reflects the conspicuous abundance of bramble growth in urban areas and the wider countryside (the practice also defies the efforts of supermarkets to tempt residents of Britain, during peak bramble-fruit season, with blackberries that have been grown in such far-away places as Guatemala). The only other commonly used verb in Britain that I can think of which relates specifically to picking fruit is 'to scump'. Denoting the theft of fruit from an orchard or garden, scumping is something that occurs on a commercial scale in Britain. Recently, for instance, a large number of apples were stolen from an orchard in my local area that is managed by a charity for which I am a trustee. The story was picked up by a national newspaper—*The Sun*, an archetypal tabloid—and they opted for the rather flippant headline of 'Apple turnover'.

Returning to the wild strawberries in my garden, there is a third contributor to the joy that they offer me, and this comes from the act of dividing their bounty with others, for I am not the only animal who enjoys this delicacy. The same, in fact, can be said about all the humanly edible items that grow in the garden.

The rosemary (mentioned back in Chapter 3) is shared with, to name just one species, the rosemary beetle—an arrestingly attractive insect that has claret-and-metallic-green striped wing cases. Like the plant from which it takes its name, this beetle originated in the Mediterranean region, but it established itself in Britain in the 1990s. As one would expect with a co-evolved relationship, the herb can cope with the herbivore's residency. Nevertheless, the BBC's *Gardeners' World* magazine—to cite just one of the available sources of gardening advice—is happy to endorse the application of neonicotinoid biocides to the plant, as long as it is not flowering and is thus unlikely to draw in pollinating bees to the potential pool of collateral victims (or so their thinking goes).

Continuing round the garden, the raspberries are shared, for example, with green shieldbug nymphs, who suck out the fruits' juices through their straw-like mouth. The sage is home to two rather similar species of diminutive insects with giraffe-spot wings. Their

body length is the height of the letter ‘t’ on this printed page, and they are known as the sage leafhopper and the Ligurian leafhopper. The disc-shaped fruits of the honesty—a hot-pepper snack for me—are a favoured food of large white butterfly caterpillars, who accumulate the mustard oils from this and other plants in the brassica family as a defensive strategy against would-be predators. The lemon balm, which I use to give a zero-food-mile twist to various teas from far-flung places, is fed on by the caterpillars of a gorgeous moth known as the lesser yellow underwing. The mint offers sustenance to an equally stunning day-flying moth with amethyst-and-amber wings known as *Pyrausta aurata*, or, more simply, the mint moth (see Figure 5.3). And, in what proves to be a convenient division of interests in the rhubarb, dock bugs and other invertebrates seem to feed only on the leaves, which are toxic to humans, while the stems of the plant are spared for my own consumption.

The idea of sharing plants in this way is not something that features prominently in the typical advice on wildlife-friendly gardening, which, instead, is focused on offering nectar sources for



Figure 5.3: A mint moth nectaring on an ox-eye daisy (more on this plant later).

pollinators, often with non-native plants. This to some extent reflects a bias that exists towards pollinating insects, especially bees, for their facilitating role in human agriculture. This championing of nectar above other dietary specializations of insects is also, I believe, a pragmatic strategy for finding traction with potential wildlife gardening newbies who want to do something to support nature but would rather not have lots of holes and bumps in their foliage. In time, I suppose, they may warm to the idea of such ‘blemishes’ and even begin to see in them a story of significant life events that have unfolded.

In fairness, focusing on nectar is also a more ecologically sensible strategy for smaller gardens, where it may not be possible to offer food-plants in sufficient quantity, in the right microclimatic conditions, and in the necessary habitat context to support a viable colony of a particular species of insect. In other words, ‘commuters’ will always be grateful for even a small amount of nectar or pollen, while potential leaf-, stem-, root-, sap-, and seed-feeding residents can be much more demanding about resources. To give an example from the garden, I would be thrilled if the wild strawberries could support the grizzled skipper, which is a locally declining moth-like butterfly whose caterpillars feed on this plant, but I know that this is almost certainly not going to happen. As Andrew Wood notes in his *Butterflies of Hertfordshire and Middlesex* (a local nature atlas that synthesized the recording work of a staggering five thousand enthusiasts), “the conditions need to be just right for Grizzled Skipper no matter how much of its foodplant is available. It is also apparent that creating those conditions could be difficult, even if we totally understood what they were.” Unlocking trophic layers is not always straightforward.

I could go on with my description of edible items in the garden that I share with other species. Indeed, I have a pencil-scratched list with a couple of dozen other herbs, fruits, and vegetables, which I had earmarked for potential inclusion here. However, with a desire to avoid my chronicling of this aspect of the garden becoming like a presentation of holiday snaps, I will just give one more example; and it is another brassica.

A couple of years back, I was surprised to spot a grey squirrel making regular visits to a lone kale plant near the French windows, tearing off a single leaf each time and delicately passing it into his or her mouth with both front paws. (I hope that the squirrel was a *she* and not a *he*, as in my mind I will always remember this animal, for no particular reason, as Betty.) In Betty's act of nimble paw-work, it looked as if the kale leaf was moving into her mouth on a conveyor belt, and throughout the time that this was occurring she gazed fixedly at me. All that it would have taken to discourage her was a jiggle of the door handle, but I did not do this. That was because—my reasoning went—I could always go to the shop down the road to buy more kale, but this might be her only source. Clearly, I would not make a good farmer; but then I have long known this.

As a sixteen-year-old, I spent most of the long summer break after the completion of school exams working on a farm in south-east Herefordshire. With its patchwork of woodlands, orchards, and fields, this part of the English countryside retains a bucolic charm, yet there is also a darkness that hangs over it as the place where the savagely violent and brutally perverted serial killer Fred West grew up. Four years before my summer on the farm, the bodies of two of West's early victims had been uncovered in fields a few miles to the north. One had been eight months pregnant when she was killed, with West's child.

Bucolic or dark, though, my focus was mostly elsewhere, for I had got the work so that I could save up for a backpacking trip in western Europe, which I would take the following summer. The prospect of travel was the reason that I was able to stick with it for the whole season.

The work started off well enough, with a few weeks of 'apple thinning'. This was an orchard-based job that involved removing some of the developing apples on well-stocked branches so as to promote the growth of a crop that would be supermarket-worthy. It was particularly important to remove any apple that could be judged misshapen. One common 'deformity'—a small bulge where the stem joined the fruit, not unlike an 'outie' belly button—was termed, for no reason that anyone knew, a 'king's knob'.

I worked hard at this job, and each night, when I closed my eyes, all that I could see were green-and-red orbs. But I did not impress the more experienced hands and, after a few weeks, I was pulled out of the orchard. In fact, only one of the three youngsters working that summer managed to win over the old-timers: a young lady who—in what was my introduction to the phenomenon of colleague-to-colleague workplace feedback—earned the nickname ‘Billy Whizz’.

After my mediocrity in the orchard, I was redeployed in the barn for the much less pleasant assignment of ‘potato grading’. Unfortunately, this job lasted far longer than had my stint with the apple trees. It involved standing by a conveyor belt as trailer-loads of newly dug potatoes whizzed past, with the task being to remove any unsellable potatoes, along with debris such as golf balls, rubber gloves, and medicine bottles. The rapid lateral movement, in combination with the intermittent stench of rotten potatoes, fuelled a motion sickness that lingered long into each evening. It was also an exceptionally monotonous job. One way in which a fellow farm-worker and I managed to enliven the work was by ‘playing chicken’ with the rogue objects, such as the golf balls, each daring the other to break first in retrieving the item before it disappeared off the end of the conveyor belt to be sealed up in a sack and sent off to the supermarket. While this introduced elements of suspense and humour to the task, it also led to a far greater number of spurious items getting through our defences than should have been the case.

It was in this second job that I got to know a couple of the farm’s full-time employees, who operated the fixed machinery and drove the tractors. I ate lunch with them most days in a small, grubby room to the side of the barn. Some of these breaks were entertaining, particularly the ones in which these two employees spoke of their informal competitive exploits, such as the challenge of getting as long a line of cars as possible to build up behind a tractor by making unnecessary excursions on the local trunk road. Other lunches were more difficult, like the one when a mouse attempted to dash across the floor, only to be smashed into the skirting board by the steel-capped boot of one of the tractor drivers. As I sat there stunned, the

rodent-squasher carried on munching his sandwiches as if nothing of note had happened.

There were occasional chances to get assigned to a job away from the potato-grader, but I invariably blew them. There was one afternoon, for instance, when I was set to work in an arable field pulling up rogue wild oats. After less than an hour, the tractor driver who instructed me had clearly seen enough to be convinced of my deficiencies in this task, and I was sent straight back to the barn. In my defence, I had been distracted by a desire to sniff the pineappleweed that grew by the gateway into the field, where the regular compaction of soil by the tractors had created ideal conditions for the plant. In a way, then, it was more his fault than mine.

After returning to school for the new academic year, I got a part-time job in which I showed much more aptitude than I had on the farm: I became a pusher. (What I pushed, I should note, in the interest of clarity, was trolleys.) In this role, I established that workers in this part of the country clearly had a thing for competitions that involved making long lines of items that obstructed traffic. In the case of the supermarket I worked for, the challenge was to push as lengthy a train as possible of the trolleys (*chariots*, as the French more poetically call them). A record attempt was only considered legitimate if it met three criteria. First, reasonably enough, it had to be witnessed by a fellow employee. Secondly, there was to be no use of the strap that management gave us for binding trolleys together (this device was an affront to the art and was rejected, even outside of competitive conditions, by all but one exceedingly square pusher). Thirdly, the attempt had to be made on a Saturday afternoon, the busiest time each week in the car park. The all-time record was a fifty-plus effort by a guy who trained by lifting trolleys off the ground with one arm. My own best was twenty-five, which was not shabby at all (as I said above, I showed some aptitude at this job).

I mention my role at the supermarket not just to brag about a personal accomplishment. In the job, I had access to the entire site, and it was on strolls into the delivery yard, where industrial-sized bins were bursting with out-of-date products, that I first saw what a serious problem food wastage was. Having experienced how hard

farm labour could be only months earlier—games of chicken aside—I was now seeing that much of that work was for nothing. And it was at this point in my life that I began to give serious thought to the problems inherent in food production. As I learned more about the destruction of wild nature and the awful conditions that were being faced by industrially reared livestock—and as I developed a deep green worldview—a whole raft of new issues came to light.

The culmination of two decades of subsequent musing is the system of agriculture that is practised in parts of my back garden. As hinted at above, it is not really agriculture at all, being much closer to foraging than farming. And, of course, by being so willing to share the garden's edibles with other species and thus reducing the potential 'yield', all that I am doing, in one sense, is displacing the footprint of my food. More broadly, I am aware that a mass scaling-up of my approach, in place of modern agricultural practices, would mean starvation for many humans.

Such is the size of the Earth's human population that we have no choice, at present, but to assert a claim to most farmable land and manage it primarily for the benefit of our own species. This is a framework on which even organic and biodynamic practices are built. With the current food system, our vast population is propped up on unsustainable and covetous practices, the scale of which can only seem acceptable when viewed through the twisted lens of human supremacy.

Eileen Crist, in the book *Abundant Earth*, gets to the nub of this issue with characteristic incisiveness:

What must the global population size be in order for all people to be well fed on organic, diversified, and mostly locally and regionally grown food, while also allowing terrestrial and marine species to be freed and rewilded? Simply replacing industrial monocultures with organic production systems, while promoting less polluting and healthier options, would not enable the reduction of land-use under cultivation.

In other words, as long as the human population remains as high as it is—or, indeed, continues to grow towards ten billion—we

will be locked into practices that make Earth a human colony above all else. There is certainly real value in changing our patterns of consumption, such as effecting shifts towards plant-based diets with minimal food miles and restricted water needs, just as there is in altering the way that livestock are 'cared for' so as to strip brutality from the system. But without dramatically scaling back our numbers, we will not be able to relax our throttling grip on wild nature. And, in case you were wondering: while technology may help in some ways, it is not a solution in itself. Without a guiding will to shrink the human enterprise, technological advances will not reverse humanity's destructive trend but only find increasingly efficient means of exploitation.

In answering the inevitable question of what a population level is that might enable a mutual flourishing of human and non-human life, Crist suggests, based on available research, that, "from our present perspective, two billion is a sound ideal." And the key to getting there, she argues, lies in "state-of-the-art family planning, full gender equality, and comprehensive sex education becom[ing] part of every society on the planet."

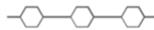
In that last sentence lies what is probably the most important work to be done if the ongoing mass extinction is to be slowed and then halted, thus giving life, including humans, the prospect of a positive future over the coming millennia. In the same vein, choosing to go child-free, or to have one child instead of two, is the most important action that an individual can take to project the Earth from humanity's rampant march. Despite this, the issue of human overpopulation is one that so rarely features in the public-facing work of environment-focused non-governmental organizations.

I will retreat from this big thinking back into the garden now and tie off my line of inquiry into the ingredients that we should be seeking to grow at home. Even if my wife and I set about maximizing our yield of produce, we would not come close to achieving total self-sufficiency: the area of land is too small. In any case, there are many plants in the garden that we cannot derive sustenance from, and we like to employ only the most gentle of agricultural techniques. What we do instead, at least to some extent, is opt for those foods whose

true enjoyment demands that they be consumed soon after their harvesting and whose transportation is difficult without the use of wasteful packaging. An exemplar of such a food, and one that thrives in our back garden, is raspberries. I have only ever seen these delicate, delectable fruits being sold in single-use plastic containers ('punnets', as we call them in Britain). Chives are another fine example. They begin to decline in flavour from the moment they are cut, and they are almost impossible to buy without plastic packaging. In addition, with commercially sold chives, you never get their dainty, lilac-hued flowers and thus miss out on the sweet-onion punch of this divine *bonne bouche*.

At the other end of the scale of transportability are ingredients that keep well and that are dense in flavour. Any given area's imports should really focus on such items, especially where they offer tastes that are not available locally. The classic kind of ingredient that satisfies the above criteria is spices, the ancient nucleus of long-distance trade. In my mind, coffee beans also *just* meet the criteria, which saves me the hassle of having to swallow a large dose of guilt with every post-lunch pick-me-up. (If the guilt ever gets too much or if Armageddon happens—whichever comes first—there is chicory growing in the garden, and it is possible, I am told, to make a coffee substitute by roasting its root.)

In fact, I think that I would benefit from a coffee lift right now, and so I will draw to a close a section in which I have offered, if nothing else, a rambling salute to the wild strawberry.



Consuming the plant-parts that I have described above binds me to the earth, and so it seems only right, then, that I allow any uneaten parts to reconnect with the soil. I am talking, here, of course, about composting. As Wendell Berry succinctly put it, "a garden is not a disposable container, and it will digest and reuse its own wastes." It will also happily digest and reuse waste from food grown elsewhere, such as the grounds of coffee (further swallowing the guilt). For, to quote John Michael Greer, in his book *The Ecotechnic Future*, "Nature

composts relentlessly.” The “art of composting,” he adds, “consists of setting up the right conditions to put this natural process into overdrive.”

For my wife and me, composting is something to which we have rapidly developed a quasi-religious devotion. When we rent a place to stay on holiday, for instance, our first concern is not the existence of a swimming pool or the availability of decent Wi-Fi, but whether there is a system in place for the recycling of food waste. I should say that I describe this peculiarity not in an attempt to imply a virtuousness of character. (My admission above about ‘playing chicken’ while potato grading should have dispelled any such notion.) Rather, I mention it merely to illustrate the addictive nature that composting has for us.

At home, when we were implementing our own system, we were unable to source the equipment second hand, and so, instead, we set about creating something from old items that were stored in the shed. Thanks to the local council’s approach to recycling having gone through several rapid iterations some years earlier, we were left with three large oblong containers for which we had no use. It was a simple enough task to cut out the bottoms of the two that had lids and bury them a couple of inches deep in some exposed soil. The worms quickly found the scraps that we began to add, and very soon compost was being created on site. With the third container, if you are curious to know, we made a new bed of soil, which now provides a home for many beautiful wild flowers—including viper’s bugloss, a species with violet-blue petals enwrapping long magenta stamens in flowers that are adored by many nectar-feeding insects.

To the council’s credit, when they rolled out some new green wheelie bins for garden cuttings, in place of heavy-duty material bags, we asked if we could stick with the old system, and they obliged us with our wish. I think we must now be one of the final households in the city—if not the very last—using the bags instead of the bins. (I am sure that the people who collect the green waste do not thank us for our membership of the dwindling club.) We have also been able to reach a compromise with the council about the control of ‘weeds’ on the publicly owned pavement outside our front door. Their standard approach here is to periodically spray herbicides. Following

a complaint that I made, however, they seem to have put us onto a special list as they now send someone out to mechanically cut the 'offending' plants. We are normally able to hide some of the growing 'weeds' behind recycling receptacles until they have set seed, and only then reveal them for removal. There's nothing like getting value for money from your taxes.

The reason why we give a proportion of our green waste up for collection by the council, I should say, is that some of it is simply too thick or too tough to be effectively composted in our small-scale approach. The council-collected waste, owing to the much larger amounts involved, can be composted at a higher temperature, and the thicker and tougher materials can thus be digested more rapidly. I have a working hypothesis that the ideal size for a human community is one where there are just enough people producing just enough green waste to run an effective communal hot-composting system.

Not helping our own composting temperature is that we sited the containers in a shady spot. But then—as will be explained in the next chapter, which covers the importance of light—most of the sunnier spots are given over to growth rather than decay. ●

Joe Gray

Joe Gray is a field naturalist who lives in the catchment of the River Colne on the island known as Great Britain. He has a master's degree in Zoology from Cambridge and another in Forestry from Bangor, and he is a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society. Joe is also a co-founder of *The Ecological Citizen* (a peer-reviewed, nature-centred journal), a Knowledge Advisor on ecological ethics for the United Nations' Harmony with Nature programme, and Chair of GENIE (the Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy).

As a trustee and volunteer naturalist at Highfield Park—his local charity-run green space—he leads courses for people of all ages on various aspects of natural history and reconnecting with nature. He is also an Associate Tutor on the Field Studies Council's extensive nature-learning programme. Other teaching activities in which he has been involved include the delivery of sessions to British and international secondary-school students on the rights of nature.

Joe spends much of his spare time, when not in 'lockdown', wandering the surviving scraps of wild nature within the industrialized landscape that surrounds his home. He also writes fiction under the pen name Dewey Dabbar.

Chapter 5

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