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# ¡Viva la revolucion organica!



JENNY SLAUGHTER IS A LOCAL NUTRITIONIST who runs the Latham Farm Camping Barn at Wadsworth where she serves up delicious, healthy and locally produced food. In February she went to Cuba as part of a gardening brigade organised by the Cuba Organic Support Group, a U.K. based organisation which supports the organic movement in Cuba.

I'm just back from an organic gardening brigade 'holiday' in Cuba. I first read about the greening of Cuba and the gardening brigades organised by the Cuba Organic Support Group in Permaculture Magazine, that well-known travelogue.

I knew I needed a sunny break to ward off the winter blues but wanted to do something more interesting and useful than the usual sun, sea and sex! So off I went.

At Heathrow I had no trouble identifying my fellow subversive travellers. They were all carrying pitch-forks and spades - the weapons of the new revolution! I went incognito, travelling light, with a humble trowel hidden in my hand luggage.

Cuba is an island of beautiful contradictions. It is the land of Buena Vista Social Clubs and cold war austerity, of unbelievably dull food and prolific organic fruit and vegetable huertos, of Cuban pesos (common local currency) and American tourist dollars.

I was intrigued to experience a tiny island, so close to Uncle Sam, that was escaping Americanisation by default. The irony of the proximity and the back firing benefits of the embargo are completely fascinating. Which brings me back to the organic gardening and agriculture bit.

No pesticides, no fertilisers, no medicines, no fuel - what can a poor island do? When the Soviet bloc collapsed in 1989, all imports stopped overnight and Cuba was left floundering. The government declared the 'period especial' (special period) and all efforts were concentrated on making Cuba self sufficient in food and medicine. "Great crises bring great solutions", says Fidel Castro. What lessons can another small island learn in the wake of B.S.E. and the devastating foot and mouth disease?

I visited the Ministry of Agriculture's Research Institute for Pastures and Forage. I promise you, this was riveting! The bottom line here is that by using sustainable farming techniques based on permaculture principles and a sensible balance of animals and arable, 12Kcals of food energy can be produced for every 1Kcal of energy input. That is sustainability gone wild! For your reference, the reverse is true of our modern intensive farming methods. It can take up to 12Kcals of input (usually derived from fossil fuels) to get one

miserable calorie of potentially diseased meat. No wonder our farming industry is on its knees.

Cuba also has a long tradition of using medicinal plants. Cuban doctors are amongst the best in the world - ask any medic. They are trained in both pharmaceutical and alternative remedies, which can be used according to availability and patient preference. So medicinal plants are everywhere in and amongst the vegetables in backyards, patios, fields and organoponicos (market gardens). In one laboratory I saw alfalfa being harvested, dried and packaged ready for distribution to old peoples homes as a useful calcium supplement to protect against osteoporosis.

So what did I do? Apart from voraciously stuffing in all this information to report back to the Hebden Bridge Times, I worked! I worked in the blistering heat in Fernandini's fertile oasis, in Husto's parched patio, in Havana's show case botanical gardens and in the school gardens of Havana's suburbs. I went to the beach about three times in all at the end of the day to cool off. There would have been a mutiny in our camp if this were not timetable. And I still managed to nightclub and salsa through most evenings.

I made great friends and met truly inspiring people - like fellow nutritionist Vilda Figueiros. Vilda and her husband Pepe run the food preservation project in Havana. Her mission is to teach the local people, especially children, the art of growing, cooking and preserving all the fantastic food that Cuba is capable of producing. So the next generation will revolutionise the country's cuisine. Eat your heart out, Jamie Oliver!

But there is a cautionary tale to tell. An energetic and enthusiastic farmer with a young family and an English degree is given some land by the State. He farms it with hard slog and little help according to all accepted principles. He turns the land around. He increases the milk yield, which is distributed to the priority groups, pregnant women and young children. Some petty bureaucrat from local government comes along and confiscates two thirds of the land for redistribution. The reason given is that he is too successful and therefore must be earning too much money. "Honestly" the farmer says as he wipes his rough blackened hand across an emotionally charged face "no-one can earn too much money in this country."

So the quest for the perfect system goes on. P.S. Vilda Figueiros will be visiting England in June as a guest of the Cuba Organic Support Group. See the COSG website for further details <http://www.cosg.supanet.com/cosghome.html>

## Green Avenger



# Litter Louts!

This month's nomination for Green Room 101 comes from Councillor Paul Monahan, Mayor of Hebden Royd.

LITTER! WHAT A DELIGHTFUL WORD. Think of a litter of puppies, playing and tumbling with each other; or a litter of pigs, all contentedly suckling from their dam. Unfortunately these days, all we think of is 'litter lout'.

Are you one? Was it you who emptied your cars ashtray in the car park last week? Was it you who left a trail of your night out in the street past my door? When you went out last Friday, did you have six cans of beer, a curry takeaway, a fight and use a condom, then throw all the remains into my garden?

Do you empty your dog on the footpath? Please don't. Take it - and the \*\*it - home with you.

Perhaps your litter "isn't really litter at all", it's 'just' the wrapper off a cigarette packet, 'just' a chewing gum, or you 'just' spit in the street. Perhaps its only that you cannot be bothered to take home the box or bag when you have taken bottles to the bottle bank. Yes, we know that recycling is a good idea, but wouldn't it be better if you took the rubbish home with you? (You didn't use a car to go to the bottle bank, then leave the engine running while you dumped the bottles did you?)

If it's not your litter, is it your children's? Have they left the remains of their usual school lunch of half-a-bag of chips, a packet of crisps and three chocolate bars scattered about the road or the school grounds?

Remember! Litter is not nice, litter is ugly, litter is a crime. I know that if you are reading this, then you are probably not a litter lout, but

beware! If you are, its off to Room 101 for you!

If you would like to submit a nomination for Green Room 101, please send your contribution (preferably by e-mail or on disc or otherwise by fax or post) to John Brierley at the ATC. It has to have a vaguely green theme and be no more than about 300 words.

We now have a facility for commenting on the nominations for Green Room 101 on our website. Just go to [www.alternativetechnology.org.uk](http://www.alternativetechnology.org.uk) and have your say.

**JUST BIN IT! - If you want to help clean up the town, the Tidy Britain Group has proposed a clean-up weekend called "Just Bin It". In Hebden Bridge, this will be the weekend of 7th/8th April. Further details will be announced nearer the time.**



## A Sideways Look John Morrison

THE FOOT & MOUTH CRISIS IS BUT THE LATEST BROKEN LINK in an increasingly fragile food chain. As we lurch from one crisis to another, it seems that our cheap food will cost us dear. And not just us; future generations too will be paying for all our mistakes. E-Coli, GM, BSE, CJD: the whole alphabet soup of our livestock mismanagement, and our meddling with the building blocks of life.

After World War II the Holy Grail of food production was good, cheap, plentiful food for those who lived in a land fit for heroes. The motives were good, even if some practices became unacceptable. Cooping chickens up in battery cages. Confining veal calves in darkness to ensure pale meat. And, perhaps most cynical of all, forcing herbivorous animals to become not just carnivores... but cannibals. That's a sin of almost Biblical proportions; what on earth were we thinking of? Yes, some

of the indignities visited on animals in the name of producing good, cheap food should make us hang our heads in shame.

It's not as though we've succeeded in our aim. Good, cheap food is still a distant prospect - in that the good food isn't cheap, and the cheap food tends not to be very good. Worse, the gap between cheap and good is actually getting wider.

The supermarkets are hastening this process, by operating a two-tier system of selling processed foodstuffs. On the one hand they have their cheap 'n' cheerful, no-frills, budget brands (24 beef burgers for 99p anyone?). On the other hand they sell sleek, seductive, over-packaged 'premium' products. By rolling an undistinguished cut of meat in peppercorns, or marinating it in 'Indian' sauce, the supermarkets can charge double the price. Imagine - trying to reduce the cuisine of a whole subconti-

nent to a single glutinous, glow-in-the-dark sauce. What would 'English' sauce be, I wonder? Thin gravy, probably. And what will the supermarkets think of next? Separate checkout tills for paupers, with their fluffy white bread and their loss-leader tins of baked beans?

Iceland, the frozen food stores, tried to gain ground on their competitors by ensuring that all their produce was both organic and GM-free. The result, perhaps predictably, was a drop in profits. What sector of the market were they aiming at? After all, the people who want organic produce are not the same folk who like their food frozen solid and shaped like cartoon characters.

It's unsettling to see food production divide up into good quality for the wealthy and fastidious, and cheap rubbish for those whose budgets do not stretch so far. But that's the way it seems to be going. We know what's in those 99p burgers, don't we? It's just something we'd prefer not to think about.

Value-added foods are taking over the freezers and cook-chill cabinet. Instead of searching for expensive new taste sensations, to titillate our jaded palates, maybe it's time to stop bombarding over-processed ready meals with microwaves and get back to some proper cooking. What were they called, those things we used to throw into a casserole, before bunging it in the oven for a couple of hours? Oh yes, I remember now: they were called 'ingredients'...