



photo:treehugger.org

Cuba's Organic Revolution

by Kjersten Jeppesen

“Checkmate to Neoliberalism!” proclaims a poster in the office of the Cuban Institute for Tropical Agriculture where a government and grassroots partnership is bucking the world trend toward industrialized agriculture. The long-standing U.S. trade embargo and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, left Cuba destitute, in need of machinery, fertilizers, pesticides and fuel. In 1991, Fidel Castro launched Cuba’s “alternative model,” a science-based, low-input, sustainable agricultural program, the largest such conversion in history.

Cuba became a laboratory for using non-chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture. Cuba needs to feed two percent of Latin America’s population, and it has 11 percent of its scientists to do it. Barefoot, just-graduated agronomists, work in rural co-operatives to invent the needed substances for the agricultural revolution. Farmers re-discover techniques of intercropping, and through necessity replace tractors with oxen. The experiment continues to evolve. More than 200 bio-tech centers produce and distribute non-toxic fertilizers and pesticides.

In contrast to the industrialized countries where small farming is being squeezed out by agribusiness, land reform switched 40% of state farmland to incentive based co-operatives. Remaining state farms were broken up into basic production units in which the state still owns the land but members run the business.

In the countryside, organic sugar, coffee and orange groves are becoming established, but the spectacular aspect of the organic revolution is taking

place in the cities, where a world model for organic practices has developed. Sixty percent of Cuba’s produce is grown right where it is eaten. Veggie stalls appear on pavements, street corners, and under the covered walk-ways of Havana’s elegant but crumbling colonial buildings. Chemicals are forbidden. The smallest gardens are grown between houses, and in more than a million patios (*huertos*).

Called *organoponics* the larger urban market gardens grow in raised beds and the produce is sold on site. A typical urban farmer feeds his garden with compost from his kitchen, his catfish on worms and larvae, his rabbits on leaves and herbs, and he makes his own natural pesticides. He grows vegetables, avocados, mangos, medicinal plants and herbs under his palm trees. Havana has 62,000 *huertos*, plots of less than 800 square meters.

The Playa Borough Community Garden is a hectare of parsley, lettuce, spinach and tomatoes. Here, compost is made by worms, and fungi is controlled by other fungi. Volunteers assist paid workers and a full-time technical manager is employed by Granja Urbana, the government’s Urban Farming Institute.

The government gives unused city land to anyone wishing to cultivate it. State shops supply seeds and tools, and high productivity delivers results. An official of the Institute for Tropical Agriculture states that every dollar of produce on a small plot costs 25 cents to produce. Increasing area increases cost of product: more workers, lower yields, more complex irrigation systems, more transport needs. As is, customers collect their food on their way home from work.

Kjersten Jeppesen is an acclaimed artist living in Southern California.

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