

ARTICLE FOR PERMACULTURE NEWS ABOUT ALLOTMENTS AND SOFI. OCTOBER '98

1,000-1,500 WORDS + PICTURES FOR ISSUE 20 - 1/99 DEADLINE 12/98
+ REFERENCES TO SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT / SOIL ASSOCIATION -
FOOD FUTURES PROJECT / HDRA'S GROW YOUR OWN CAMPAIGN (+
CONTACTS)

BACKGROUND/ACTIVITY RANGE THOUGHTS FOR PERMAPEOPLE URBAN
CONTEXT SOCIO LOFI

You've read the books and you understand the grand concept of permaculture, that the natural world is abundant and generous. But then how do you translate it into reality? How to realise the potential of these ideas? Emigrating to Nimbin, Australia would be an instant solution, but you don't have the airfare and you do have a life in a dreary 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 culture of self-sufficiency 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 you could grow most of the food you needed this way.

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.

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. Gradually after several years' practice and lots more soil improvement, we've learned how to grow dozens of different varieties of fruits as well as more than a hundred vegetable maincrops.

As their competence grew, Richard and Darrell helped and encouraged their friends and neighbours to grow their own. They have 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 happen 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 enough land. It is often reassuring to see the common sense that put paths in the shade and buildings in full sun representing a continuous tradition of indigenous permacultural practice in this country. You have to 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 a commitment you can make to the long-term future, the greater will be the eventual return. We 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 fruit 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 eat like an aristocrat on a pauper's income.