

Permaculture: Where Do I Start?



Vegetable garden incorporating annuals and perennials

Peterborough Master Gardeners

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So what do gardeners do in the winter? Once we've read all our seed magazines and compiled our purchasing lists, or designed new or changes to existing perennial beds, or decided on our vegetable crop rotation for the upcoming season, or read a new gardening book, or watched some gardening videos or TED talks, or found ourselves in the middle of taking a gardening course, what next? Personally, once I've exhausted all these possibilities, I tend to reread my favourite gardening books. I have an incredibly bad memory and find it really helps me when I reread the same books over and over; hoping eventually something will sink in. My books to reread this year are both permaculture-related: [Toby Hemingway's "Gaia's Garden"](#) and [Rosemary Morrow's "Earth User's Guide to Permaculture"](#).

When I first became interested in permaculture a number of years ago, I started reading books and watching videos by the two founders, Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. The concept, ethics, and principles resonated with me, but I have to admit that I struggled based on the literature available at that time, to understand how to translate this into my own Canadian garden. It was not until a couple of years later that I attended a couple of local permaculture design courses and read the book by Toby Hemingway who focuses on North American gardens, that I felt confident enough to bring some of those concepts and methods into my home garden.

As I mentioned in [my last blog](#), permaculture is a design system, a set of guidelines, principles and

practices for sustainable living and land use, working with nature in a continuous cycle that benefits both people and wildlife. As with anything new or overwhelming, it is easy to be deterred by the big picture. Instead, focus on smaller ideas or concepts. If you start implementing smaller more manageable tasks, it will give you confidence to tackle the larger concepts.

The following are a few easy-to-implement permaculture techniques to get you started:

1. **Sheet mulching.** This was actually the first group activity I performed in my first design course. It can also be called lasagna gardening. Permaculture encompasses a no-dig philosophy focusing on building soil life. Sheet mulching allows you to create new beds whilst eliminating weeds and building up the health of the soil. It is also a lot healthier on your back. You simply lay a heavy layer of newspaper or cardboard over the area and top it with 12 inches or so of organic mulch.
2. **Keyhole garden beds.** Keyhole beds are often used in permaculture because they maximize use of space, whilst building soil fertility. They decrease irrigation needs and are easy to plant, harvest and maintain. The bed can be either raised or not, and is often created in a circular pattern which decreases the space required for paths and increases space for plants. This type of bed is most often used for growing herbs & vegetables and because of the circular design, plants with different growing requirements can be planted together often creating different microclimates. For more information:
<https://permaculturefoodforest.wordpress.com/2016/04/14/keyhole-gardens/>
3. **Creating gardening communities or guilds.** In permaculture, a guild can be defined as a grouping of plants, trees, animals and insects that work together protecting their health, habitat and productivity. Probably one of the most familiar guilds is the Three Sisters Guild in which squash, corn and beans are grown together; each one supporting and benefiting the others. The beans grow up the corn and provide nitrogen, whilst the squash mulches and covers the soil. In my last garden, I grew apple tree guilds, surrounding each apple tree with daffodils in the spring (deter predators from chewing bark), comfrey and yarrow, and herbs such as dill & fennel along with chives & onions.
4. **Multiple stories or forest gardens.** As an avid gardener and someone who has difficulty saying 'enough is enough' when it comes to plants—and also the owner of a small city garden—this technique is one I am especially interested in. The idea is that a garden can have multiple stories or layers; from a low herb or ground cover layer up to perennials, shrubs, small trees and finally the canopy trees. The plants in each layer combine and support each other to create and maintain a healthy ecosystem.

Permaculture is much more than the simple examples I have given. It can encompass everything from designing landscapes and buildings, to water and waste management. The benefits for me include enriching the land, feeding and providing habitat, growing food for my family, and giving me somewhere to unwind and feel good about life. However, I am omitting one very important benefit for myself—by incorporating some permaculture practices into my garden, the garden tends to look after itself much more with less interference and work for me!