Lettuce Consider the Organic Garden:

Personal Opinions on Some of the Misguided Myths of Organic Gardening

In 1982, as I wrote my rough proposal for a book on edible landscaping in Oyster Bay, New York, I gazed across a well-clipped Long Island estate lawn to a recently abandoned tennis court. After just a few seasons of neglect, every fissure in the asphalt had been filled with grasses and a wealth of herbaceous weeds. Even the casual momentum of Nature dwarfs all the human effort we put into cultivated gardens. Once untended, even the most environmentally kosher garden soon returns to Nature's bosom. Buried within this steady, powerful momentum are the seeds of Nature's renewal, which are more powerful than any human garden.

With this in mind, what follows is a personal discussion of various styles of "natural" [organic] gardening and where I think each is headed.

Organic Movement

The organic gardening movement has begun to receive the respect it has deserved for so many years. The organic method is finally coming out of the dark closet of wishful, undocumented thinking. Good science, observation, replicated field trials, and a levelheaded knowledge of what we don't know are some of the elements balancing the starry-eyed visionaries of the 1970s.

Some things happen faster than others. Ladybugs are now culturally associated with organic gardening. Thousands of people buy ladybugs thinking they'll actually control all their garden pests—or at least the aphids. Alas, purchased ladybugs are a very poor, if not completely ineffectual, way to control any pest. Even the *New Yorker* ran an extensive piece [in the October 7, 1991 issue] on the science behind the futility of buying ladybugs for any other purpose than fattening the wallets of the seller. Yet, a year later, a prominent "leader" of the California Green Industry, the misleading slogan for the landscape contractors and conventional nurseries, told conference attendees she is very pleased to be selling ladybugs to all her clients, and they "make such great symbols of the environment". Symbols of deceptive advertising . . . perhaps. [The only ladybugs worth buying are those guaranteed to be defatted prior to sale. Still, these little ladies are programmed to wander off. A much more effective and behaved critter for consuming aphids is the green lacewing, which can also be purchased.]

The premise, "Diversity equals stability", is a common theme in the sustainable/organic world. I wish the continual references to generic "Diversity" in the popular press would cease. While diversity within an ecosystem allows for a complex interaction between all the elements, plants, animals, and people, it is not a panacea. Randomly chosen diversity or complexity doesn't necessarily provide any special benefits. And, using tropical diversity as a model is childlike. While the tropics often have lots of vertically integrated plants, the temperate American landscape, with its hardwood forests, meadows, and prairies, is less vertically complex and is more adapted to the growth of annual plants than the tropics.

This is not to say that our gardens, and particularly our farms, can't be diverse. Most gardens have plenty of room for more well-chosen diversity, which may enrich the biological atmosphere and the

environmental dynamics for a more self-modulating garden. Such gardens are perhaps more natural but a far cry from actual native ecosystems.

After all, our garden's diversity must be composed of the proper plants. For example, kudzu is theoretically a multipurpose plant with many edible parts and useful fibers. Adding kudzu would be another unit of diversity in your garden. However, you better leave town before your neighbors come after you as the kudzu vines entangle everything that's moving slower than 25 miles per hour! More subtly, you may think twice about nurturing lamb's quarters if you're growing lots of heirloom tomato plants because this tasty edible "weed" also harbors verticillium wilt. Too much diversity, or the wrong kind, only promotes that universal dynamic—chaos.

Nonetheless, the organic movement continues to grow both literally and figuratively. So, my organic themes are: gardeners are not as important to Nature as we think, Nature eventually takes back everything, moderation furthers a balanced ecosystem, and we should endeavor to stay humble and in our place—relative to the grander scheme of things. As George Carlin so eloquently observed in his 1992 HBO special: "*Save* the *planet*!? Are these f*%$*#@& people kidding me? There's nothing wrong with the planet that it can't fix. We still haven't learned how to care for one another—and we're gonna *save* the f*%$*#@& planet? So, take care of yourself. And take care of somebody else."

Double-Dig It

Perhaps the most widely accepted "new" idea in gardening during the past 30 years has been double-digging. As an interpretation of Alan Chadwick's work at the University of California at Santa Cruz campus in the 1970s and 1980s, John Jeavons, via the Ecology Action of the Mid-Peninsula and his flock of books, has been quite successful in popularizing raised-bed gardening. Actually, he meant to promote a very astute program of gardening known as the biodynamic/French intensive method. He now calls his work "Grow Biointensive®" [GB]. The GB approach is an integrated set of techniques, tools, plants, and environmentally sensitive management. Unfortunately, the popularization of the method has led to some very diluted and confused concepts.

The GB method uses a variety of techniques to deeply texturize the soil so that more plants can be grown closer together, but it doesn't really intend to cultivate in the sense of turning *over* soil. The true GB method of cultivation loosens soil without inverting any soil layers. This allows the beneficial bacteria to thrive in the zone of soil for which they spent thousands of years evolving and adapting. The simplistic "media-cation" [as in fornication] of the method has led many to assume, the more you churn and the deeper you dig, the better the garden will be. This is not necessarily the case. In fact, excessive cultivation is often detrimental. Any digging, in the sense of churning, kills microbes and slows the absorption of nutrients. A subtle effect, but important. And, wooden-framed raised beds filled with a continuous mix of soil and compost don't count, either.

In the process of texturizing the soil, the soil's surface is raised because of the incorporation of some air and organic matter. The raised-bed look to the cultivated area is a byproduct of the soil improving techniques—not a single-minded goal. Conversely, heaping a bunch of dirt to make the shape of a raised bed may not produce any desirable results. Sometimes, the mere heaping or boxing of a good topsoil will provide enough extra drainage to promote a healthier and more productive crop. A heaped-up raised bed may look like a GB garden, but it's a distant ecological cousin.

Often, raised beds have a net gain over old-fashioned rototilled dirt gardens. So, I'm happy to see even the bastardized versions of raised and double-dug beds proliferate around the country. I often use boxed, raised vegetable beds in edible landscape designs for their tidiness, the gopher-excluding wire mesh across the bottom, the enhanced drainage, their convenience, and their permanence. But, I do not pretend that I've duplicated the delicate and subtle ecological dynamics of a GB garden.

The simplified forms of raised beds and double-digging will continue to spread, especially as busy schedules dictate more efficient gardens. Hopefully, more gardeners will explore the roots of these superficial methods and discover the challenging nuance of the GB approach. Their gardens will only improve.

Edible Landscaping

Many people still identify me as one of the "founders" of the "edible landscaping" movement. The generic form of edible landscaping is meant to reintroduce food plants back into the yard around the home in an aesthetically pleasing fashion. I've never suggested that *every* plant in the yard has to be digestible to have a *true* edible landscape. The idea is to blend some utilitarian plants into a visually pleasing design. Edible landscaping doesn't really dictate organic versus chemical gardening. However, my book on the topic, *Designing and Maintaining Your Edible Landscape—Naturally*, provides a thorough, nondogmatic, and scientific basis for edible landscapes while offering a smörgåsbord of organic techniques for their care.

To some, the idea of good-looking landscapes with a high function or productivity was pretentious, maybe even elitist. The rush of enthusiasm for edible landscapes, especially between 1980–1990, was fueled by the realization that long straight rows of ratty corn don't have to be the order of the day. Previously, the Landscape Architecture department of a university had never considered talking to the Agriculture or Pomology departments. Now, these various ivory-tower "divisions" more routinely mingle.

Lately, people have been asking me, "What happened to edible landscaping? Is it dead?" While interest has dwindled in California compared to 1980–1990, the seed of the idea has multiplied and disseminated like dandelions—which *are* edible. While some believe that eternal popularity is the true mark of success, I take an altogether different view. Like the succession of growth of grasses and lupines cloaking a recent landslide and yielding to the choking shade of woody shrubs some decades later, all gardening styles and methods should go through natural deaths, rebirths, and renewals. And, edible landscaping is no exception.

Now, edible landscapes have begun to fully integrate into the web of suburban life—as they were meant to. My favorite example of the success of edible landscaping comes from one of those women's magazines found clustered around the supermarket cashier like leering buzzards. It is a cartoon. In the background, three men are on all fours "grazing" on the lawn. One guy is picking from a hedge. Another is on a ladder in a fruit tree. A woman is leaning over the fence to tell her neighbor, "It's one of those new edible landscapes . . . saves me hours in the kitchen." Mainstream America is making fun of edible landscaping—we have arrived! So many of my friends from the sustainable/organic/alternative energy nonprofit groups of the 1980s actually tried *not* to have their work introduced into "those silly suburbs". I always pleaded the opposite. Newsstand satire of edible landscaping is the mark of market penetration. This means the foot's in the door—or better. The details will follow.

I'm not concerned whether or not the phrase "edible landscape" disappears, like a head of lettuce dissolving in a worm bin, completely from the lexicon. While the spread of edible landscaping now seems slower, it is a completely healthy and natural cultural assimilation.

In fact, the gradual spread of edible landscaping is much preferred over the exotic fads some have fostered in an effort to prolong media exposure. The culinary gyrations found with some edible flower recipes and snooty cuisine is more worthy of laughter than serious eating. While I do appreciate an elegant "gastronomical experience," I don't think of it as anything more than a wonderful, hedonistic extravagance—nothing that will shift the culture's center of gravity. Real people eat real food. Good barbecue will always triumph in numbers [pounds or cholesterol] over carved mushroom caps and fried squash blossoms stuffed with weird cheeses.

Ruth Stout's Legacy

Ruth Stout died many years ago, but all who met her or watched the few videos about her, easily recall her incredibly buoyant, gregarious spirit and large-handed sturdy body—like a Julia Child of the garden. She was, and still is, *the* lady of the no-till, toss-the-straw-and-sit-back garden. Few realize she had been gardening in the conventional spade-over-the-dirt manner for more than a decade before she was inspired to retire her shovel. Yet, the results were still quite fantastic. Ruth was onto something. And, her legacy does live on in an occasional rare article about no-till vegetable gardening.

Most gardeners are attached to digging from the purely arbitrary assumption that you're not "working with the earth" unless you shovel some of it around. Yet, the landslide is the only natural model for cultivation. And, landslides are rather rare phenomena in most areas. Therefore, cultivation via tillage is actually a rather rude imposition on the natural position of soil.

More practically, the yields from a no-till garden can be as good as—or, in rare situations, better than—a single-dug garden. [I doubt if no-till yields could compete with the productivity from an intensive double-dug bed.] Properly tended, the no-till garden should require considerably less labor and none of the strain of double-digging. With a bit of practice, some smarts, and a little more space, no-till gardens can be grown without hauling in any manures or fertilizers from outside the yard. A decent harvest. Less work. No costly fertilizers. You'd think this would take off like free beer at a baseball game or complimentary tofu at a vegan convention. I certainly expected more interest in and practice of no-till gardening techniques by now. But, I suspect that the culture is still too attached to digging as a self-serving measure of gardening accomplishment. It is mildly amusing—and on some days, slightly depressing—that all the environmentalists so intent on "saving the planet" are so quick to grab a shovel. What they're really doing is degrading the soil's structure, sending some of the planet downstream into a lake or the ocean, and reveling in what is actually quite an abnormal act.

My wish is that the coming years bring a renewal of this valuable gardening method. The soil, at least, will breathe a sigh of relief.

Permacultural Piety?

In 1978, I read *Permaculture One*, by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. "Permaculture" was coined as a joining of the two terms, "permanent" and "agriculture". A good permaculture is supposed to be a food-producing ecosystem [in most cases, a garden] which is humanly designed, requires little work to

sustain, mimics the diversity and complexity of a forest [or other natural system], is heavily based upon perennial food plants, and is self-perpetuating and permanent. With Bill Mollison's first U.S. lecture in 1980, sponsored by the Farallones Institute where I was directing the Edible Landscape Program, interest in permaculture took off like lamb's quarters on a heap of moist horseshit.

In the late 1970s, I was very excited about permaculture—especially its attempt to develop integrated, sustainable food gardens. Slowly, my enthusiasm waned. Like most of the people I've watched cycle through the permaculture "experience" during the past several decades, I found the details to be lacking or counterproductive.

One of the big draws of permaculture, especially to well-educated non-gardeners, is the lure of less or no work, bountiful yields, and the soft fuzzy glow of knowing the garden will live on without you. This also proves to be the biggest letdown for many.

In reality, forests, whether in the tropical or temperate zones, are not the places where most of the foods we like to eat orginate. Forests are a natural result of the evolution of grass- and shrublands. The vegetables and fruits we crave—and most of the flowers—come from meadow and forest border environments. We must take away some of the forest in most American states in order to create an artificial and ecologically degraded environment for the sake our favorite foods. Luckily, early white settlers did most of the damage, so we can pretend it didn't happen and it isn't unnatural. In actuality, most gardeners must beat back and hold back the ecologic momentum in order to raise food. Yet, as soon as one stops weeding, pruning, or mowing, the reclamation process begins. All human food gardens require continuous stewardship. Sometimes the labor is minimal, such as the yearly burning of the grasses and pine seedlings beneath oak trees in the Yosemite Valley by native peoples prior to the European invaders. Other times, the work is sweaty, filthy, character-building toil.

Now, the third wave of interest in permaculture has arrived. Even *Landscape Architecture* magazine—seldom known to present any truly environmental responsive landscape design—is reviewing the topic. Mostly, I'm glad that permaculture is around to intrigue a new audience. Permaculture will continue to be a worthwhile intellectual hook that captivates and lures upper-cranium people into the fuzzy logic of the garden. Permaculture is like a beneficial fungus in your brain that attaches to your brain cells but eventually roots into the duff and soil. Once a cerebral person is gardening and finally getting real dirty, the dictates of the permacultural religion fall away like layers of a molting caterpillar.

I'll be around gardening . . . and with gardening details to share.

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