

# SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

## ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE

BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER, WITH STEVEN L. HOPP,  
CAMILLE KINGSOLVER



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# **Summary of Animal, Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver, with Steven L. Hopp, and Camille Kingsolver**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

One family's story of living off the land.

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# Introduction

When you hear the phrase “animal, vegetable, and...” you might automatically fill in the last blank with the word “mineral.” That’s because these three categories are what we most often hear referenced in school. But for the Kingsolver family, that categorization looked a little different one year. When they made the radical decision to begin growing their own food, they found that the process of living off the land was more miraculous than they expected. This is their story of getting in touch with the earth and each other while breaking free from pesticides and big corporations.



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## Do We Even Know What “Real Food” is Anymore?

One of my favorite breakfast dishes is something that I jokingly call “chemical muffins.” It’s simply a pack of instant strawberry muffin mix that comes in a sealed plastic package. Add half a cup of milk to the mixture, pour it into the muffin tin, pop it in the oven, and in ten minutes, you have yourself some strawberry muffins! As far as low-energy breakfast foods go, this is a fast and filling meal that anybody can make, regardless of their lack of cooking expertise. But it’s also chock full of unhealthy preservatives! In fact, the reason I call them “chemical muffins” is because you can literally taste the preservatives when you bite into them. It’s not healthy at all but it tastes great.

And the authors are exactly right when they affirm that this is the problem with American food consumption today. Thanks to the hectic pace of our modern lives, we’re more concerned with food that is fast and convenient than we are with making healthy and ethical eating choices. And so we continue to stuff our bodies with chemicals and genetically modified food in the name of convenience. The authors’ research also shows that people tend to prioritize low prices over ethical choices. Although we could shop at our local farmers market and support local and ethical farmers, we often opt not to do so because the prices are higher. However, the authors observe that the prices are higher because the cost of ethical practices are simply more expensive. That might seem like a bit of a no-brainer but the fact is that until these practices become mainstream, it will always cost more to take time and care with your livestock and crops instead of pursuing the cheap, mass produced route.

To illustrate this point, the authors highlight the dangerous and unethical farming practices that are often seen in the mass production of grains, corn, and soybeans. These types of crops are commonly grown through a practice that is known as a “monoculture.” But if you’re not an agricultural expert, that term might not mean very much to you. So, what exactly is a monoculture? Well, if we break it apart linguistically, we know that “mono” means “one,” so a monoculture is a culture characterized by only one thing.

We already know that a lack of diversity in human society is never healthy, so it makes sense that the same would be true for plants. And that's exactly what the author wants to explore in his investigation of monoculture. This term is typically used to describe the phenomenon of planting only one type of crop in a given area and monocultures typically occur when people plant crops like corn or wheat. But why would it be a bad thing to have a field of only wheat or only corn?

It might surprise you to learn that this practice is detrimental because the lack of diversity among the crops places undue strain on the earth and its resources. To flourish, the soil needs to soak up nutrients from a variety of different plants. If an entire field is populated by only one type of plant, the soil's nutrients will quickly be depleted. So, how can we counteract this problem? The author's solution draws on the teachings of Native American environmental biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. A member of the Potawatomi tribe, Kimmerer often draws on her heritage to teach important concepts about environmental biology. She frequently relies on one story in particular: the tale of The Three Sisters. The story of The Three Sisters is a Native American parable that has been used to teach the value of sustainability and reciprocity in our attitudes toward food and farming.

As the story goes, there were once three sisters who visited a Native American village in search of food and shelter. The villagers didn't have much to offer, but they took pity on the sisters and shared everything they had out of the kindness of their hearts. The sisters later revealed that they were the spiritual guardians of three crops: corn, beans, and squash. And to thank the villagers for their kindness, they promised that the villagers would always have a bountiful harvest of each of these three crops. As a result, the villagers always planted corn, beans, and squash together. And not only did they reap a consistently plentiful harvest, they found that their land was healthier and more fertile as a result. This might sound like a lovely story but the principles of environmental biology have revealed that it's more than just a lovely myth. The mythical guardians of corn, beans, and squash might not exist, but keeping these "sister plants" together is always a good idea. That's because these crops work together, pulling mutually beneficial nutrients from the air

and soil and sharing those resources with one another. These shared resources enable the three of them to flourish and the soil is healthier as a result.

However, if you're not an agricultural expert, this might not sound like such a bad thing. So what if the soil isn't all that healthy? You probably don't go through your day worrying about the quality of the soil around you, so why does it matter? Well, the problem with growing plants in a monoculture is that the lack of nutrients in the soil affects the crops. Because the soil has nothing to offer the plants, they must depend on chemical-based fertilizers for their nutrients. That's the equivalent of raising your plants solely on junk food. So, when your plants are raised on an unhealthy diet and you eat the food that is made from those plants, it's not very nutritious and it doesn't taste very good. That's not really what you want for your food, is it? Hopefully, most people would say no!

From this example, we can see that modern American planters favor monocultures because they are conducive to mass production. If you only grow wheat that needs little in the way of agricultural attention, it's more profitable to harvest and sell that wheat crop in bulk. But in the long run, it's damaging to the soil. And if we continue to prioritize profit over plants, we'll eventually destroy the earth to such an extent that nothing else can grow. But if we embrace indigenous wisdom and return to traditional, sustainable farming practices, we can eliminate monocultures and literally restore the earth. The authors certainly felt that it was wise to return to traditional practices and this is what motivated them to uproot their lives and begin growing their own food.



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# Growing With the Seasons

The authors' new life choices showed them that they would have to learn and grow according to the seasons. Through this experience, they found a new appreciation for the Biblical assertion that "for everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to harvest." The authors' lived this principle firsthand and they found that March was the best time to start your garden. Because the weather may still be inhospitable during this season, they found that you can start some crops inside by growing flowers and plant seeds indoors. By April, the ground should be fertile and the weather should be kinder. This is when you can transition your indoor crops to an outdoor garden and begin your planting in earnest. Their experience showed them that hardy vegetables such as potatoes, onions, peas, broccoli and cabbage are likely to flourish during this season. In fact, depending on your climate, these vegetables may even be able to survive the winter! So, if you plant them in February, they may be ready to harvest by April.

As you're harvesting your more rugged vegetables, you can begin to plant more delicate crops that are well suited to the spring season. Lettuce flourishes during the spring and should be ready soon, so you can enjoy a fresh spring salad fairly quickly! As spring wears on, you can also begin planting vegetables like tomatoes, squash, eggplants and cucumbers. These will all be ready to harvest by July or August and you'll find that you're able to enjoy a wide variety of healthy and delicious dishes. The authors also found that their food tasted a little better because of their personal connection to it. That's not to imply that they are flawless gardeners, but rather that when they tasted their food, they also tasted the love, effort, and determination that went into growing it themselves. It tasted a little more special because it was the literal fruit of their labor and they were deeply proud of it.

But in addition to the personal pride they found in growing their own food, they also discovered that they were able to make healthier choices and save more money! Because they grew all their fruits and vegetables themselves,

they were able to avoid the pesticides and chemicals that overwhelm the vast majority of mass-produced food. And because they weren't giving their money to big supermarkets, they were also able to cut down on their monthly grocery bill. And last but not least, they found that growing their own food helped them stay more in touch with the earth, with their own bodies, and with each other. Growing your own food is hard work, but it helps you to appreciate nature's cycle of growth. It helps you to fall in love with the miracle of watching new life sprout, bud, and grow into fruition. And when you know what you're putting in your body, you can identify a clear difference between the presence of healthy food and the absence of processed food. This means that growing your own food can literally help you feel happier and healthier on multiple levels!



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# The Autumn Harvest

The growth process doesn't stop in summer! Although spring and summer are great times for harvesting vegetables, autumn is the perfect time for harvesting meat, pumpkins, and potatoes. In their efforts to live and harvest ethically, the authors were concerned with the ethics of harvesting meat from the animals they had raised on their farm. They know that animals which are bred for mass consumption are raised in cruel and inhumane conditions and they didn't want to inflict that torment on another living soul. Instead, they researched the difference between "harvesting" and "killing" an animal for meat and they found that these practices were actually separated by some substantial differences. According to the modern process of mass producing and killing animals for meat, the animal's life has no value or significance. No one gives any thought to its quality of life during its very short lifespan or to the agony it suffers during the butchering process.

The authors didn't want to do that, so they raised their chickens, cows, and pigs in a kind and humane way. While they lived, the animals were well fed and free to roam comfortably. They were not injected with any chemicals or preservatives or forced to sleep in cramped and unsanitary conditions. And when the time came, the authors harvested their livestock gently and painlessly by putting them to sleep before they killed them so that they wouldn't feel any pain. They also attempted to be sustainable and ethical in their use of the meat they harvested by utilizing a method known as "blood to bone." This method is typically found in sustainable, high-end kitchens where chefs use every single part of any animal that goes into a dish.

For example, one revolutionary chef has already implemented this practice in his own restaurant by breeding Ossabaw pigs. These pigs have a uniquely beneficial relationship with the environment which means that they are also enriching the soil around them as they grow. When the pigs

are slaughtered, the author and his team of chefs take care to use every part of the meat in a fashion that enhances both the flavor and sustainability of every dish. The authors believe that these methods are accessible for everyone and that more people should be aware of this new approach to life, growth, and eating.



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## Final Summary

In the chaos of our modern world, it's easy to lose sight of the important things. One important thing that we often neglect is the impact and ethics of our food choices. Many people fail to think about the chemicals that are going in their bodies or the suffering that is inflicted on innocent animals and on our planet. The authors wanted to take a more mindful and sustainable approach and so they attempted to grow all of their own food and see how this choice would make a difference in their lives.

They found that their experiment strengthened their connection to the earth, to their own bodies, and to one another. They developed a new appreciation for nature and the cycle of growth. And they also found that it is surprisingly easy and rewarding to make healthy, sustainable life choices such as living off the land.



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