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JACK LAZOR, THE GURU OF GRAINS

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Jack Lazor, the Guru of Grains An Interview with Jack and Anne Lazor

By Amy Halloran

Jack Lazor has written a book, *The Organic Grain Grower: Small Scale, Holistic Grain Production for the Home and Market Producer*, published by Chelsea Green. The chapters include small histories of each grain along with Lazor's anecdotes about growing them. This is a condensed version of a conversation at Butterworks Farm at the end of July. The monumental tome hit bookstores in September.

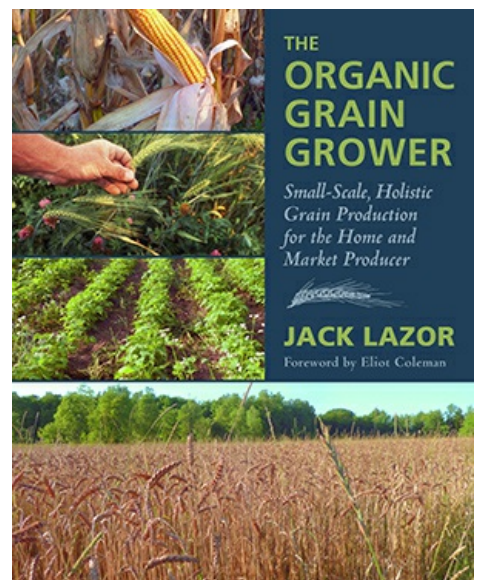
- Maria Buteux Reade

Amy Halloran: How did the book grow out of your life?

Jack Lazor: At the NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association) conference 2 years ago, I gave a workshop on whole farm systems. In the audience was this woman who worked for Chelsea Green, McKenna Goodman. We struck up a conversation afterwards and she said "I think you have something we could put in a book, so why don't you come up with an idea?"

What do I really know about, what's my real passion? Grain growing. I made up an outline and took it down to White River Junction and they liked it.

I started writing and she liked my style and so I did it kind of in an unconventional way. Instead of just writing the whole manuscript I basically wrote it chapter by chapter and turned the chapters in after each chapter.



AH: Had you written other things?

JL: I graduated from Tufts in 1973. For my thesis I wrote a history of farming in the town I grew up in Northeastern Connecticut from 1850-1890. Agricultural history has always been my thing. And it's pretty obvious in the book that I needed to do everything the old-fashioned way first before I did it the modern way.

Ann Lazor: Except for writing. You started out on the computer.

JL: True. But in farming we had to try the threshing machine and the reaper before we used the combine. We had to use the chopper and the hayloader before we used the forage harvester. We used milk cans before we had a bulk tank. We wanted to do everything the old-fashioned way but we very quickly learned there was a reason why people gave them up. But at least we got to try it.

My first experience farming was at Sturbridge Village. I worked on the farm while I was in college. Anne did too. My father worked at Monsanto. He was a research chemist. He was a master gardener and orchardist, bread baker, and a pickled herring maker. There was a lot of process. I grew up with a lot of process.

When I was deciding the back-to-the-land thing was what I wanted to do, he told me to do it as a hobby, have a real job, something that will support myself. I decided to do farming for my real job.

AH: Your writing style is really fluid. Were you a letter writer?

JL: I've found that for some reason, the book needed to be written and I must have been the person to do it because it just flowed out of me. I decided that the best way to do it was to kind of intersperse anecdote with recommendation, and not be afraid to tell people what my mistakes have been.

I wanted it to be warm, you know? And it is warm. It's warm and welcoming and it's not critical. It's my style. I was able to actually get my feelings across. It's amazing. I can't believe I did it all but I did. Interesting now that it's over, I kind of don't know what to do with myself.

AH: What job do you want the book to do in the world?

JL: I've got so many people asking me how to do stuff that I'd like to be able to tell them to go read my book. And it's not that I don't want to tell the story over and over again, but it would be a way to reach more people more thoroughly or more quickly. Education.

AL: Plus so many people helped you.

JL: It's kind of like sharing the wealth.

AL: You tapped into a generation that's no longer there.

JL: It's true and thank God I was able to disseminate some of the information I was given by old timers like Clarence Huff.

AL: Now we're the old timers!

JL: Clarence was this old English farmer from Quebec. He had a combine, had a seed cleaner, and we used to buy oats from him. We bought his combine from him and he came and actually ran the combine for us the first year. I went to see Clarence a few years later and he had Alzheimer's, didn't know who I was. You know he's the one who told where my seed cleaner was so I was able to buy it for 200 bucks?

AH: I think it's really great you have this legacy in a book.

JL: The fact that we live on the Canadian border, you know, most of my craft was learned up there because that's where the grain is being grown. Go up to Derby Line and cross over in October and the combines are rolling, you think you're in Illinois. It's no different than here. It's the same rolling country, same growing season, if anything a little shorter growing season, but the Canadians are self-sufficient in grain.

So I have basically been emulating the Canadians. It was also the Canadians that developed short season varieties of corn and soybeans that have allowed us to grow those crops in this cooler climate. When we first moved here in the 70s, there was no corn and soy being grown across the border, just a little bit for silage. Around 1980 we started seeing them, short season hybrids. After I figured out I could grow hybrids and actually mature grain, that's when I decided I wanted to grow my own corn and that's when I realized that all the varieties of corn, especially the short season ones, are all gone.

I got friendly with Walter Goldstein at the Michael Fields Institute in Wisconsin and he told me about Frank Kutka, who developed this Early Riser corn (an open pollinated variety). I started growing it 7 or 8 years ago. We just looked at our corn this morning and it's over my head and tasseled.

AH: The people who are coming to you for advice as the movement to grow grain builds momentum will be ambassadors for the book.

JL: Yes, Heather Darby (from the University of Vermont) will be. She's so generous. To me that generosity is the most important thing any one of us can have, whether we be generous to the earth or each other or with our information.

AH: I'm all the more impressed with the book, knowing that you don't have a history of writing.

JL: I found out that I could do it, it's a skill that I have. There's a lot of other stuff that I can't do very well. I'm a terrible mechanic. I can fix stuff but I hate it, I hate it. I love the concept of growing things and I definitely more of an intellectual than I am a pragmatist or something. Anne's a pragmatist and I'm a creative dreamer. It's been ood. we've been a good team over the years.

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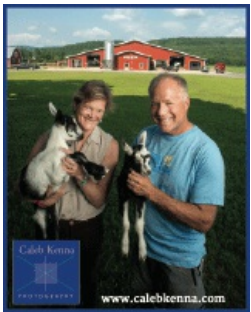
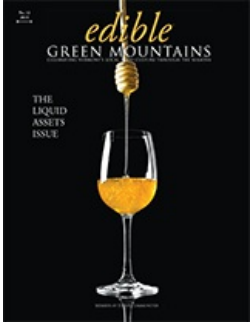
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- GRIST FOR THE MILL
- Warming the Kitchen
- Echos of Home

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