

# Jack London: Sustainable Farmer

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In 1905, while living with Charmian at Wake Robin Lodge in Glen Ellen, California, Jack London decided to settle permanently in the Valley of the Moon. In June, he purchased his first of real estate — the Hill Ranch. for \$7,000 -- "**130 acres of the most beautiful, primitive land to be found in California,**" London said.

When he cleared 40 acres to raise hay, he discovered the land had been depleted by "**old-fashioned methods of taking everything off and putting nothing back.**"

The Kohler and Lamotte Ranches on Sonoma Mountain were worn out, useless because the former owners had tilled the land for forty years without fertilizing or allowing it to lie fallow, and allowing it to erode with the winter rains. The fertile hills of California were being wasted. London believed "**we must develop scientific methods to turn the slopes into productive areas.**

***The six bankrupt ranches represent at least eighteen bankruptcies; ...at least eighteen farmers of the old school have lost their money, broken their hearts, lost their land. The challenge to me is this: by using my head, my judgment, and all the latest knowledge in the matter of farming, can I make a success where these eighteen men failed? I have pledged myself, my manhood, my fortune, my books, and all I possess to this undertaking.***

London taught himself about farming, reading agricultural and scientific tomes. He wrote to the agricultural departments of the University of California and the State for information and advice. "**I adopted the policy of taking nothing off the ranch,**" he said. He implemented modern farming techniques, rotating crops and using natural fertilizer, such as "green manures" and cover crops that were plowed into the soil to fix nitrogen. London developed a liquid manure system using recycle materials hosed from the dairy barn He also used an ancient technique he had seen as a war correspondent in 1904 in Korea... terracing to prevent soil erosion. As a result, London claimed, "**... instead of one-tenth of one meager crop a year you can grow three rich crops a year.**"

He wanted to "**leave the land better for my having been,**" and so more than 100 years ago, he pioneered many of the principles which are the foundation of organic farming today. Today's organic and biodynamic farming techniques owe a great deal to London's innovation, including controlled animal grazing, use of green manures, crop rotation, recycling animal and plant waste via composting and natural fertilizers. Jack London was one of the first true organic farmers in the US. "**Do you realize that I devote two hours a day to writing and ten to farming?**" he wrote in his journal.

He asked the world's leading horticulturist, Luther Burbank to assist. He experimented with innovative ideas such as growing spineless cactus.

He built the first concrete block silo in California and filled it with silage from his and neighboring ranches. This green silage consisted of shredded corn stalks that would be later fed to his dairy cows. The pigs got the corn. He hired Italian stonemasons to build a barn for his horses as well as a manure pit to develop composted fertilizer.

He produced record yields of oat hay on acreage that had been considered overfarmed. He planted hay, 65,000 eucalyptus trees and went after more acreage, gobbling up struggling ranches nearby.

In 1915, he built the **Pig Palace**, (so named by a San Francisco newspaper reporter astounded by the \$3,000 it cost to build it). It was laid out in a circle to save labor, so one man could care for over 200 hogs. The feed house is a two story circular tower. Feed was stored in bins in the upper story. London had a water heater in this building so that he could mix hot water it with the feed. There were doors on either side so that the laborer didn't have to walk all the way around to attend to the 17 pens. All the troughs were filled with water by opening a single valve. London devised a system of flushing and sanitizing both in the Pig Palace and in the barns

Each family of hogs had its own area; a courtyard with feed and water troughs, roofed sleeping area, and a fenced outdoor run. The piggery was designed to efficiently care for prized breeding pigs. The birthing pens had iron pipes up from the floor and out from the wall about eight inches, so that when the sow lay down she wouldn't crush the little ones against the wall.

His neighbors laughed, but the design won awards and drew nationwide attention. When his prized pigs developed cholera London immediately went into action. Thinking that the disease had been brought to the ranch, he fenced off the animal area, so that the only entry was through a gate that required walking through a carbolic acid bath that disinfected the foot wear of anyone going near the animals.

After London's death, his wife, Charmian, asked his fans to remember what London once called "The Ranch of Good Intentions." "***Have any of you thought what is to become of the great thing he has started up here? ... I am begging you now, with all my heart, not to forget that he laid his hand upon the hills of California with the biggest writing of all his writing and imagination and wisdom ...***"