

Euell Gibbons: More Than Grape Nuts

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Do a Google search for Euell Gibbons today, and you're not likely to turn up much about his environmental activism or connection to organic farming. What you'll find is that he's mostly remembered for starring in a series of Grape Nuts commercials, asking questions like, "Did you ever eat a pine tree? Many parts are edible."

But what fewer people know is that Euell Gibbons played an important role in organic farming history. Not only was he almost single-handedly responsible for reviving interest in foraging wild foods in the 1960s, but he was also instrumental in connecting organic farming to the environmental movement in the late '60s and early '70s. And it all started with a series of articles that he wrote for *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine.

The Organic Nature Lover: Euell Gibbons and Organic Gardening

In June 1966, editor Bob Rodale announced a new series of article in *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine. Titled "The Organic Nature Lover," the series was authored by Euell Gibbons, author of three books on foraging and cooking wild plants: *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (1962), *Stalking the Blue-Eyed Scallop* (1964), and *Stalking the Healthful Herbs* (1966). Previously, the magazine had focused almost exclusively on gardening and cultivated plants. But Euell's introductory article reminded organic gardeners that their philosophy toward cultivated plants could and should extend to all of nature.

"The organic gardener's interest in nature extends far beyond his garden fence," Euell wrote. "Being a respecter of nature and a cooperator with her, he is, by definition, a nature-lover. But because he is involved with nature in a creative relationship, the attitude of the organically oriented person is far different from that of the aloof nature-tourist, or nature-sightseer." Organic gardeners, Euell explained, inherently rejected the modern Western idea of "the conquest of nature." The gardener "doesn't consider nature an enemy to be conquered, but a friend and benefactor to be wooed in a spirit of cooperation and love....He knows that he is an integral part of nature, and he is not about to declare war on himself."¹

During the 1960s, the conservation movement was divided into two main camps. One group focused strictly on utilitarian conservation—building gigantic dams to ensure a steady water and electricity supply to the growing megacities of the American West and clearcutting old-growth forests and replanting them with commercially valuable monocultures.

The other group, horrified by the destruction wrought by utilitarian conservationists, went to the opposite extreme. They pushed to set aside scenic and ecologically important land as wilderness areas, untouched by humans. They believed that all human interaction with nature was inherently destructive, and the wilderness areas became, in effect, museums. Wilderness, by definition, had to remain untouched by humans.²

Euell Gibbons took a middle-of-the-road approach in these debates, emphasizing that not all human interactions with nature were negative or destructive. After all, Indigenous people had lived in, gardened, and managed the landscapes that preservationists were setting aside as "wilderness," so it was certainly possible for humans to enjoy nature's bounty in a less destructive way. "Although the organic gardener is the finest of conservationists he does not equate conservation with non-use," Euell clarified. "While gathering these wild delicacies he

¹ Euell Gibbons, "The Organic Nature-Lover," *Organic Gardening and Farming* 13, no. 6 (June 1966): 70, 72.

² Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

doesn't think he is making a clever raid into hostile territory, nor that he is forcing nature to contribute to him....The organic idea is not just a bag of tricks for producing better vegetables; it brings a whole new outlook on nature."³

This new outlook on nature—that humans could work with nature in a positive way, and that their interactions with the nature world didn't have to be inherently destructive—fit very well with the organic philosophy of working with nature. Euell Gibbons simply broadened that philosophy to include “wild” natural areas—the forests and hedgerows between the fields on most farms. And his articles helped position organic farming at the forefront of the emerging environmental movement, offering a hopeful, positive alternative to the more typical doomsday messages about pollution and destruction.

On a Maine Island: Euell Gibbons's Solo Wilderness Adventure

The southeast coast of Maine is dotted with hundreds of islands. Some are large, covered with vacation homes, and visited regularly by ferries. Others are just small lumps of granite rock jutting out of the ocean, carpeted by a few trees and other plants, and rarely visited by anyone. It was on some of these islands that Euell Gibbons partnered with the Hurricane Island School to offer wilderness survival and foraging training to enthusiastic young people in the late 1960s.

“I endeavor to train the students in the recognition and use of the wild foods that nature so generously offers in this section,” Euell wrote about this program and a similar one at the Minnesota Outward Bound School in his 1971 book *Stalking the Good Life: My Love Affair with Nature*. “It's not done in a classroom, but right on the lakes and streams and in the forest. They learn by actually gathering, preparing, cooking, and eating these delicacies.”⁴

The climax of these wilderness survival courses was “the solo survival test, where each student is marooned—all alone—on some lake or promontory, with a minimum of equipment and no food whatever, and has to live three days and three nights on the bounty that nature can provide for those who approach her with knowing eyes and a humble spirit.”⁵ Some students enjoyed their solo trip and some hated it, “but all agreed that spending those three days alone on an island had been one of the most important episodes in their lives.”⁶ And Euell's instruction in sustainable foraging was so good that, even after five years of the program, the berries, seafood, and edible vegetation were still as “abundant as ever.” “Boys who have been trained to live in harmony with nature, rather than trying to conquer her, do not destroy,” Euell observed.⁷

But some of the more observant students in one of the Maine programs noticed a discrepancy. Sure, Euell was an expert forager—but when they cornered him, they discovered that he had never been on a solo trip without lots of equipment and supplemental food. “It was their unanimous opinion that I had never been on a survival trip that could fairly be compared to their solo experiences, and furthermore, they believed I should go on such a solo immediately,” he recalled. The students waited until right before lunch, rushed Euell into a boat, relieved him of a ball of twine and some sugar that “just happened” to be in his pocket, dropped him off on “a hunk of granite called Bald Island,” and left.⁸

³ Gibbons, “Organic Nature-Lover,” 72.

⁴ Euell Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life: My Love Affair with Nature* (New York: David McKay, 1971), 36-37.

⁵ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 37.

⁶ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 41.

⁷ Euell Gibbons, *Stalking the Faraway Places* (New York: David McKay, 1973), 72.

⁸ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 41.

After an initial moment of “mild panic,” Euell decided that he had an obligation not only to survive three days on the island, but to harvest and cook as much wild food as possible. He picked wild rose hips, scooped out the seeds, and filled the cavities with ripe raspberries. He made a salad from orach, glasswort, sea blite, sea rocket, and sheep sorrel. He shelled and cooked beach peas, collected some skunk currants, and gathered blue mussels, periwinkles, sea urchins, and clams from the oceans. He ate so much that he gained three pounds, plus gathered a big pile of wild foods to take back to camp.⁹

Three days later, the students picked Euell up and assessed his performance. Euell expected them to be in awe of his abilities as a forager, but he was in for a disappointment. “After they got my story they decided that I should receive a passing grade, but no more,” he reported. “They would have agreed to a higher grade, except for one thing. I had been telling them that solo should be a time of serious meditation, deep contemplation and integrating spiritual experiences—and apparently, in the whole three days, I had thought of nothing but food!”¹⁰

Euell Gibbons, Environmentalist: Earth Day 1970 [5/23/24]

Perhaps in part because of his connection with the Outward Bound camp, Euell was closely in tune with the emerging environmental movement. He first began to write about environmental issues in 1968, expressing concern that “America is in a mess that is rapidly growing worse.”¹¹ And the group that his environmental writing resonated with most strongly was the counterculture, “large numbers” of whom read his foraging books. “Weed eating is an important indicator of the interest in natural living among the young rebels,” Robert Rodale observed in 1969.¹²

While hippies had been buying his books for years, Euell first connected personally with the counterculture during the Earth Day festivities in April 1970. Born in 1911, Euell was nearly 59 years old on Earth Day—way over thirty. Like many people his age, he was initially turned off by the long hair and strange clothes of his hippie audience. But he quickly discovered that they were “serious and truly concerned about the erosion of the quality of life due to the massive befouling of the earth, air and water.”¹³

Euell was impressed by how passionate the young people who listened to him were about the environment. “They are willing and eager to bring youthful energy, dedication, and intelligence to the conservation cause, and this is the most hopeful sign that I have seen that the present destructive trend might be reversed,” he reported. In his solidarity for the hippies, Euell even decided to declare “my own head a natural area,” at least temporarily. But he found long hair an uncomfortable bother, so he decided that “as soon as I have convinced some of the youngsters that they have no monopoly on either concern for the environment or the ability to grow hair, I think I’ll shorten it.”¹⁴

While he was excited about hippie interest in environmental issues, Euell felt that “too many of them saw the situation as a battle between them and the establishment.” He couldn’t blame them for being angry, but he hoped that they would “act out of their genuine concern for a

⁹ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 43-47.

¹⁰ Euell Gibbons, “Outward Bound Again,” *Organic Gardening and Farming* 15, no. 4 (April 1968): 103.

¹¹ Euell Gibbons, “Where Did We Go Wrong?” *Organic Gardening and Farming* 15, no. 1 (January 1968): 92-94.

¹² Robert Rodale, “The New ‘Back to the Land’ Movement,” *Organic Gardening and Farming* 16, no. 9 (September 1969): 21.

¹³ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 226-227.

¹⁴ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 227-227.

better world, and not out of their anger." "I oppose name-calling, violence, and even some forms of militant pressure, not only because they are wrong, but because they are stupid," he explained. "Inevitably, such tactics delay solution of the problem." The only solution, Euell believed, was love—both for nature and for other humans. After all, "even the polluting industrialist is a human being, who loves and is loved," he reminded his audience. "Let our own humanity and love speak to his humanity and love in working for a better environment... For love is a powerful form of pressure which few are prepared to resist. The solution of our ecological problems starts in your heart."¹⁵

Organic gardening—done out of love, of course—was also a major part of the solution. "The organic gardener has been a sort of literary joke, considered by the 'economic man' as a kook, a crank, a crackpot, or a cultist," he wrote. "But now the public is grinning out of the other side of its mouth, and millions are ready to concede that the organic people have been right." Organic gardening could be "the leavening, the way-shower to a better mode of living, where the environment would be constantly improving, rather than deteriorating as it is now," Euell wrote. "Your demonstrations of the practicality of growing food without harming the land, water or the air may be the key to man's survival on this planet."¹⁶

Perils of Fame: How Grape Nuts Turned Euell Gibbons into a Joke

Euell Gibbon's involvement in the environmental movement quickly catapulted him into the national spotlight. *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* and his other books sold well, and the media found the idea of foraging for wild foods to be quite fascinating—at least as a sort of weird oddity. Euell admitted that "many interviewers want to portray me as some kind of weed-eating freak, like the man at the carnival show who eats beer glasses and swallows razor blades."¹⁷ But he liked the publicity and rarely turned down an opportunity for a television appearance.

One reason that reporters tended to sensationalize Euell was because he liked to brag that he could easily find enough wild plants to make lunch no matter where he was at the moment. When a reporter called his bluff in New York City and challenged him to actually try it in Central Park, Euell managed to prepare a full meal of cooked greens, salad, fried fish from a pond, and sassafras tea to drink.¹⁸ During another interview in San Francisco, he made a similar boast and foraged a lunch of lamb's quarters, wild beets, wild mustard, charlock, orach, wild licorice, and wild lettuce. "The camera crew was ready to concede that I could not only prepare a lunch from the available wild food here, but could easily vegetable-feed a large family indefinitely from this natural wild supermarket," he bragged.¹⁹

Euell enjoyed this publicity, and the media enjoyed him, too. Unfortunately, their incurable love for sensationalism ended up portraying Euell—at least in the eyes of those who didn't read his books—as a weird, kooky guy who ate strange weeds. Even though Euell realized this, he still liked being on camera. Plus, having lived in poverty for most of his life, he was always worried about money.²⁰ So when the Post company offered Euell a contract to star in commercials for their Grape Nuts cereal in the early 1970s, he jumped at the chance. Euell

¹⁵ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 227-228.

¹⁶ Euell Gibbons, "How Organic Farming Can Save Our Air," *Organic Gardening and Farming* 17, no. 11 (November 1970): 106, 109.

¹⁷ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 74.

¹⁸ Gibbons, *Stalking the Good Life*, 74-81.

¹⁹ Gibbons, *Stalking the Faraway Places*, 113-116.

²⁰ John McPhee, "The Forager," *New York Times* (January 10, 1976): 20.

starred in a series of 30-second commercials that showed him foraging some wild plant food and then sitting down to a bowl of Grape Nuts.²¹

That was just too much for the anti-nature scientific establishment of the mid-1970s. Worried that Euell's commercials might get people interested in foraging as well as in Grape Nuts, the FTC banned the segments from saying that any wild plants were edible on July 4, 1975. Jerome Goldstein noted the irony of passing such a blatant restriction of free speech on Independence Day.²² The message was clear—the FTC didn't want anybody getting the idea that something growing naturally might be edible, nutritious, or even delicious. Food could only come from nice tidy packages at the grocery store! Joining in the effort to discredit Euell, comedians misrepresented him as a kook who ate all sorts of inedible objects. One episode of "The Electric Company" portrayed a man called "Early Gibbons" eating stumps, staircases, sticks, and stones—ostensibly to teach kids the sound "st" but also scaring them away from wild foods in the process.²³

Euell lived only half a year after the commercials were banned. Anti-foraging interests used his death on December 29, 1975 as an argument against foraging, hinting that he had died of "an undisclosed stomach ailment" from eating "dandelion greens, wild onions, and sassafras tea."²⁴ Actually, Euell died of a heart attack—which, ironically, was most likely due to a preexisting heart condition and some unhealthy lifestyle choices. He was a heavy smoker and ate way too much fat, white flour, and sugar, as the recipes in his foraging books make clear.²⁵ But the misinformation campaign against foraging convinced untold numbers of Americans that it was actually Euell's love for wild foods—not his all-too-typical American lifestyle—that killed him.

While understanding that it had stemmed from financial insecurity, John McPhee lamented how Euell had "obscured his accomplishments behind a veil of commercial personality. He became a household figure of a cartoon sort....All too suddenly, he stood for what he did not stand for." McPhee wanted to "take those Grape Nuts and blow them from here to Hawaii—to get him out from under them."²⁶

Euell's wife, Freda, wrote him a far better eulogy than the Grape Nuts commercials. "Euell not only popularized the lavish gifts that nature has to offer us in the way of edible wild plants, but he also taught thousands to forage with joy and gratitude and to open their eyes to the wonder and beauty nature provide in an endless variety," she wrote. "Possibly more important was the awareness he instilled through his books and lectures of our responsibility in helping nature to maintain the marvelous balance which is literally our life's blood on this beautiful planet."²⁷

²¹ Irv Oslin, "'Euell' Never Know Who You'll Meet in the Column Writing Business," *Ashland-Times Gazette*, April 27, 2022.

²² Jerome Goldstein, "Blame It All on George's Mother," *Organic Gardening and Farming* 22, no. 10 (October 1975): 127.

²³ Oslin, "'Euell' Never Know."

²⁴ Malcolm Forbes, *They Went That-a-Way* (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 122-123.

²⁵ "Euell Gibbons: The Father of Modern Wild Foods," *Wild Food Adventurer Newsletter* 3, no. 4 (November 25, 1998).

²⁶ McPhee, "The Forager," 20.

²⁷ Freda Gibbons, "Foreword," in Euell Gibbons and Gordon Tucker, *Euell Gibbons' Handbook of Edible Wild Plants* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning, 1979).