

Permaculture Frequently Asked Questions

What is Permaculture?

Permaculture is about designing ecological human habitats and food production systems. It is a land use and community building movement which strives for the harmonious integration of human dwellings, microclimate, annual and perennial plants, animals, soils, and water into stable, productive communities. The focus is not on these elements themselves, but rather on the relationships created among them by the way we place them in the landscape. This synergy is further enhanced by mimicking patterns found in nature. A central theme in permaculture is the design of ecological landscapes that produce food. Emphasis is placed on multi-use and perennial plants, practices such as composting, sheet mulching, recycling, companion planting, natural pest control and the integration of animals to recycle nutrients, graze weeds and provide food and other materials.

Where did permaculture come from?

The word "permaculture" was coined in 1978 by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. It was originally a contraction of "permanent agriculture" but is often now explained as relating to "permanent culture."

Permaculture is an Australian 'invention' but has now spread all around the world.

Is permaculture just about gardening?

No. Permaculture is about sustainability, which includes much more than food, however since providing food is a key aspect of sustainability, it is a major focus of permaculture. Permaculture entails much more than just food production. Energy-efficient buildings, waste water treatment, recycling, and land stewardship in general are other important components of permaculture. More recently, permaculture has expanded its purview to include economic and social structures that support the evolution and development of more permanent communities, such as co-housing projects and eco-villages. As such, permaculture design concepts are applicable to urban as well as rural settings, and are appropriate for single households as well as whole farms and villages.

What are some other practical applications of Permaculture?

Permaculture is not limited to plant and animal agriculture, but also includes community planning and development, use of appropriate technologies (coupled with an adjustment of life-style), and adoption of concepts and philosophies that are both earth-based and people-centered, such as bioregionalism.

Many of the appropriate technologies advocated by permaculturists are well known. Among these are solar and wind power, composting toilets, solar greenhouses, energy efficient housing, and solar food cooking and drying.

Due to the inherent sustainability of perennial cropping systems, permaculture places a heavy emphasis on tree crops. Systems that integrate annual and perennial crops—such as alley cropping and agroforestry—take advantage of "the edge effect," increase biological diversity, and offer other characteristics missing in monoculture systems. Thus, multicropping systems that blend woody perennials and annuals hold promise as viable techniques for large-scale farming. Ecological methods of production for any specific crop or farming system (e.g., soil building practices, biological pest control, composting) are central to permaculture as well as to sustainable agriculture in general.

Since permaculture is not a production system, per se, but rather a land use and community planning philosophy, it is not limited to a specific method of production.

Furthermore, as permaculture principles may be adapted to farms or villages worldwide, it is site specific and therefore amenable to locally adapted techniques of production. As an example, standard organic farming and gardening techniques utilizing cover crops, green manures, crop rotation, and mulches are emphasized in permacultural systems.

However, there are many other options and technologies available to sustainable farmers working within a permacultural framework (e.g., chisel plows, no-till implements, spading implements, compost turners, rotational grazing). The decision as to which "system" is employed is site-specific and management dependent.

Farming systems and techniques commonly associated with permaculture include agroforestry, swales, contour plantings, Keyline agriculture (soil and water management), hedgerows and windbreaks, and integrated farming systems such as pond-dike aquaculture, aquaponics, intercropping, and polyculture.

Gardening and recycling methods common to permaculture include edible landscaping, keyhole gardening, companion planting, trellising, sheet mulching, chicken tractors, solar greenhouses, spiral herb gardens, swales, and wormfarming/vermicomposting.

Water collection, management, and re-use systems like Keyline, greywater, rain catchment, constructed wetlands, aquaponics (the integration of hydroponics with recirculating aquaculture), and solar aquatic ponds (also known as Living Machines) play an important role in permaculture designs.

[Above taken from a great website <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/perma.html>]

What are the Permaculture Ethics?

Permaculture is unique among alternative farming systems (e.g., organic, sustainable, eco-agriculture, biodynamic) in that it works with a set of ethics that suggest we *think* and *act* responsibly in relation to each other and the earth.

The ethics of permaculture provide a sense of place in the larger scheme of things, and serve as a guidepost to right livelihood. The ethics are:

Earth Care
People Care
Fair Share

How can I learn more about Permaculture?

Most people find out about Permaculture through friends or the media (TV/Internet). For instance, Gardening Australia (ABC TV) often highlights permaculture demonstration sites. Since the 1990's, more and more excellent material is available on the Internet.

You can find out more about permaculture through:

Training

All Seasons Permaculture Design Course [Ballarat, starts March]
Introduction to Permaculture courses [search the Net for your closest]
Permaculture Design Course (PDC)

Books

Permaculture One (1978) Mollison & Holmgren. Despite its age, this is still a great place to start. 127 pp.
Introduction to Permaculture (1991) Mollison & Mia Slay. 198 pp.
Permaculture Designers Manual (1988) Mollison. 576 pages; a huge text – not an easy starting point, but Bill's concept was a single book to cover all PDC content.
The Permaculture Home Garden (1996) Linda Woodrow. More suited to tropical than temperate climates but very easy to read. 181 pp.

Internet sites

<http://www.permaculturemelbourne.org.au> [Permaculture Melbourne]
<http://www.tagari.com> [Bill Mollison's website]
<http://www.holmgren.com.au> [David Holmgren's website]
<http://www.permacultureinternational.org> [Australian site – good national info]
<http://www.permaculturesa.org.au> [Permaculture South Australia]
<http://www.permaculture.co.uk/main2.html> [UK permaculture]
<http://www.permacultureactivist.net> [USA Permaculture]

Is Permaculture training recognised?

The most common permaculture training is the 72 hour Permaculture Design Course which was developed by Bill Mollison in the early 1980's. This course has never been formally accredited within Australia but is recognised within the permaculture community world-wide.

In 2003, a series of permaculture qualifications aligned with the Australian Qualifications Framework were accredited by Permaculture International Limited (PIL). Called Accredited Permaculture Training (APT) they are government-recognised courses within the TAFE (technical training) sector and are being delivered all over Australia. The All Seasons Permaculture Course covers both the PDC and APT Certificate III in Permaculture curriculum

For information about Accredited Permaculture Training, go to
<http://www.permacultureinternational.org/apt>

For information about the All Seasons Permaculture Design Course go to
http://www.breaze.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=137&Itemid=80
or email permaculture@breaze.org.au

Permaculture Design Principles

There have been many slightly different versions of the Permaculture design principles over the years; here are two sets:

David Holmgren (principle then related traditional saying)

1. Observe and interact “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”
2. Catch and store energy “Make hay while the sun shines”
3. Obtain a yield “You can’t work on an empty stomach”
4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback “The sins of the fathers are visited on the children unto the seventh generation”
5. Use and value renewable resources and services “Let nature take its course”
6. Produce no waste “A stitch in time, saves nine. Waste not, want not”
7. Design from patterns to details “Can’t see the wood for the trees”
8. Integrate rather than segregate “Many hands make light work”
9. Use small and slow solutions “The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Slow and steady wins the race”
10. Use and value diversity “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket”
11. Use edges and value the marginal “Don’t think you are on the right track just because it is a well-worn path”
12. Creatively use and respond to change “Vision is not seeing things as they are but as they will be”

[From Holmgren, D. (2002) Permaculture:Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability. Hepburn: Holmgren Design Services]

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (USA)

1. Relative location
2. Each element performs multiple functions
3. Each function is supported by many elements
4. Energy efficient planning
5. Using biological resources
6. Energy cycling
7. Small-scale intensive systems
8. Natural plant succession and stacking
9. Polyculture and diversity of species
10. Increasing "edge" within a system
11. Observe and replicate natural patterns
12. Pay attention to scale
13. Attitude

[from <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/perma.html>]

This is a great website for reading a range of different Permaculture sources... enjoy!