Opinion Piece by Robert Kourik

Heal the Earth . . . I'm not so sure

"I love working with the earth," she warbled. She was thin, muscular, and very sure of herself. This tanned, supple masseuse has spent years handling other bodies for hedonistic and therapeutic reasons. At the moment she's working in the Esalen Institute's garden at the edge of the California coast and happily planting bareroot artichoke plants. Only, I notice she's blithely planting them upside down. She's confident her actions will make the earth a better place. Yet, she's murdering innocent artichokes.

Heal the earth? I think not. Heal the ego . . . maybe. That's about all. While the ego and pride are important to human survival, they're not part of the real landscape's evolution—not of the natural ecosystem. What nurtures the fragile human psyche can easily maim or kill natural plants and animals. In the garden, our psychological needs may be our biggest environmental hazard.

Nonetheless, it was one of those crystalline, warm, and sunny days between storms when the Big Sur winter coast basks in the glory of few tourists. I was at the Esalen Institute, perhaps best known for its nude encounter sessions in the 1970s. However, it also hosts workshops on human growth potential and training in massage, and various curious and innovative forms of mind and body "exercises." This masseuse has been trained for a finely tuned sense of touch, to seek out any minutely stressed muscle. She really does want to "work with the soil." I wonder if I'm supposed to tell her that she's more likely the Charles Manson of artichoke plants? I decide to remain quiet. She wouldn't understand. As we chat, I nod in what could easily be mistaken as an approving manner. Telling her wouldn't shift her belief that she can heal the earth one iota.

Bonsai Buffoonery

This is different than blatant "green" advertising hype. This woman is naïve; she doesn't know any better. On the other hand, consider the recent "environmental ad" displaying a bonsai tree from The La Tierra Verde Catalog—such a cute name—with ad copy cajoling the consumer to give a gift "that enriches the quality of life" and "connects you spiritually with Mother Earth." In an attempt to stand out from other green advertisers and to take the higher moral ground, La Tierra Verde presents its bonsai tree kits as a living symbol of the spirituality of trees "for those who love the planet."

The irony of choosing a bonsai as a green marketing gimmick may be, in my view, nearly unparalleled in its bad taste. This company should know better. If it really loves the planet, it should skip bonsai trees. Foremost, these really aren't, over the long haul, easy trees to take care of properly. On the potting sheds, windows sills, and porches of America, well-intentioned gardeners have probably killed more bonsai trees than the number of people at a garden show. The death of all these trees is not remembered by a marble memorial, except for unmarked compost piles or their silent, invisible internment in a landfill. The planet gained almost nothing; all the resources spent trying to prolong the tree's life more than negates the pitiful amount of compost generated.

While bonsai trees have a revered history and respected aesthetic in Japan, there is nothing spiritual about the act of manipulating a tree into such submission and less than one to five percent of its natural height. There are isolated natural examples of very contorted and dwarfed trees, but these are infrequent exceptions. Even ignoring the bondage-like training program, how can the elimination of 95–99% of the

oxygen-making, carbon-fixing foliage be remotely inferred to as environmental? In my opinion, the trees humans plant should be allowed to grow to their fullest potential.

Sure, city dwellers may not have the space to grow a full-sized tree. But, they should not fool themselves into thinking the tiny amount of foliage of a bonsai has any real beneficial effect on the city's air. There's nothing wrong with training and treasuring a bonsai tree as a living art form. Nevertheless, please, let's just not pretend there's anything natural or "green" about the tree other than the leaves.

À la Natural or à la Unnatural?

Still, the problem of what a natural garden is or isn't remains. The question is as eternal as spring. Exactly how "natural" can a garden be? Is it possible to get people involved—deeply engaged—in organic gardening without doing more harm than good? The optimist in me says, "Yes!" The cynic mocks, "Perhaps not." The evidence often stacks up on the cynical side.

Mucking About

Circa 1980. Somewhere in Northern California. An enthusiastic inexperienced gardener takes over a garden at a nonprofit center via chutzpah and industriousness. He makes it a productive garden by using sheer willpower and sweat. He's focused on bettering the yields per square foot as revealed by John Jeavons in his book, *How to Grow More Vegetables*. [The biodynamic French intensive method promoted by Jeavons has a 30-year history of promoting greater yields in smaller spaces with organic methods featuring double-digging and raised beds. His documented yields are often two to ten times or more greater per square foot than conventional farming.]

This amateur fanatic gardener is on a schedule. He's got a garden calendar. He's read all of Jeavon's books about the double-digging technique. It's late March, and the gardener's schedule says it's time to double-dig and plant. The soil may be so wet it's practically soggy, but his calendar says to dig today. So, he mucks about for hours in the clayey loam soil trying to shape lofty raised beds. Sadly, it's months later at which time the poor condition of the soil is revealed when a little drying causes large fissures, and the guy admits, "I might have dug when the soil was too wet."

His mucking around has squeezed the air and tilth out of the plate-like structure of the clay. The clay platelets have been crushed together by the action of cultivation into soil, which is stickier and gummier than when he started. Drying reveals the damage when air-sucking cracks start killing tiny feeding roots. He actually does get higher yields of zucchini than his chosen competitor—Jeavons. [Big deal. Since when did you not grow enough zucchini?] Yet, this gardener's single example of superior yield per square foot may have set back the soil's structure several years or more. The true health of the soil can't be judged by yields alone. In fact, after a certain point, higher yields may be a good indicator of an increasingly *unhealthy* soil. And, sheer physical effort can coerce abundant harvests from maimed soil for years. However, it shouldn't be mistaken for vibrant, sustainable soil.

Ironically, our anonymous gardener actually lived on 80 acres. His machismo for greater yields per foot seems rather petty in the face of so much land for cultivation. Part of the equation of any environmental garden is how well it fits in the greater surrounding context. Just as a pasture makes no sense in the formally forested tropics, an overly ambitious bio-intensive garden on 80 acres is equally absurd. Bio-intensive gardening is more appropriate to small suburban and urban lots than rural settings. There are many alternative gardening techniques that use more square footage yet actually take considerably less time and effort. In fact, with the right crop, enough spacing between crops and some skill, it's possible

to grow food without adding any fertilizer, no compost, little-if-any tillage, and no supplemental irrigation—even in the arid West.

This is an example of the kind of gardener who sees ambitious tillage as a measure of his/her intent and skill. Such gardeners actually degrade the garden by treating it as subservient to human intervention. This represents a mild form of gardening fascism. These gardeners can't garden without digging because the act of tillage proves they are gardening and "improving" the soil. Both are often false assumptions that may service the gardener's ego but not real-world ecology.

So, what's the solution? Tell this driven, inexhaustible gardener not to dig—at least when it's too wet—and see if he listens? Perhaps. Yet, this strategy doesn't always work.