

# Margaret Jones

## Soil & Health pioneer

Dee Pignégy profiles the longest-serving member of the Soil & Health Association



Historic images: Margaret Jones' collection

**M**argaret Jones is 90 years old and is proud of the fact that nobody is subsidising her health! She may be old but she is living proof that old doesn't mean you lose your faculties. There is no pillbox sitting on her bedside table. "If you believe in organics you can't believe in pharmaceuticals," she says.

### Asking questions and seeking causes

Margaret believes in asking questions – and there are far more questions than answers. Why are we so sick? Fifty years ago one in fifty people had cancer, now one in three; these statistics horrify her. For everything there is a cause and she believes in looking for causes. "People can be full of food but end up in hospital. We are generating a health crisis that everyone will be paying for, for years."

Organics alone may fail to achieve much social change, but she believes that food can teach us about the things that really matter like animal rights, workers' rights, food security, keeping healthy, and the need to avoid poisoning nature. Margaret is pretty firm in her beliefs and, like many older people with rich lives those beliefs were formed from years of observation, research, and on-the-ground experiences.

### Healthy upbringing

She credits her health with her lifestyle and upbringing. "I was a Plunket baby and in those days they were good on nutrition. I was breastfed for a year." She grew up in Himatangi (in the Manawatu) on Chaos Farm where a few cows provided plenty of raw milk and cream, chooks provided eggs, and vegetables came fresh from the garden.

"Organics wasn't a word that was used. Everyone had amazing gardens, there was plenty of manure from the

cows and chooks, and we didn't even have a compost heap – everything went to feed cows or chooks or straight onto the garden. In those days New Zealand was covered in bush and there were lots of sawmills. Timber wasn't treated and chemicals were not in use so untreated sawdust used for mulching was plentiful. Today if you want to bring me a gift, make it one of the three S's – seaweed, sawdust or shit!" she says.

The family was too poor to buy lollies and sweets and their biscuits and cakes came homemade from the oven. There was no need to read the labels on the sacks of flour, oats and other staples. The farm provided one of life's big sustainability lessons: that the land sustains all life.

### Growing up in a political family

But to truly understand Margaret's beliefs and her attitudes about personal responsibility and action, you need to look to her parents, Mary and Leo Sim. She grew up in a political family. Her father was very patriotic and when war was declared in 1914 he left his job on the railway and signed up to fight in Gallipoli. He was wounded and sent home, but after a short period of recovery he worked his passage to the UK and joined the British Army by giving his home address as Scotland.

While on leave in Ireland, he met leading Marxist theorist James Connolly, who asked him if he knew what he was fighting for, suggested that he buy a book by Karl Marx. He followed the advice and bought some books, continued to fight till

the end of the war, came back to New Zealand and married Mary, a Scottish Presbyterian lady. Margaret was the first-born of their five children.

Margaret's father started attending political meetings and one evening saw a billboard on the pavement advertising

a Communist Party meeting. He found himself inside a room filled with thick smoke and a gathering of men. On arriving back home at 2 am he woke Mary to tell her that they were now Communists.

Margaret's mother, who was the youngest of 10 children had worked in the mills in Dundee, was very clever and was soon converted. Margaret laughs and says: "I must have been the first person in New Zealand fed on Communist milk as I was still on the breast at the time."

In those days there were political debates of all kinds. The family was known as a political family and people came to help on the farm and talk politics. Mealtimes saw many people around the table – swaggers looking for a bed, farm helpers and political acquaintances. "Even [George] Bernard Shaw visited us," Margaret recalls.

During the Great Depression, men were being sent away from their families to plant trees, build roads and live in big camps out in the country. Separating families was the spark that led to the riots of 1932 and at the age of 11 Margaret joined her mother and other women and children in a march against injustice.

### Early interests and education

At high school Margaret studied biology and home science – a great background for learning why the body needed nutrients from natural, unprocessed sources. She wanted to be a teacher and she struck gold at Training College with the Dean of Women who believed that teachers needed to be fit and healthy. Margaret taught primary school children for 40 years and for the first 30 years never had a day off sick. Today she teaches English as a second language.

When Margaret was only 15 she discovered the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) and used her pocket money to buy a subscription. Later she became a member of NZAVS, the New Zealand Anti Vivisection Society. She is totally opposed to any experiments on

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**Page opposite:** Leo and Mary Sim and family, 1931; Margaret is on the left

**Above:** Jock Barnes (left, leader of the Waterside Workers' Union) and Margaret's father Leo Sim, with a truck loaded with meat and other provisions for the families of the wharfies during the 1951 waterfront lockout. Although it was illegal to provide any help or food to the wharfies and their families during the lockout, Leo used his truck to deliver food every Friday.

**Right:** Chaos Farm: the Sim family homestead at Himatangi (meaning 'wailing of the winds')

**Far right:** Margaret Jones in her house with communist and socialist memorabilia



Photo: Mike Pignéguy

animals. She has no patience with people who can't treat their bodies correctly and are either totally unaware or just don't care that pharmaceuticals are not just a health issue for us, but also for animals that are experimented on.

"How many beagle dogs did they use to prove smoking damages your health?" she asks, reminding us that they all died horrible deaths in the end.

### Better than a night at the pictures

Margaret had the good fortune to experience another of life's lessons – she saw the world in terms of relationships and connections – a web of life just like nature's communities.

She was 21 years old, headed for the picture theatre on Auckland's Queen St when a billboard advertising the Hume

Compost Society meeting caught her eye. Upstairs, she was greeted by an elderly lady who enquired if she was in the wrong place.

"Do you learn about gardening and compost here?" Margaret asked. And so she joined the 30 organic pioneers gathered there, and has been one ever since. "The war was the catalyst and compost societies were formed all over New Zealand. Just like the gardens the compost societies flourished." Perhaps climate change will be the catalyst for a huge revival not just in organic gardening but in organic lifestyles as well.

### Passing on her passion for healthy food

When I visited Margaret she showed me her notes for a talk she was giving to a class of school children who wanted to know about her childhood. She would like to see food growing embedded in every school. The desire for bad food is not in the DNA and she sees school gardens guiding the development of taste. She will introduce children to a time when people ate food that was in season, fresh and local and was not contaminated by chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Perhaps she should invite the teacher to bring the children to her

home which is a small museum in itself and, after examining all the history on display, the children could walk around the garden to see how easy it is to turn your front lawn into lunch!

### Thinking for ourselves

Margaret gives up her time to talk to many groups in the hope that she will inspire people to go home and do something. "Organics is a set of values and everybody is just as capable of thinking about things for themselves," she says. She hopes her work will make people think about their own situation and ask why the world is in such a state. But she is not holding her breath. "Where are the New Zealand radical thinkers challenging the present economic system and raising the political awareness of a new generation?"

She certainly hasn't lost her sense of humour as she laughs and tells me that the new generation is probably all "a Twitter"! 

**Dee Pignéguy** is the author of *Gardening For Planet Earth*, *Nature's Techno Tricks* and *Feed Me Right*. She teaches organic gardening, is a gardening mentor for Project Gro, and a Soil & Health National Councillor.



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