

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



38 / Dr Wes Jackson, biologist, botanist, geneticist, Salina, Kansas

“I am writing in what is left of Matfield Green, a Kansas town of some fifty people ... It is typical of countless towns throughout the Midwest and the Great Plains. People have left, buildings are falling down, buildings are burning down.” The year is 1991 and the author is Wes Jackson. In his book ‘Becoming Native to This Place’ he devotes a whole chapter to Matfield Green. At the end of this chapter, Jackson sketches his dream of the future of Matfield Green, a town in which old homes will have been restored and are occupied by scientists, writers and artists, a lively town with a new multi-faced culture added to the existing one of cattle ranching. Jackson and friends bought many empty homes for next to nothing and, with the help of volunteers and interns, fixed them up. He established a *dépendance* of his brainchild, The Land Institute, in Matfield Green, in the old hardware store and lumberyard (which in 2009 became our home). Our arrival set off a third phase in the revival of the town, with the second phase initiated by Chicago architect Bill and actress Julia McBride, who arrived a few years earlier. We, and more recent newcomers, are finishing what Jackson started. None of us would have been here if Jackson hadn’t opened the door—without Jackson, Matfield Green would have become a ghost town.

Wes Jackson has been described as “a large man with the metabolism of a hummingbird. This is a good thing, because a commanding physical presence and oodles of restless, probing energy are likely prerequisites for the job Jackson has carved out for himself: nothing less than the overthrow of agriculture as we know it.” His nonprofit near Salina started in 1976. “There was a convergence of two ideas. One: It appeared to me from a government study that soil was eroding about as bad as when the Soil Conservation Service was formed in the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, despite thousands of miles of terraces, grass, waterways and millions of dollars invested. This was shocking. Two: About that time, I took students on a field trip to visit nature’s Konza Prairie. No soil erosion apparent, no applied fertilizer, no sprays, no fossil fuel. Elsewhere in our grain fields of wheat, corn, soybeans, sorghum, it was the

opposite: soil erosion was visible--those fields were fossil fuel dependent for fertility, pest management and traction. The contrast between nature's way and agriculture was striking. Why?"

Our grain fields feature annuals--plants that must be replanted each year from seed on disturbed ground like wheat, corn, soybeans, sunflowers. The prairie, like most other land ecosystems, features perennials: plant mixtures that keep coming up every year from deep roots that hold soil. "Clearly, agriculture had taken a far turn away from nature's way. The grains responsible for 70% of our calories are grown on around 70% of acreage worldwide. So, why no perennial corn or wheat? Why not farm like a prairie?" This sounded crazy then, but Jackson didn't mind. "So we set out to perennialize major crops and domesticate some promising wild species. We now see results from our geneticists at work on several perennial grains and our ecologist at work to integrate them." Today, wheat hybrids are in field trials in 20 locations in eight countries, and The Land Institute even supports the perennialization of upland rice in China. Other perennial species and hybrids are in different research plots in Salina and elsewhere. The Land Institute is ensuring that farming like a prairie will have a life of its own, yielding agricultural landscapes that absorb greenhouse gases, protect soil, water and air, and feed us.

Jackson was born and raised on a farm near Topeka, Kansas. He earned a BA in biology, an MA in botany, and a PhD in genetics (from North Carolina State University). He established and served as chair of one of the United States' first environmental studies programs (at California State University, Sacramento). His Land Institute first explored alternatives in appropriate technology, environmental ethics, and education, but a research program in sustainable agriculture eventually became central to its work. In 1978 already, Jackson proposed the development of a perennial poly-culture. He sought to have fields planted in poly-cultures, more than one plant in a field, as in nature. A Natural Systems Agriculture model was developed.

Farming, in Jackson's view, is humanity's original sin. This fall from grace occurred around 10,000 years ago, when people first started gathering and planting the seeds of annual grasses, such as wild wheat and barley. "That was probably the first moment when we began to erode the ecological capital of the soil," he says. "It's when humans first started withdrawing the earth's nonrenewable resources." As he sees it, fossil-fuel dependency, environmental pollution, overpopulation and global warming are all extensions of the path humans took when they first started tilling the soil. "It wasn't intentional. It didn't require a chamber of commerce or the devil to make us do it—we just did it."

Jackson received the alternative Nobel Prize, the Right Livelihood Award, in Sweden and is recognized as a world leader in the international sustainable agriculture movement. He wrote 'Man and the Environment'; 'New Roots for Agriculture'; he collaborated with philosopher and author Wendell Berry on 'Meeting the Expectations of the Land'. Then followed 'Becoming Native to This Place', in which he sketched his dream of that idyllic future for Matfield Green; and much more.

Jackson is often asked when he will be done. "The honest answer is, never. We intend to design an agriculture that relies on proven ecological patterns and processes to achieve sustainability, changing agriculture from being extractive and damaging to restorative and nurturing. This work requires help from people who honor the long term, those for whom instant gratification is not a priority. For us there is no 'endgame'. My view is: If your life's work can be accomplished in your lifetime, you're not thinking big enough."