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Interview with Sue Coppard, founder of the WWOOF

Sue Coppard is founder of WWOOF, a worldwide network that serves as a conduit linking volunteers with organic farms. In return for volunteer help, WWOOF hosts offer volunteers food, accommodation and opportunities to learn about organic lifestyles. Created in 1971 and one of the world's first voluntourism organizations, WWOOF was borne out of Sue's desire to periodically escape her life as a London secretary and spend time in the countryside.



Today WWOOF is a global movement, with over 50,000 volunteers working on 7,000-plus host farms in more than 100 countries. I first learned about WWOOF from one of its host members and another "Peer to Pier" subject, Claudia Scholler, proprietor of Cortijo El Saltador, a traditional Andalucian farmhouse in the foothills of Spain's Sierra Alhamilla. In getting acquainted with Sue I learned not only a great deal about organic practices but also got an education on a wide range of other areas—from the basic tenet of anthroposophical philosophy to the potentially huge and positive impact of simply following your own heart, and the wisdom of not needing to have all the answers before embarking on a new endeavor. Not to mention, I remembered all my own reasons for seeking adventure and being out-of-doors! I hope you enjoy this conversation with Sue.

Meg: Can you explain what WWOOF is?

Sue: WWOOF is an acronym standing for

World Wide Opportunities On Organic Farms. It is a cooperative network, now worldwide, which offers members the opportunity to stay as working guests on a wide variety of organic farms, smallholdings, gardens and other rural enterprises. No money changes hands, it's an exchange. In return for your help on the land and with other tasks you receive bed and board, and a lot more besides: farming and agricultural experience – even training to change to a rural life; contact with nature and animals; access to beautiful countryside; good physical exercise; learning a host of other skills such as bread making, weaving, cheese making, bee keeping, cider making, or running a farmers' market stall; friendships with people from many different cultures and nationalities; and the chance to experience entirely different ways of life, regions, or even continents. The world is your oyster! Alternatively, you could visit the same WWOOF place regularly and get to know your own region throughout the seasons – leaving a considerably lighter carbon footprint! On top of all this, you have the satisfaction of knowing you are helping the stalwart but not overwhelmingly-rewarded people who make up the Organic Movement around the world – which will surely be the salvation of the planet. I wish to acknowledge the immensely hard and inspired work by so many WWOOF organisers which are responsible for WWOOF's extraordinary growth. Many countries now have their own WWOOF organization, all quite different as each is independently self-governing and has evolved in its own individual way. Those WWOOF Hosts in a country without a WWOOF organization belong to WWOOF Independents, an internet network.



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Meg: Can you describe what led up to WWOOF's creation?

Sue: In 1971 when I started WWOOF I was secretary to the Textile Research Unit at the Royal College of Art in London. I loved London and my life was interesting and fun, but I did miss the countryside. When I was a kid my brother and I used to stay on my cousin's farm where we ran wild – exploring the woods, picking flowers, playing by the stream, tree climbing, watching the animals, collecting the eggs and sliding down hay stacks in the barn. Bliss! However, by 1971 I had no friends or family living in the country – no 'country seat' where I could invite myself to stay. Watching from my window the leaves bowl along the London pavement one sunny, windy day, I just knew I had to find a way back. I wondered whether I could find a farm which would let me stay? Perhaps in return for my help with their work? But maybe it would be lonely without companions to chat to. I wondered whether anyone else would like to do the same thing? I'd just heard of organic farms while doing some administrative work for 'RESURGENCE' magazine and it occurred to me—correctly—that such places might be more inclined to use unskilled labor than a big, commercial farm. So I set about finding a place to try out the idea. A couple of contacts (Andrew Singer, who published the booklet 'Making Communes', and Michael Allaby, who edited 'SPAN', a journal published by the Soil Association, Britain's leading organization promoting organic farming) put me in touch with Emerson College, which teaches Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical philosophy {Editor's Note: A system of beliefs and practices that maintain that through training and personal discipline one can attain experience of the spiritual world.} Emerson College is in deepest Sussex, where students study biodynamic agriculture—organic agriculture with additional homeopathic and planetary influences. The three farm managers were distinctly dubious when I was introduced to them—clearly thinking 'what use could townies be?' However, John Davy, the very helpful vice-principal at Emerson (and also science correspondent to the 'Observer'), leaned on them gently and they had no choice but to agree to a trial weekend. Once home I hastily put a brief advert in London's trendy 'Time Out' magazine: "Working Weekends on Organic Farms: Reply to Box No." It brought 15 replies, to whom I speedily sent the proposal. In the end, just three of us, together with sleeping bags and work clothes, travelled down on the Friday evening from Victoria Station, were met at the other end and transported to the College. I had been a little apprehensive as to what the others would be like, but they turned out to be real kindred spirits and a pleasure to be with. We had a brilliant weekend doing what I can only describe as housework: hacking back encroaching brambles from a field, and clearing out blocked ditches so they ran freely again. The sun shone, the birds sang, we had some interesting conversations, and they gave us a strawberry and cream tea in the barn, with pigeons cooing aloft and the odd moo from a neighboring cow. My bedroom was in a small cottage with herbs hanging to dry from the rafters, the moon shining in, and owls hooting from beyond. It was heaven. We must have done OK because at the end of Sunday afternoon the farmers said to us: "Yes, you've done quite well, would you like to fix another weekend?" And so WWOOF began.

Meg: What were your goals in those early days?

Sue: My goal when I first thought up WWOOF was to get myself into the countryside in a 'meaningful', affordable way with good company. A pub stay would not have done the trick. Events from Emerson that glow in my memory are: haymaking – feeling much like a Constable painting; swimming in the wild pool in the woods after toiling in the sweltering sun; coming across glow worms one balmy twilight; laughing and joking as we threw turnips into the cart; being taught how to clean and grease tools once the day's work had finished; and a happy trip down to the pub in the village after supper. It wasn't long before we began to learn what the Organic Movement was all about, and the more we learned the more enthusiastic and keen to help we became. On one of the early WWOOF weekends, Soil Association director Hugh Coates sat us down after Saturday dinner and gave us a long discourse on the how's and why's of Organic, and we became total converts to The Cause. From then on, WWOOF had a win-win dual function: nourishing ourselves and helping the planet. The way I see it now is that WWOOF was hanging about in the stratosphere looking for a way to 'manifest', and picked on me as a suitable channel: a London secretary with modest organizational skills who



needed to get out into the countryside! An inspiring, funny journal at that time was quirky 'alternative' little magazine 'SEED', run from a tiny office in London's Notting Hill by Ken Sams, an American who had come through the Korean war and was now bent on offering people more enlightened values. (He was also the father of Craig and Greg, who first brought organic food to London). Ken had read an article about WWOOF, 'Coppard's Land Army' written by Michael Allaby, and contacted me for an interview. We met over coffee and chatted, and as I was now between jobs and they needed a secretary I joined 'SEED'. I wrote the piece myself, subtitled 'Rent-a-Serf'. I learned a lot about health, nutrition and spiritual matters typing all those articles, and would contact the organic farmers I read about, offering them weekend WWOOF help. I was thrilled when they accepted. As the weeks went by and more people got to hear about WWOOF, membership increased. People, especially the town-bound, were dying to get into the country for their fix of Green 'Vitamin C'. Fortunately, farms and smallholders also heard about us and invited us to come and help them, so both sides of WWOOF – Helpers and Hosts – expanded gently. We realized we had joined a very important wider movement which had immense power to transform the world.

Meg: What other eco tourism or voluntourism organizations existed when WWOOF was created in 1971?

Sue: I think there were a few other volunteer organizations when WWOOF started back in 1971. I went with my brother to do forestry work clearing fire breaks in Portugal under the wing of a French body (now defunct I suppose) called Le Cercle Allie. You could also go and work on a kibbutz in Israel, which I always meant to do but never got around to. Then there was the UK's Conservation Corps, where you went as a gang and worked on the land – usually creating paths, steps or ponds, or maintaining a particular habitat. There may have been others I didn't know about. I hadn't even heard of the Young Farmers!

Meg: The WWOOF website refers to the "general ideals" of WWOOF—what are those?

Sue: The 'general ideals' of WWOOF are as listed in one of our earlier brochures:

*To get first-hand experience of organic farming and growing

*To get into the countryside

*To help the organic movement, which is often labor intensive and does not rely on artificial fertilizers for fertility or persistent poisons for pest control.

*To make contact with other people in the organic movement. As far as I know, these are the main motives of WWOOFs around the world.

Meg: Can you describe the current scope of WWOOF?

Sue: Nowadays the sun never sets on WWOOF! It spreads right round the globe and the number of countries with their own WWOOF organization is constantly expanding. At present the number of Hosts in the UK is 480 with about 5,534 active WWOOFers. Fifty countries have their own national and autonomous WWOOF organization, and 58 countries are available via the 'WWOOF Independents' organization. There is no central organization that records membership data, each organization does this individually. Recent estimates suggest that there are over 7,000 WWOOF hosts around the world, and it seems probable that up to 50,000 volunteers have current membership to the global network of WWOOF organizations. I think WWOOF's growth is mainly due to the simple but dynamic nature of the WWOOF exchange offering a structure for



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volunteers to contact potential host farms, and the zeal of both organizers and members to extend opportunities. This simple cultural exchange based around organic agriculture seems to offer positive rewards with fresh and inspiring experiences for both Host and volunteer. The organization itself does not have a central guiding body, but it has been allowed to grow in an organic way. New organizations are started by people in a country where no WWOOF organization exists. They are helped by one of the existing WWOOF organizations. The main point is that they can adapt to local needs and culture. However, all WWOOF organizations agree to the basic founding principles of WWOOF, and by doing so are accepted into the WWOOF family network. These principles are what bind them together under the banner of WWOOF. Individuals have assorted reasons for joining WWOOF. Many like me have a need to get back to nature. Others wish to learn how to grow their own food or tend animals, and there is no better way than learning by doing. Some hope to move to the country or find rural employment – WWOOF is an excellent way of dipping a toe in the water. Ditto finding out first hand whether communal life in a commune is for you or not. You can explore different regions and countries, and step into different cultures by ‘going native’ – a very rich experience. Students find it a rewarding and not too expensive way of doing a ‘gap year’. However, whatever the motive, it seems that once they learn what’s involved the majority of WWOOFers become convinced of the need for a universal move to organic methods. Another real benefit is the friendships that are made within WWOOF, mixing as one does with people of all ages and nationalities and from different walks of life, with interesting philosophies and activities. Innumerable fascinating conversations are held around the meal table, and many windows opened on new aspects of life. Through the other end of the telescope, WWOOF Hosts generally get a lot from having WWOOF help besides the much-needed assistance. Sometimes they feel lonely or out on a limb as none of their neighbours are of the ‘organic’ mind set. WWOOFers bring a fresh, enthusiastic attitude and an enquiring mind, and appreciate the hard work the way of life demands. They are also by and large very interesting people. Sometimes WWOOFers bring new techniques to teach the Host. I felt very proud when I, a London secretary, was able to show a farm manager and his son a really stable pattern for loading hay bales onto a trailer – learnt at Emerson! I was also taught how to store log ‘igloos’ (bark facing outwards) to protect the wood from rain – which I naturally passed on. American WWOOFers helped one Cameroonian Host, battling alone in his unsupportive village, to set up his own website and apply for funding for his projects (creating a botanical garden, for instance). Another, French WWOOFer taught him how to make wooden beehives and drove him on a tour around Cameroon, which he had never been able to manage before. The unstoppable ‘Farmer Tantoh’ has since completed a scholarship year in the USA studying organic methods, and in the UK at the end of May he is to be awarded the 2011 African International Achievers Award. There are some extremely kind Hosts who have been able to help WWOOFers through some problem or other. I’d say this happens because people in the Organic Movement are special; they are really intelligent and care about the world, and don’t put material wealth above human values. This is what makes WWOOF worth belonging to.

Meg: What is involved in the administration of WWOOF, and what is your current role with the organization?

Sue: I’m officially WWOOF’s Founder. I help with PR, and come up with observations or suggestions every so often – same as I reckon any member should. I go to the Annual General Meetings, and as WWOOF’s ‘inventor’ I applied to the UK Intellectual Property Office to register the WWOOF trademark. In Enid Blyton’s thrilling book ‘The Naughtiest Girl in the School’ the running of the school was carried out by the weekly children’s council, chaired by the head boy and girl, where any pupil could submit an idea and have it discussed and acted on. I always tried to run WWOOF like that. However, I’m not involved in the day to day management now. Administration on a basic level means keeping a Host list and providing it to volunteers. But maintaining the Host list also involves getting and monitoring the list – helping Hosts adapt to the role of hosting volunteers and so the quality of experience they offer volunteers. A similar role is required with regard to volunteers. Providing advice in the selection of suitable Hosts for their requirements and making clear arrangements for a stay with a Host’s farm. Different national WWOOF organizations do this in different ways,



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and some organizers receive pay while others work on a voluntary basis for expenses only. In the UK, there are currently three directors (and two individuals considering becoming directors) who meet three times a year with the WWOOF UK Coordinator, the WWOOF Independents Coordinator, and a new post being recruited for: WWOOF International Coordinator. This is the WWOOF Ltd. governance aspect of things. WWOOF UK became a limited company in 1993 and a registered charity in 2008. The WWOOF UK group meets an additional three times a year, between Council meetings. The actual delivery of operations is down to our main office at LILI (Low-Impact Living Initiative), who are contracted by WWOOF to perform this function. The LILI team is six people, working between a half and three days per week each, administering the day-to-day operations. The WWOOF UK Coordinator is also the Contract Manager. Larger issues regarding the objectives and ideals of WWOOF are dealt with by each national organization. Occasional meetings happen between the different national groups to discuss the larger philosophical issues right down to the detail of operational principles. The overall guidance of WWOOF UK is carried out by a Council of experienced/representative people.

Meg: I understand the organization's name has changed a couple of times—can you talk a little bit about this?

Sue: WWOOF started life as Working Weekends On Organic Farms – which was precisely what it offered. Scheduled weekends were arranged for up to a certain number of Helpers to book through the Regional Organizer to stay at particular WWOOF places. It took a lot of administration. However, quite soon offers were received from Hosts who were too far flung for weekend stays, for instance Dick Roberts' sheep and fruit farm in New Zealand. So the ever-expanding FIY List (Fix-It-Yourself) was produced to enable members to make their own arrangements to WWOOF independently. Meanwhile, WWOOF had sprung up in countries where distances made 'weekending' impossible. These WWOOF's called themselves Willing Workers On Organic Farms, and eventually WWOOF UK followed suite. We were, after all, no longer confined to weekends. Finally the FIY system took over from Scheduled Weekends which were dropped. Possibly some UK immigration officials did not comprehend WWOOF's altruistic volunteer ethos and construed from our then name (Willing Workers) that WWOOF was acting as a migrant worker agency. Indeed, on arrival in the UK some new members from certain countries did go AWOL and we never heard from them again! As a result, other unfortunate wannabe WWOOFers were sent straight home. Our membership secretary stopped sending application forms to the rogue nations as it was felt too many applicants could not be trusted not to abuse WWOOF's function. And as WWOOF had now spread right round the world, we changed to the current name of World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms to avoid giving a misleading impression of what was being offered. I guess this name is as big as it gets!

Meg: I understand you stepped back from WWOOF as it began to grow and spent a year backpacking around the world. Could you talk about that "breather"?

Sue: A reporter once wrote incorrectly that I retired from WWOOF when it began to grow—I simply took fifteen month's sabbatical to explore 'the East', a long-held dream. This was the second best thing I did for WWOOF as I had been running it on my own until then, unable to see how the administration could be shared. It had come to dominate my life to the extent that I no longer had time to read the newspaper over my leisurely Sunday morning breakfast, and although I loved WWOOF, by 1973 it had become pretty unremitting and demanding. Having read about the Japanese Communes Movement in 'Communes' magazine, I felt ready to take the plunge: start off in a Japanese commune and take it from there. I learned from their English correspondent that it was possible to stay at his commune in return for work, so this was arranged. In the next WWOOF News I invited members to come and discuss the future of WWOOF. Four of the fifteen members present decided to take on the work between them: membership, newsletter, weekend bookings and finance.



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It went like clockwork – no hiccups, and set the pattern for excellent WWOOF ‘governance’ from that date to this: a de-centralized team of inspired and dedicated organizers who communicate regularly and meet together at intervals throughout the year. When any job gets to be too much, it is divided between two or more people. Thus the team of organizers expanded along with the work involved. I rejoined them when I returned to England.

Meg: Could you talk about your year of travel?

Sue: I let my London flat, and travelled on the Trans Siberian Railway from Moscow to Nakhodka – one whole week aboard that train! I was lucky to be in a compartment with three congenial, tranquil souls (non-snorers!), and we spent a lot of time gazing at the unchanging countryside and dozing, and in my case studying Japanese. Other times I socialized in the restaurant car (a vegetarian’s nightmare if I had been one!) and visited never-ending bottle parties in other compartments: great fun but I was truly grateful not to be sleeping in one of those! Then by ship down to Yokohama. This was fun because a band played nice Russian music every night and I had made friends with four really kind Japanese lads who had been doing their hippy thing round Europe before returning to respectability in Japan. I stayed with a friend’s friend in Tokyo who showed me around before putting me on the train up north to Hokkaido Island, to my first commune. I was engaged in peasant agricultural work for the most part, but ‘Organic’ was unknown there despite their rather high-minded philosophical basis. There were some other English speaking people staying, including American Barbara. After a couple of months we two went hitch-hiking (exceedingly easy for two blond lasses – cars screeched to a halt the moment you stuck your thumb up!) We stayed at other communes, all totally different, with many activities and *raison d’être*: running schools, printing, rice growing and egg farming, communism, orange growing, Shinto religion (where they prayed under a freezing waterfall!), Buddhism, manufacturing tatami matting, running a hospital and a hospice... so I was lucky enough to do a variety of work and live among Japanese people. I tried to find work teaching English in Kobe but this evaded me so I moved on. I went to stay with friends in Hong Kong, and from there I went on to explore Thailand and Bangkok. I then went to Java where I visited some magnificent temples and had a brief touch-down at East Timor where some very kind evangelical Christians took me to their home for a brief sojourn—and gave me a book all about Speaking In Tongues. And thence to Bali for an all too short spell. Bali was wonderful, so beautiful and full of magic—not all of it benign though! The owner of the B&B where I stayed with a fellow traveler took me to the local temple for the communal full moon ceremonies, with eerie gamelan music, Balinese dancing and shadow puppets. After that to Australia—I worked for a very nice lady who belonged to the Soil Association and ran an organic fruit farm in Queensland. She took me to see some wonderful places as well. I also stayed with my uncle’s family on the outskirts of Sydney, though sadly the promised trip into the bush never materialized. Then I worked for an herb grower, and an organic farm in Orange run by Ken Yeomans, son of P.A. Yeomans, the genius who devised the remarkable Keyline system for water conservation and fertility creation. After that came the aforementioned Dick Roberts’ farm in Nelson, New Zealand, which was most enjoyable work. On my arrival I was amazed to find three WWOOFers from England already staying with Dick – including Rob and Sue Lea, who went on to set up WWOOF No.2, in New Zealand. I also stayed and helped on another local organic holding. One delightful activity here was taking their pig family for a walk along the hillside paths until we came to a water hole where they wallowed joyfully in the mud. Then I made my way round the country staying and working with other organic folks; also some distant relatives which was great fun: they took me to some hot springs and we actually bathed in them! Then I went to Fiji and was exceedingly lucky to land on my feet – yet again: I was invited to stay in a village in one of their majestic thatched halls, where we drank the not-particularly enjoyable kava after our evening meal. The next day my (male) hitch-hiking partner had to go and do agriculture in the baking sun with the men, but I went with the women to the river where we went in the water and drove the fish into ‘tennis nets’ being held across the river further down. We were also invited to stay and had a lovely meal, with lots of interesting conversation, at a very kind local Islamic priest’s home. Sadly, there was bad feeling between the Fijians and the Indians even then. I ended by staying with a very



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hospitable English contact who took us snorkeling and to a lively dance down in the town. I then went to Samoa and stayed with local people. (This is something travel agents can't arrange for you, but it fell into my lap like a ripe plum!) Visiting an island, a local girl took me to see the volcanic lava fields and we swam in the lagoon at sunset, wrapped around in our sarongs, palm trees waving along the sandy shore. Then I was a guest in Hawaii with a lovely family I had met on an earlier plane flight. Great place, but as a female you aren't go walking in the country on your own. My last stays were in the States: with an old London friend in San Francisco (where I did no work!); and then a Jesus commune in the giant redwood forest further north, where I toiled in their vegetable garden – and was rebuked by the 'sisters' for "taking the minds of our brothers off the Lord" by wearing shorts and bare legs. It was nice there and they had achieved so much, but I felt obliged to leave early because a few of them could not contain their zeal and would not let up haranguing me to renounce my ego and become one of their Born Again number. (I now realized why the poor Pacific Islanders could not withstand the sustained onslaught by missionaries in the nineteenth century.) Then it was uncle and cousins in Texas; and finally an old school friend now living in Puerto Rico. Whew! And so back to London. I had had a fantastic time and was truly grateful for the wealth of experiences, but it was marvelous to be back in my own little domain again. What had I learned? Well, the main lesson I took from the whole journey was that I believe it's a mistake to think you must have all the answers before you attempt what you really want to do: if you start out regardless, help and advice just seem to turn up. Also, I concluded that a major difference between 'Westerners' and Asiatic peoples is that we query things a lot more, hopefully with a view to running something better, rather than just obeying unquestioningly. We seem less fearful of rocking the boat. I'm afraid can't say I learned any lessons that made a difference to WWOOF's growth; at that time there were no other WWOOFs to observe. However, UK WWOOF had been progressing very satisfactorily in my absence, and what I conclude from that is that joint consultation, together with accurate recording of decisions, plus action initials, is a very efficient and democratic form of management.

Meg: Can you talk about WWOOF's role in cultivating organic farming practices?

Sue: I can't speak about what other WWOOFs offer in the way of organic and other education as I'm simply not in the picture. I wish them much success. WWOOF UK sees its function chiefly as a contact agency enabling members to arrange working stays with the farms and holdings most suited to their interests, where they can obviously study as much as they wish—Hosts generally are extremely helpful and keen to impart organic practice. Additionally, WWOOF NEWS sometimes contains articles on organics. However, in the UK we have the Soil Association and Garden Organic (erstwhile HDRA) and their journals and local branches, together with the Organic Research Centre, and they are considered our definitive sources of organic knowledge. There are also plenty of organic-orientated courses at universities and agricultural / horticultural colleges for those wishing to pursue a career in this field. In the days before this was the case, however, WWOOF did attempt to offer a DIY (Do-it-Yourself) organic course where students could work through listings of relevant areas and techniques (eg. dairying, bee keeping, potato growing, etc.) with Hosts specializing in these. Sadly, pre-PC publishing problems were responsible for the failure of this imaginative venture before it became available.



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Meg: Who are the types of people who are WWOOFers?

Sue: WWOOFers are anybody who wishes to try it. They range from 'aged' (in years but not in spirit!) to extremely young. Even children can go WWOOFing with their parents – in fact, some farms welcome visiting children as playmates for their own perhaps rather isolated youngsters. WWOOFers are of many nationalities and from many walks of life. When I was a Host I was visited by a policeman, a lighthouse keeper, students, teachers, computer experts, jobless, off-duty mothers, an army major – to name but a few. It just doesn't matter who or what you are so long as you are willing to help and keen to learn.

Meg: Were you seeking to please yourself or make a difference in WWOOF's early days...or both?

Sue: My initial reason for inventing WWOOF was to get myself and others into the country. However, as soon as I learned a bit about what Organic meant I became a fervent campaigner for The Cause. There are so many reasons to be organic: 'Feeding the soil' means feeding the dense micro-life which makes up the soil, giving it fertility and structure so that it retains moisture and does not suffer from erosion by wind and rain. Organic soil also stores far more carbon. Food produced organically is healthier, and crops and animals more resilient. Organic food contains a whole lot more nutrition (vitamins, minerals and enzymes) and is not coated with a thin cocktail of biocides – dangerous to both farm workers and consumers; nor does organic meat contain hormonal growth promoters and unnecessary antibiotics. Intensive monoculture makes crops particularly vulnerable to pests and diseases; however, many of the 'protective' chemicals sprayed on crops kill pest predators, thus allowing surviving pests to develop greater resistance. Organic farming is far kinder to animals, feeding them healthier food (cows will do almost anything to escape from their chemical grassland into a bio-dynamic meadow) and not curtailing their natural behavior so cruelly, as do intensive methods. Organic agriculture is far less oil and import dependent, nor does vast machinery compact the soil so severely thus destroying its structure. Organic farming is generally mixed (and crops and animals rotated to prevent disease building up), which creates a far better, and more beautiful, environment for wildlife – animals, insects, birds, plants – to flourish. Nor does it pollute rivers and waterways to anything like the same extent as chemical farming. If these hidden costs were taken into account, organic produce would no longer be the more expensive food. Organic methods do not allow the use of GMO's (Genetically Manipulated Organisms) which much (under-reported) research and experience have found damage health and fertility – besides leading to the domination of world food production by a few mega corporations and not living up to its promises. This in addition to irreversible harm which 'GM creep' may well inflict on the planet's ecosystems. Organic farming creates far more rural employment, both directly and as offshoot activity, leading to more cooperative rural communities.

Meg: Could you describe your lifestyle today?

Sue: For some years now I have lived in a small house with a walled garden in a little historic town in Wiltshire. I'm a musician (accordion) and play in various styles and nationalities for functions where live music is needed for atmosphere. I also teach the accordion to individual students, and am secretary to the regional accordion club. Life here is sociable, with lots of interesting meetings and associations on offer – poetry, art, history, esoteric talks, concerts, 'green' politics, gardening, music, country walks, town events, film societies... I could fill up at least four lives! And I still seem to get involved in green, ecological and WWOOF matters. I think I am rather influenced by John Tregoran, erstwhile philosophical character from 'The Archers' (BBC ongoing serial of country folk, beloved throughout the land), who said: "As an individual you can't possibly hope to remedy all the world's ills. But you must take action when you see something on your own doorstep where you could help."



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Meg: Are you a gardener?

Sue: I am though not a brilliant one – I'm not a good garden 'engineer' for a start. What I know I learned from my mother and from WWOOFing. However, I do enjoy eating vegetables and fruit I've grown myself, and I love listening to the birds singing while I toil away.

Meg: Tell me about this 'green' prayer you wrote: Great Spirit of Life, who has given us such a beautiful world, fill our hearts with love for our fellow beings throughout the planet and help us serve the wellbeing of all.

Sue: Prayer to me means communicating with the Great Spirit, or angels. I guess the higher your level of spiritual evolution (since I believe in reincarnation, as taught by the Theosophists) the more effective prayer would be. I have been doing meditation for quite a few years now, which I feel helps one's 'Path' lead where you need to go and brings the right people and teachings into your life. I do believe everything is the equivalent of many parts of one big tree, with different levels of consciousness temporarily believing themselves to be separate. (Does a white blood cell know it's part of me?) However, that's only because I've heard this many times, not experienced it myself. I did try being an atheist for a few days when I was young as I didn't go along with the 'God' I was taught at school. However, I found atheism too bleak and decided I must find a better concept of 'God' – who I now believe to be the intelligent, loving, energy 'building blocks' of creation, the ultimate consciousness which IS everything: the Great OneSelf. Believing in something beyond material existence (no more than a big fluke, if you can believe that!) seems to give life more direction and meaning – to me at least. I felt there should be a tiny prayer, acceptable to all faiths and none, which could indicate something of this and act as a kind of guide at the beginning of 'green' meetings. (Not that it ever has been!) As for 'green', I guess it means not arrogantly assuming that the world and its beings are there for humans to exploit, but should be treated with love and respect. And I have the impression that in spite of all that is going wrong in so many places (when did it not!), more people are tuning in to this philosophy.

SOURCE: viewfromthepier.com