

## *Obtain a Yield*

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Note: this article was written for the YahooGroups Gardening Organically, thus contains references to "GO" – the name of the group

This month I was fortunate to hear David Holmgren, the Australian author of *Permaculture: Pathways and Principles Beyond Sustainability*, speak in Santa Barbara, CA (Aug. 2, 2005). Permaculture is a design system created in the 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. The term came from combining the words permanent + agriculture, in other words, a way to design a sustainable culture, one which can self-perpetuate by intentionally producing all the resources it needs.

For example: contrast our discussions here on GO about compost – growing our own plant nutrition and enriching the life of our soil – with your MiracleGro neighbor whose lush foliage is totally dependent upon the outside resources of toxic chemicals which simultaneously sterilize his soil.

Permaculture Design Principles begin with observation of nature – taking a look at the natural cycles and the truisms of those cycles, and working with them, rather than against them. Examples from our GO experience would include selection of plants whose needs and requirements match what our site has to offer, as contrasted with those where we have to fight the uphill battle to keep them alive. A prior GO essay concerned how "organic" is much more than simply discarding the bottles of chemicals and substituting homemade "natural" sprays. Rather, organic is a different way of approaching the entire topic of gardening, switching from a mindset of "substances applied-to the garden" to working with nature's amazing powerful systems and cycles.

David Holmgren distilled his observations about nature into a set of Permaculture Design Principles. These are such basic truisms about life on the planet that one can read them and say "well duh," yet totally miss their power. They are the type of observations which apply equally well to a solution to an insect pest problem, to the selection of building materials for a house, the selection of a method of transportation, a way of managing finances, the building of a community. (Mr. Holmgren's Permaculture Design Principles are explained at length in his book, but also listed on his website <http://www.holmgren.com.au/html/Writings/essence.htm> )

In the decades David Holmgren has been working with the Permaculture principles he and fellow thinkers have come to understand that Permaculture holds enormous potential as a path for human culture as we depart from a fossil-fuel-dependent culture and segue into the version of civilization that will follow. These are thinkers who follow such concepts as Peak Oil (<http://www.peakoil.net/> and <http://www.peakoil.net/uhdsg/Default.htm> )

In a brief tour through his design principles that day in Santa Barbara, Mr. Holmgren showed us examples of Permaculture communities around the world: Japan, Germany, Russia, the

U.S., Australia. Photos of colorful produce in root cellars, photos of artistically sculpted cisterns, photos of beautiful passive solar sunrooms, photos of bicycles handcrafted from found materials, aerial photos of rainwater retaining swales, and yes, photos of abundantly producing gardens.

You'll note that I use the word "producing." One of Mr. Holmgren's Permaculture Design Principles is "obtain a yield." Last week he underlined the point that the origins of our ornamental gardens and sweeping lawns is with the emergence of the middle class and their desire to imitate the estates of the nobility. Sweeping lawns and nonfunctional ornamental landscapes are a scoffing statement: "I don't NEED to produce food."

I have lived all my life in Southern California amid cities luxurious in year-round ornamental gardens. Up to now, my focus has been on our region's lack of water wisdom – how much imported potable water it takes to maintain this mix of tropical non-native plants in what is truly a desert climate. Yet Holmgren's comment affected me deeply, to realize that by declaring "I don't NEED to produce food," we are perpetuating a dependency on a national food production system which is deeply flawed with respect to soil resources, biodiversity and chemical inputs, and is highly dependent upon exhaustible polluting, greenhouse-gas-emitting petroleum products.

"I don't NEED to produce food" is an ostentatious attitude: I can afford to be dependent upon someone else for my basic sustenance, because I am the nobility. I am above it all, I can transcend the basic critter-need of finding nourishment, I can detach myself from the system of life and rely on processed products from the supermarket that come in colorful printed boxes or wrapped in non-biodegradable Styrofoam and saran.

In the 1930s and 1940s nearly 20 million Americans turned to their gardens in support of that war effort. Called Victory Gardens, these backyard cultivations produced nearly 40% of the produce consumed (<http://www.victoryseeds.com/TheVictoryGarden/index.html>). Yet the reality was, gardening grew more than just vegetables. Those gardens grew resilience, determination, self-reliance. They were an active way to participate in the solutions to world problems.

Each of us here on GO knows intimately the deep sense of satisfaction of burying our fingers in the rich earth, and providing what a plant needs to flourish. We have experienced that thrill of harvesting the first rounded tomato deeply scented, warmed by the sun. Those inner feelings of satisfaction and thrill are empowering, we have achieved something. That tomato nourishes not just our belly, it nourishes our spirit.

In this time of environmental upheaval, with new reports of wildlife extinctions, forest destruction, glacial melting, furious hurricanes, we at GO have found one unifying, rallying cry: We DO need to produce food. Clean food for our bodies, empowerment for our spirits, renewal for the earth. We need this very different sort of victory.

Our spirits need it, because it is tangible evidence that environmental change is real and is possible. Our bodies need it, because we can grow healthier at home. Our earth needs it, because in its seeds are restoration, political statement, environmental action, activism, and

ultimately, victory.

Invite your neighbors to join you in growing a Victory Garden. Show them how to begin.  
Learn together. Obtain a yield.