



Toward a Permaculture Way of Life

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The word “permaculture” conjures images of corncob houses, expansive tomato patches and chickens prancing through wildflowers. Some people imagine hippies and idealists, radical liberals living in a community detached from modern society. Others have never even heard the word at all.

In reality, permaculture is not detachment from society, but a new relationship with modern life based on nature. It derives from the idea that humanity has become too detached from its native instincts. “Permaculture has always been about creating permanent culture,” said Bill Maxwell, a writer who is currently working on building a permaculture-based community in Los Angeles. “The best example is to create your home in such a way that it will last forever. Think of the way we do things; for example, you build a house. You use a lot of wood, then along comes a fire, or a flood, and all of a sudden your home’s gone. It makes no sense to build homes that way ... so the idea is to look around and see if there’s another way.”

In agriculture, there is great hope for permaculture as a sustainable solution to the soil degradation and desertification caused by monocropping, the dominant system in place today worldwide. With permaculture, farmers grow a mixture of food, tree crops and small livestock, with each part of the system benefiting the other parts. Trees tap soil moisture, for example, leaf-fall from trees enriches the soil — and so on.

However, permaculture goes beyond its typical association with agriculture and gardening — and can be related to anything from running a government to love and relationships. In essence, permaculture is the practice of examining cycles and studying patterns within a given system. By observing these cycles, one should be able to classify which aspects of the system work and which do not, allowing for a functional system. For example, in order to run a successful business, you observe whether a product is selling, and if it isn’t, stop carrying it. If you’re spending too much money on paper for the fax machine, you can examine how much paper is being wasted and decide how to encourage conservation. Not only is it environmentally sound, but it’s in one’s best interest economically. While this idea seems abstract, it has been the environmental “law” since the beginning of time. If you examine nature, it doesn’t take long to realize that everything is connected; permaculture experts believe that Western society is flawed in its inability to recognize this fact of nature.

The Permaculture Institute of Northern California, founded by Penny Livingston Stark and her husband, James Stark, is an internationally recognized foundation devoted to spreading the philosophy of permaculture. Based in Pt. Reyes, California, the institute works toward restoring human relationships with nature and teaching people how to live more naturally. By remodeling gardens to be more sustainable and holding training sessions that teach how to incorporate

permaculture into people's lives, the institute is one of the best examples of how the philosophy can be implemented.

Some Marin residents are catching on early. Becky Hendricks, 17, is a student at Sir Francis Drake High School as well as an intern for the Permaculture Institute of Northern California. "In permaculture, one of the basic ideas is that all life is interrelated, and that everything has an effect. It's the same idea in a community," she said. "If one person makes a choice, it affects everyone around them. So if we strive to create communities in our environment, not only will we be implementing permaculture but life overall will become easier. If you need someone to tend to your garden, or cook dinner, you can count on someone around you to help you out."

While the Starks maintain an entire piece of property based on permaculture, complete with abundant gardens and chickens darting around corncob structures, you do not need to devote your life to permaculture in order to practice it. So the question is, How does the average person living in Marin integrate permaculture into his or her daily life?

One simple solution is altering your garden to be more water efficient. By planting native, water-wise plants instead of exotic ones that require more water, you can save resources with little effort. Linda J. Novy, a horticulturist and sustainable-landscape-management consultant, offers another suggestion for people who would like to apply permaculture to their home garden. "I encourage them to look at having an assessment of the inputs into their landscape," she said. "Water is certainly one of them; fossil fuels, pesticides — what seems to be high in use? I think people would benefit from having a professional energy analysis of their garden," says Novy, who has devoted her career to showing people how to maintain a more environmentally sustainable garden and lifestyle. "I also think that more and more contractors need to honor and implement the Clean Water Act, as water is one of the most abused resources yet is easy to preserve."

For more information regarding permaculture and environmental landscaping, you can consult:

- The Permaculture Institute of Northern California: www.permacultureinstitute.com
- The Urban Permaculture Guild: www.urbanpermacultureguild.org
- or your local sustainable-landscaping consultant.