

The Bullock's Permaculture Homestead

Summer Newsletter 2007 (v. 3)



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Upcoming Events

July 15 – August 4: Permaculture Design Course

August 12 – August 18: Permaculture Teacher Training

See the Courses & Events section of our website for more details.

Also, if you happen to be in the area, remember that we have a community potluck each Sunday at 1 pm, so feel free to swing by with some tasty morsels and join us!

Words from the Daver

“Hmm...Permaculture, you say? Now what is that?”

That seems to be the question that quickly flusters most budding permaculturists. You've spent all this time taking design courses, WWOOFing, thinking about what to do with your backyard, but when that pesky question comes up you draw a blank and don't know where to start. Sometimes you just simplify it down to “organic gardening” when you don't feel like having a long discussion. Other times you may start to tell about all the wonderful things that fall under the umbrella of Permaculture and find yourself off on a tangent about companion plantings for broccoli. Either way, Permaculture can be daunting to explain (without oversimplifying or, conversely, writing a novel).

Well, I'd like to throw in my two cents and share with you how I go about explaining it. If anyone thinks I'm missing something important, please let me know.

First off, I like to start with the main ethics that drive the Permaculture movement. The beauty of these ethics is that they are pretty much universal and everyone can relate to them. Care of the Earth, Care of People, and Share the Surplus (I know there are others, but let's leave it at that for now...they all really fall under Care of the Earth anyway, right?). Although not everyone will agree on how to accomplish those things, on a basic level conservatives and liberals alike would concur that these things are important. President George Bush himself supports the Student Conservation Association (Care of the Earth), believes in being neighborly as a part of his Christian values (Care of People), and called for all Americans to volunteer more shortly after his election (Share the Surplus). So for describing Permaculture, these ethics can lay a firm foundation for understanding.

The next piece I like to explain is that Permaculture is a design-based system for trying to approach sustainability where we try to work with Nature instead of against it (it can help to relate it to other design fields with which people are more familiar such as architecture, urban planning, or landscape architecture).

This is actually something that I find a lot of people get confused on so I'd like to briefly explain. Permaculture refers to the design system. If you haven't gone through the process of Permaculture design (or something equivalent), then you aren't really creating a Permaculture. For instance, you can have a composting toilet, an organic vegetable garden, a straw bale house, a greywater recycling system, an herb spiral, a hive of bees, and sixteen free-range goats in a paddock system, but still not have a Permaculture. Permaculture is simply the design system used to INTEGRATE all these elements so that they function well together in a common sense sort of way. Working from a malleable plan based on "thoughtful, protracted observation" rather than just reacting to needs as they arise is the heart of Permaculture (and how you avoid planting walnut seedlings that will one day shade out your greenhouse).

For most people that is as far as my explanation needs to go. They think it sounds neat-o and we're friends. For the folks who seem really intrigued I will continue on and tell them about a few of the principles from [Introduction to Permaculture](#) by Bill Mollison (such as relative location and obtaining a yield) and I give examples of how a Permaculture might look with regards to these topics. I also try to point them to a source of more detailed information like the permaculture entry in the Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture>), [Gaia's Garden](#) by Toby Hemenway, or suggest a Permaculture Design Course. If they are near a worthwhile Permaculture site (that is one actually planned using Permaculture design principles) I will suggest a visit.

So to recap, I like to start with the ethics (which sound lovely to all of us). Then I explain that Permaculture is a design-based system for creating sustainable places where humans fit into the natural world better than the conventional, exploitive model in which we live today. Finally, for those whose interest is piqued, I will go on to describe some principles and give examples.

So hopefully next time someone asks you, “What is this Permaculture stuff all about, anyway?” you’ll have a simple, concise answer prepared and you’ll wow ‘em with your knowledge and wisdom. ☺ Good luck!

Open Letter to a Hopeful Homesteader by Kelda Miller

Dearest B____,

How much I want to tell you that I completely understand your passion. You and your husband and your two small children are about to pack up and move to the country to begin living the dream that is in your heart. You talk about the herbs you'll grow, the house you'll build, and the self-reliant experiment you can hardly wait to begin. I look into your sparkling eyes and can't help but smile with you.

And what follows here are the words I cannot say to you, not unless I knew you better, or knew you were interested. I don't know your path.

I vacillate between days when I feel like I may know something, one small thing, and days when I know that I know nothing at all.

And if, by some stroke of luck, today is a day when I do know something, what is it?



The Earth speaks to us all, this I know.

And as I write to you, sitting on a crowded bus, my heart is speaking in subtle ways to everyone around me, and theirs to me.

And I have heard very clearly, that we need to stop moving out to the country, us humans. We need to stop driving cars. We need to start opening our hearts to the diverse, chaotic mix of people right outside our doorsteps. And we need to invite the Earth back into our lives, starting from here.

We have taken so much, us humans. We have taken so much from the Earth, we have taken so much from each other.

Let the healing begin!!

And I hear you, B_____, probably more than I can tell you in words. I know the neighborhood you live in now, longing to escape. It's not a community; it's cars, cul-de-sacs, fences, televisions, stuff, and often fearful, angry minds. It's Wal-Marts, Safeways, Blockbusters, Krispy Kremes, as well as schools, churches, and dog parks. And all of these things are a mind-numbing traffic experience away. You are not like this, I know. You want your children to experience life and love, not madness.

I hear you. I grew up in your neighborhood. There was a lot of madness.

Huh, I got three strange gifts from that experience. 1) A scary car accident as a child. 2) A love of long walks. 3) An obstinately stubborn rebelliousness.

I can hear what the Earth says as someone who has never adapted my mind to that of a car, as I have never driven.

I am tired of my own willful defiance, B_____. And I am terribly tired of the pride I feel in weaker moments. I just say this bit about not driving, simply, humbly, because it is truly very different here, from this feet-on-the-ground place.



One thing I've learned is that all of the Earth is sacred. The sun and the wind kiss old-growth forest and parking lots alike. We cannot, with our freeways and parking lots, destroy sacredness. It is beyond our capabilities.

We either invite it to live with us or we don't.

I propose an experiment, a simple one. The next time you go through town, imagine every space that is now dominated by the automobile as a green vacant lot waiting for a garden. (You really have to try this now; you can't just read about it....) Driveway = delete. Cul-de-sac = delete. Five-lane thoroughfare = delete. Mall parking lot = delete. Walgreens parking lot = delete. Church parking lot = delete. Automobile sales = delete. Car washes = delete. Ten lane freeways = delete. Gas stations = delete.

Hmm...true, this experiment is turning completely insane because, with all this childish fantasizing, the place 'out in the country' for which you long starts to look like it's already here.

Welcome to my world.

BUT, the rationalist says, it's IMPRACTICAL to think of our towns without cars or asphalt. How would we go to the store, to the school? How would we go to work in the morning?

Close your eyes.

See the houses, the buildings of your town; see the land all around them as vacant lots waiting for gardens. In your mind's eye stand in your kitchen and make your children two jugs of lemonade. Ask your kids if they'd like to set up a stand and sell lemonade to your neighbors. Now, in your mind's eye, sit on your porch and watch where they go. Their feet are on the ground and they know the best place.

Watch as other neighbors, or their kids, buy some lemonade & join them. Someone else in the neighborhood has too much zucchini; another person has too many plums. An old woman likes to tell stories. Your husband, I don't know, let's say he's an electrician, is doing electrical work for your neighbors. Someone sets up a couple farms, or a ranch, a short distance away. The forest begins to grow back.

This is small. This is not the town you once had; this is just your neighborhood. There are other neighborhoods like this, but different. There are wide walking paths between them, maybe even wide enough for the occasional car if necessary. There are neighborhoods that make villages; they are connected by bus, by trolley. There are villages that make towns and cities; they are connected by boats, by trains.

This is stupid.

Why do I write this? Why do I indulge in such fantasies?

Maybe because they aren't fantasies, they are flesh and blood and garden and bone all over the world. Patterns like this neighborhood are buried in our DNA. The automobile, and an amazing culture of detachment, just took it away for a while, that's all.

Back in the car-dominated world outside this bus window, we have created 'towns' that people want to run away from. That is never a good sign. And then when they leave, those people aren't able to create functional villages 'in the country' either. If they still interact with schools and stores and offices, then they simply just drive their cars more than they used to.

And they may be making farms out of perfectly good forests.

The Western progress-and-growth-oriented culture is like a rambunctious teenager turning up the volume on their radio higher and higher until it is a deafening thudding noise. Just a little more volume, a little more 'growth'...it's good for us. Just a little more...

What we seek when we move out to the country is to turn the volume down, to bring back some love and sanity to our lives.

Maybe we don't need to move though. Maybe we just need each other.

Maybe we just need a campfire and a late night snuggle over tea, B_____, to build our strength. It's embarrassing maybe, but it does take strength to reach out to the unfamiliar world of people who are not exactly like us; to the old woman who swears at dogs who run through her garden; to the shy children whose father yells at them; to the Mary Kay mother with star-athlete daughters; to the family of color who faces subtle and overt racism at every turn.

It doesn't take a revolution to have a campfire, or for our kids to have a lemonade stand. Your house or mine?

Funky Chickens for Sustainable Food Systems by Geoff Johnson



As awareness grows around the social and environmental problems of our modern corporate food systems, so does a movement towards sustainable, home-scale food production. It seems that while many of us may envision this as backyard fruit trees and veggie beds, less often do we think of animals. In fact, there seems to be a common misconception that animals automatically compromise the ecological sustainability of an agricultural system. Although industrial agriculture's use of both animals and plants has proven disastrous on many fronts (*i.e.* ecological, ethical, disease epidemics like BSE and Avian

Flu, etc.), animals can be appropriately integrated into well-designed agricultural systems to actually improve their sustainability. To provide an example of how this can be true at the home-scale, I would like to offer a personal account of how integrating chickens into my urban gardening has helped me to reduce my ecological footprint.

For the last nine years I've been using intensive soil building and veggie production methods to produce a significant amount of my own food. I strive to do it thoughtfully, but it's still a lot of work, and all too often requires importing materials such as organic fertilizer from off-site. This year, I've got some serious help. I now look after a small backyard flock of eleven chickens, and they help to look after me.

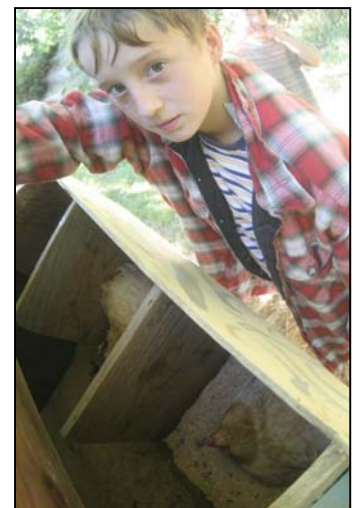
I make sure my hens are happy by providing them with all the things they could possibly want (except roosters, which are illegal in the city despite the widespread acceptance of car alarms!). These include: a healthy, balanced diet, adequate shelter, water, protection from predators, lots of room to run around, access to grit for digestion, access to dust to bathe in, and special care when one of them gets sick. In turn, they supply me with pest control (especially apple codling moth larvae), weed control, surface tillage, fertilization, composting and worm production services, and the richest eggs I've ever tasted. Being aware of everything they need as well as everything they have to offer allows me to set up a symbiotic relationship instead of treating them as single-yield, industrial units, cut off from the web of life.

What's more, our new relationship is growing as I continue to draw on permaculture design ideas I've seen work successfully on various farms I've visited. This year I plan on developing my yard to simultaneously improve their quality of life and harness their awesome chicken power! Soon my dimwitted yet endearing accomplices will find themselves spending time in the back of my greenhouse. In exchange for the extra heat and carbon dioxide they generate for the seedlings, they will have a warmer place to spend nights and cold rainy days. When their new coop heats up on nice days they will have access to a large area planted with nutritious perennial greens, seed producing shrubs, and mulberry trees that will supplement their summer diets. Eventually I may even occasionally supplement my diet with one of them (but I'll probably wait until we know each other a bit better...).

For the moment my chickens spend their days scratching for yummy slugs and pill bugs in the area where this year's vegetable garden will be. They've been busy destroying unsightly lawn and weeds, and building rich soil in the process. Last month I dumped bags of okara (soybean pulp) and leaf mold on this area and have watched as the chickens rake out, mix together, and scratch these amendments (along with their own nitrogen rich "fertilizer") into the surface of the soil. In six winter weeks, this natural behavior has developed a rich, loose loam for spring veggie production, freeing up my time and energy for other tasks.

In a smaller, caged in area of the yard my fine-feathered friends perform the same feat, but in a more intensive way. It is here that I dump daily buckets of kitchen waste from a local restaurant. The birds get their fill of gourmet greens and leftover nachos; diverting organics from the waste stream and building humus while creating perfect conditions for thousands of red wiggler worms. Leftovers are raked up and buried, and worms are sold to high-rise, vermicomposting enthusiasts, confirming the Permaculture maxim that wherever an energy cycle is created, so is potential for a yield.

But all this talk of heat transfer and waste diversion really leaves something out. Chickens are just really nice beings to have around. Aside from all their useful contributions to a sustainable lifestyle, I like the cute sounds they make, and watching them get funky in their dust bath (if you haven't seen this, it beats watching TV or surfing the net any day). As for eating them, my hesitation, for now, is personal, not ecological. When I think about the material/energy inputs, pollution, social justice issues, and monoculture associated with industrial legume production, processing and transportation (including distant "organic" operations, the choice for me is clear. I think that supporting local farmers who produce free-run, organic chickens and eggs is a much safer bet for satisfying our limited protein needs in an ecologically sustainable way. Better still, we can "bring the chickens home", letting them convert our kitchen waste, pests, and weeds into compost, quality eggs, and a range of garden services. Viva la chicken!



Recommended reading:

- pages 28 – 30 in the Permaculture Designer's Manual (Pyramids, Food Webs, Growth, and Vegetarianism) by Bill Mollison
- Chickens in Your Back Yard: a Beginner's Guide by Rick and Gail Luttmann
- Chicken Tractor: the Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil by Andy Lee, Pat Foreman, and Patricia L. Foreman

*Geoff is your friendly, neighborhood Permaculturist living in Victoria, B.C. His article was originally printed in "The Latest Dirt", Newsletter of the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre.