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Permaculture restores a piece of the backyard ecosystem

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Maybe you plant flowers that attract beneficial insects to your tomato plants. Or maybe you capture, store and divert rainwater to your garden in summer's dry months. Maybe yet you build a solar oven to dry garden tomatoes.

The effort can be small or large, complex or simple. All of it, though, falls under the heading:

"permaculture."

Ever heard of it? Neither had I.

"Permaculture is a revolution disguised as organic gardening, and so people get into it," said [Jude Hobbs](#), who helps teach a new permaculture course at Oregon State University but has been teaching its principles for 20 years, which she calls a "whole systems approach to design."

"(People) think it's about growing food then they go: 'Whoa, we can catch water to water our food source. We can get a little solar water heater going. We can support our local credit union, because it's about economics. . .'

"(Permaculture) is a way to get to sustainability."

On a bike tour of Southeast Portland permaculture gardens last week, more than two-dozen people saw how several of their fellow Portlanders are trying to slow down and live more sustainably by growing some of their own food and connect with the natural world right out their back doors.

Becky Luening and Brian Willson showed tour-goers their two 1,500-gallon water tanks that catch rain runoff from their roof. Those help water six raised beds as well as a cranberry bog planted in front of one of the tanks.

They grow peaches, pears, apples, persimmons, rhubarb, gooseberries, blueberries, loganberries, grapes and vegetables. They have landscaped their yard to attract as many birds, butterflies, bees and dragonflies as possible.

"All of our patterns and habits for the last century are unsustainable," said Willson, who is writing a book called *Going AWOL from the American Way of Life*. "We've developed a frenetic way of surviving where we work all the time. We live fast. We don't focus on relationships. It's a collective mental illness. That's what we know. It's not sustainable.

"Permaculture provides a practical way to reintegrate oneself into nature."

And to get there we need to rely on our neighbors and community for help, said Randy White, who led the bike tour and created the Portland-based online social networking site [Bright Neighbor](#), which aims to create a tight-knit green community.

"This is what we're going to be doing in the future," he said. "We want to be a support network of knowledge."

Julie Griswald was on the tour to get ideas for maximizing edible crops in her small urban garden. But she had to Google "permaculture" to know what it meant.

"It is more gardening for me," she said of her reason for going on the tour. "I'm leery of hype. Some of this is jumping on a bandwagon."

The idea of permaculture (and fancy name) has been around awhile.

Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren coined the term in the mid-1970s in publishing a book called "Permaculture One." A basic tenet involves landscaping to mimic nature and help grow organic food, which can look any number of ways depending on your home and geographic region.

During the tour, White enthusiastically dragged out a waist-high pile of dried bean plants, handed out empty medicine bottles "from our petroleum based medicine system" and thundered, "If you want to get going with permaculture, you can take these seeds and propagate!"

Now, that might be enough to send someone new to permaculture packing with the thought "This ain't my scene."

But permaculture is full of good ideas. Anything that helps us better understand relationships in nature - like why pollinating bees are something to embrace and not to spray with insecticide - is important.

And permaculture is a practice that starts small, just outside your door. If you aim too big and your gigantic garden overwhelms you, then you haven't gotten anywhere. If you succeed at growing some herbs and lettuce, however, great.

Hobbs, who helps teach the course at OSU, likes to say this about permaculture and sustainability.

"I say no guilt. No dogma. I'm doing the best I can. Everyday I try to do a little better."

I like that, too.

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