

Earth Activist Training Seminar with Starhawk January 2010

by Vicki Noble

My mind is wrapping itself around permaculture principles today, as I finally have a chance to relax and observe my yard and vegetable gardens for the first time since I completed Starhawk's Earth Activist Training course in Cazadero two weeks ago. I feel especially blessed to have learned the lessons of permaculture design within the context of earth activism, which Starhawk models so beautifully in her public and political life.

She was just back from Egypt where she had participated with a thousand people in a mostly unsuccessful effort to enter Gaza and bring relief and support to the imprisoned people of that ravaged place. During our two-week course, along with the marvelous technical systems we were shown how to understand and build, we also did daily rituals in a Pagan way.

Each morning began with a grounding, a casting of the circle, and the calling in of the four directions and center. First it was Star herself who led our group in these practices, but soon the group was invited to participate, each individual being invited to offer some part of a ritual into the circle. And on several occasions, we did extended group rituals under Starhawk's potent facilitation, our chanting supported by her trance-inducing doumbek drum rhythms, where we were the lucky receivers of the powerful transmission of energy and magic for which she is world renowned.

It was impressive and sacred, and I doubt I was the only person moved to tears more than once by the profound hope for planetary and personal healing generated in the heart of such Pagan rituals.



Planting out a new garden

But this morning I am simply observing. Observation is numero uno in permaculture, a system of natural design dedicated to finding ecological solutions to land use (in the largest sense) and in my particular case, for the small urban lot where I live in Santa Cruz, California. For twenty years I have studied the living soil (with its teeming microbes and helpful bacteria), sustainable agriculture (the kind they practiced seven thousand years ago in Old Europe), and organic gardening.

Finally I am able to put into practice some of the armchair knowledge I have accumulated over the years, having moved two years ago into this small but charming rental house near the ocean in a district called, wonderfully, Pleasure Point.

The pleasure I am finding here is epitomized by the raised garden beds my landlady put in for me during my first year here, including steel chicken-wire at the base to keep out the voracious gophers that populate my backyard—combined with her warm invitation for me to stay in her house as long as I like. After moving more times than I like to recall in the past decade, this lovely piece of ground is the foundation of serenity and joy I so want for myself in my later years.

The experience of being in one place—and actively gardening for almost three years now—has given me an opportunity to actually practice observation of the cycles and microclimates that exist here in my small territory.

Without really knowing anything about permaculture per se, it turns out I have been practicing some of its principles by intuition and happy accident. I have one shady southeastern corner near a fence in my backyard where I put in some herbs next to the ferns that already lived there. Last year I added a lovely Huichol tobacco plant with delicate trumpet-like yellow flowers, along with some mints and white yarrow; they are finding a kind of artistic harmony together that pleases me no end.

I admit I like to crowd my plants and put them in circles or groupings instead of rows, so as it turns out, it shouldn't be a stretch for me to learn "polyculture" planting. I'm planning to devote one of my two vegetable beds to putting in a mix of seeds for garden greens (mustard, arugula, and mizuna, three of my favorites), followed closely by lettuce, chard, and carrots among the previously sown seeds. (It was great having fresh carrots from my garden in every soup I made almost all winter, so I may have to keep planting carrots as the summer turns to fall.)

Next come the herbs (I love fennel bulbs, anise hyssop, and basil) and then legumes which "fix nitrogen" back into the soil (I might try fava beans in the winter and bush beans for summer). The idea is that you harvest this dense planting daily and eat fresh salads for many months, while thinning the garden. Cabbages—so decorative they look like art objects—can go in later in the summer as the others come out, and on it goes. I'm interested in planting some "tree kale" I saw when I visited friends living near the Buddhist retreat center where our course was held.

Two years ago I ordered plants from an organic medicinal-herbs nursery online. Some of the plants I put in have done well (chamomile, rosemary, sacred tobacco, a variety of echinaceas; motherwort, mugwort, and valerian) while others failed miserably (most notably black cohosh, which I tried two years in a row without success). There is one plant in particular in which I am quite emotionally invested, the small blue elderberry tree I bought the first year, which will flower (attracting bees), and fruit (attracting birds), and whose berries make a kick-ass syrup for curing colds and flu.

My little seedling tree had a terrible time in its first location in my front garden bed, where snails decimated it. I moved it to a pot for the next year, and still it was unhappy, wilting and drying each time I neglected to water it enough. Finally last summer I opened a spot for it, put it in the ground in the middle of my backyard, wished it well (I "witched" it well is more like it), and have since left it more or less alone. This seems the happiest arrangement so far and I'm truly hoping it will begin to flourish this year, as I attempt to turn the area around the little tiny tree into a "guild."

Plant guilds are "natural plant communities," certain sets or groupings of plants that not only get along well, but actually contribute to one another's growth and enhance the well being of the land. It's one of the many permaculture approaches that imitates nature and increases diversity. To put it bluntly regarding mainstream methods: "Monocultures deplete the soil, provide a sumptuous feast for pests, and dull the senses" (Gaia's Garden, p. 142). You put the smaller plants around the outer edge of where the mature tree (or in this case,

shrub) will eventually reach, along with a ground cover and some herbs or flowers; you can even cultivate mushrooms in some instances. I have been actively imagining my guild for the last 24 hours, my passion for the idea steadily growing, only to come up against an obstacle already.

So far, even with all my searching, I can't seem to find "companion plants" for elderberry. This may be because one of the functions of elderberry is to "confuse pests"; does that somehow make it unfriendly as well to other plants? Clearly, I will have to study this more before proceeding with my great plan! (Back to the permaculture drawing table.) I did learn, in passing, that the foliage from trimming an elderberry tree is super-good for my compost pile, causing it to ferment better and faster.

We learned so many wonderful ecological approaches and sustainable systems during the two-week training program, partly through excellent and interesting lectures and slide presentations. But the hands-on instruction is what stays with me the most, such as the day our entire group went out onto a slope on the retreat property behind our classroom, where we created "swales" to catch the rainwater that otherwise goes shooting down across the land and into the creek at the bottom, eventually flowing out to the ocean. In a remarkably simple but brilliant engineering system, we dug horizontal grooves along the contour of the hill, so that the water could be tricked into flowing sideways in the little canals where it might seep into the soil on the hillside instead of running off so quickly.

Then on another day we planted fruit trees below the swales, to benefit from the salvaged rain water—a kind of passive (and I thought, quite beautiful) irrigation system. During that same process we learned how to "sheet mulch" around the newly planted trees, a process that adds back nutrients and organic matter to the land without chemical fertilizers, and kills weeds without chemical poisons, by laying down cardboard and compost (recycled kitchen scraps that have fermented over time and become humus; at a retreat center, they have plenty of kitchen scraps).

The hands-on highlight for me was the day I used my first power tool (a jig saw) and learned to do some rudimentary plumbing, by participating in the installation of a gray-water system for one of the yurts on Starhawk's land nearby. It was inspiring! There is now a very real possibility that I could create water-harvesting systems in my back yard and begin catching rain water from my roof, as well as "gray water" from the shower or laundry, to water plants and lawn. This would keep more of the water that falls on my property here for longer, while wasting less water in general and lowering my water bills.

One thing I couldn't help but notice during the course is that all the different methods, approaches, and techniques taught by our intelligent and enthusiastic teaching team are conceptual systems developed by men—smart and progressive men, obviously, but men nonetheless. Permaculture is indeed an excellent approach to sustainable living on this planet and one that feels nurturing and inviting to use in "real life." I'm also aware, however, that there is in this "new" paradigm a premium placed on the "hunter-forager" (back to the forest) life model so beloved of so many young men of recent generations, who often seem repelled by even the ideas of "cultivation" and the sedentary life of a farming people.

I have even heard some blame the invention of agriculture for our contemporary problems, mistakenly equating it with patriarchy. Yet I have spent the last three decades of my life at the center of a movement uncovering and bringing to light the existence of peaceful, egalitarian Goddess-worshipping "Neolithic" civilizations around the planet, whose matriarchal members (male and female) practiced sustainable agriculture in a ritually-based reciprocity with nature for as much as four thousand years.

Only after patriarchy was established did the agricultural societies (now colonized and often enslaved) begin clear-cutting forests and causing other environmental damage; this distinction has been clearly documented by scientists who study pollen samples and tree rings, among other things.

I would like to see the inclusion of a matriarchal model in permaculture, which would bring balance and

perspective to the approach. Forest gardens are fabulous—innovative and creative ways of returning the planet to something nearer its earlier or even original state before we humans began destroying so much of the ecosystem. But it was early women who apprehended the idea of how to harvest the wild grasses and make ritual bread out of the ground seeds, the charred remains of which are found outside Ice Age caves in France from 12,000 BCE. Then they figured out how to bring those wild seeds closer to home and cultivate them for the good of the community, creating storehouses (granaries) as well as baskets, bags, pots and bowls for holding the results of their inventions.

Food-preservation, cooking, and the creation of containers may not seem as sexy as water catchment and building compost toilets, but it is. The mystery of using fire to turn seeds into bread has been equated by ancient and tribal people with the pregnancy and birthing of a baby from a woman's body. In many indigenous communities today, weaving and making pottery still require performance of the same rituals as those that necessarily surround the gestation and birth processes of human women.

The organization of indigenous seasonal festivals and sacred ceremonies has always revolved around agricultural cycles, because the agriculture—so often the province of women—has been performed since ancient times in a reverent and reciprocal way. The famous Chipco (tree-hugging) women in India, whose brave practices have inspired today's contemporary tree-sitters, were women whose subsistence agriculture was threatened by bulldozers and armies of invading capitalist men with money on their minds.

Ancient agriculture, rather than being a problem or the source of our current troubles, is a model: it was a very successful and long-lived "experiment" in natural cooperative living. The rituals, songs, dances, myths, stories, customs, and oral traditions (even "old wives tales") of people all around the planet keep alive the traditions of the ancient agriculturalists.

Your grandmother's embroidered tea towels from Poland have stylized Goddesses on them, as do the woven belts and hats and rugs from every continent. Permaculture, along with organic and biodynamic farming, are not new inventions. They are brilliant and worthwhile systems that we are remembering and reclaiming, as part of what it means to be human and alive inside an evolutionary web of life. When I install my rain water harvesting system, I will be giving thanks to the brilliant guy who most recently invented it, and to the fabulous teachers and purveyors of permaculture knowledge in the world today, along with making offerings to a lineage of ancient women who created the first containers for catching water, carrying babies, and baking that first (can you imagine it?) apple pie.



Building a cob bench

numerous books, including *Shakti Woman* and *The Double Goddess*. She lives in Santa Cruz, California, near her children and grandchildren, and teaches in the Women's Spirituality Masters Program at ITP in Palo Alto. She attended the EAT course at Black Mountain Preserve in January 2010.

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