

The Bullock's Permaculture Homestead

Spring Newsletter 2008 (v. 5)



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News & Upcoming Events

- Course Dates
 - Introduction to Permaculture Weekend Workshop: May 30th – June 1st
 - Permaculture Design Course: July 13th – August 2nd
 - Permaculture Teacher Training: August 10th – 17th
- Don't wait too long to sign-up!

Words from the Daver

Hello from the frontlines! Spring is upon us again and it's almost time to get serious in the garden. So what projects do we have in the hopper for 2008?

As always structures, landscapes, and systems will be constantly improving. Up the hill a new roof, stairs, and landing for our library are almost complete. This will allow us to begin looking at plans to make a small office space and get our woodshop in order.

Downhill we've nearly completed our new solar energy system for pumping water to fill our tanks and ponds in the summer and powering our day-to-day lives in the winter. We've got our fingers crossed that we will be able to flip the switch this year!

For the horticulturists out there, you'll be happy to see that we intend to do a big push to improve our nursery. Better stock, better marketing, and better organization are all part of the plan. We'll also be spring grafting or summer budding rootstocks that are already in place, but have gotten away from us. This will mean more production for minimal effort (not to mention a lot of fun).

In addition to all that we will be working to improve our administrative procedures (exciting, huh?).

For those of you who live nearby and haven't been out for a while, I encourage you to pay us a visit sometime this year. We think you'll like what you see!

Happy spring!

Dave

What's Wrong With Permaculture? By Michael Becker

It's February, and I'm sitting in my garden writing studio here in Hood River reviewing notes from last summer's experiences. Teaching at the Bullocks design course, working with my students at our school garden and selling at the farmers market, developing my own town lot system, and the amazing time we had at the educators' course back at the Bullocks in August. What a great summer and so many amazing experiences for me as a teacher, I'm certain I learned as much as anybody. It was a time of deep recharge for me as I saw so many people hard at work to see things change, to make life better, to understand the work that lay before them, and to commit to starting those tasks. In that reflection, though, I have to ask myself, what is missing? Why with the many people I have had the delight to spend time and share energy with, and all the work happening out there, why is it such a dark time in so many ways? With all the answers available to make change towards a different path, and a design based methodology to link the parts, what is the disconnect in the system? What is wrong with Permaculture?

OK, so wrong may be a bit harsh, but why, after 30 years, aren't the ideas and concepts of Permaculture more widespread, especially in the US? Why do I still, more often than not receive blank stares when I say the word? What is the missing link that lies as blockage to modern people? Is it the word itself? Should the "P" word be relegated to secret society, whispered in hushed tones behind closed garden gates? Are there ways to get the ideas spreading in a smoother fashion?

The way I see it, there are four main problems that we as Permaculturists need to address. First is the scale of the topic. When I reflect on twenty odd years of study towards my own understanding of the idea, it's no small wonder that people might experience some difficulty in offering a concise 2 minute sound bite, assuming you can get someone to pay attention for that long! Second, is the wide variety of definitions of what Permaculture really is. They range from the short and sweet to outrageously technical and complicated, but each tends to leave folks equally mystified. From Douglas Bullocks, "It's really just a fertility cult" to Bill Mollison's,

“Don’t shit in your nest”, to the new academia versions that lose customers in their verbosity, it’s no wonder that people who have had a rough introduction are reluctant to return for a second helping. Third, our culture doesn’t know what to do with a generalist anymore. The famous “Renaissance Man” archetype is not a real prominent player in our cash driven economy. People tend to specialize in their particular field to make a home for themselves. When a broad spectrum Permaculture conversation takes place it can leave people feeling they cannot gain the background in all the areas of study. My Latin botany background is still sorely lacking, but I’m working on it. There are not enough functioning models for people to observe and experience the ideas rather than hear about them, or read about them in a book. And fourth, is the standard mode of delivery for Permaculture Education. Three week, residential design courses are an enlightening, often life changing experience. Problematically they are expensive, disruptive to a scheduled life, difficult for families and tend to collect people that are open to the ideas, rather than seeking a crowd not previously open or tuned toward the information.

These problems, difficult as they may seem are all able to be addressed. The reality of being a Permaculturist is you have the role of educator along for the ride. Mollison says “everything gardens”, Becker says, “everyone teaches”, being aware of this can hopefully lead to instruction that helps people understand and feel capable of the work rather than shutting out potential new students of the discipline. What are the key elements necessary in good Permaculture *Education Design*? Here are three ideas that can begin to bridge the gap.

First of all, operating on the premise that Permaculturists are by definition teachers, it is our responsibility to meet our students with a sense of grace and compassion. We are all on a continuum of teacher and learner, there is always someone with a skill we don’t know and someone who is looking for those things we are competent at and ready to share. When we as teachers begin to look at students not as a place to “send” our knowledge to but as another human on a quest that resembles our own, we can remember those days when some new bit of information changed how we looked at the world. Our job as educators is to find the “handle” that someone can use to connect their current knowledge base to a new idea. Without the connection process the idea flows through and although it may be entertaining at the time it will not be retained for the long-term. These interactions tend to be informal and more personal than a standard classroom scene. We need to be on the lookout for those “teachable moments” that we can capitalize upon. A friend was at my home the other weekend and I was out in the garden mulching for spring and I commented on the variety of food that was still in the garden in January. He said he didn’t see much of anything. I told him there was a whole dinner there. He of course denied the idea. That night during a wonderful soup made of fresh dug potatoes, leeks, garlic, onions, Swiss chard, and winter carrots his paradigm of what a garden can do was forever changed.

Next we need to offer more models and experiences for people to really see and feel the ideas. Many modern Permaculture books and texts require a sense of vision and time that is often a block to really seeing the ideas. Many small scale projects could have more of an effect than a few large ones. Taking a solar shower, eating good food from a cob oven, standing on a beautiful earthen floor, helping at a neighborhood garden, smelling well made compost, experiencing a perennial polyculture in a small backyard plot, these are all experiences that there may be some magazine or film information from but making it real and feeling it with your feet or your tongue

is so much more powerful. Spending time at the Bullock farm is a surreal experience for many, putting those elements into an urban setting, surrounded by contemporary life grounds those possibilities into a new reality. As Permaculture teachers our job is to engineer experiences that people are forced to slow down and think about. When school teachers *hear* about our gardens they are often quick to point out why it might not work at their school. When teachers *walk* through our gardens, they say, “We could do something like this”. We need to remember that we don’t need to give all the information; we need to give a small amount of good information.

And finally, we need to be relentless pushers for change. School food, classroom gardens, edible green spaces, farmers markets, local food systems, local economies, clean air, and clean water all need champions. Permaculture lays out a path that we don’t need to be experts in every endeavor to follow. Trust that others will be working on their path and focus on your own. We are most effective when we apply ourselves to local, small-scale problems. When people see success they want to be involved. Permaculture Principles apply to educational process as well. Start small, obtain a yield, bask in the glory, and then get back to work. It really is that simple. Offer solutions to those problems that effect what we hold most dear, food, families, jobs, sense of place, and satisfaction in a job well done.

The bulbs are popping, buds are swelling, seed catalogs are getting dog eared from heavy flipping, and the days are getting longer, soon it will be the time that we are all in the thick of our projects. Will we have the most effect that we can? Will people look back on time they spent this summer and say, “that is when it all started for me”? Will this be the summer that everybody gets it, when Permaculture becomes “the” word? When Toby Hemenway is on Oprah? Maybe, but if not, I’ll work hard again next year anyway. What other choice do we really have?

*Michael is a Permaculturist and teacher at Hood River Middle School in Oregon. He was named “Oregon’s Middle School Teacher of the Year” in 2007. Each summer he also teaches at the Bullock’s Permaculture Design Course and Teacher Training.

A Recipe for Lonely Apple Trees by Geoff Johnson

Once you’ve established a truly ecological garden, all you really need to be worried about is being hit by falling fruit while napping amongst the herbs. Tree guilds refer to a careful assembly of beneficial plants clustered around a central (usually food producing) tree. They’re a great way to illustrate ecological design principals as they relate to urban-scale gardening, and are a great place for gardeners to start practicing Permaculture.

Often, in a misguided attempt to simplify nature, we humans tend towards isolating landscape elements from one another. And then we complain about how high maintenance they are! A typical semi-dwarf apple tree requires us to spray for pests and disease, pull weeds, fertilize etc... But only if we neglect to



nurture it with a community of multifunctional plants to support these functions.

An apple centred guild, for example, might be encircled at the drip line by grass-suppressing spring bulbs. Since bulbs generally peak in spring and subside in early summer, they effectively share light, nutrients and soil moisture with the tree while competing with greedy spring grass. While some bulbs, like daffodils, are known to repel browsing deer and burrowing rodents, others, like camas and perennial onions, supplement the edible harvest. Bulbs are also an ideal choice to plant near the base of the trunk.

Inside this outermost ring, we would typically find a mixed circle of mulch-producing plants with a scattering of insectary and edible herbs. Artichoke, nettles, yarrow, and, especially, comfrey can also compete with grass but, unlike shallow rooted bulbs, they tend to have powerful root systems that can penetrate and eventually de-compact subsoil, bringing deep mineral nutrients to the surface. Some, like lupine, and alfalfa even fix nitrogen. This inner ring can be selectively slashed three or four times per year, producing deep, rich mulch to shade and feed the living soil. And once balanced, the soil eco-system will have an enhanced ability to prevent any single species (such as apple scab fungus) from getting out of control.

Of course, many of these mulchable plants can also provide food for both people and beneficial insects if we let them flower. Keep in mind that not everything need be cut down for mulch at once. Leave a comfrey for the bees, a yarrow for the pest-predators, an artichoke for the gardener, and maybe even a lupine for aesthetic icing on the ecological cake.

*Geoff is your friendly, neighborhood Permaculturist living in Victoria, B.C.

Contributions

We are always looking for good contributions for our newsletter. Here are a few guidelines:

- We prefer “how-to” articles, or articles of broad interest in the Permaculture community (e.g. how to make ice without electricity, a new design for a portable animal enclosure, new ideas about establishing community Permaculture guild, etc.)
- We prefer not to have project updates, project promotions, or other things that are not of interest to a wide Permaculture audience.

- Target Release Dates

Spring – March 1

Summer – June 1

Autumn – September 1

Winter – December 1

- Submissions Due

February 15

May 15

August 15

November 15

If you are thinking of writing an article, please contact Dave at permaculture.dave@gmail.com to discuss your topic and get ideas.

Thanks!