

Did you say 'Permaculture'?

A term you may have heard bandied about in recent months is "permaculture".

What does it mean? Well, just like many concepts, there are a varied number of definitions. Here is one, credited to Bill Mollison, the 'father' of permaculture: "(Permaculture is) ... an integrated system of design, that encompasses not only agriculture, horticulture, architecture and ecology, but also economic systems, land access strategies and legal systems for businesses and communities."

Another, less technical one stated by Rob Avis of Verge Permaculture in Calgary is this: "Permaculture is a framework that allows you to take all of the most cutting edge environmental and social solutions and weave them together into something that is guaranteed to work long term".

Xeriscaping (low-water gardening), edible gardening, composting, and other sustainable approaches to landscape 'manipulation' all fall under the larger umbrella of permaculture. I like to use the word 'permascape' to represent the gardening part of permaculture.

Examining the permascape aspect of permaculture includes practices such as harvesting and redistributing rainwater; planting in 'guilds' (similar to companion planting); removing unproductive, resource-hungry lawns; adding nutrients to the soil using compost; plus many other ideas.

Central to permaculture are three ethics: Care for the Earth, Care for People, and Fair Share.

We can Care for the Earth by treating it gently and giving it the respect it deserves. For example, to reduce soil compaction and textural damage, use human brawn and energy ('many hands make light work') whenever possible. Create and use organic-rich compost, worm castings, or animal manure (composted, when required) to enrich your soils.

As you change your gardening habits and care for the earth, you'll notice she gives back: abundant food harvests, increasingly healthier soils, cleaner air and less 'drudgery' gardening. In fact, you likely will find you have fertile soil you need to find a home for!

Growing a polyculture (growing a mix of species) is much more productive, less expensive, and contributes to soil health than the monoculture farming adapted in the early twentieth century. Never mind the physical and mental health benefits to spending time out-of-doors and nurturing life.

Care for People happens naturally. Initially, you may have some strange or questioning looks from your over-the fence neighbours. But as your permascape

grows and you begin to reap the rewards, what better way to get to know your neighbourhood than to invite them into your permascape and demonstrate your mutually beneficial relationship with our Earth?

In these increasingly unsettling times of global climate change, food shortages, civil unrest and peak oil, the statement “United we Stand, Divided we Fall” comes to mind. Permaculture has a way of creating community which, in my view, is a start on the track to the healthier societies enjoyed by previous generations. Furthermore, the permaculture approach is to focus on the positives - the opportunities that exist - rather than the obstacles, even in the most desperate situations.

Fair Share: taking of what we need and sharing what we don't whilst recognising there are limits to how much we can give and how much we can take. Although this ethic is directed toward setting limits to consumption and reproduction, and redistributing surplus, I would like to include the sharing of knowledge in this ethic to further develop the inter-connectedness underlying permaculture.

That's it in a nutshell – admittedly a very small nutshell. For a comprehensive introduction, join Grasslands Nursery as we host Element Eco-Design (Vernon) on May 21 – 22. For just \$110 + HST you can take part in a two-day, hands-on, information-packed weekend. Please visit www.elementcodesign.com or www.grasslandsnursery.ca for more.

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