

From Organic Gardening to Do Nothing Gardening

by Dan Dorsey

Almost immediately after moving onto my acre and a third in the Sonoran Desert, I began digging up my plots for a "standard" organic garden. Most of the area had been turned and compacted by the bulldozer when the required septic tank was installed. I cut through the soil with a pick and shovel to 18 inches, added horse manure and peat moss, and mixed. To keep out rabbits I put up stakes and a chicken wire fence. I started a compost pile, watering it down and turning it every few days. I planted the hybrid seeds I had ordered in neat rows, and I spent a good part of the season weeding and handpicking bugs off the vegetables. Not yet having an irrigation system in place, I spent more time dragging the hose from bed to bed. In truth, the work involved in organic gardening seemed too much. At the same time, I had the feeling I was working against nature rather than with it. I resolved to mend my labor intensive ways.

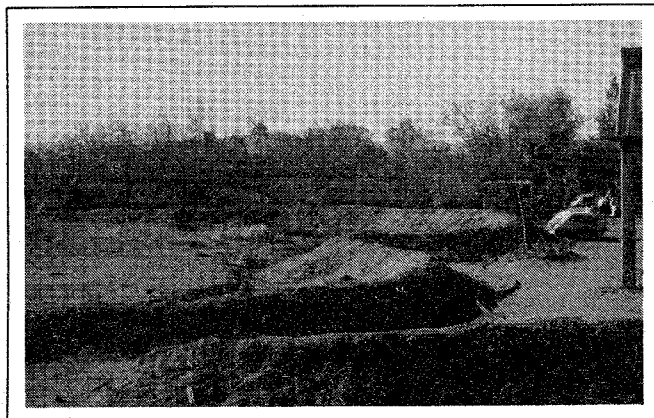
Over the winter I read a remarkable book by Masanobu Fukuoka called *The Natural Way of Farming*. In this book Fukuoka describes how over the last twenty years on his small farm in Japan he has been doing less and less to his rice fields and orchards. At the same time his yields have increased to better than his neighbors in the area who are still tilling, planting, spraying, fertilizing, and cultivating. In other words, Fukuoka has become a manager of his fields, letting nature do most of the work. Although there is a great difference between his bioregion and the Sonoran Desert, I thought with some modification his principles would work here.

The following spring, I asked myself "What could I not do this year?" First, I took down my square fences and swaled the area into curved organic shapes to catch water. My two cats kept the rabbits at bay. Next I decided not to till the soil. I mixed batches of seed of clovers, legumes, grains, herbs, vegetables, and flowers (all open-pollinated), and broadcast them in the

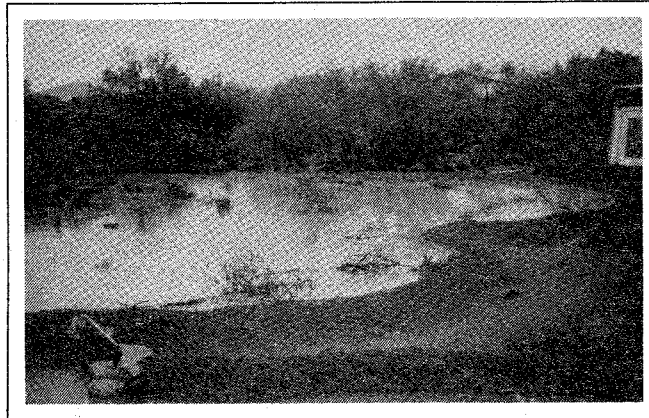
swales and beds. In some places I added manure and raked the seeds into the soil. Some of the vegetable beds I watered, while the seeds in the swales were left to await the summer rains. I did not suppress weeds, but let them grow. Using a hoola hoe, I suppressed only a few "problem" weeds all season. I did away with the compost pile entirely, putting weeds and household scraps directly on the soil. This organic matter acted as a mulch while it slowly decomposed. Many volunteers resprouted from the previous year in both likely and unlikely places. Some of these vegetables produced a bumper crop, as I left them alone to grow wherever they decided to sprout. Finally, I began planting my perennial guilds [see issue #6 for more on guilds—ed] around the annuals and swales.

By the end of the year, I had a wild, jungle-like garden, full of vegetables, grains, melons, weeds, and flowers. There was almost no insect damage (instead of picking off insects, I decided to let the garden alone). The area had a pleasing naturalness with all the complexity of a natural ecosystem. In one five by five foot area were seven different species of weeds, three flowers, eight edible plants, and eleven species of insects, plus all the microscopic soil life. Since we had a good summer rainy season, blackeyed peas, tepary beans, amaranth, melons, squash, and millet had matured in the swales with only runoff rain water.

In conclusion, evolving a natural system around water harvesting structures is a more natural way of gardening, with much less work and resource input. This natural system is based on letting nature take care of most of the work, such as insect control and loosening of the soil. Man becomes a low-key manager of the area. Once the plants are established, the system can reseed itself each year, and a self-perpetuating garden can develop that meets our needs and those of nature. Isn't that permaculture philosophy?



On-contour swale immediately after formation.



Swale during a rainstorm. Note how far water backs up behind the swale.