

Tackling Permaculture in the UK

The term “permaculture” is derived from Bill Mollison’s vision of *permanent agriculture*. Permaculture is about producing food in an environmentally sound way. It is concerned with people growing their own food on their own land and using it for themselves, their immediate family and possibly the local community. This is certainly the impression we gained from examining permaculture food projects in Britain (detailed in Sherriff 1999). Since its inception permaculture has developed and diversified. It is essentially an approach to designing productive whole systems, through the maximisation of the interconnectedness of elements, which has an ethical foundation in sustainability and a scientific basis in ecology. The key characteristic is that it sets out to maximise beneficial relationships through the effective placement of elements (Mollison 1991).

One thing to note is that permaculture is quite different from organic agriculture. According to European Standards, and policed by organisations such as the UK Soil Association, organic agriculture is basically agriculture without pesticides and fertilisers, without genetically modified crops, and with compassionate animal husbandry. Permaculture will often look like organic agriculture, and the end result of a permaculture design may qualify for organic certification, but there are a number of important differences. Organic agriculture is a production method: permaculture is an approach to design.

Permaculture places more emphasis on cycling of energy and resources locally; it places greater emphasis on the maximisation of interconnectedness; **it is creative rather than regulatory**; it emphasises the use of perennials; self-regulatory systems are encouraged; and community trading structures take a clear priority over global trading. The latter is particularly striking. Whilst organisations such as the UK Soil Association should be congratulated for campaigning for more farmers’ markets and other local trading initiatives, you can still buy cabbages classed as organic that have been flown hundreds of miles for each of the processing, distribution and sale stages. This is in marked contrast to, for example, Hardy’s Field in Lincolnshire,

which has sold carrots through a Local Exchange Trading Scheme.

If urban agriculture is about places being self-sufficient, then monocultural cropping is not appropriate. Permaculture is about crop diversity. Where self-sufficiency is not the aim, permacultural trade systems extend the scope of the project from the individual to community. Here, the Local Exchange Trading Scheme (LETS) maximises the interconnectedness between disparate elements in the community with local people offering skills or products that others require, and, in exchange, they in turn offer another skill or product. The diversity of permaculture food suits local schemes, and the financial security of the trading methods enable a greater variety of crops to be grown and creative risks to be taken. In permaculture, growing food is never seen in isolation. For example Becontree Organic Growers in Dagenham, East London, develop the local economy through LETS, work with a local university, and with colleges and conservation groups. Becontree Organic Growers are able to fulfill the criteria of Local Agenda 21 through: reusing and recycling resources, saving energy, cultivating local land, monitoring the local environment, green building and planning, community development and education, and developing the local economy.

Permaculture, by definition, seeks where possible to utilise resources frugally. This is important in urban agriculture for two reasons: it enhances its sustainability; and it makes it inexpensive to practise. The latter is particularly important where urban agriculture is proposed as a way to

regenerate deprived areas. Within permaculture, resources are often recycled. From butts to collect rainwater, to compost toilets which turn human excrement into usable fertiliser, the efficient use and reuse of resources is central to permaculture’s scientific and ethical foundations.

Artificial fertilisers and pesticides do not feature in permaculture. Instead soil health is maintained through a number of holistic techniques including polycultural planting and green mulching, and to deter pests through biodiverse planting and the encouragement of predators to frequent the ecosystem. Legumes, such as clover, can provide a crop with nitrogen, for example, and a biodiverse garden confuses pests and is therefore less vulnerable than a monoculture.

Permaculture produce is likely to have a higher nutritional value than conventional crops, due largely to the health of the soil (Sustain 2001). It follows that any urban agriculture initiative seeking to supply communities with a healthy alternative to the conventional would do well to follow the chemical-free and soil-building principles of organic agriculture. Permaculture provides a way of creatively applying these principles in diverse, community-centered projects.

In conclusion, permaculture is valuable as an approach to urban food production and consumption, it provides a useful methodology for food growing and for trading food locally and it should be given consideration by all those with a stake in urban agriculture.

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