

## Permaculture and the Home Garden: Finding a Balance

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“Permaculture” means different things to different people, as it should, since it is a whole systems approach, and systems are diverse in use and in method. Coined by David Holmgren and Bill Mollison in the late '70s, “permaculture” was defined, according to <Holmgren.com.au>, as “Consciously designed landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fiber, and energy for provision of local needs.”

The term now encompasses many strategies and goals in gardening, agriculture, and landscaping. Just as our Western medicine has begun to embrace some Eastern-based beliefs of mind-body, or whole system health care, we gardeners embrace a larger picture: permaculture as a way of sustainability for future generations. Sustainable practices are perceived as a noble pursuit for some, a way of life for others, a catch-phrase for even more.

Through permaculture we are recalling in our gardens and landscapes the way plants grow in nature. However, since many of us move often—from one town or suburb to another, across the state or the country—we, the backyard gardeners, the growers of salads, berries, herbs, and flowers, may think that it takes heavy labor, much time, and a big budget to accomplish permaculture. Otherwise, why would anyone NOT prioritize sustainable practices?

While sometimes big gardening or landscaping changes are needed to create a permaculture, in most home gardens, all we need to succeed are small steps, patience, and faith in the process. Often, we need to let go of how “things are supposed to be.” Fortunately, as soon as people latch onto an idea, others modify it in a variety of ways. Progress lies in the understanding, which in turn lies in education. While many books about permaculture exist, for those of us who like small chunks of information, I recommend the Permaculture Flower diagram found at <Holmgren.com.au>. The diagram shows the connections between sustainability, mind-body wellness, environmental and commercial harmony, and progress.

There are many ways to build permaculture into your home gardening scheme, but here are some that work for me. The first is the way we view garden waste. Grass clippings, fallen leaves, and even dying plants are perfectly suited to re-fuel your garden. They are a great source of nutrients and can function as mulch, conserving rainwater and suppressing weeds. Excellent information about cycling yard waste can be found at <permaculturenews.org>.

Second, if you already have flower beds, or are considering the highly recommended and very popular move away from high-maintenance, high resource-demand lawns, then planting native is your go-to for guidance. The best thing about natives is their resilience. I cannot tell you how many gorgeous, but non-native flowers I have tried and lost over the years.

Rather than purchasing annuals to make the warm season colorful, look into the varied bloom times of natives, perennials, trees, and shrubs for seasons of color. I have several native fruit trees, including pawpaws, elderberry, currant, mulberry, and chokecherry. Some of the fruits taste better

cooked, while others are excellent right off the tree. In my yard, the strong survive my poor attention span, and “the strong” are the natives.

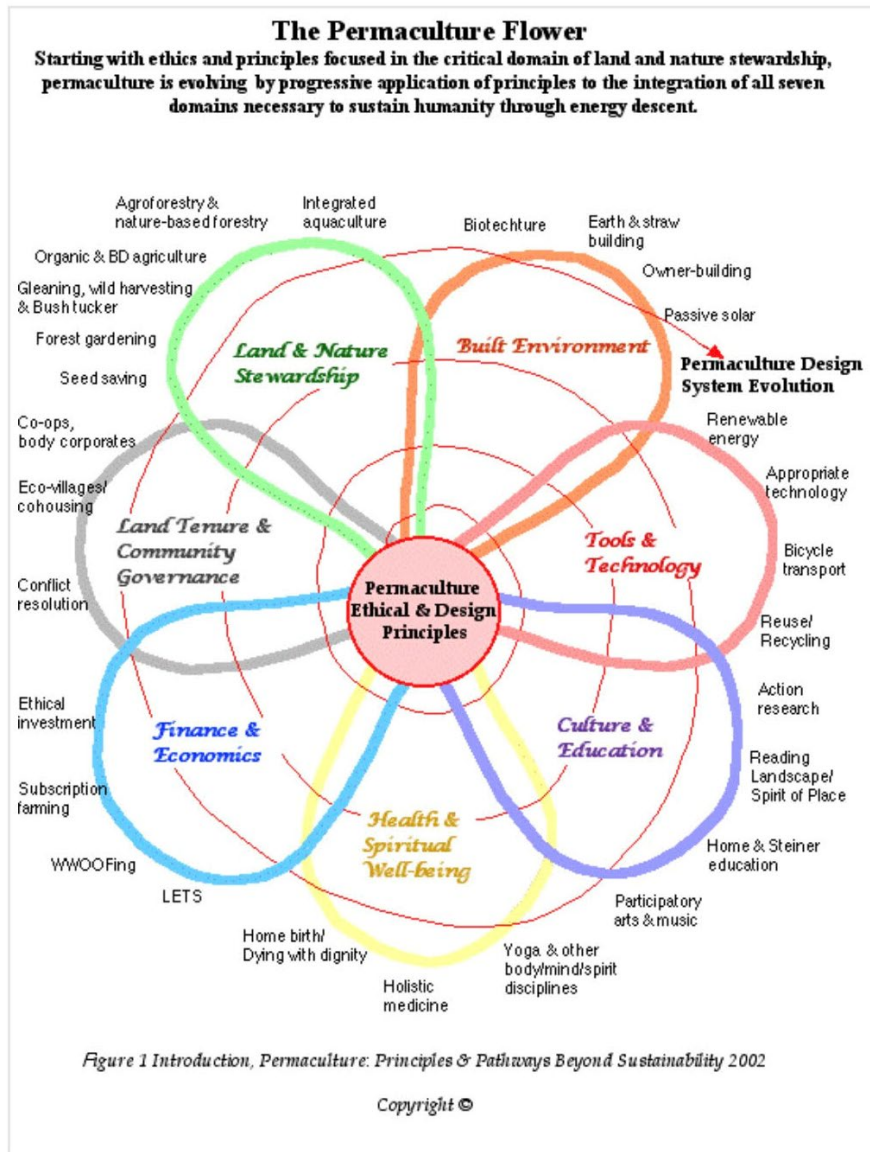
Third, plant veggies among your natives and perennials. At the back of my garden is Joe Pye Weed; tomatoes are planted in the middle; and in the front are supportive yarrow and root vegetables such as carrots and radishes, which help attract pollinators and cover the “ugly knees” of the tomatoes in the late summer/early fall weeks.

Planting this way also invites a natural balance between pests and good predators. For instance, when the hornworms come, as they always do, I find predatory wasp eggs on them long before they have eaten more than just a handful of leaves. I find mantises eating junebugs, assassin bugs and toads eating other garden villains.

Following another permaculture practice, I create a “hügelkultur” pile with woody branches from tree and shrub prunings, a natural way of enhancing the good fungus population in my garden. Fungus is essential for soil health and conducts communication among all the plants (trees and shrubs included), in all naturally occurring plant environments. Fungal networks underground supply nutrients to nearby plants as well as warnings of environmental threats, to which plants have been shown to be able to adapt or overcome. Another way to enhance the fungal network in your yard is by using natural, un-dyed and small wood chips to mulch around your plants instead of the heavy bark sold commercially. Excellent information and instructions about hugelkultur can be found in Michael Judd’s book, *Edible Landscaping with a Permaculture Twist*.

When you look out your window at your yard and ponder the future of the world, keep in mind the famous words of Bill Mollison, Holmgren.com.au: “Though the problems of the world are increasingly complex, the solutions remain embarrassingly simple.” Cheers to the garden and the gardeners!

For more information about gardening, visit our web site, <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call us at 301-600-1596.



The “Permaculture Flower” shows the connections between sustainability (i.e., producing food for humankind), mind-body wellness, environmental and commercial harmony, and progress of humankind. Taken from David Holmgren’s *Introduction, Permaculture: Principles & Pathways beyond Sustainability*. c. 2002.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

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