

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

What do you compost? You may be a permaculturist

Harstine Island News · August 6, 2020 · Page A-13



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: A garden cairn provides a hiding place for garter snakes, which eat slugs and other pests before they eat plants. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

If you compost, are the inputs to your compost from your animals, woodlot and garden as well as your groceries?

Do you conserve moisture with wood chips and use your gray water? Here on Harstine Island, that also means you're encouraging mushrooms and therefore bees.

And depending on the wood chips you're using, you might also be fertilizing with leached nitrogen.

You might already be a permaculturist, but it's scaled more toward a spectrum than an either/or position and sometimes it's purely accidental.

Jacqueline Freeman might not have intended to thin her slug population by stacking rocks in cairns. She might have been trying to make neat work of double-digging her soil; trench and pile soil, deeply loosen the compacted trench bottom, then amend the pile with compost and replace it. The excluded rocks look best in piles or bordering beds. When she noticed that garter snakes were sheltering under the rocks and emerging to eat the slugs that had been denuding her beets, she realized she had done what permaculture calls "function stacking."

She had improved her garden beds, removed rocks, and created habitat for a natural predator of a superabundant and invasive pest.

Pest control in permaculture takes many forms. Wood vinegar, a byproduct of charcoal production, can be used to control pests such as cabbage worm. Effective microorganisms (EM) are believed to improve nutrient density, crop health and resilience, but like many folk practices, your mileage may vary.

Anybody who has planted perennials or tree crops has committed permaculture. The degree of commitment extends if the perennial is edible, and that means tasty to more than humans.

"Earth care, people care, fair share" is a basic permaculture doctrine, so deer have just as much right to your tree collards. Just protect them so deer browse won't kill them.

What makes perennial tree collards a permaculture plant is not just their yearly crop of big, tender purple leaves. Its resistance to our slugs and deer means freedom from sprays and traps. Most

important, it creates community. A cutting can be made of any branch with five leaf nodes, rooted, and given away. Permaculture borrowed from barter economies, so pay it forward.

In a sense, permaculture takes the best low-impact, broad-benefit ideas from everywhere and braids them into a permanent culture stronger than its strands. The Three Sisters model of planting beans, squash and corn together is present in many indigenous lifeways, but the Iroquois Confederacy gave it a cute name and good story.

Similarly, permaculture was coined by some non-indigenous Australians in the 1960s, but the concept stood on the shoulders of giants, and the autonomy built into its practices has broad appeal.

Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms in Virginia shows permaculture is profitably scalable in grass-based, direct-marketed animal husbandry.

Ben Falk restored an exhausted 10-acre hill farm in Vermont and built a thriving consulting business eventually becoming the nation's biggest supplier of sea berries. Toby Hemenway (rest in peace) applied permaculture to the Pacific Northwest in his 2009 book "Gaia's Garden" which became a classic and is currently in its second edition. And mushroom messiah Paul Stamets runs his visionary mycelial empire out of our very own Shelton.

What these very different people have in common includes emphasis on localism, resilience, regenerative systems, and self-reliance. Libertarians like Jack Spirko of "Survival Podcast" have taken permaculture to living in preparedness:

"If times get tough, or even if they don't." Such messages are particularly compelling in these times of pandemic, protest and upheaval.

Although you may be uncertain about the future there is yet so much we can do.

Participate in local seed exchanges, like at East Side Urban Farm & Feed in Olympia. Produce and share compost, and compost tea or donate materials to those who produce them.

Waste less and reuse more.

"Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without," has outlived the Great Depression. Buy from farmers markets, or direct sales or community supported agriculture.

Grow pollinator gardens and build houses for mason bees and bats. Raise chickens for eggs and soil building. We already do some of these things, but in community and dialogue we can best direct our efforts to share what we most enjoy.