Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated weekly one-hour radio program and Podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. This show is rebroadcast across the country on stations, which include among others, CHES Erin, Ontario and CKDU Halifax, Nova Scotia. I'm Jon Steinman your host for the next hour.

During the most recent broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, we launched a new multi-part series titled, A Primer on Pesticide Propaganda. The series will continue in the coming weeks, but there were a few themes touched on throughout that broadcast that helped inspire the collection of individuals who will be lending their voice to today's show.

Perhaps of greatest relevance in tying the Pesticide series to today is recognizing how the very ideology that drives the conventional food system of which most of us are all a part, is one that is very a much a product of science. Sharing his thoughts on this, we'll listen to well-known literary figure Wendell Berry.

Also lending their voice will be Michael Pollan – author of such well-known titles as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and his most recent, *In Defense of Food*. We'll listen in on a talk given by Michael in 2007 when he presented his unique and provocative thoughts on an alternative approach to viewing nature and our food.

And rounding off the show, we'll listen in on an episode of Peak Moment Television, a weekly broadcast produced in Nevada County, California and hosted by Janaia Donaldson. On this episode, Janaia visits with Judy Alexander in Port Townsend, Washington. Judy has been experimenting with growing as much food as she possibly can around her home, and this tour of her garden will present an on-the-ground example of how by engaging in such localized food production, one can begin to witness a very alternative ideology to how our food is produced – that instead of relying on science and its reductionist and limiting theories, the wisdom of natural systems is instead allowed to guide what seems as a far more responsible approach to sourcing our sustenance.

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JS: As was addressed during part I of our recent series on chemical agriculture, the adoption of such an agricultural system is quite the substantial illustration of how our understanding of nature, and of how our food is grown, has suffered under the heavy hand of a strong and vested faith in scientific theory. Those who choose alternative methods of farming would suggest that instead of creating deeper understanding of our surroundings, these chemical scientific farming systems have done the very opposite and instead disconnected us from the rhythms of nature.

Born in 1934 in Kentucky, poet and author Wendell Berry was raised in a farming family and continued the farming tradition. Among his many published works, in the 1970s and 1980s he edited and wrote for the Rodale Press including their publications Organic Gardening and Farming and The New Farm.

In 1999 Berry was invited to read some of his poetry in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And in this first one, and certainly with tongue in cheek, he thanks the wonders of science, and in doing so, captures what can clearly be understood of our scientific approach to meeting our needs as a rather self-serving relationship.

Wendell Berry: This is poem called "Longer."

Experts are bragging now of our longevity. Stand up and take a bow, experts, for we are pleased as usual. You have by miracles of science prolonged our life to see, catastrophes of science we'd otherwise have missed. How sad to be unkissed by one's posterity, ten generations hence. Each war we'll live to see will be the best so far. We'll live life without end and bury every friend less lucky than ourselves. And meanwhile, for our good we'll take expensive pills and eat unseasoned food, uncomforted by fat, with no dessert, no cream. We'll live past memory, our own or anybody's. Go down in history without our teeth or hair, commemorating time by notches in our chair. At last life will extend into the nursing home. We'll breathe a long time there, the television on. Too weak to turn it off, but still alive. Please pass the biscuits, ham and eggs, and pass the gravy please. Cream in my coffee? Yes. And now that we have it you got a cigarette?

JS: In this next segment from Wendell Berry's talk, he reads from a piece addressing the impacts of reductionist science on the passing of agricultural knowledge from generation to generation. In this case, his comments nicely tie in to another piece of our most recent broadcast, and that is the seeming misguided segmenting of the plants that grow around us. As was raised on that broadcast, defining a plant as a weed has painted a pretty negative image of that plant, yet when viewing that plant for what it really is, it becomes clear how useful and functional that plant really can be. Dandelions, Lamb's quarters, Burdock, all are considered weeds by conventional standards, yet all are highly more nutritious than most of the foods now making up the North American diet. Wendell Berry would suggest that this is a product of our scientific approach to growing food, and the greatest travesty of such an approach is what he considers to be the destruction of knowledge.

WB: In speaking of the reductionism of modern science, we should not forget that the primary reduction is in the assumption that human experience or human meaning can be adequately represented in any human language. This assumption is false. To show what I mean, I will give the example that is most immediate to my mind.

My grandson, who is four years old, is now following his father and me over the same countryside that I followed my father and grandfather over. When his time comes my grandson will choose as he must, but so far we all have been farmers. I know from my grandfather that when he was a child he too followed his father in this way, hearing and seeing, not knowing yet that the most essential part of his education had begun. And so in this familiar spectacle of a small boy tagging along behind his father across the fields, we're part of a long procession five generations of which I have seen. Issuing out of generations lost to memory, going back for all I know across previous landscapes and the whole history of farming.

Modern humans tend to believe that whatever is known can be recorded in books, or on tapes, or on computer disks, and then again learned by those artificial means. But it is increasingly plain to me that the meaning, the cultural significance, even the practical value of this sort of family procession across a landscape can be known but not told. These things, though they have a public value, do not have a public meaning. They are too specific to a particular place and history. This is exactly the tragedy in the modern displacement of people and cultures.

That such things can be known but not told can be shown by answering a simple question, "Who knows the meaning, the cultural significance, and the practical value of this rural family's generational procession across its native landscape?" The answer is not so simple as the question. No one person ever will know all the answer. My grandson certainly does not know it, and my son does not though he has positioned himself to learn some of it should he be so blessed. I am the one who, to some extent, knows, though I know also that I cannot tell it to anyone living.

I am in the middle now, between my grandfather and my father who are alive in my memory, and my son and my grandson who are alive in my sight. If my son, after 30 more years have passed has the good pleasure of seeing his own child and grandchild in that procession, then he will know something like what I now know. This living procession through time in a place *is* the record by which such knowledge survives and is conveyed. When the procession ends, so does the knowledge.

JS: And that was poet and author Wendell Berry. The next person lending their voice to today's show is a familiar one on Deconstructing Dinner, and that is Michael Pollan. Michael is the author of well-known titles *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*. In September 2006, we listened to Michael speak about his book *The Botany of Desire*, and in March 2007, he shared similar thoughts to an audience in Monterey, California, at the TED Conference – an annual event showcasing though-provoking speakers from around the world. Pollan's unique views on the human relationship with

our surrounding plants and animals presents quite the polar opposite to the relationship that dominates our food system. And here's Michael Pollan.

Michael Pollan: It's a simple idea about nature, and I want to say a word for nature because we haven't talked that much about it the last couple of days. I want to say a word for the soil and the bees, the plants and the animals, and tell you about a tool, a very simple tool that I have found. Although it's really nothing more than a literary conceit, it's not a technology, is very powerful for I think, changing our relationship to the natural world and to the other species on whom we depend.

That tool is very simply, as Chris suggested, looking at us and the world from the plant's or animal's point of view. It's not my idea, other peoples have hit on it, but I've tried to take it to some new places. Let me tell you where I got it. Like a lot of my ideas, like a lot of the tools I use, I found it in the garden. I'm a very devoted gardener, and there was a day about seven years ago, I was planting potatoes, it was the first week of May, this is New England when the apple trees are just vibrating with bloom. They're just white clouds above. I was here planting my chunks, cutting up potatoes and planting it, and the bees were working on this tree. Bumble bees just making this thing vibrate. One of the things I really like about gardening is that it doesn't take all your concentration. You really can't get hurt—it's not like woodworking—and you have plenty of mental space for speculation.

And the question I asked myself that afternoon in the garden, working alongside that bumblebee, was, What did I and that bumblebee have in common? How was our role in this garden similar and different? I realized that we actually had quite a bit in common: both of us were disseminating the genes of one species and not another. Both of us probably, if I can imagine the bee's point of view, thought we were calling the shots. I had decided what kind of potato I wanted to plant. I had picked my Yukon Gold or Yellow Fin or whatever it was, and I had summoned those genes from a seed catalogue across the country, brought it and I was planting it. That bee no doubt assumed that it had decided I'm going for that apple tree, I'm going for that blossom, I'm going to get the nectar, and I'm going to leave.

We have a grammar that suggests that's who we are. That we are sovereign subjects in nature—the bee as well as me. I plant the potatoes, I weed the garden, I domesticate the species, but that day it occurred to me, what if that grammar is nothing more than a self-serving conceit? Because of course the bee thinks he's in charge, or she's in charge, but we know better; we know that what's going on between the bee and that flower is that bee has been cleverly manipulated by that flower. And when I say manipulated, I'm talking about in a Darwinian sense, right? It has evolved a very specific set of traits, colours, scent, flavour, pattern, that has lured that bee in, and the bee has been cleverly fooled into taking the nectar and also picking up some powder on its leg and going off to the next blossom. The bee is not calling the shots. I realized then, I wasn't either. I had been seduced by that potato and not another into planting and spreading its genes, giving it a little more habitat. And that's when I got the idea, which was, What would happen if we looked at us from the point of view of these other species who are working on us?

Agriculture suddenly appeared to me, not as an invention, not as a human technology, but as a co-evolutionary development in which a group of very clever species, mostly edible grasses, had exploited us, figured out how to get us to basically deforest the world—the competition of grasses, right? - and suddenly everything looked different. Suddenly mowing the lawn that day was a completely different experience. I had thought, always, and in fact written this in my first book (it was a book about gardening) that lawns were nature under culture's boot, that they were totalitarian landscapes, and that when we mowed them we were cruelly suppressing this species and never letting it set seed or die or have sex. And that's what the lawn was. But then I realized, No. This is exactly what the grasses want us to do. I'm a dupe. I'm a dupe of the lawns whose goal in life is to out compete the trees, who they compete with for sunlight. And so by getting us to mow the lawn, we keep the trees from coming back, which in New England happens very very quickly.

So I started looking at things this was and wrote a whole book about it called *The Botany of Desire*. I realized that in the same way you can look at a flower and deduce all sorts of interesting things about the taste and the desires of bees—that they like sweetness, that they like this colour and not that colour, that they like symmetry—what could we find out about ourselves by doing the same thing? That a certain kind of potato, a certain kind of drug, a Sativa, Indica, Cannabis cross has something to say about us, and that wouldn't this be an interesting way to look at the world?

Now the test of any idea, I said it was a literary conceit, is what does it get us? When you're talking about nature, which is really my subject as a writer, does it meet the Aldo Leopold test, which is, "Does it make us better citizens of the biotic community?" Get us to do things that leads to the support and perpetuation of the biota, rather than its destruction? I would submit that this idea does this.

Let me go through what you gain when you look at the world this way, besides some entertaining insights about human desire. As an intellectual matter, looking at the world from other species' points of view helps us deal with this weird anomaly, which is intellectually – and this is in the realm of intellectual history – which is that we have this Darwinian revolution 150 years ago in which thanks to Darwin we figured out that we are just one species among many; evolution is working on us the same way it's working on all the others; we are acted upon as well as acting; we are really *in* the fabric of life.

But the weird thing is we have not absorbed this lesson 150 years later. None of us, really, believes this. We are still Cartesians, the children of Descartes who believed that subjectivity, consciousness, sets us apart. That the world is divided into subjects and objects, that there is nature on one side and culture on another. As soon as you start seeing things from the plants' point of view or the animals' point of view, you realize that the real literary conceit is *that*. Is the idea that nature is opposed to culture; the idea that consciousness is everything. And that's another very important thing it does. Looking at the world from other species' point of view is a cure for the disease of human self-importance. You suddenly realize that consciousness, which we value and we consider the crowning achievement of nature, human consciousness, is really just another set of

tools for getting along in the world. It's kind of natural that we would think that it was the best tool, but you know there's a comedian who said, "Who's telling me that consciousness is so good and so important? Well, consciousness." So when you look at the plants, you realize that there are other tools and they are just as interesting.

I'll give you two examples, also from the garden. Lima beans. You know what a lima bean does when it's attacked by spider mites? It releases this volatile chemical that goes out into the world and summons another species of mite that comes in and attacks the spider mite, defending the lima bean. So what plants have, while we have consciousness, tool-making, language, they have bio-chemistry. They have perfected that the a degree far beyond what we can imagine. Their complexity, their sophistication, is something to really marvel at. I think it's really the scandal of the human genome project. We went into it thinking 40 or 50,000 human genes; we came out with only 23,000. Just to give you a grounds for comparison: rice, 35,000 genes. So who's the more sophisticated species? Well we're all equally sophisticated. We've been evolving just as long, just along different paths. So the cure for self-importance, a way to sort of make us feel the Darwinian idea, and that's really what I do as a writer, as a story-teller, is try to make people feel what we know, and tell stories that actually help us think ecologically.

Now the other use of this is practical. I'm going to take you to a farm right now. As I used this idea to develop my understanding of the food system, what I learned in fact is that we are all, now, being manipulated by corn. The talk you heard about ethanol earlier today, to me, is the final triumph of corn over good sense. It is part of corn's scheme for world domination. And you will see, the amount of corn planted this year will be up dramatically from last year, and there will be that much more habitat because we've decided ethanol is going to help us.

So it helped me understand industrial agriculture, which of course is a Cartesian system. It's based on this idea that we bend other species to our will and that we are in charge and that we create these factories and we have these technological inputs and we get the food out of it or the fuel or whatever we want. Let me take you to a very different kind of farm. This is farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. I went looking for a farm where these ideas about looking at things from the species' point of view are actually implemented. And I found it in a man, the farmer's name is Joel Salatin, and I spent a week as an apprentice on his farm. I took away from this some of the most hopeful news about our relationship to nature that I've ever come across in 25 years of writing about nature, and that is this.

The farm is called Polyface. The idea is that he's got six different species of animals, as well as some plants, growing in this very elaborate, symbiotic arrangement. It's permaculture, for those of you who know a little bit about this, such that the cows and the pigs and the sheep and the turkeys and the (what else does he have?), all the six different species, rabbits actually, are all performing ecological services for each other such that the manure for one is the lunch for the other, and they take care of pests for one another. It's a very elaborate and beautiful dance, but I'm going to just give you a close-up on one piece of it, and that is the relationship between his cattle and his chickens, his laying

hens. I'll show you how if you take this approach, what you get. And this is a lot more than growing food, as you'll see. This is a different way to think about nature, and a way to get away from the zero-sum notion, the Cartesian idea, that either nature's winning or we're winning, and that for us to get what we want nature is diminished.

So, one day cattle in a pen. The only technology involved here is this cheap electric fencing, relatively new, hooked up to a car battery, even I could carry a quarter acre paddock and set it up in 15 minutes. Cows graze one day, and they move. They graze everything down, intensive grazing. He waits three days and then we towed in something called the egg mobile. The egg mobile is a very rickety contraption; it looks like a prairie schooner made out of boards, but it houses 350 chickens. He tows this into the paddock three days later and opens the gangplank, turns them down, and 350 hens come streaming down the gangplank, clucking, gossiping as chickens will, and they make a beeline for the cow patties. And what they're doing is very interesting. They're digging through the cow patties for the maggots, the grub, the larvae of flies. The reason he's waited three days is because he knows that on the fourth day or the fifth day those larvae will hatch, and he'll have a huge fly problem. But he waits that long to grow them as big and juicy and tasty as he can because they are the chickens favorite form of protein. So the chickens do their little break dance, they're pushing around the manure to get at the grubs, and in the process they are spreading the manure out, a very useful and second ecosystem service. And third, while they're in this paddock they are of course defecating madly and their very nitrogenous manure is fertilizing this field. They then move out to the next one, and in the course of just a few weeks the grass just enters this blaze of growth, and within four or five weeks he can do it again. He can graze again, he can cut, he can bring in another species like the lambs, or he can make hay for the winter.

Now, I want you to just look really close up onto what's happened there. It's a very productive system and what I need to tell you is that on 100 acres he gets 40,000 pounds of beef, 30,000 pounds of pork, 25,000 dozen eggs, 20,000 broilers, 1000 turkeys, 1000 rabbits - an immense amount of food. You know you hear, "Can organic feed the world?" Well, look at how much food you can produce on 100 acres if you do this kind of, again, give each species what it wants. Let it realize its desires, its physiological distinctiveness. Put that in play.

But look at it from the point of view of the grass now. What happens to the grass when you do this? When a ruminant grazes grass, the grass is cut from this height to this height, and it immediately does something very interesting. Anyone of you who gardens knows that there is something called the root-shoot ratio, and plants need to keep the root mass in some rough balance with the leaf mass to be happy. So when they lose a lot of leaf mass, they shed roots. They kind of cauterize them, and the roots die. The species in the soil go to work basically chewing through those roots, decomposing them - the earthworms, the fungi, the bacteria - and the result is new soil. This is how soil is created. It's created from the bottom up. This is how the prairies were built: the relationship between bison and grasses. What I realized when I understood this, and if you ask Joel Salatin what he is he'll tell you he's not a chicken farmer, he's not a sheep farmer, he's not a cattle rancher - he's a grass farmer because grass is really the keystone species of

such a system. If you think about it, this completely contradicts the tragic idea of nature we hold in our heads, which is that for us to get what we want nature is diminished. More for us, less for nature. Here, all this food comes off this farm, and at the end of the season there is actually more soil, more fertility, and more biodiversity. That's a remarkably hopeful thing to do. There are a lot of farmers doing this today. This is well beyond organic agriculture, which is still a Cartesian system more or less. What it tells you is that if you begin to take account of other species, take account of the soil, that even with nothing more than this perspectival idea, because there is no technology involved here except for those fences, they're so cheap they could be all over Africa in no time. We can take the food we need from the earth and actually heal the earth in the process. This is a way to reanimate the world, and that's what's so exciting about this perspective. When we really begin to feel Darwin's insights in our bones, the things we can do with nothing more than these ideas, are something to be very hopeful about. Thank you very much.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner and that was Michael Pollan – the author of such recent books as *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *The Botany of Desire* and *In Defense of Food*. Michael was recorded speaking in Monterey, California in March 2007 at the TED Conference hosted annually. A conference that showcases thought-provoking speakers. A link to the video of Michael's talk will be linked to from the Deconstructing Dinner website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner

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JS: You're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated weekly one-hour radio program and Podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman, and today's broadcast has been inspired by the recent airing of our part I of a multi-part series titled, A Primer on Pesticide Propaganda. It was during that broadcast that the suggestion was raised that our dominant food system and its war on weeds in particular, is misguided. We've now heard from Wendell Berry speaking on the failure of our scientific approach to growing our food, and from Michael Pollan and his suggestion of an alternative philosophy on how to view our relationship with nature itself.

For the remainder of today's broadcast, we'll visit Port Townsend, Washington, where one woman has taken on the noble task of growing as much food as she possibly can around her home, and taken on such a project, Judy Alexander has discovered how effective it really can be to listen to nature and orchestrate its very rhythms. These segments were recorded for the weekly television show, Peak Moment, hosted by Janaia Donaldson. The show highlights practical solutions and responses towards a lower energy, more connected, and sustainable life. The shows look to answer the question, "How can we thrive, build stronger communities, and help one another in this time of transition?" The show airs on community-access television stations across the United States, and is archived on the website Global Public Media, a partner of Deconstructing Dinner and a project of the Post Carbon Institute.

Janaia Donaldson: Hi, welcome to Peak Moment. I'm Janaia Donaldson. I'm in Port Townsend, Washington, on a classic Pacific Northwest overcast day with my guest Judy Alexander.

Judy Alexander: Hi, Janaia.

JD: Who's this?

JA: Archie, the cat.

JD: We are in Judy's wonderful backyard. How did you get involved with adventuring in gardening and more? It's a lot more to it.

JA: Well, I've been a gardener for a lot of years, just sort of a hobbyist gardener. But what I'm doing now is definitely coming from a different place. I went to a real life-changing conference with Donella Meadows in the year 2000 I think it was on global sustainability. And it just opened my eyes to the predicament that the planet is facing with limited resources and growing population and peak oil and all that stuff you guys know about. This particular year was devoted to – I've been trying to get out of my car for the last six years and have been reducing my fossil fuel usage pretty significantly. But this year's goal…

JD: 2006.

JA: 2006 goal was to spend my summer seeing how much food I could grow on my property. I live in town. I live three miles from the center of town in the city limits, and I have a lot that's 75 x 125 and then part of my neighbour's yard. I've just planted something in every square inch of dirt I could find. It's partly to see how much I can provide for myself and my neighbourhood in the way of healthy food.

JD: That's a pretty major undertaking.

JA: At the end of the summer, I would agree with you Janaia. I didn't know what I was doing when I started. [both laugh]

JD: I mean you've got a prolific garden going here.

JA: I do.

JD: But it sounds to me that you took what Danella's workshop – you took something serious from that, that it wasn't just another set of good ideas.

JA: It was huge. It was like getting hit in the head with a 2x4. The second day of this five-day workshop, the entire ninety people were completely depressed, and it was mostly by Danella's information because it seemed so hopeless. Luckily, the remaining few days of the workshop were a little more inspiring and heartening to all of us. The two

of us that went there from Port Townsend came back with – we made a 20-year commitment to each other to change our town.

JD: Woah. Ok. Thank you.

JA: And then we met Dick and Jeanne Roy from the Northwest Earth Institute two weeks later, and we spent five years getting seventy Northwest Earth Institute courses started, just in Port Townsend.

JD: Which are about what? Tell us just a word or two about what those courses are.

JA: Voluntary simplicity, choices for sustainable living, deep ecology, discovering a sense of place, perspectives on the global economy, and there's one called Healthy Children, Healthy Planet; that's a new one. They're eight-week classes that you just get a group of people together, and it basically clarifies your understanding and your value-systems around the challenges to sustainability for us as a species.

JD: So you've spent a while here sharing and educating your neighbours in your town.

JA: Definitely, yeah.

JD: And still are, I think. And this year, the garden is doing a demonstration. Is that right?

JA: Yeah, it's turning out to be a demonstration, but I think that the garden was really more of a personal challenge, I think. I've been learning a lot of about genetically modified foods, and I've been seeing more and more how unhealthy the mainstream food supply is becoming, and I just didn't want to be part of it. I just felt like how am I going to take better care of myself? I always tend to take my own personal responsibility seriously. When I learn something I have to be my own experiment, and that's kind of what this was. How much food can I grow? And how successful can I be at it? How many people in the neighbourhood can also benefit from this produce? It's been kind of amazing to me. I kind of shocked myself, I mean the potato supply alone, this isn't even the entire harvest, this is probably about half the potato harvest right here.

JD: So we've got three huge boxes of potatoes. Show us one of these?

JA: I mean this thing is huge!

JD: That's a meal for three people.

JA: I know, except the truth is that I could probably eat it. It's not even the middle of August. I dug these a week or two ago, so like they were even harvestable before the end of the summer.

JD: I mean this is your winter supply, or a good part of it.

JA: Yeah, if they last, yeah. I mean if they store well.

JD: Part of what's in your thoughts here is, what is your land capable of, and your own energy, and your own resources? And with an eye to not just, I'm taking care of myself here, but….

JA: No, I want to inspire people. I want to show people what you can do. It's like, you can really provide for yourself in a way. It definitely takes time and it takes a certain amount of physical capacity and energy. I do spend time in my garden probably every day. But I don't want people to feel so dependent. We have a three-day food supply. One of my projects this last year involved going down to the Gulf Coast after Katrina, and I saw what happened to an entire community in the face of a disaster. We're a waterfront community; we could have a tsunami; we could have an earthquake; we could have our food supply cut off like that. In our county right now there's not even a three-day food supply if we get cut off from the mainstream. The Olympic Peninsula is the first to go from the power grid. We have all sorts of inherent vulnerabilities in our location that people kind of don't pay attention to.

JD: Well, because it means you have to change your life.

JA: Yeah.

JD: And our habits. We've become so accustomed to the petroleum rolling and the food coming in and the grid working, and so on.

JA: I want to go on record for saying how much fun this is. I don't think it would be as much fun if the earthquake happened last week and I was quick planting a garden because I didn't think I could survive and I was scared. But because I'm not scared, I'm challenging myself and it's completely fun and enjoyable for me to come up with all these potatoes [both laugh] with very little effort. The potato patch was a breeze; it was easy.

JD: That's great.

JA: So I just think that people need to realize that even though getting in your car and driving to Safeway is easy, there's a lot of joy they're missing out on by being that dependent on the mainstream supply.

JD: You probably have all kinds of stories about how you enjoyed eating these for the next while.

JA: Oh yeah.

JD: How many things did you try growing this year?

JA: Well I actually thought I had about 35 or 40 different crops, if you want to call them crops, or plants that I was growing, but I actually wrote them down and I have almost 60.

JD: 60?! That's astounding. I see you've got fruit trees, you've got some pear trees that were part of this land, yes?

JA: I've been adding them too. I moved in here five years ago and there was probably about six or seven fruit trees, but I have since planted an extra cherry tree and a peach tree, which I didn't know you could grow here.

JD: Wow, I didn't either.

JA: I have one peach on my peach tree this year. And I'm looking to see if I can find some space to put in a nut tree or two. I don't know if I'll be able to do that. But I have probably 10 or 12 fruit trees.

JD: What are the most out there kind of things that you've planted this year?

JA: Well I tried one celery plant, just to see how it would grow. It was actually red celery, which I had never seen before. I bought it at the co-op, a little celery start. I've planted leeks really successfully. My main production goal this summer was to grow very successful cauliflower, because I had failed in previous years.

JD: I see.

JA: I grew 17 really big, juicy yummy sweet cauliflower.

JD: Congratulations.

JA: Same number of cabbages. I had red and green cabbages, four kinds of onions, six kinds of lettuce.

JD: You got raspberries and carrots.

JA: Five kinds of berries, blueberries, carrots, beets, beans, corn…

JD: Squashes.

JA: Yeah, about five kinds of squash, tomatoes. All the usual and then some unusual stuff. Some more successful than others.

JD: And so probably out of that you've learned what you'll try next year or what you might put somewhere else next year or different variety or whatever.

End of television segment

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner. A quick reminder that you can learn more about today's broadcast and listen to previous shows by checking out our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner. We're currently taking a listen to the audio of a television broadcast of Peak Moment, a weekly show that airs on community access television in the United States and is hosted by Janaia Donaldson. On this episode that we're listening in on, Janaia is speaking with Judy Alexander, a home gardener in Port Townsend, Washington. Judy took it upon herself to become more in tune with the land that provides her with food. And to do so, chose to grow as much of her own food as possible. While the audio we're listening in on was intended for a T.V. audience, this next segment of the episode is quite ideal to listen to in audio format, as this next segment takes a tour of Judy's water catchment and irrigation system that she quite easily set up to supply her garden with rainwater. The benefit to listening to the tour of this system of hers in audio format is that while listening, I know for myself I was instead of viewing how Judy set hers up was picturing how such a system could work in and around my own home. And here's Peak Moment.

JD: What I'd love to do is take a little bit of a tour because you've got some ingenious things that you're doing here, and probably a place to start (since I look at the cloudy skies, like it's about rain and water and irrigation and that whole thing). So you've got a rainwater catchment system.

JA: Yeah, it's something that my brother has designed for me. It's not my – I'm not as physics oriented as he was. I purchased I think ten rain barrels, $25 a piece through the extension service, and I have four catching water off roofs of buildings, and the other six receive water from those four barrels.

JD: Let's go take a look.

JA: Ok. So this is one of my ten rain barrels. It's actually catching rain off of a little rental building in my front yard. The black marks on the rain barrel measure an eighth of an inch of rain. An eighth of an inch fills the barrel this high.

JD: An eighth of an inch to do this hole?

JA: Because of the size of the roof that it's catching off of. This is a 500 square foot building, so it would be half of that of the roof. And so with half an inch of rain this rain barrel fills, and that can happen in a couple of hours or definitely overnight with a steady rain. So the thing with rain barrels that was interesting for me to learn is that you get a lot of water with one rain storm, and you have to really be on top of the system. It's not the kind of thing you can go and take a two-month vacation and expect that it operates by itself. Gardens and rain barrel system definitely keep you on the property and make you pay attention and make you pay attention to the weather. It's all, for me, really good; it's very grounding.

JD: It's nice. So you collect the water here and then what happens? Because you've got it up above ground level…

JA: Right. The fact that it's raised up a little bit allows us to feed it to other garden barrels, and we'll go back and look at the ones in the garden that are not near a roof, which is great because the water is where I need it by the plants. But this rain barrel is hooked up to a fairly tricky little hose system with those shut-off valves. It's got a splitter with shot-off valves so you can actually fill this rain barrel from the tap and you can fill it from the roof. So in the dry season we fill it up from the regular water system, and that way you can keep track of how much water you're using. It's a contained amount; you can keep track of how many times you have to fill it.

JD: So when you turn the spigot on, where does it go?

JA: You turn that spigot on and with the splitter the way it is right now it goes into a hose that travels alongside the fence that goes up the side of my property and there's three rain barrels that this one barrel can fill. The first one is at the end of my raspberry patch. That soaker hose irrigates my raspberries. The next one is on the other side of the fence that goes to the potato patch where those potatoes came from. And the last barrel on the line was one that irrigated my kale and onion beds.

JD: So that's clever. It's just ding, ding, ding.

JA: Yeah, there's one long hose with sort of spitter hoses off, and then there's clips that you can clip on the end of the hoses. So you'd fill the first barrel and then you'd clip it and it goes to the second barrel, and you clip it and it goes to the third barrel. So I'm going to go ahead and turn this on and we're going to get the water going to the raspberry patch, and we'll go back and take a look and see what's going on there.

This rain barrel here is the one that catches the rain from the biggest section of my roof. So we had to figure out when we made this system how to connect this rain barrel up to multiple rain barrels in the back. Because in a single nights rain, this roof right up here could catch three or four times the amount of rain that would fit in the one barrel. That's why the pipe runs across the way to this other little gutter system and it goes down the gutter and feeds into the other rain barrels in the back garden.

The flag at the top is what I mentioned before; it measures how high the water level is in the rain barrel since you can't see through these. The white ones you can see the level of the water, but the black ones you can't. So the flags are on a little float system: they got up and they go down based on the level of the water. This is the freezer. The outside freezer.

JD: That's a good use for this.

JA: I didn't have room for it in my house, so it's outside and it holds the rain barrel up, which is very heavy. The sink has one faucet hooked up to the rain barrel. If I'm just washing off paintbrushes or something that just sloppy water, I'll just use the rain barrel

water. If I need clean water for something, I can use this faucet. That's a splitter over there between the hose for one and the sink for the other.

JD: Ok. And the water goes down to finish into a bucket.

JA: And the bucket gets dumped on the garden. As long as I know that the water is clean in the bucket, I put it on the garden. If I've done something sloppy in here, I'll take it and dump it on the driveway or something.

JD: I love it. This whole system, it didn't take a rocket scientist, and it's cute.

JA: It's funky, but it works. It definitely works. You know, the way that my rain barrels are set up, they definitely require some tweaking here and there. There's little things: you have to go get a new splitter, or you have to change the height, or you have to get a new hose. There's things you have to pay attention to, to keep it working, but it's totally fun.

JD: Yeah, and it works. So from over here at the other barrels, then you've got it hooked up to other hoses and stuff for your other beds?

JA: Yeah. Let's go look.

JD: Ok.

JA: So these are the back rain barrels that are fed off the big roof, and these two white ones are hooked together so they fill simultaneously. This one is hooked up to hoses that deliver water over to the corn patch with soaker hoses. This hose is buried underground and snakes around to the carrot row, the leek row, and the broccoli row, and where the cauliflower used to be before I ate it. If I just turn this on like that, that activates the drip system, which this year I only have hooked up in those three rows. Next year I'm going to have the drip system in as many places as I can get it because it's awesome. It's totally conservative of water usage. The rain barrels, just with this three-foot off the ground, has enough pressure to force the water up the drip tape and it delivers them the smallest amount of water needed to the root system of the plants and nothing else. Then if you mulch on top of the drip tape, then the mulch keeps the wetness in too. It's amazing. I haven't mulched the carrot row because the carrots needed to come up before…

JD: Yeah, little guys…

JA: But I will mulch them. The leeks and the broccoli and the cauliflower were mulched and it works really great.

JD: What's this contraption?

JA: This is great. I got all these five gallon buckets/jugs from the food co-op. They get tamari or olive oil in them. This delivers water to my fruit trees, which I don't have on

drip systems. Just by taking this little thing down here and filling the bucket in a matter of about thirty seconds…

JD: Clever!

JA: Just hook it back up.

JD: I want to take a look over there at the bees.

JA: Alright, we'll go look at the bees.

JD: Because that's something else you've got.

JA: Alright, we're in the middle of the bee airport here. There's no air traffic control as far as I can tell! They're coming and going a lot. Lots of them have a lot of pollen on their legs.

JD: It's gorgeous. This beautiful orange colour.

JA: Yeah, it's awesome.

JD: So how did you get into doing bees?

JA: Well that's an interesting story. I mentioned the Northwest Earth Institute courses, when we started talking? One time I was taking the course on choices for sustainable living and this one woman was doing an opening at the beginning of an evening. And her opening, which is like just a little story at the beginning of the class, was telling us about her father keeping bees. She had a bee box and she got done telling the whole story about how she loved the bees and all that stuff, and she said, "I'm going to give this bee box to Judy." And I went, "Really? You are?" So I inherited a hobby that night without realizing it. I have come to find out that keeping bees is not inexpensive. There is a fair amount of cost involved. It turns out that Marty, the woman who gave me the bee box, has been willing to be my mentor. She pretty much cares for the bees. I'm learning, but I just didn't want to invest in the whole suit and hat and all that stuff. She's got all the equipment, so she takes care of the bees for me. They definitely make my garden way more productive.

JD: I bet they do.

JA: The raspberry patch, they're just like in and out of that place all the time. I have learned to not fear them. I've only been stung once or twice in about three years of having bees. So they're not unfriendly. But boy are they busy.

JD: They're just happy as can be with the sun coming out.

JA: I've had, I think, ten swarms this summer.

JD: Wow.

JA: They go in that pear tree over there and this plum tree. One swarm was about this tall and about this big around. I don't know where all the bees came from. It was huge. I'd never seen such a big one before. So I keep getting more hives and then I've been giving them away. I know all the other people. They keep bees in town now because they've been coming in picking up the swarms and taking them.

JD: What I hear in this is a couple of things. One is, we know that bees are endangered partly from diseases and killer bees and so on. This is a wonderful, healthy sign that you've got here and that you're sharing with your community. Because that's part of the point about your garden here is that the bees are a shared project with people. So is your garden. One of the things I just realized is that you said that you have a lot and a half. Well the half of a lot, the one that we're in, belongs to your neighbours.

JA: It's my neighbours.

JD: I think the dramatic thing is to see what you've done in yours actually, and what you started with, what the rest of your neighbours yard is like. Let's take a look at that.

End of television segment.

JS: And this is Deconstructive Dinner. I'm your host Jon Steinman. In the latter part of today's broadcast we're listening to a tour of the home of Judy Alexander, a resident of Port Townsend, Washington, and a great example of how possible it can be to grow one's own sustenance right at home. And as we close out today's broadcast, this last segment explores some of the other tools that Judy uses on her property, with these being next in a line of relationships that she's formed with her natural surroundings.

JA: How about some cabbage? Want some cabbage leaves? These are my girls. I've got nine girls. I wanted a multi-racial flock. I have two black ones, a white one, two brown ones, and four what I call checkerboards. This is the third incarnation of the chicken coop. I had to move it in a few different configurations in my little area back here back here. Learning as I go; it's my experimentation model. The first place had me walking through their poop to collect the eggs, and I thought that wasn't such a good idea. So now I can go like ten steps outside my backdoor and just gather the eggs and I don't have to walk in the coop like this to get it.

JD: It's nice. You have a little box separately for that. That's great.

JA: I have a garbage hierarchy on my system here, where the paper garbage goes to the trash, like anybody else's house. Most of the organic food garbage goes to these guys, and they just process everything from melon rinds to everything leafy, greeny, seedy, breads and stuff like that. Then the lower echelon garbage, like the coffee grounds and

the tea bags, the worms get that. So we'll go look at the worm bin in a minute. I like to send as little of my refuse to the garbage, to the curb.

JD: Well you're following the principle in nature that there is no such thing as waste; it just feeds the next thing in the process. That's what you're doing here.

JA: I totally enjoy bringing my clients out to the chicken coop when a chicken has just laid an egg and have them gather the warm egg fresh out of the chicken. Kids in particular are just awed by it; they've never seen it.

JD: Well if you think about this, for a kid who has seen cartons of eggs coming from the supermarket, these are live animals and they're warm and it's a miracle.

JA: Yeah, I even had one of my clients give me a chicken in trade for services. It's kind of like the old stories of the country doctor.

JD: Well you know, the barter economy. We're probably going to do more and more of that in the times to come.

JA: I love waking up to the sound of these guys clucking away in the morning, waiting for me to come and let them out of their coop. I do have to be a little bit mindful of – we have raccoons even though this is in the city limits. There's raccoons and deer and all sorts of other kinds of wildlife that come through here, so I have to kind of listen for the distress signal. The chickens get all revved up when there's a raccoon anywhere close. Because the trees are overhead – the raccoons can actually be sitting in these trees and not still get to the chickens when they're cooped up at night. But they can sense that something dangerous is nearby. I know what it sounds like when that's the case. I actually ran out of my house one night, or afternoon actually, full mid-afternoon sun, barefoot to one of these raccoons with one of these chickens in its mouth, and I screamed and it dropped the chicken and scrambled out of the yard, and the chicken was fine. Part of the learning for me of growing so many plants and keeping animals and chickens, and doing the worm bin, and the compost heap, all this stuff is really seeing the whole cycle of nature and life and food. It's just taught me so much about how things take care of themselves, really. We mess with it a lot with the way we try to get rid of stuff. Chickens just know what to do with all this stuff. They teach me so much.

JD: Well let's go take a look at the worms.

JA: Alrighty. So Janaia, we're standing up above the last few months of my food garbage right now [both laugh]. At least the stuff the chickens don't eat: the remains of my teabags and coffee grounds and sort of non-chicken garbage for the last few months.

JD: Not much really.

JA: Well actually I kind of divided it. This half is closer to the finished product of worm castings, and this is really quite rich in nutrients and feeds back into the soil for growing purposes. You were remarking earlier about the newspaper…

JD: Yeah, the newspaper, I wouldn't have expected in the compost here.

JA: Some worm-keepers, I don't know what you'd call them, some vermiculturalists or whatever, put in corrugated cardboard, books, different things. My favorite story is that I had a bunch of old client confidential files that I needed to get rid of a few years ago and I didn't have a paper shredder and didn't know somebody who had a paper shredder, so I took them out here and tore them up! After about three months, my worms turned my confidential files into great compost for my garden. I felt like I had this secret, you know?

JD: You did. And you can just go over to your carrots and beets and say, "Thank you former client for feeding me."

JA: I think they would feel totally secure knowing that's how I took care of their secret information.

JD: So there are a lot of worms in here. Little guys, big guys.

JA: They tend to hang out in little enclaves I noticed.

JD: Little guy, big guy together.

JA: Sometimes it seems like they work kind of slow and then….

JD: Smells nice.

JA: Is it rich?

JD: Yeah, it's just that nice clean, woodsy, earthy kind of fragrance. Nothing smelly or ucky at all. Well you do the whole cycle, don't you? We started from sun and rain to…

JA: It's kind of coming together for me in my mind. After I've kept the bees for a while and done the worms for a while and worked out the rain barrel system, tweaks and stuff, it's really feeling more like a working, full circle thing.

JD: Circles and circles. The whole life thing.

JA: It's real satisfying.

JD: Thank you. This has been a great tour.

JA: I'm really glad you enjoyed it. I grew up in a suburb and I feel like my heart is on the farm, even though this isn't a farm. I really love being close to the earth like this. I would recommend it to anybody.

JD: Thank you.

JA: Thank you, Janaia.

JS: And that was the audio of an episode of Peak Moment, a weekly television series produced in Nevada County, California, and airing on community-access television throughout the United States. Hosted by Janaia Donaldson, the program looks to answer the question, "How can we thrive, build stronger communities, and help one another in this time of transition?" The time of transition being referred to here is the one in which all of our resources have reached their peak of supply and of use. And one during which how we use and produce our energy is indeed in need of a rethink. In the episode we heard today, Judy Alexander of Port Townsend, Washington, developed a far more localized and lower impact system of sourcing her human energy, her food. Located on the Deconstructing Dinner website will be a link of the video version of this episode, and that website is cjly.net/deconstructingdinner. You can also visit the website for Peak Moment at peakmoment.tv

ending theme

JS: And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British-Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host, Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant, John Ryan.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson area resident, Adham Shaikh.

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