

In the Spirit of Luther Burbank

Michigan's Oikos Tree Crops

by Paul W. Keiser

At the age of 5, Ken Asmus picked a May apple and ate it. He planted the seeds under honeysuckle plants in the backyard and they grew. He also collected bugs and insects. As a teenager, he went north to be alone in the forest. Rudolf Steiner said that the “wonder years” are from birth through age 7, a formative period. Rachel Carson said that if she could encourage the good fairy who oversees christenings of children, she would have each human as they grow up retain their sense of wonder.

Several miles southwest of Kalamazoo, Michigan, lies one of the most biodiverse farms on Earth. There are so many different kinds of plants that it's clear proprietor Ken Asmus has the type of intensity possessed by Thomas Edison, John Muir, Jane Goodall, Wangari Maathai and José Bové. In fact, Ken Asmus reminds this writer of America's plant saint, Luther Burbank.

Oikos Tree Crops is the name of Asmus's business — in Greek, an Indo-European kin language to English, *oikos* (English form, *ecos*) means “house.” Ken Asmus is possessed not merely with ecological thinking/feeling — a rare faculty in this specialized culture — he also takes repeated, sustained action, action being the purpose of possessing knowledge. Everything is connected. This is not just an ideal.

PEOPLE

Ken Asmus was born and grew up in Saginaw. He attended Western Michigan University and graduated in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. While there he took all ecology courses that were offered. Ken's father operated two Christmas tree farms (although this was not his Dad's full-time job), one of 400 acres and the other 140 acres. During Ken's summers when he was not in school, he worked with his father on the farms. After university, Ken worked as a



In his office/workshop, Ken Asmus holds Shagbark hickory nuts/seeds.

manager of a wholesale nursery and later managed a store at Kalamazoo's largest retail nursery, where his interests in plant ecology and horticulture led him to his own farm and plant breeding.

Ken made an appearance on *The Martha Stewart Show* on television two years ago, and Oikos Tree Crops has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Chicago Tribune*, *American Gardener*, *Midwest Living* and other publications.

Ken's wife, Mary Jo, is a professional who coaches business executives for a living. She and Ken have two daughters, Brianna (25 years) and Kelly (21). Brianna is teaching English at a university near Tokyo, Japan, and Kelly is learning occupational therapy at Ken's alma mater, WMU. Both of the young women work part-time on the farm when they are home.

Oikos' busiest time of year is in the spring, when plants, seeds and other products are being purchased. Ken hires three local students during this period to assist with picking, digging, packing, and shipping. Over the years, Ken has been

amazed to find that most youth cannot even use a shovel!

LAND & THE FARM'S DEVELOPMENT

In 1980, an open, hilly pasture with thin, sandy topsoils was purchased (reminiscent of Aldo Leopold's Wisconsin farm). There were no trees and no equipment, but Ken Asmus had a vision: his arboretum.

Hard work built this tree farm, plus the importation of materials to rebuild the soil. Spent mushroom compost and grape pulp were brought in, the latter from Welch's Grape Juice Co., three miles away. Ken let the grape pulp sit in piles to partially degrade, wherein fungi, sowbugs and other organisms find habitat. Later, the piles were spread by bulldozing. The increased carbonaceous topsoil allowed for more lush and abundant plant growth and for water retention and percolation.

Today, Ken says that Oikos has over 500 types of trees nestled across the land with other species of plants he is cultivating. A continuous stream of creativity emanates from this man, similar to John

“Johnny Appleseed” Chapman or John James Audubon, reminding this writer of David Fairchild’s book *The World Was My Garden: Travels of a Plant Explorer*. Ken has focused on combining wild plants with the domestic, which corporate-government-academic agriculture has been exploiting, corrupting, and depleting for decades. During the Nixon administration, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz cursed America’s farmers with the national commandment to “get bigger, get more efficient, or get out” of farming. This was the call to plow from property line to property line, thus wiping out hedgerows, shelterbelts, grass waterways and other erosion preventers and biodiverse habitats. Ken Asmus, with his “Rescue Ecology” and plant collecting from all over the world and breeding programs, has been capturing the nutrition, hardiness and adaptability of wild plants for the beneficial use of present and future generations, both human and non-human.

WEEDS

In his own words, here is how Ken views weeds: “Every now and then you read something that sounds too absurd to be real. Such is the case with plants in the news. Science goes out the window, replaced by the stereotypical ‘evil plant theory.’ Such is the case for red maple, black locust, purple loosestrife, garlic mustard, autumn olive, red cedar, and numerous other native and non-native plants. Since nature has no scientific definition, *weed* has become a flexible term to justify the removal of certain plants that are considered harmful to the environment. Such was the case with cattails a few years ago when wetland managers said the dense monoculture of cattails were sucking up the water in our wetlands. I remember hearing about this in the late 1970s. Who comes up with this stuff? Now I’m hearing that many groups have assembled with herbicides and weed pullers going out into natural areas to ‘make the environment whole again.’ Is this real? If you look at the history of this type of philosophy, it always ends in disaster. The idea that balance can be achieved by removal of a plant or animal can work in agriculture, but it has rather limited effects and is usually temporary. Nature has other plans. Ecological inte-



Ken shows off some robust quince seedlings in the greenhouse.

gration makes it possible for all living organisms, no matter what their origin, to eventually create a more diverse and evolutionary ecosystem. Plants are not disease — they are the *cure*. They are the healers. Plants are not green protoplasm taking up space where ‘more desirable’ plants could be growing. Over 20 different species of native animals use purple loosestrife at some point in their life cycle. Will someone tell me again why I need to fear this ‘devil plant’? In a recent scientific study, native green ash, red maple and black walnut grew up to twice as fast if their root zone was in contact with autumn olive. I’m taking my cue from nature. Embrace all life. Will you?”

Ken offers this soulful invitation to take a stand in an age when money forces can destroy anything on Earth: land, water, air. Experiencing the ecological, agricultural and social degradation of the Salem River Watershed in southwestern New Jersey for seven decades, this writer watched the wetland “weed” phragmites occupy disturbed wet areas; and also observed deer, red-winged blackbirds and other wildlife find shelter in the beautiful grasses. Isn’t purple loosestrife magnificent?

Like Johnny Appleseed, who went down the Ohio River to plant apple seeds and create orchards among the

settlers, Ken plants most trees from seeds — nature’s way!

VARIETIES

Oikos Tree Crops’ beautiful catalog contains color photos and descriptions of an incredible 271 plants for sale. Categories include: Edible Native Fruits, Fruiting Plants for Wildlife, Fruiting Plants for People, Chestnuts (12 varieties), Hazelnuts (5), Walnuts (12), Pecan and Hickory (7) Oaks (20) Hybrid Oaks (26), Rare, Unusual and Hard-to-Find Plants (55), Vegetables, Tubers and Roots, Flowering Perennials and Palms.

This man has coaxed Southern trees such as live oak, pecans and palms into Michigan. We tasted his delicious paw paw and persimmon fruits, which remind us of tropical mangoes and papayas. He has potato seed stocks from Peru in which he is trying to develop enough hardiness to survive winter in the soil. There is information on other topics in Oikos’ botanical handbook catalog.

CULTURE PROBLEMS

Deer and squirrels can cause problems with the plant crops, says Ken, who notes that they were especially troublesome in 2007. He uses repellents such as hot pepper spray (warning: keep out of

the eyes!) and Ro-Pel (which is not recommended for use on edible crops).

One year in the greenhouse, grasshoppers were a problem. For greenhouse pest control, Ken uses pyrethrum and neem. Biologically, lacewings have come and fed on aphids (note: the lacewing's larval stage is aquatic, so streams must be healthy), plus toads and frogs enter the greenhouse and search for insect intruders.

MARKETING

Ken recommends attending non-horticultural marketing conferences. He frankly believes that over the last 60 years, the industrial agricultural sectors have promoted one production and marketing system after another which later have proven to be disasters.

The Oikos catalog includes "Growing Supplies" listed for sale. "Soilicious" is an organic fertilizer available for sale with plant purchase, to get the plants off to a great start. It contains Azomite (75 elements) and other plant, mineral and microbial substances.

Orders are shipped all over the world. Regionally, Ken encourages customers to pick up products at the farm, on a pre-order basis.

Ken only gives farm tours by appointment, and not in the busy springtime.

AFFILIATIONS & PHILOSOPHY

To name a few, Ken belongs to the Northern Nut Growers Association, International Oak Society, International

Dendrological Association and Michigan Seedling Association.

Future generations, both human and non-human, are included in the vision of Ken Asmus' work.

He is starting a company that will market "new, wild edible fruits, nuts and tubers." Other growers will join him in this enterprise, but he must approve the organic growing methods that each will use in this cooperative relationship.

Ken considers trees that have wild characteristics to be adaptable, pest and disease resistant and he notes that they carry vital nutrient spectrums. These qualities will be critically needed in the future as the industrial monocultures of agribusiness fail.

Endangered plants are included whenever possible. If there are laws preventing this, he develops hybrids of the species or variety to fill ecological plant niches.

Oikos' shop has a composting toilet, which every person who has ecological concerns should consider installing and using. Without such recycling, there is no "sustainability!"

Ken considers his customers to be "Oikosians."

Domesticated wild plants retain wildness, flavor and nutrition. Principles include growing ecologically harmonious native or so-called non-native plants that are superior to domestic monocultures.

As Henry David Thoreau said, "In wildness is the salvation of the world!" and at Oikos Tree Crops, Ken Asmus

makes it his mission to nurture the wild.

Paul and Nancy Jones Keiser keep breeding flocks of sheep, chickens and ducks, raise chemical-free vegetables and melons and sell Fertrell organic fertilizers and animal feed supplements. They can be contacted at 2757 Hayes, Marne, Michigan 49435, phone 616-677-6176.

Ken Asmus can be reached at Oikos Tree Crops, P.O. Box 19425, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49019, phone 269-624-6233, website www.oikostreecrops.com.

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