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Land at rest

Peninsula Permaculture · July 15, 2021 · Page A-12



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: All-heal's pretty flowers and creeping cover are a welcome discovery. The blooms are ending and mostly seeds by now. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

As summer stretches out, I enjoy some weed-spotting while watering. I stay posted on incidental guests and if they're getting on too well — undesirables have to get the whack before they spread.

I'm not a botanist, so I use an app and image research to confirm my identifications. PlantNet has been an invaluable starting point: take a picture, upload it and the app compares it to other identified pictures from all over the world. Even if you can't nail down the species, you'll probably get the genus.

Some areas of my land are resting, and overgrowing with whatever gets there first because I didn't plant a cover crop. Other areas are so changed by removal of plants and passage of vehicles that surprising guests show up.

Last year it was all-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*), which a friend told me simultaneously turned up on her homestead on Harstine Island's west side. It's now colonized my driveway, finding opportunities at the edge where wheels and treads have impacted and laterally displaced the soil. It's proven a fine groundcover underneath the bamboo and seaberries as the alder are phased out.

A great deal of herb-Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) was here in 2019, but we stayed on top of it with pulling. It still turns up here and there and gets mowed to prevent seeding.

Herb-Robert has medicinal uses and some claim it's a good companion plant for vegetables and flowers because its unpleasant smell deters insects. The blog Julia's Edible Weeds says crushed leaves will repel mosquitoes, but my mosquitoes are all buzz and no bite. Maybe I'll try it in my socks for sand fleas.

The smell is best described as like that of burning tires. No, it's not your neighbor this time, you just stepped in some herb-Robert.

I find it tastes good as a tonic. I enjoy bitter, sour and complex flavors, and after a few chews the burning tire is gone and something more nuanced predominates. Its clean finish makes a fine breath freshener! It's even better than chewing fresh turkey tail mushrooms.

I generally prefer to leave the roots of plants in the ground. Scraping off the aerial parts with a sharp hoe or hori-hori (a Japanese gardening knife that lives at my waist), especially in the dry season, stops

growth without sacrificing soil.

Roots have established a relationship with the soil and its microorganisms, and when the plant is cut at the base, roots often decay and add to the soil. Xanna Seto at Harstine's Serpent Song Sanctuary does this with vegetables on her hügelkultur, so this year I'm trying it everywhere.

If roots don't decay or sprout again, they are still retaining soil in our summers — the real risk of good topsoil drying up and blowing away is worth leaving some "weeds." With automatic precision watering via driplines, weeds can be cut in dry weather to stop growth while still holding their ground.

As I cut armloads of comfrey for compost teas and mulching, I throw the severed tops of weeds on top of the bristly comfrey mulch that will break down in time for fall cover cropping. They'll be well dead by the time they touch the soil again.

In maintaining unused or underused spaces with compost tea applications, mulching and mowing, I'm keeping soil — if not building it — until it's ready for me to use. The pioneer plants that appear in it tell me the story of their homes, and give me suggestions for making them more hospitable to all.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

Originally published in the print edition of the Shelton-Mason County Journal, July 15, 2021, page A-12.

Transcribed from the page scan in the SmallTownPapers archive: <https://smc.stparchive.com/Archive/SMC/SMC07152021P12.php>