

ROBERT KOURIK PRESENTS:



A Look at Permaculture Design: as a Model for Sustainable, Ecologically Sound Landscapes

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A PEEK INSIDE



A Look at Permaculture Design: as a Model for Sustainable, Ecologically Sound Landscapes.....1

Capturing the Clouds: Fog Drip & Cisterns.....5

Tidbits.....9

Them Old Clogged-Pipe Blues.....10

Book Orders....11

Native Plants are the Most Drought-Resistant... Not Always.....12

There are many valid ways to practice organic or environmentally-sound gardening or landscaping. Unfortunately there's also a tendency in the organic-gardening community to turn originally dynamic and open horticultural approaches into factions based on dogma as inflexible as that of any religious discipline or diet plan. This is especially ironic since nature is full of fluctuation and change.

Bob recommends a two-pronged approach when encountering rigid environmental/organic doctrine: first, review and discuss what you perceive to be the facts—taking into consideration both your own and others' actual horticultural experience and using the tenets of science (with its inherent limitations) as a foundation. Secondly, be prepared to change your views and methods constantly in the light of new insights and scientific discoveries. In other words, my one dogmatic tenet is that rigid dogma has no place in a natural, evolving garden.

As a result, I constantly research the scientific literature to

always an act of faith, because we have so little grasp of how things really work. Nonetheless, I still prefer to apply the rigors of scientific inquiry as a fascinating double-check against my presumptions.

Thus, what follows is the first of a continuing series of discussions about the scientific underpinnings of Permaculture—now in the throes of its second major U.S. revival—and other environmental landscape-design doctrines. This article, originally a “background piece” for an Organic Gardening cover story on Permaculture co-founder Bill Mollison, is not an attack on Permaculture but a discussion using it as a point of reference. (Since Permaculture is a well-articulated hypothesis, it is easier to discuss than a generic concept like “sustainable landscaping.”) I should mention that the goals of my work and those of Permaculture are remarkably similar, although the paths are rather different.

A Look at Permaculture Design Concepts

Permaculture. It's not a new brand of yogurt, but a combination of the words “permanent” and “agriculture,” coined in Australia by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. Early in my fascination with organic edible landscapes, (circa 1978), I happened across a copy of *Permaculture One, A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements*, (1). At the time, I was

preoccupied with the problems of integrating more perennial food crops into ornamental landscapes, and of creating landscapes which were environmentally sound and sustainable. Lo and behold, here was a book that stated on its back cover: “By carefully designing a system around functional relationships between plant and animal species you can create a stable ‘cultivated ecology’...permaculture (is based upon) the underlying philosophy of working with, rather than against nature...” It was the perfect seed of encouragement for me at the time.

There are a number of systems which embrace many of the underlying concepts of Permaculture, but under different names— sustainable agriculture, regeneration gardening, organic gardening, edible landscaping, the “One-Straw Revolution,” agroecology, and appropriate horticulture. Whatever the semantic contortions, many gardeners are trying to find an approach to gardening that respects nature, is sensitive to seasonal cycles, works with environmental dynamics, utilizes renewable energy sources and natural fertilizers, and grows healthy plants and food without caustic chemical controls.

In the 1970s, Permaculture developed in parallel with the work of numerous other people and organizations: the Farallones Institute in California; the New Alchemy Institute in Cape Cod, MA; the Regeneration Projects of Rodale Press in Pennsylvania, Wes Jackson's

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substantiate or refute my own gardening assumptions, which could otherwise turn into my own personal myth and dogma. Gardening is

