

# Creating Paradise

## Rob Hopkins

*Permaculture is about practical solutions for sustainable living. It addresses the question of how can we live more sustainably while also increasing our quality of life? In this article, Permaculture designer and teacher Rob Hopkins answers the frequently asked question “what is permaculture?”.*

Take a walk around your local supermarket and check the ‘country of origin’ part of the labels. Kenya, Holland, France, New Zealand, the madness of our present day food supply system becomes clear. Tired looking lettuces, emerging from months on cold storage sit snugly in a plastic dish covered with more plastic. Oranges, sometimes treated with pesticides banned within the EU, jostle alongside apples, usually from anywhere but Ireland.

Even the much heralded ‘triumph’ of organics, their taking their place in the supermarket aisles, is deceptive. Is a bag of carrots, grown in Turkey, flown to Ireland, wrapped in plastic and then sold as organic, actually better to the environment than locally chemically reared ones? It’s a point worth considering. We are creating a food system where consumers have a more active relationship with farmers in Turkey and Holland than with their local farmers.

Permaculture was originally conceived in the 1970s by Australians David Holmgren and Bill Mollison as a ‘permanent agriculture’. Any society, they reasoned, that didn’t have a sustainable agricultural system as its base, was doomed to disaster. History is littered with civilizations who thought they knew better than Nature. The problems created by a modern agricultural system which lays waste to the next generation’s inheritance are rapidly becoming only too clear.

What differentiates Permaculture from other related areas such as organic gardening and biodynamics, is that it is about design, rather than techniques. It is the conscious integration of our homes, gardens, woodlands, communities and livelihoods in the most energy efficient, abundant and sustainable way

Holmgren and Mollison’s concepts originally came from many years spent studying rainforest ecology in Tasmania. These ancient forests, they reasoned, are hugely productive in terms of biomass and have a huge species diversity. They are the most efficient recycling systems on the planet, not a scrap being wasted, everything is returned to the soil. Rainforests don’t need weeding, no-one has to water them, you don’t see any bags of NPK fertiliser lying around. The reason the rainforest is so efficient, they concluded, is because of the huge amount of beneficial relationships between all the different parts. They are self-sustaining eco-systems with a resilience which has resulted in their lasting for many thousands of years and they will last indefinitely into the future.

The longer they looked at the rainforests, the more they began to feel ‘we could make one of these’! What would happen, they thought, if we took the rainforest as a model for our agriculture, rather than monocultures, which simply don’t exist in Nature. They began designing agricultural systems based on these ideas, moving from single crops towards much more tree based systems, with a large species diversity and based on detailed observation of the site. As the concept grew, it became clear that just as a sustainable society needed a sustainable agriculture, it also needed a sustainable economy, sustainable communities and so on. The term ‘permaculture’ began to move away from being contraction of ‘permanent agriculture’ to being a contraction of ‘permanent culture’, that is creating a culture of permanence.

Permaculture, as it has evolved and as it is now practiced around the world, is an approach to the design of sustainable human habitats based on principles observed from ecology. It combines many of the best traditional practices with much cutting edge sustainable technology. It provides a toolkit for the repair of the planet and of our communities. Returning to the supermarket we began this article with, there is no reason why that lettuce or apple shouldn’t have been grown in Ireland, or better still close to where you live, or better again in your own garden, or even in pots on your balcony. The oranges might be a bit trickier, but there are other fruits, with similar levels of vitamin C that can be grown here, blueberries, blackcurrants and other more unusual fruits as well. By bringing food growing back home, we can create more beautiful towns and cities, increase the amount of healthy fresh food in our diets and reconnect with the seasons and our local ecology. This is already happening around the world, and is just one example of Permaculture in practice.

That our food supply system is seriously flawed is clear, but there is a solution. It involves people like us, in our communities, taking responsibility for our food production, for composting our waste, for creating sustainable livelihoods. We aren’t talking self-sufficiency here, more self-reliance, building a local economy while at the same time protecting and enhancing the local ecology. It works, it can be done, and if we are to survive into the future like the rainforests, it has to be done. To quote Bill Mollison, “every technique for conserving and restoring the earth is already known, what is not evident is that any nation or large group of people is prepared to make the change. However, millions of ordinary people are starting to do it themselves without help from political authorities”.

Source:

<http://www.transitionculture.org>