



permaculture



what is it?

Permaculture is a design system. It's the direct application of the principles of ecology in the design of sustainable human habitats.

Many people think permaculture is just about growing things; and although there's a large focus on food production (we all need food), it goes way beyond that – into energy, health, education, community, architecture, economics and more. It brings sustainability into all aspects of life.

Permaculture pulls its resources from three main areas:

- Nature
- Traditional (usually less environmentally-damaging) systems
- Modern scientific and technological knowledge

In the early 1970s, the concept of permaculture was formed by Bill Mollison and his then student David Holmgren in Australia. It was based on Mollison's observations of natural systems, and how resilient, productive and self-sustaining they were. He thought that if we could design those attributes into our food production, it could be as sustainable as natural systems.

As they started to develop their ideas, they became aware that the same principles could be applied elsewhere, and that it was a way of conserving and building natural resources to supply a whole range of human needs, including timber, fuel, medicines and livelihoods. And beyond that, they could be applied to how we run our economic, educational and social systems as well.

Mollison and Holmgren developed a basic permaculture design course, and the first generation of participants went on to run their own courses, and since then it has spread throughout the world.

In 1983, the Permaculture Association of Britain (PAB) was formed. Now many countries have established national and regional associations that are linked globally, and as well as the basic design course, offer short introductory courses, specialist courses in applied design, teacher training and online courses. There's also a diploma in applied design, available after a minimum of two years proven permaculture application.

The UK has been at the forefront of developing the permaculture diploma pathway for design course graduates.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of backyard gardens, farms, smallholdings, waste land, communities and small businesses have been designed using permaculture principles.



Chicken integrated into a recently-established forest garden – where it provides manure and pest control for the developing system.

what are the benefits?

The permaculture approach begins with a sustainable system and tries to maximise yield, whereas conventional agriculture begins with a maximum yield target and tries to make it sustainable; but it's never sustainable in the long term. It erodes soil, poisons nature and kills pollinators – which can't continue indefinitely. Permaculture can be applied to already functioning systems that have elements of unsustainability (high waste, high input), or to the blank canvas of a bare, degraded landscape. Permaculture design reduces waste, pollution and work, by integrating systems and elements within systems. Just as in nature there's no waste, pollution or work – in a permaculture system, resources are recycled, and the needs of one part of the system are met by the outputs of another. For example, a chicken in the wrong place can trash a vegetable plot, but in the right place can eat weed seeds and insect pests, and scratch up and manure the ground as well as providing eggs and meat. So it's about giving elements more functions by putting them in the right place.

It also represents more efficient use of space. Instead of monoculture, plants of different heights are 'stacked', and animals integrated. Another type of 'stacking' involves adding value to products locally – e.g. a glut of fruit at a certain time of year isn't exported, but turned into preserves, chutneys, wines and juices .

Permaculture design is also a very useful concept for regenerating waste land and degraded systems. Also, with its more efficient use of resources, it can reduce our need to earn and work so much. It's also empowering, because it shows us what we can do with our own skills and how we can live in a more self-determined way.



what can I do?

First, educate yourself. Do an introduction course (they tend to be over a weekend), or a design course (min. 72 hours – usually over 2 weeks). Link up with like-minded people. Even if you're not a gardener, or don't have access to land, you can involve yourself in the growing cycle by buying local, organic food from a box scheme or community-supported agriculture (consumers linked directly to producers – farmer's markets, pick-your-own etc.).

Decrease your use of non-sustainable resources – e.g. car sharing, cycling, public transport; in fact, reduce consumption generally where possible.

You could say that all this is common sense, but permaculture is about how to integrate the whole range of low-impact activities in a unique design system.

For example, permaculture design and planning involves zones for energy efficiency – the activities you do most need to be closest to the back door – feeding scraps to the chickens, the herb garden, the compost heap. This may be common sense in traditional societies, but in the West, we need to re-learn things.

Another example is maximising 'edge', where two systems meet and productivity increases, mimicking, for example, the edge of a woodland, or the seashore.



The 'edge effect' is a permaculture principle. Ecosystems are more productive at the edges – e.g. where woodland meets grassland or sea meets shore. You can increase the length of edges by making them wavy.



Zoning can be used on any permaculture plot, for greater efficiency. Nearest to the house will be the herb garden, followed by vegetable gardens and compost heaps, animals and orchards, all the way to wilderness.

Other examples could be as simple as re-using or recycling, or as complex as designing a forest garden, with hundreds of species mimicking a natural forest. Permaculture design will require higher input at the start, to establish productive, low-cost and self-managing systems. But the objective of permaculture is that over time, the inputs reduce and the productivity increases.

Join the Permaculture Association, and your local group. If you don't have a local group, find your nearest one and get someone to come and help start one. Groups provide training, seed exchanges, car sharing, workshare and demonstration days. Set up something that can be demonstrated, then allow people access to learn about the successes and problems involved. Network your experiences locally and regionally – use the Permaculture Association to help.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/permaculture for more info, links, products, courses & books, including:
- Jomo Neiger, *the Permaculture Promise*
- Toby Hemenway, *the Permaculture City*
- Ross Mars, *How to Permaculture Your Life*
- permaculture.org.uk – UK Permaculture Assoc.
- permaculture.org – US Association
- permaculturevisions.com – lots of info

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 230+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.