

It's Getting Easier, Being Green

Permaculture Goes Mainstream

Those who deem themselves friends of the environment often choose to make their political credo an all-encompassing lifestyle: they turn “green” or “crunchy,” and occasionally go to great lengths to reduce their impact on the world around them. Some choose to eat nothing but organic foods or refuse to ride in automobiles. Others are more radical, like “fruitarians” (who consider it theft to drink milk, torture to cut leaves from plants, and murder to eat animals) or those who collect and compost “humanure” (human manure).

For those seeking a more moderate approach to environmentally-friendly living, one option is “permaculture,” a movement that has begun the transition from the activist fringes to the American mainstream.

Permaculture was born in the mid-1970s as a response to environmentalist concerns about energy, agriculture, and deforestation. Two Australian ecologists, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, coined the term “permaculture” (*permanent agriculture*) for what

they envisioned as a new approach to ecological design. As outlined in books, lectures, and hundreds of websites, permaculture seeks to preserve resources and minimize waste. Much of it, in fact, is common sense.

Although the principles and practices of permaculture can be used for commercial properties, farms, or entire village designs, they seem to be catching on in the United States for individual homes. Permaculture promises to provide a comprehensive system for designing every aspect of a house and property: It conserves electricity, fuel, and water; it makes better use of natural elements such as sunlight, wind, gravity, and trees; it makes everything look better, run better, feel better.

For example, a permaculture home can be built with a roofline that blocks sunlight during the summer, but permits the lower elevation winter sun to shine into south-facing windows. Thoughtfully designed floor and furniture surfaces inside these windows can absorb the heat and release it in the evening hours. Building materials and colors can be selected to improve a

home's ability to absorb or reflect light. Thoughtful design thus makes it possible to save money on heating and air conditioning, and makes it possible to use the sun's energy without the set-up cost required for large solar panels.

Strategically placed trees can also contribute to the cooling and heating of the home and property. Deciduous trees can shade the home and yard in the summertime, then lose their leaves to let sunlight warm the home in the winter. Trees can also help with air flow by blocking wind or redirecting breezes for windows and screen doors to capture. And well-placed trees provide leaf mulch; food crops; shade for smaller plants; and a natural frame for grapes, kiwis, and other varieties of fruit-bearing vine.

Other plants can also be intelligently incorporated into the permaculture homestead. Flowers can be selected not just for beauty, but also for saving labor (they can be self-seeding, fix nitrogen to the soil, and attract beneficial insects like ladybugs and aphid-eating hoverflies) or for eating (many flowers can add color, nutrition, aroma, and flavor to salads and other dishes). Other plants and bushes can be placed along frequently used walkways to provide convenient snacks. Instead of a conventional garden plot in the backyard, a small greenhouse can be connected to the kitchen, making fresh vegetables readily available.

Prudent water management is also critical to permaculture. Used kitchen water can be cleaned by living water-

plant filters and taken by gravity to meet the needs of the greenhouse. Water from walkways, driveways, and natural landscape features can be channeled into ponds that serve a variety of functions on the property. Even used "gray water" from laundry machines can, with proper treatment, be reused to water plants.

More ambitious permaculturists will sometimes raise chickens, make their own paper, collect water in rooftop tanks, build their houses out of cob, or generate power with windmills or other alternative energy sources. The ultimate goal is to preserve resources while using a complex network of interlocking natural forces and organisms to minimize the labor required for food production and natural beauty.

Permaculture's power for saving labor comes from the connections between the various elements working together and serving multiple purposes: One can only benefit from a tree that cools, fertilizes, and provides food if the home is set up to benefit from the shade, if plants are there to benefit from the fertilizer, and if one is interested in eating the particular food that the tree produces. But this dauntingly complex vision can be a turn-off for someone looking for a more leisurely approach to green living, which is why some people have opted only to pick and choose *à la carte* from the menu of more moderate permaculture ideas.

Although it is difficult to find statistical proof, anecdotal evidence suggests that permaculture, once the sole province of hippies and leftists, is

becoming more widespread among homeowners hoping to live in an environmentally-friendly manner. There are many permaculture schools in the United States, Australia, and numerous other countries around the world. (According to reports, Zimbabwe, in particular, has taken avidly to permaculture, with several courses and large-scale projects.) Landscape architects and designers with permaculture training can be found in most areas of the United States. There is even a Permaculture Credit Union, based in New Mexico, which seeks to combine “sound financial business practice with earth-care ethics to supply its mem-

bers with a growing set of financial services.”

A mainstream version of permaculture—including only the most moderate, sensible permaculture practices—is likely to continue gaining adherents in coming years. Some true believers may worry about watering down the essential permaculture principles, but that’s precisely the point: If ordinary Americans are to adopt more ecologically-friendly ways of life, it will have to be as a result of common-sense choices that supplement normal living, not a radical shift to a fully green existence.