

Forest Gardening Communities in Cascadia: Then and Now

Gardening Lessons from the Past

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IF WE HOPE TO SPREAD PERMACULTURE throughout our contemporary landscape, and to incorporate into it related techniques observed and adapted from other cultures, regions, and times, then “gardening” people and communities will be as important as our husbandry of the Earth. A network of communities in the Pacific Northwest is promulgating permaculture ethics and principles on a broadening scale as it adopts and adapts indigenous cultural practices.

Learning from precolonial polycultures

Forest gardening as practiced in “home gardens” in tropical and population dense regions such as Kerala, India, and the island of Java is very different from the food gathering practices of the Native Americans of our continent. However, there have been examples of perennial polyculture in temperate regions for millennia. Historical accounts of indigenous intensification methods (enhancing the productivity of native food harvests), burning practices, and more familiar forms of cultivation in pre- and post-colonial North America are just joining the academic mainstream.

Using our area as an example, the historic and present climax ecosystem for much of Cascadia (the bioregional name for the Pacific Northwest of North America) is a dense temperate rainforest. Nearly any small patch or large plot of land left unattended will be colonized by forest. Though most of this bioregion receives average amounts of rainfall, we experience a seasonal summer drought. Because water is necessary to photosynthesis, deciduous trees have a tough time competing with coniferous trees which are able to photosynthesize during the winter when nearly everything else is dormant, light is

modestly available, and moisture is plentiful. With most open areas predisposed to succeed to forest, and with most of the new growth (i.e. food for somebody) and light to be found in the canopy, it is open spaces, access to light, low-growing edible parts, and heat which are lacking in our bioregion.

In response to these ecological lacks and surpluses, many tribes of our area burned favored food-producing landscapes every one-to-four years following harvest in the weeks before the fall rains began. This kept the forest at bay on the glacial-outwash “prairies” and sub-alpine meadows that yielded nutritionally

valuable starchy roots and berries, and attracted herbivores to the new growth. The scraps of hunting and fishing were used to fertilize prized patches of salal berries, camas bulbs, and other foods. These techniques, which were used in both broad landscapes and more intensively monitored patches, served to increase the size, quality, ease of harvest, and reproductive success of the species of interest. The stewardship responsibilities and first harvesting rights to these patches were passed down through families, but others were allowed to harvest, and surpluses were often redistributed to the wider community



Getting friends and neighbors involved is the first step to “forest gardening” community.

through potlatches.

It may not seem at first glance that these ways are applicable to our modern lives. For example, the deliberate burning of landscapes is an alarming concept to most communities. Semi-nomadic harvesting regimes are problematic due to land-use regulations, the loss of traditional harvesting knowledge and sustainable technologies, decreased diversity, declining plant and animal populations, and even extinctions. The cultural presumption of ownership and the enforcement of private property laws affect where and how we garden, steward,

wildcraft, and hunt. Human and wind-powered water transport and the coastal and riverine trading systems dependent on it have been displaced by petroleum-fueled commerce. But I believe that valuable insights remain to be gathered. Many permaculture practices and communal living techniques mimic these indigenous activities and serve to re-wild our bodies, souls, and communities.

Political, communal, and physical changes

In investigating traditional cultural practices, we must recognize that the indigenous peoples of North America have been and continue to be ruthlessly suppressed and their rights, practices, and worldviews persecuted. Their land has been usurped and their traditional knowledge ignored or derided. However, the timing, patterns, techniques, and ecological intuitiveness of the “perennial polyculture” practiced by the first peoples of this continent have not been entirely lost, though both ecological conditions and the rules for cultural survival have greatly changed.

Indigenous species and technologies

Over the generations, as native peoples refined their harvesting techniques and cultural structures, the health of crop patches and other wild food resources was (for the most part) maintained sustainably throughout Cascadia. The lessons we can take from this for contemporary permaculture would affect our management of zones 3-5—the land we cultivate or resources we tend or harvest away from the immediate environs of the dwelling. Indigenous peoples in this region intensified harvesting of, or in some cases actually cultivated native plants or analog species (those ecologically similar to the native species). Using indigenous cultivation techniques can enhance the potential of native harvests that we might otherwise overlook in the design of an edible forest garden. In this way, our household economies could be more fully harmonized with the bioregions in which we live.

Yet with erosion of the practices and the loss of relationships of intensification, it is my belief that these once-tended plants have lost some of their human-added value. Absent the familial tending of patches, fruits may now be smaller and less predictable in distribution. Less useful plants may have come to populate areas that had once been intensified for favored plants (e.g., conifer trees invading camas prairie).

There is little published literature on adapting these native practices, where they are even documented at all (see the end of this article for some suggested readings). But read what is available, learn the history of your area, and ask elders who may have knowledge. And remember to offer help or gifts to those who give share knowledge with you, for cultural technologies are very valuable! By making use of native species and practices we may be able to offer the coming generations an invaluable legacy; it's the job of our time to build bridges between pre- and post-industrial cultures.

If you extend your view of cultivation technologies to include

the redistribution of surplus, then we may learn something from Wayne Suttles' description of the coast peoples' potlatch system of festive wealth redistribution in *Affinal Ties, Subsistence, and Prestige among the Coast Salish*:



Dave Sansone teaches people the right way to plant a bare root tree.

“Since wealth is indirectly or directly obtainable through food, then inequalities in food production will be translated into inequalities in wealth. If one community over a period of several years were to produce more food than its neighbors, it might come to have a greater part of the society's wealth. Under such circumstances the less productive communities might become unable to give wealth back in exchange for further gifts of food from the more productive one. If amassing wealth were an end in itself the process of sharing surplus food might thus break down. But wealth, in the Native view, is only a means to high status achieved through the giving of it... The potlatchers have converted their surplus wealth into high status. High status in turn enables the potlatchers to establish wider ties, make better marriages with more distant villages, and thus extend the process further.”

In restoring functional ecosystems, we should not try to re-create landscapes that have existed in earlier times, worldviews, or ecologies. The greatest potential for “forest gardening” lies in using analogs that help us mimic the natural forest, in more