

Permaculture

*Ideas from the Past,
Providing Food for the Future*

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“One generation plants trees; another enjoys the shade” This is a very old Chinese proverb. This saying encompasses an understanding of the longevity of our landscapes and also our obligation to future generations. Unfortunately as our cities developed, urban dwellers moved away from taking advantage of what our outdoor spaces can offer. However, things are changing. We are now in a time when we are greening rooftops, shopping at farmers markets, and seed companies are struggling to keep up with demand. It seems that there are many people looking to new, and perhaps old ideas in an effort to be greener.

There are not many things greener than buying local produce, other than perhaps growing it yourself. And growing food yourself is a satisfying and rewarding activity. A food garden doesn't have to be isolated and set in rows; in fact a food garden doesn't necessarily have to be replanted every spring or look like a food garden at all. Don't be intimidated by convention. In this age of change and questioning, of sustainability, and climate issues, perhaps we need a new (actually an old way) of gardening that includes the production of food in our home landscapes. Not many people are familiar with the concept of permaculture, but this and other different ways of looking at our outdoor spaces could hold the key to our future and our sustainability.

Permaculture is too complex to explain in its entirety in an article, but the concept can and should be considered. In its essence, it's a way of acknowledging the importance of local food, the environment and development, all working together as part of a large system in perpetuity. It is a conscious attempt to mimic certain aspects of the natural world to enhance our landscape to provide food, fiber, and

energy. All of these pieces are part of an effort to strengthen the concept of a local economy. A very forward thinking idea, yet one deeply rooted in the past.

As a perpetual garden, which attempts to create a sustainable system, permaculture is a highly planned and managed garden space. This concept is incredibly complex and to achieve its goals requires a paradigm shift away from current gardening methods and even the look of a standard landscape. To be fair, the concept is so all encompassing that it is highly recommended that you talk to trained professionals prior to pursuing the idea. This planning will involve the use of varying plant heights to create a small forest, a food forest, and the emphasis on perennial crops, and many other aspects distinguishes this idea from a standard food garden. Also this type of gardening is not exclusively for traditional fruits and vegetables but also plants such as herbs, useful ornamental and plants grown for fibers. Water is given top priority and the harvesting and diversion of water to retain more within the system is a major component.

In the end the goal is to design a system, one that is built on guilds — the associations between large groups of microorganisms, plants and animals. For instance, think of companion planting as a basic start to a guild. Productivity is important, but it is not necessarily determined simply by the amount of food being produced. A food forest is about including a high level of biodiversity in a balanced system that provides food as one of its benefits.



For many people a complete switch might be overwhelming, but there are valuable lessons to be learned from such a holistic landscaping model.

Some of the major points to this broad technique can help us understand the true scope of this adventure in gardening. Observation and interaction with your garden is essential as is the ability to obtain a yield for your efforts. The use of renewable resources is fundamental and a reduction or elimination of waste is a serious goal. Blending or integrating parts of your garden is essential, a big change from the days of isolation of different parts of a garden. This blending is more natural and increases biodiversity; and that in turn lowers pest and disease pressure. Value this diversity and be creative in the garden, and be willing to respond and change when necessary. Most importantly, don't try and do everything at once — start small and slow, because developing this technique can take many years.

Using these and other foundation points can help urban and suburban dwellers restore diminished landscapes and restore ecosystem health while growing food. In the end, the concept is designed to go even further and provide for raising small animals such as chickens, or even producing housing materials such as lumber. The goal is the creation of a community around common resources produced locally. These clearly aren't backyard ideas for everyone, but they are larger inspiring concepts that follow the same overall pattern.

Many people would think that they don't

have the space to work with this concept, and although it is much easier on a larger plot it is possible for suburban and even urban lots to provide a wide variety of edible treats while providing a beautiful space to relax and enjoy yourself. Researching this gardening technique provides an option for those gardeners looking for a long term challenge. It's an opportunity for those looking to respect the planet by using human ingenuity and the greenest methods and concepts possible to create gardens for the future. Ensure that you are looking at the bigger picture, but start small to avoid being confused. Using your own compost as mulch and planting some grafted fruit trees in your yard is something everyone can start with. It will provide visual interest and something to eat in the fall. Perhaps the next year you might install a rain barrel, plant some strawberries in the mulch under the fruit trees, and introduce some lettuce and herbs into open spaces to reduce the amount of weeding you are doing. Now there is more to eat, less work to do, more moisture in the soil and you are saving rain for when it is required during drier times of the year.

By thinking about our garden spaces today, we can become more self-reliant and also acknowledge the opportunity to improve the natural world and what it has to offer future generations. It's time to embrace the natural world and to explore the existence of different ideas for our garden spaces.

Growing more of our own food will be rewarding and also create a higher level of sustainability and can be another little thing we do to pursue a more positive future. We can change the face of urban and suburban areas and build the communities of the future, in a garden. 

