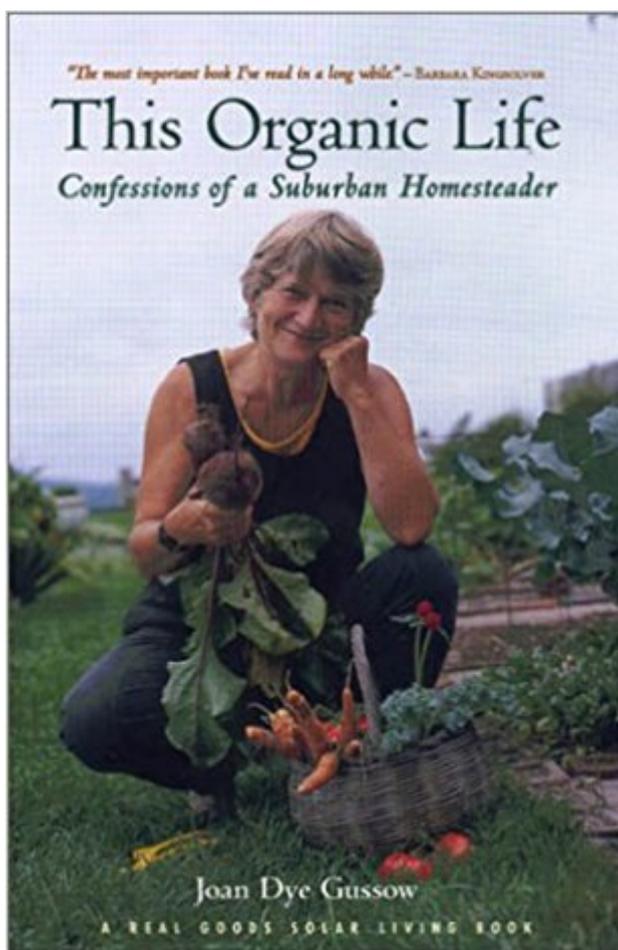


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This Organic Life: Confessions Of A Suburban Homesteader



Synopsis

Joan Dye Gussow is an extraordinarily ordinary woman. She lives in a home not unlike the average home in a neighborhood that is, more or less, typically suburban. What sets her apart from the rest of us is that she thinks more deeply--and in more eloquent detail--about food. In sharing her ponderings, she sets a delightful example for those of us who seek the healthiest, most pleasurable lifestyle within an environment determined to propel us in the opposite direction. Joan is a suburbanite with a green thumb, with a feisty, defiant spirit and a relentlessly positive outlook. At the heart of *This Organic Life* is the premise that locally grown food eaten in season makes sense economically, ecologically, and gastronomically. Transporting produce to New York from California--not to mention Central and South America, Australia, or Europe--consumes more energy in transit than it yields in calories. (It costs 435 fossil fuel calories to fly a 5-calorie strawberry from California to New York.) Add in the deleterious effects of agribusiness, such as the endless cycle of pesticide, herbicide, and chemical fertilizers; the loss of topsoil from erosion of over-tilled croplands; depleted aquifers and soil salinization from over-irrigation; and the arguments in favor of "this organic life" become overwhelmingly convincing. Joan's story is funny and fiery as she points out the absurdities we have unthinkingly come to accept. You won't find an electric can opener in this woman's house. In fact, you probably won't find many cans, as Joan has discovered ways to nourish herself, literally and spiritually, from her own backyard. If you are looking for a tale of courage and independence in a setting that is entirely familiar, read her story.

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Customer Reviews

I had this book on my wishlist for quite some time, then finally broke down and checked it out of my local library. I had been warned about the "chatty" style and the lack of focus, but I was intrigued enough about the subject itself to overlook those potential flaws. I used to belong to a CSA Farm, so the subject of sustainable and responsible agriculture is close to my heart. The style of writing did not bother me. Although she does seem at times to meander in the early chapters, she has quite a few complicated and inter-related subjects to cover: the purchase of her first home, the purchase of her new home, the development of her commitment to self-sufficient agriculture (or something close to it), and the death of her husband. Once those subjects are covered, I found the book became clearer and more linear (for better or worse). Most of what she says I can't argue with. I agree that there is something fundamentally wrong with a food production system that makes it more affordable for we Northeasterners to buy food shipped in from California than to buy food from our own home states. When she describes the system as essentially a lot of fuel going to ship cold water, one has to want to reevaluate their food choices. I found myself nodding in agreement when she talked about the taste of the foods we have the "luxury" of being able to buy year round. Having tasted food right off the farm, I can verify that there is a world of difference between it and the items you find in your store- even if they are "in season". Fresh produce does get addictive. Of course, not everyone has the luxury of having enough land to grow a substantial garden on, as Gussow points out. She suggests a CSA as an alternative, but that can be an unrealistic commitment for many people as well....

"This Organic Life" offers a crucial message about the importance of soil, a living part of the Earth and of our lives, and about how our food choices affect the health of the soil. Gussow makes this and some related points forcefully and repeatedly, and bravely offers up the example of her own decisions to enact a local-foods philosophy. The writing suffers from underinvolvement of an editor. The work lacks focus, especially in the first half, when her marriage, her community, a search for a new home, remodeling, and other events compete with the "Organic" promised in the book's title. An editor would have been able to bring continuity and theme to these essays, which actually are a narrative of the middle age and early elderly eras of her life. Strong editing would also have eliminated the confusing (and really needless) details about the nature of her newly purchased house and the foot by foot descriptions of the lot. Verbal descriptions, at least of this kind, cannot provide a sense of the surely daunting prospects she and her husband faced in claiming their new plot of land. The really interesting stuff is contained in the latter part of the book, where Gussow

combines polemic with her adventures in gardening and storing food in her own yard and in the community garden she helped commence. Each of us who tries to live a commitment to sustainable and healthy participation in the natural coil struggle with a myriad of choices and compromises. We are hopeful that our journey towards responsible activity is a progressive one. I think an essential part of the journey is a frank acknowledgement of our limitations and contradictory behavior. Gussow makes some concession to hypocritical choices in food selection.

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