

Corn Trials at Viva la Vida

An interview with Caren von Gontard of Viva la Vida and Mary Maruca

Caren von Gontard, one of the founding members of Viva la Vida, published a fall account of some corn trials at a farm in Colorado. The farm had been under biodynamic cultivation for 12 years, with some years fallow. Although this was the third year that corn had been grown on the land, it was the first year that the seeds had been grown without the use of the BD preps. Instead, the farmers employed a spiritual protocol. To describe it, Caren used such words as “allowing” and “supporting” - their goal was for the plants to evolve toward their individual destiny. The result? Many of the corn stalks produced multiple stems and all produced multi-eared, fully formed fruit, indicating, as Caren said, that the cosmic forces fully filled the form. The 1.5 acres produced approximately 240 bushels. The results were so interesting that I asked Caren a few questions:

Q: Could you speak to your personal experience of working with a spiritual farming protocol for corn? For example, I am reminded of what indigenous farmers in the dry southwest do when they sing their prayers to the corn before planting and later to help it grow.

A: Since I began my farming journey from Waldorf teacher training through various other Anthroposophical endeavors (biographical counseling training, storytelling, and more) and ultimately to biodynamics, I had a spiritual practice of sorts and used it behind or in association with all the activities on our farm. When I finally began studying with Enzo Nastati, I developed a more refined sensibility for the forces behind the practices of biodynamics and eventually began to enhance those practices to include what I would call more “evolved” and truly regenerative agriculture.

I don't mean this in the newly coined use of *regenerative*, concerning the meaning of which I am not actually clear. I mean it in the sense that plants are evolving, just as animals and humans are evolving. By supporting the natural evolution of plants we are supporting the true regeneration of their species and varieties. Allowing and supporting plants to “become” what lies in their evolutionary destiny means to allow the spiritual being of each species the freedom to develop as it intends and not as humans prefer. For this, we must listen deeply and be open to receiving any message whether it coincides with our desires or not.

As one example, some plants are destined to retire completely. In modern environmental parlance that means they are destined to become extinct. We must ask the question: is this a good thing or a bad thing? While the environmental movement may assert that extinction is a so-called bad thing, the spiritual world includes disappearance of species and appearance of new species, or the adaptation of current species to become something different, as integral parts of natural evolution. So these changes are neither good nor bad; they are simply part of evolutionary wisdom.

One must ask oneself then, as a farmer or gardener, if we wish to support the plants to become what *they* want to become? Are we willing to accept the consequences of this on our own farms and in our own lives?

Every farmer knows from experience that various species are becoming more and more difficult to grow. Every farmer in the West seeks out the drought-resistant and heat-tolerant lettuce rather than older varieties that thrived more heartily in moister, temperate climates than we now may be experiencing. But how often do we have the patience, the time, or the inclination to allow our own plants to evolve within our own farm and thus to adapt to change? Do we allow some of our plants to always go to seed and carefully replant and nurture each generation along, which could very well be a task we pass on to our children or grandchildren?

Q: How did your protocol develop?

A: Biodynamic Anthroposophist and farmer Enzo Nastati has been working with plants and agriculture for over five decades. During that time he has faithfully worked toward a deeper understanding of the kingdoms of nature and our role and duty towards them. The specific protocols Enzo has taught us over the years come from his deep study of Rudolf Steiner and his personal experience, but they are only a guiding principle. Each and every farmer has to find his or her own particular methods, words, and spiritual language to meet each and every situation. As Rudolf Steiner reminds us: Evil is a good misplaced.

Q: Where did your corn seeds come from?

A: The corn we planted in our first trial was from organic seed purchased from a seed supplier. The first year we planted that seed and used standard biodynamic practices: compost made with the preps, multiple applications of 500 and 501 plus cow pat pit made on the farm.

The second year the seed from that harvest was grown using the Trinium products developed by Enzo Nastati. All the Trinium products began in the past as biodynamic preparations enhanced through homeopathy, plus further spiritual methods and natural additives.

Last year, no products were used on the planted corn, but we gifted the corn images we had worked on from the previous Holy Nights until planting in the spring.

Q: What personal alignment/preparation is required to work with the corn seeds and the land this way?

A: The consciousness of the farmer is of utmost importance, but love is the most critical. To gift our own willing hands and loving hearts to the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms - all of which reside in our care in any place we plant - brings far more effect than any preparations we could ever use. Asking forgiveness of the kingdoms of nature

for man's violations is the first step. Committing to avoid harmful actions and to bring only loving and healing actions is the second step. The third step is to get out of the way and allow the plants to speak for themselves, then willingly support what they ask for.

These are not a hierarchical list of steps, but rather all must be done simultaneously. It's a long and arduous journey for any farmer to undertake, as it requires our genuine selves to participate. Nevertheless, it is a journey of joy and surprise, and offers the greatest rewards.

Q: Does this process relate in some way to Steiner's 3-fold organism that he hoped the farm organism and communities could move toward?

A: Though we have never spoken directly in our seminars with Enzo of this aspect of Steiner's many gifts to us, it seems apparent that Steiner viewed the farm organism as a most important aspect of agriculture, and agriculture as one of the most important tasks of our time. Given the timing of the Koberwitz seminar in Steiner's life, being one of the last offerings he left to us, we can reasonably understand that it is a basis for understanding the overall three-fold structure of man, of community, and of our farms.

Q: Have you planted biodynamic corn in this field before but more the regular way with the preps or the Trinium method, but not at this same spiritual level? If so, what is the yield difference from planting using this protocol?

A: This particular corn patch was a newly planted section of a hayfield that we had plowed the previous autumn. The most remarkable result in this field was that the "weeds" were minimal. In an old hayfield where alfalfa, clover, and mixed grasses had lived, it is unusual to not have a lot of that grow up the first year of conversion.

Q: Did you plant the pumpkins with the corn (3-Sisters kind of planting but without the squash?) in the same way, aligning with the seed? What were the outcomes?

A: We planted pumpkins and squash along the edges of the field where the plants could receive enough sunlight to flourish. All the plants thrived and produced multiple fruit. Some of the pumpkins produced three, four, even five full-sized pumpkins by harvest time.

Q: You mentioned that you set intentions for the corn when going into the field and that these intentions primarily were reflected in the way the corn developed. Had any work been done with the corn in advance to make you think these corn stalks might be shorter than usual? It seems powerful that your intentions were reflected in the corn. Would you suggest others begin to work in such ways and, if so, how?

A: Every year during the Holy Nights, a group within our community here in Paonia come together to listen to our seeds, to imagine their requests, to paint or draw the progression of those plants from seed to flower to the next generation of seed, and to commit to supporting them when we plant the seeds in the spring.

We spend a few hours together on New Year's Eve afternoon working with our seeds and painting the images we receive. Then, that night we grind Three Kings Preparation together in silence from 11.30 p.m. to 12.30 a.m. of New Year's Day. At the Midnight Minute, together we perform a series of eurhythmy gestures and recite several evocations while we place our intentions for the coming year to the spiritual world.

Q: Will you plant again in 2020? If so, is there anything you plan to do differently next year?

A: We will plant this section of the field again, but likely the corn patch will be smaller. This is only because we need to plant other market crops, and that is a good field for them. We are also beginning to plant broom corn as a trial and will use a portion of the field for that.

We will again bring our images and paintings created on New Year's Eve to the field and offer them to the seeds at planting. Further, during the growing season we offer gestures to the plants at various stages to support their development and evolution. These gestures might be called prayer eurhythmy for plants, offered at specific moments in the development cycle of the plants. But most of all, we give the love of our hearts and the willingness of our hands to the spiritual beings of the plants themselves.