

DESIGNING TO RECLINE: Introducing Permaculture gardening

Contributed by quercusrobur

An episode of the Australian TV series "Global Gardener" features Bill Mollison demonstrating the making of his permaculture garden. Planting through sheet mulches of newspaper and straw, he claims to have created a landscape able to satisfy all of his needs for food, wood, medicine and fibres in less than thirty working days over a three-year period.

"And this is where the designer turns into the recliner," he winks, lying back and munching fruit amongst an embarrassment of abundance. "If you have it well planted, you can pretend to be working in the garden and be invisible from the house." The word 'permaculture' is a contraction of PERMANent agriCULTURE (or sometimes PERMANent CULTURE), a term coined in the late seventies by Mollison and his fellow countryman David Holmgren. It's a concept that is beautifully simple, yet can be notoriously difficult to explain. Speak to 100 permaculturists and you'll get 100 different definitions. But "creating abundant and sustainable human habitats by following nature's patterns" is a useful sound-bite summary. Permaculture is about intelligent design - making links and connections in order to set up good living systems that don't destroy or pollute. It's to do with Earthcare; (looking after the planet); Peoplecare; (looking after each other and ourselves) and Fairshares; (there's enough for all our needs but not for all our greed). Permaculture isn't about having to get your head around untold facts, figures, Latin names and complicated techniques. Advocated instead is contemplative observation of natural systems in order to see universal patterns and principles at work. These are then applied to meeting our own needs using minimum effort for maximum effect. For example, if we are to feed ourselves sustainably we clearly need to be moving away from industrialised agriculture and more towards a gardening philosophy - less high chemical input prairie farming of monocultures and more market and home gardens - places for creating edible landscapes, community growing projects and forest gardens. In London alone there are swathes of potential food-growing spaces - thousands of hectares of agricultural and derelict land, millions of households with gardens as well as allotments, school playgrounds, rooftops, parks and balconies. Not many of us would be able to grow ALL of the food we need to live, but most of could make a significant contribution to our own diets. I haven't had to buy onions or garlic for years, and soft fruits practically come out of our earholes in the summer, as do broad and runner beans, tomatoes and courgettes. Home-grown potatoes are available from summer to winter solstice, and plenty of other crops come and go throughout the productive season. It's probably true to say that every family meal throughout the year will include at least one thing that is from our garden or allotment, even if its just a handful of winter chard. Growing your own not only guarantees a supply of fresh, locally grown produce, but has many other benefits. For example: Exercise and stress relief (I particularly like Mollison's description of gardening as a "gentle form of Tai Chi"), a reconnection with the soil or an excuse to simply lean on the spade and philosophise the afternoon away. Like popular beat combo The Levellers (nearly) sang, "There's only one way of doing permaculture, and that's your own", but there are a few ground rules to follow. Work with nature, not against it. For example, using mulches rather than digging will encourage worms to cultivate the soil and keeps it moist, and planting flowers like poached egg plants and marigolds, or making a pond, will attract pest-controlling ladybirds and frogs. Create diversity Grow as wide and mixed a variety of fruits, nuts and vegetables as possible (a polyculture), not just row upon row of one thing. Monocultures aren't just boring, they are a disaster waiting to happen - remember the Irish Potato Famine of 1845. Close the broken cycles Compost your kitchen waste, don't put it in landfill pits - or, better still, install a compost toilet to stop your own 'wastes' from being flushed out to sea & See solutions instead of problems Those nettles between your cropping areas aren't weeds - they are a resource! You can eat them in soup or make them into beer, use them to create rope, dyes and fertiliser; plus they are medicinal and provide a habitat for wildlife. Put things in the right place There's not a lot of point in planting 'Cut & Come Again' lettuces on your allotment two miles away from your house. When you are knocking up a salad for tea, human nature and the law of minimum effort dictates that you will pop round to the greengrocers and buy a lettuce whilst your crop sits and runs to seed. It makes more sense to put those elements that require frequent picking or attention - salad plants, herbs, strawberries, seedlings in trays - close to the back door where that best of all fertilisers, "the gardener's shadow", most often falls. On the other hand, maincrop vegetables like spuds or onions that require a lot of space but only occasional weeding and watering would probably be better sited on that once a week cycling distance allotment. What I like about permaculture is that it asks us to start from where we are now; "at the end of your nose," as Bill Mollison says. You don't have to wait until "After The Revolution" to sprout a jar of beans on your kitchen shelf or join your local LETS scheme. Nor do you need to be able to afford to buy acres of land to plant a windowbox full of herbs or support your nearest Farmers Market. Starting an organic allotment or planting an apple tree are tremendously empowering acts, and positive steps towards creating healthy self-reliant communities. At its essence, permaculture is about making real that old 'green truism', "Think Globally But Act Locally". For, cliché or not, that is where the future lies if we are to have one. Graham Burnett. Graham is the writer and illustrator of "Permaculture a Beginners Guide" and runs permaculture courses at Dial House (also home of Camp Idle). For more information see www.spiralseed.co.uk