

What is Biodynamics?

In the last hundred years, there have been two major developments on the land that seem to go hand in hand - the increasing mechanisation of agriculture and the sense that nature is becoming degraded and losing its vitality. Add to this the pollution of the environment, the signs of illness in trees and violent changes in the weather, and we feel that nature is crying out for both a new way of understanding the environment and a new way of working the land to heal the earth.

It was concern about worrying trends developing in agriculture that led farmers to ask Rudolf Steiner to give his 'Agriculture' lectures in 1924, on which the biodynamic agricultural movement is founded.

What he set out there can be regarded as the foundation for a new understanding of life which recognises a spiritual dimension by enlarging the basis of science to include the cosmic and what is beyond the sense-perceptible. Biodynamics has a holistic world-view that, for example, sees the influence of planetary rhythms on the growth of plants and animals as of equal importance to a purely chemical analysis.

It is however, the regeneration of the forces that work through the soil to the plant, aided by enlivened compost or manure, that is the central aim of biodynamics and which is conspicuously different to other organic systems. When crops are harvested from the land it is not only their substance which is removed but also the forces and vitality which make them worth eating. To give back this vitality we use special therapeutic preparations for the soil, the plants and also for the compost and manure.

These are :

Horn manure Preparation (500) - specially prepared manure is made into a spray to vitalise the soil, enhance seed germination, root formation and primary shoot development.

Horn silica Preparation (501) - ground mountain quartz (silica) is made into a spray to benefit plants: it helps them achieve optimum development and maturity and particularly affects taste, colour and aroma.

Compost Preparations - these are added to the compost or manure heap in small quantities and are made from yarrow, chamomile, nettles, oak bark, dandelion and the juice from pressed flowers of valerian. They work to regulate the composting processes and to enable the different elements (calcium, nitrogen, phosphorous etc.) needed for healthy plant growth, to be present in a living organic way.

When the treated compost or manure has been applied to the soil, the plants become more sensitive to their environment and responsive to the rhythms of the day, seasons and planets that the farmer takes note of when sowing, cultivating and harvesting.

At the heart of biodynamics is the ideal of the farm as a self-contained, mixed farm providing its own seeds, fertility and feed for a wide range of different animals and a range of environments from ponds and hedges to orchards, woods and pasture. It is the art of the farmer to develop the right blend of animals, crops and environments to encourage bird and insect life and to provide a harmonious and sustainable balance for each

particular holding. In this sense each farm becomes an 'individuality' shaped by the inter-relationship of the farmer and the land.

Increasingly farmers and gardeners are actively involving the community in helping to ensure continued care for the land, whether through box schemes, community trust ownership or school visits etc.

There are biodynamic farms and gardens in more than 30 countries throughout five continents. Biodynamic produce is marketed under the Demeter symbol which is linked to an international network of Demeter organisations. Biodynamic Associations exist in 26 different countries. As well as fostering the practical development of biodynamics they arrange conferences, offer training, produce journals and undertake research.

The world-wide movement has its centre at The Goetheanum, in Dornach, Switzerland, the home of The School of Spiritual Science, of which there are seven departments. The Biodynamic Agriculture Department is part of the Natural Science Section.

Biodynamics provides a sustainable agriculture answering the urgent need to heal the earth and provide nourishing food for the whole human being.

Michael Bate (*Head gardener at Weleda UK Ltd*)

Biodynamic viticulture

Biodynamics is a form of organic agriculture based on the ideas of the Austrian philosopher, Rudolph Steiner.



Two things distinguish it from other forms of organic farming :

- The use of a complex system of herbal sprays and composting techniques, known as 'preparations'.
- The timing of the operations on the land, which is strictly regulated by the movements of the spheres.

Biodynamics has made some high profile converts in recent years and is taken seriously by the wine industry purely on the evidence of the wines it produces.

The biodynamic movement is effectively run by an independent organisation called *Demeter*.

Theory

Biodynamics is part of Steiner's wider system of anthroposophy, or spiritual science.

A farm, or a vineyard, is seen as a living system whose functioning is explained in terms of 'formative' forces.

If something is wrong, it is because these forces are out of balance. There might be too much 'astrality', for example, and not enough 'etheric' force.

Even the most distant movements of the stars are connected to the smallest operations of the land. Lay-lines must be taken into account.

The weakness of conventional science, in biodynamic terms, is its obsession with analysing physical effects, and ignorance of the forces that underlie them.

Steiner was well aware that this would appear 'insane' to some people.

Practice

Biodynamic practices can appear equally bizarre.

Making 'Horn Manure', for example, involves burying a cow's horn full of manure at the autumn equinox and digging it up in the spring.

But the evidence suggests that biodynamic farming has real benefits for life of the soil.

Analyses by soil microbiologist Claude Bourguignon, for example, found it compared favourably to both conventional and organic farming.

Exactly what it is about biodynamics that produces these benefits, and why, is not yet understood. But that does not make it necessary to accept Steiner's explanations.

Further research may well be able to explain its effect in terms of conventional science