

Walking with goats



It is a great pleasure to walk with a few goats through the woods. I have done it for about an hour nearly every Saturday and Sunday in the last twenty years. I take three animals on leashes and let the others run along. They nibble on undergrowth and shrubs, while we slowly progress through about 15 acres of wood, which are part of my small farm.

The sight of the animals, choosing a leaf here, a blade there, makes one aware

of the direct needs of a browser. The plants selected for feeding change throughout the year; an innate restlessness prevents depletion of any one resource; and the leashes permit me to guide the small flock away from plants which should be preserved, and toward growth which one would rather see held down.

Young goats are taken out with the older ones, beginning at about two months of age. They quickly learn to walk in the herd, come along wherever I go, and feed on fresh greenery with their elders. Old goats, which have borne their last offspring, walk along slowly, seemingly enjoying their outing with the others. And the milking does pull off leaves at rapid speed, gulping down rather large quantities of greenery in a short period of time; they can ruminate on it later, after the return to the enclosure.

The walks seem to keep them in good health and makes their milk tasty. Though I have not measured it, there seems to be more milk in the udders on the evenings after those walks.

As one makes decisions on breeding some animals and plans to discard others, it seems important over the years that such decisions are based on the greatest possible knowledge. Walking makes you familiar with your goats. You regularly observe their looks, the state of their coats,

the way they move, and their appetite. Each animal deals in its own way with small obstacles, like the entanglement of a leash in a shrub: it may pull stubbornly step back and try again, or disentangle itself in a seemingly well thought-out fashion. It seems important for breeding that one consider an animal's disposition and behavior as much as its milk production and looks, if one wants to enjoy the results of breeding goats for many generations. Experience has taught me that lesson.

There is also the beauty and the ever-changing mystery of the woods throughout the year, which one can contemplate on such walks. By standing a while with feeding goats in one place, you may become aware of a brief-flowering wild ladies slipper or a web-building spider, which could have escaped the attention of a faster wanderer.

I don't know how it is with others; but I like to have moments for contemplation during which my thoughts wander, while I do something productive which does not require full attention and walking with a small herd of Nubian goats through our North Carolina woods provides many such moments.

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book review

“A radical new concept in agriculture”

The One-Straw Revolution, by Masanobu Fukuoka; Rodale Press; 181 pages, \$7.95.



This book is readable on several levels. It's generally about agriculture, natural agriculture specifically, and very specifically about a radical new concept in agriculture.

But, as Wendell Berry says in the preface, this book “is an inspiring, necessary book about agriculture because it is not just about agriculture.”

Masanobu Fukuoka clearly understands that we cannot isolate one aspect of life from another.

The author was trained in microbiology, specializing in plant diseases. He then worked as an agricultural customs in-

spector in Japan. At the age of 25, he began to question the fundamental principles of modern farming which were then being developed, and he left his technical career to return to his home village where, over the next 35 years, he worked to develop a unique method of natural farming.

This method is the focal point of the book, the thread that holds it all together, its real reason for being. And yet, the thread is weak, for many reasons.

The method, simply put, is entirely natural: sow the seed, return the crop residue to the soil, and do little else. He doesn't plow, or grow his rice in paddies, or weed. And for him, it works.

One reason the thread is so weak (especially in the U.S.) is that Mr. Fukuoka's Japanese farm consists of 1¼ acres of rice fields and 12½ acres of mandarin oranges. The economy of Japan is different from that of the U.S., and the climate of southern Japan is certainly different from what most of us experience.

But in spite of the lack of “Practicality” for most U.S. readers, *The One-Straw Revolution* certainly contains the seeds of an agricultural revolution.

Traditional Japanese agriculture in-