
Starting Small

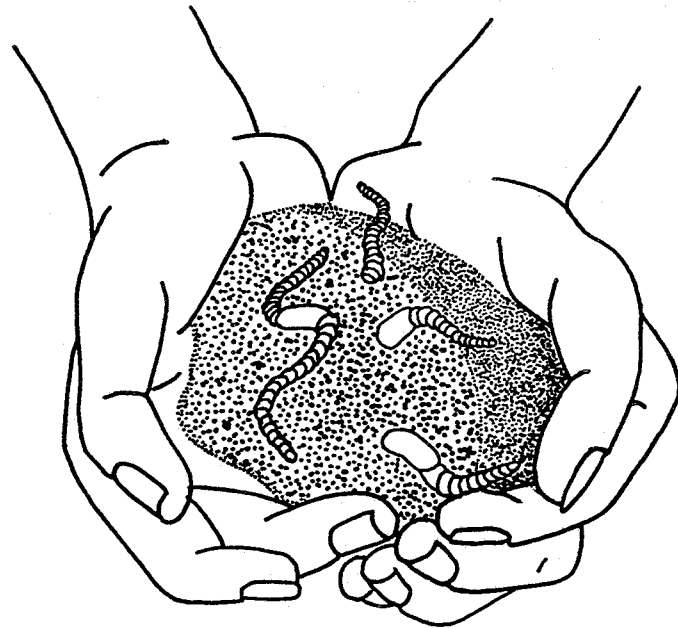
by Ben Haggard

When I studied with Bill Mollison, he asked why so few Americans go on to teach permaculture. We told him that we did not feel comfortable teaching a system that we hadn't tested thoroughly and come to have real practical experience in. Although this answer was unsatisfactory to Mollison (who has, of course, many years of this experience) it seemed sensible to me. No matter how rationally conceived a system is, nothing is as convincing as direct personal experience.

This attitude has made it possible for me to work with clients and students who are skeptical or uneasy about permaculture designs. I always recommend to them (and to myself) that they start small. A small demonstration project is good for building confidence and testing the validity of an idea. Here are some small projects I have used or seen used successfully:

Mulching

By far the most universally successful technique for dryland gardens, large or small, is mulching. In my teaching, I tell students that if they do nothing else, they should mulch. This can begin on a very small scale—a few square feet in the back of the garden somewhere. There is nothing quite so



persuasive as having someone stick their fingers into the soil under a mulch when everything around them is hot, dry and baked.

Although I have mulched since I was thirteen, I decided to try an experiment in my own garden a few years ago. One section of the garden was double dug, amended with compost and peat moss, and planted in row. An adjoining section, made up of miserable hard packed clay, got a thin layer of manure and then a deep layer of mulch (leaves, weeds, grass clippings.) The results were telling: after a single season, I was sneaking into the mulched area to steal gorgeous black soil to amend the double dug beds. I would drag anyone with even a vague interest in gardening out to the backyard to watch me jump up and down about the amazing differences. A few got excited enough to go home and mulch.

One thing I have learned over the years is that the most commonly made mistake is putting too little mulch down. Depending on the fineness and density of the material, I recommend a minimum of six to twelve uncompacted inches. If the material is hay, this twelve inches will settle down to about six dense inches after a month or two of weathering.

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Permaculturalist Priscilla Logan, a grade school teacher in Santa Fe, has been using mulch as a way to teach her students about soil life. (They call it their soil building project, and it is clear evidence of the kind of profound experiences that can come out of tiny spaces.) The kids set up a few straw bales to section off an area in front of their school. Then they layered newspaper and straw on their cordoned-off bit of ground. They introduced earthworms and away it went. These days it is considered a privilege to take an apple core out to feed the worms. The whole project took an investment of 12 bales of straw and perhaps a few hours of time to set up, and these kids will never forget it. [See *Priscilla Logan's article on page 4 for more information.*]

Water Harvesting

I have also tested water harvesting techniques on a small scale. I wasn't sure whether or not it was worthwhile to set up a cistern to catch my roof water. So I put a 30 gallon garbage can under one of my canales (a Santa Fe style drainpipe) to see what would happen. After fifteen minutes or so of rain, one section of roof filled the entire can. Similarly, one small, well-built swale can be very persuasive.

Worm Harvesting

Another simple project, good for kids, gardeners and fishermen in cold winter areas, is to move a garbage can into a garage or other protected area. Fill it halfway with manure, leaves, kitchen scraps, etc. Then introduce redworms (readily available at fishing supply stores.) Continue to add kitchen

garbage throughout the winter; the redworms will compost it for you. More important, their population will increase. In spring you will have ample quantities to introduce into the garden, feed the chickens, or whatever else you can think of to do with them. (English folk cuisine is said to have some ideas on this.)

Like sourdough starter, I always keep a tub of redworms breeding—indoors in the winter, outdoors in summer. Then it is always easy to find a batch to put under the mulch or to give away to friends to start their own worm farm.

Introducing Livestock

I haven't yet found a way to mulch my cat on a small-scale experimental basis, but I am planning to try chickens—three to be exact. Mark Slater, head of the permaculture project at Jemez House (a home for abused and abandoned kids) made an excellent suggestion for a no-tech chicken house made out of straw bales. [See *article on page 3.*] This is the perfect solution for me. I live in a tract house on an ordinary-sized city lot. This chicken house is compact, completely movable, and requires no carpentry skills. What's more, if I change my mind, I can turn it into mulch. Which is more than I can say for the cat.

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