

SHEFFIELD ORGANIC FOOD INITIATIVE: ARTICLE FOR PERMACULTURE NEWS

You've read the books and you understand the grand concept of permaculture, that the natural world can be abundant and generous. But then how do you translate the ideals into reality? How can you realise the potential of these ideas? Emigrating to Australia would be an instant solution, but you don't have the airfare and you do have a life in a post-industrial city, on the northern limits of human habitability. Rural resettlement, moving to the peaceful isolation of some valley in Wales would be idyllic, but you'd get lonely and the city needs your greenfingers more than the country.

So, thinking globally but acting locally, we gradually became part of the timeless indigenous culture of subsistence growers that barely survives this virtual and materialistic modern world. We got some allotments..... We found that organic matter is of so little value in our civilisation that people throw it away. So we got as much compost as we could make.....And we began to realise that even in Britain you can grow most of the food you need organically.

Richard Clare and Darrell Maryon co-ordinate the cultivation of almost twenty allotments in Sheffield, each plot being an eighth of an acre. They are also supervising the restoration of a two-acre walled kitchen garden and orchard five miles south of Sheffield.

Allotments gave us a start, access to a little bit of land. With good organic practices we found that it was quite straightforward to look after just one plot and soon there wasn't enough space for all the things we wanted to grow. Once we understood how to make decent compost, we had the main resource we needed to reclaim more derelict allotments. Organics makes sense to us because we can recycle free resources, like transforming vegetable waste and manure into compost or leaves into leafmould, which enable us to grow more and better on our shoestring budgets. Gradually after several years' practice and lots more soil improvement, we've learned how to grow dozens of different varieties of fruits and nuts as well as more than a hundred vegetable maincrops.

As their competence grew, Richard and Darrell helped and encouraged their friends, neighbours and local communities to grow their own. An underused local open space provided the opportunity to plant a woodland of 2000 native species trees and an extensive community orchard and nuttery. They have also supported a special needs allotment and an allotment for health set up by a local G.P. surgery.

There's a desperate need for basic, practical advice. We've been able to offer others who don't have the time, money, experience or energy to take on a whole plot, the chance to enjoy all the benefits of allotmenting. We've always been keen to explain everything we've learnt to volunteers, especially beginners. Locally grown organic produce will only ever become more widely available if a lot more people learn the craft of market gardening, which is actually a highly skilled occupation, requiring several years' practical training, like an apprenticeship or a degree.

We try to reward volunteers with produce whenever possible. Working with a diverse range of people has given us realistic expectations about the existing levels of skills and understanding in society today and how few people have enough commitment to grow successfully in the face of so many other distractions and priorities, such as wages, mortgages and babies. Anyone who manages to grow some of their own food organically deserves to be celebrated and respected.

And what role has Permaculture played in your activities?

First we had to be pragmatic and accept that allotments were the most likely way we were ever going to get access to land. It is often reassuring to see the common sense that put paths in the shade and greenhouses in full sun, representing a continuous tradition of native permacultural practice in this country. You have to think ahead, adapt to your own circumstances and change your sense of ownership, so that while you're proud of achievements, you're not too devastated when the wind takes the roof off your hut or a vandal burns it down.

The bigger the investment you can make in the long-term future, the greater will be the eventual return. Although it makes a lot of sense to use all the wonderful range of annuals capable of thriving in our climate, we often recommend that anyone who is very busy, like young professionals, should plant a whole allotment with perennials so that the biggest maintenance job is picking the fruits and nuts. You have to be very patient to wait for an orchard-allotment to mature, but it's worth it in the end. You can attain optimum nutrition even on a minimal income.

In 1994, Richard stood as a candidate in local council elections on an Allotments platform.

I wanted to advertise the fact that in the inner-city area where I live, there is no provision of allotments whatsoever, for a population of over 7000. There used to be, but all the central sites were developed and built on in the 50's and 60's. Now we have to walk a couple of miles uphill to reach the nearest site. The eighty votes I got showed considerable support for provision of what I think of as a basic human right, access to a place to grow your own food. By law, it only takes a small petition of a dozen local ratepayers to force the council to provide an allotment site in an area that is deprived of such a simple facility.

In recent history, allotments have been immensely undervalued. We hope the time is now ripe for a renaissance of allotment culture. Modern western societies like ours may not seem to have the absolute need for access to fresh local produce, but many Russians are thankful that they have their system of dachas, which now produce 80% of all the potatoes grown there and gherkins are a more reliable currency than the Rouble. Although Britain may seem to have an abundance of food on the shelves, malnutrition still exists in all its forms from hyperactivity to obesity and anorexia, and vast areas can be classed as food deserts where the only way to get fed is to travel miles to the megastore.

Allotments can be part of the solution to a whole host of problems facing society. Healthy food is still the most important thing they can supply, but there are a hundred and one other benefits that vibrant plotlands could contribute socially, environmentally and even economically. It is possible to attain high quality and sophisticated achievements, such as growing and saving seed of Heritage heirloom varieties, which are suited to small-scale production and are unavailable commercially. The most valuable function allotments could perform would be in giving more people the confidence and competence in organic cultivation which would allow them to progress to being commercial market gardeners who could satisfy the current overwhelming demand for locally-grown produce which customers can trust.

The Organic Food Initiative we manage here in Sheffield has developed demonstration gardens to explain a variety of approaches and techniques. We have also been keen to articulate the practitioner's perspective, so that people have realistic expectations about what can be achieved and are fully aware of the difficulties involved, both in starting plots and growing organically. We have also made an ongoing commitment to advising and influencing decision-makers and administrators, such as the council's L.A. 21 officer, the Health authority's Healthy Gardening Group, Sheffield's Wildlife Trust, City Farm and the Community Composting Network, which has its co-ordinator based in Sheffield. We have compiled a database of original information which explains the practicalities and the wider context of urban organics. We are currently in the process of becoming constituted as an educational trust, dedicated to providing support, advice and encouragement based on our ten years of practical experience.

A recent House of Commons report on the Future of Allotments, issued by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, acknowledged that allotments deliver a wide range of benefits, from productive to therapeutic. The Government expressed a commitment to maintaining their statutory protection of sites. However, the responsibility for improving the allotments system and supporting tenants was left to local councils. Although there is no likelihood of any legal reform of the anachronistic Acts of Parliament governing allotment provision, several local authorities have already responded positively to the report's recommendations. The independent, non-government sector is also responding to the need to prioritise allotments; the national land rights campaign group, The Land Is Ours, has gathered together an impressive team of experts to raise the profile of allotments and is setting up a nationwide network of supportive contacts.

In spite of the current depression in many aspects of agriculture, there are signs of hope from an organic point of view. Many more conventional farmers and growers than ever before are converting their land (50,000 Hectares last year). The organic movement is preparing itself for a concerted campaign promoting the social functions and benefits of organics. The HDRA has been fund-raising for its Grow

Your Own campaign to encourage domestic food production, and the Soil Association is currently preparing its Food Futures programme, a series of regionally-based projects designed to co-ordinate the development of the local organic food sector.

CONTACTS: Department of Environment, Transport and Regions: c/o HMSO
Community Composting Network: 0114 2580483 The Land Is Ours: 01865 722016
Soil Association Local Food Links: 0117 9142425 HDRA: 01203 303517
Sheffield Organic Food Initiative: 0114 2686727

20th November

1998

To: Anna Glanville-Hearson, Assistant Editor, Permaculture Magazine.

From: Richard Clare, Sheffield Organic Food Initiative, c/o 41b Burns Road, S10 3GL.

Dear Anna,

Please find attached a draft copy of the article you requested, explaining some of our allotment and organic food growing activities. Could you please let me know whether this is okay. Contact me if you'd like any of it re-written and/or I'd appreciate it if you could send me a copy of what you intend to print.

I hope the length is about right. I wanted the content to be as informative and comprehensive as possible, without seeming too dry, so the tone is conversational to begin with, becoming more formal and factual by the end. I've checked with the organisations referred to that its okay to mention them, if you haven't already covered them in greater detail elsewhere.

I enclose some photos to accompany the article. I hope they will be suitable. I need these to be returned to me as they are originals and I don't have copies. I've listed them in an order which would fit the text and suggested captions, though I'll leave it to your discretion which you use. The first photo would be good at the start and I'd suggest putting the other pictures after the italic text and before the bold, as follows:--

1. Display of organic produce grown by SOFI on local allotments at an autumn produce show at Heeley City Farm.

[You've read the books and... ..the food you need organically.]

2. Abundant organic matter, freely available. Collecting autumn leaves to make into leafmould, a better-than-peat-substitute.

- [Richard Clare and Darrell Maryon... ..a hundred vegetable maincrops.]
3. Planting loganberries with nursery children at the local community centre.
[As their competence grew... .. celebrated and respected.]
 4. Apple blossom in the community orchard on the Ponderosa Open Space in inner-city Sheffield.
[And what role has Permaculture... ..on a minimal income.]
 5. Young Bramley with hops and sage on a local orchard-allotment.
[In 1994, Richard stood... .. years of practical experience.]
 6. Heritage tomato, Oxheart Giant, thin-skinned and firm-fleshed.
[A recent House of... ..]

I also enclose a disk with the text stored digitally in Word 2 for Windows 3.1 and also converted to Mac.

MANY THANKS,

Richard and Darrell.