

PROGRAM PROFILE

BIODYNAMIC INTENSIVE COURSE AT RUDOLF STEINER COLLEGE JAMIE HAUBNER

“Who are we missing?”

It was a Tuesday morning in June, and a group of us had gathered at the picnic tables at Rudolf Steiner College in Sacramento, California. Our teacher had arrived, and with this simple question he drew us from our separate lives into a community, embarking together on an unforgettable adventure.

We had come to the college’s Raphael Garden to participate in a week-long intensive course in biodynamic gardening. Harald Hoven, master gardener in residence at the college, taught the gardening portion of the course. Harald’s wife, Cynthia, taught philosophy and eurythmy.

Many of the dozen or so students knew one another. Some were apprentices at Raphael Garden. Some had participated in the once-a-month Saturday classes that Harald had been teaching since the previous September. A handful of us were newcomers. We were a diverse group, with a broad spectrum of experience. One of our fellow students runs the acclaimed Love Apple Farm, a thriving biodynamic garden that has entered into an exclusive partnership with Manresa, a Michelin two-star restaurant in Los Gatos, California. One of the students, a native of Mexico, helps run a community supported farm in Guadalajara. One student works at a biodynamic farm for essential oils; another has children in a Waldorf school and was preparing to start a garden for the school in the fall. I came with the least amount of experience: our family had just moved to a small (twenty-two-acre) farm south of St. Louis, Missouri, and the space and I both want it to be biodynamic. I had called Harald to request special permission to attend the intensive course, and he had welcomed me with characteristic warmth. At his recommendation, I bought *Culture and Horticulture* by Wolf-Dieter Storl and had read half of it when I arrived in California.

I love Storl’s book, but nothing can replace the experience of meeting a gardener in his garden.

Partly because, in many ways, the teacher is the lesson. Partly, because, during the week we spent together, we were drawn into the rhythm of the garden in a way that is central to the biodynamic approach and impossible to re-create on the printed page. Partly because, when we left Raphael Garden at the end of the week, each of us carried home to our own space something of that space and of the experience that we had shared there.

Our first day, and our daily rhythm thereafter, began with a visit to a row of young bean plants. Each of us chose our own plant to observe during the course of the week; Harald explained that he had chosen beans for us to observe because they change so rapidly from one day to the next. The several minutes of stillness, and our quiet discussions afterward, taught me (among other things) that to garden is to enter into relationship—with the cosmos, the earth, the living things one tends, the friends with whom one labors.

We spent the rest of each morning in the garden, stepping

for a moment into the rhythmic dance of the place. One morning, for example, we pulled out a bed of chamomile and trundled it past the flow form waterfall to the compost piles.

Ah, the compost piles of Raphael Garden!

There were perhaps half a dozen when I was there, like little burial mounds. Each was as long as a man is tall, as wide as a man can span his arms, and chest high. In each mound is planted a stake, neatly marked with the date that the pile was completed and preparations were added. Sometimes a second date, some six months later than the first, indicated when the pile had been turned and preparations applied a second time. We finished a pile the morning that we cleared the chamomile bed, turned a second pile another morning, and learned much. A compost pile, Harald taught us, is an organism. The last layer of material, carefully placed, is a protective skin. The preparations, each in its own place, become the organs of the pile. “Stinging nettle,” Harald told us, “is the heart.” The morning that we turned one of the piles, someone asked suddenly, “Isn’t this the pile that we put the deer in last fall?” The pile itself answered the question, with a large bone, not yet fully composted. I learned, in that moment, that a good compost pile can redeem anything: the gardener heaps upon it all manner of refuse, and it yields in return an offering of rich goodness.

Another morning we prepared for replanting the bed that we had cleared of chamomile. We met the compost piles on the other side of the garden that day: two manure piles as wide and as tall as the plant compost piles, but stretched as long as available material allowed. One of the piles contained manure from a local dairy. The other pile contained “gold”—composted manure from Bella, the beautiful jersey cow who belongs to Raphael Garden. More than once during the week, Harald said, with obvious feeling, “Bella is our wealth.”

It is one thing to read that the biodynamic ideal is a self-sustaining system in which every element adapts to every other, creating a dance exactly suited to the space. It is one thing to read that, and it is quite another matter to see it in the daily decisions of the gardener. We saw it that morning, as a master gardener stood between his compost piles, deciding which one to use. Harald, as usual, was careful to think out loud for our benefit. “We are planting basil, and basil wants rich soil, so we will use composted manure rather than plant compost. If I were growing this basil for seed,” he continued, “I would want the very best, and I would use Bella’s compost. But this basil is to include in the produce boxes for our CSA customers, so we will use compost from the other pile.”

We began filling wheelbarrows, and a few minutes later I watched Harald teach another lesson that I will not soon forget. I once read that a wise man, unusually productive, was asked how he accomplished all that he did. “My formula,” he replied, “is simple. Do it. Do it right. Do it right now.” I saw Harald live that formula several times during my brief visit to his garden. That morning, as we were forking manure into the bed where we would be planting basil, a carelessly placed pitchfork punctured the irrigation hose in the bed beside ours. With a gentle invita-



Photos: Harald Hoven prepares holes in the compost for biodynamic preps; Jamie Haubner stirs the preps

tion to be more careful, Harald interrupted our lesson to pull a knife from his pocket and repaired the hose. I saw the same “do it right now” approach later, when the rest of us left for lunch and Harald remained behind with a pitchfork, bending a misshapen tine back into place. On still another occasion, while teaching us about seed saving, Harald noticed an infestation of harlequin beetles in a bed of broccoli. Again interrupting the scheduled thing to do the needful thing, Harald got a plastic cup and lid, sliced an “X” across the lid, and set us to work gathering beetles.

One morning we gathered valerian flowers, plucked the petals, and put the fruits of our combined labors into a hand meat grinder: a glimpse into the preparing of the preparations. One evening we gathered to stir horn manure preparation—an hour of quiet fellowship and labor at the picnic tables where we had gathered at the beginning of the week. Afterward we moved together through the garden and the orchard with our buckets and brushes, scattering healing water as we walked. A handful of us lingered into the evening as Harald, who had been teaching us of the earth, turned our gaze upward to the heavens. Again, it is one thing to read about cosmic rhythms, and another to hear them spoken of by one who seeks to govern his garden in cooperation with them.

The last morning (thanks to an extra-mile early morning digging effort by one of the students), we made and buried a batch of barrel compost. While we mixed the compost, two strangers wandered up to watch, and I felt vaguely cross that outsiders to our fellowship should interrupt our last hours together. But Harald greeted them and answered their questions, as warmly as he had welcomed us, and I was reminded that the gar-

dener is the lesson and that to garden is to be in relationship.

Speaking of relationship. I have shared something of our mornings outdoors with Harald, but I have said nothing of our afternoons with Harald’s wife, Cynthia. Harald attended Cynthia’s classes, anthroposophy and eurythmy, and the interplay between them as people was as valuable to me as the interplay between their disciplines. Here were two people whose lives have been richly changed by the work of Rudolf Steiner, weaving their lives, and their works, together to share Steiner’s work with another generation of students. I am grateful to him, and grateful to them.

This June, another group of students will gather at the picnic tables at Rudolf Steiner College. And Harald will draw another group into community by asking, “Who are we missing?” Don’t be missing! Be there. For an unforgettable adventure.

Jamie, a newcomer to biodynamics, lives with her husband and five of their seven children at Liberty Hill Farm, in Jefferson County, Missouri.

For more information about biodynamic gardening workshops and apprenticeships at Raphael Garden:

**[www.steinercollege.org/
biodynamics-education.html](http://www.steinercollege.org/biodynamics-education.html)**

Harald Hoven, director of the garden, is a master gardener, faculty member at the college, and founder of the Biodynamic Association of Northern California. Email Harald at hhoven@steinercollege.edu.