

PERMACULTURE POLICY BRIEF

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Section 1: Problems

With the current global economic crisis has come a global food crisis. The prices of almost every staple food have increased substantially across the world, some staples doubling in cost.¹ It is important to remember that a global food crisis doesn't just mean a problem *over there* for folks who happen to be poor, anonymous and exotic. Families are feeling the economic pressures of food in America as grocery bills increase and paychecks decrease. Ever increasing food costs have encouraged food shoppers to rethink the ways in which they feed their families. "The worst case of food inflation in nearly 20 years" has made luxury food less common, leftovers appreciated and store brands a much needed relief.² It can be hard to prioritize spending a bit more for organic produce, recycled paper towels or local orange juice during such a crisis because the equally devastating global environmental crisis boasts less urgency. After all, being green costs money, and when money is tight putting food on the table trumps organic. But, is being green really more expensive?

There is another way to look at the crisis, in which economic and environmental relief ensues. As American history suggests, a movement like the Victory Garden movement during the Second World War will begin to remedy both crises. "In 1943, Americans planted over 20 million Victory Gardens," all together contributing one third of the necessary food that summer.³ These days, food rarely comes from our back yards, and we do not have to wash the dirt out from under our fingernails before dinner. Instead, we blindly ask our food to travel 1500 miles from a farm to our plate. Not only do we ask gas to be burned, but we ask folks to rebel against the notion of being stuck.⁴ It's time for a food revolution. It is time to think about eating locally in the most basic and accessible manner possible. Start growing seedlings! While the suburban American dream begins to slip away, we can find hope in turning our backyards into gardens and windowsills into greenhouses. As a community in economic *and* environmental crisis, this availability to grow our own food in Oberlin is huge. Most families cannot afford fresh vegetables for salad, especially not organic ones.

Implementing permaculture growing practices in our Oberlin lives will save money and the future of the planet. After all, permaculture is by definition sustainable—growing that does not need input from outside the cycle because the system nourishes and replenishes in natural ways. Sustainable not only means that environmentally harmful pesticides are unnecessary, but

¹ Walt, Vivienne. "The World's Growing Food-Price Crisis," *TIME*.
<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1717572,00.html>.

² "Food price hikes changing U.S. eating habits: More people say they are eating at home, buying food in bulk," msnbc.com. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23882299.

³ www.revivevictorygarden.org

⁴ www.revivevictorygarden.org

that the money to pay for them is unnecessary. If the plants bearing food grow year after year, the initial investment of time and (a small amount of!) money more than pays for itself. If compost from food grown in the garden nourishes the soil and plants grow the next year from product seeds the expense of the garden store is cut out, not to mention the expense of the grocery store for fresh organic veggies. Welcome to Do It Yourself organic!

B. Solution: A Permaculture Zine

A solution to current global food crisis is to stop relying on corporate food production and distribution. Agri-business and monoculture crops deplete our soils. Supermarket chains support the oil industry as well as discriminate against low-income neighborhoods. The hands-off approach to food has led us to this point and we must learn how to reclaim our food system by controlling and cultivating it ourselves. Our group's tangible answer to the food crisis is to teach students and community members that delicious and affordable nutrition is readily available. With ingenuity and a little effort, we can feed ourselves from the earth of our own backyards.

Our group's answer the food crisis lies in a do-it-yourself permaculture zine. Our zine would include step-by-step instructions on creating a viable permaculture garden in your yard and highlight the key concepts of permaculture design. We would include growing instructions for two seasonal vegetables: cabbage for the winter and tomatoes for the summer. By focusing on two vegetables, we believe a permaculture garden would seem a little less daunting of a task to our audience. Our zine would teach students and community members how to make raised beds, collect rainwater from their gutters, and even make compost bins from old garbage cans. Additionally, it would provide basic information on growing and harvesting tomatoes and cabbage. Our goal is to create 21st century Victory Gardens that require no inputs and that will provide families with a base food supply that they can build from and experiment with.

We intend to illustrate our zine by including helpful drawings along with the instructions and try to fit as much information on as few pages as possible. After we finished the original, we would photocopy it and distribute it throughout the college and community in places such as Mudd, Oberlin Public Library, Java-Zone, Ratsy's, and Full Circle Fuels. Our intention is to reach a wide variety of people. We want to see small-scale gardens in abandoned lots, student houses, co-ops, and family homes. The aim of our zine is to demonstrate to students, faculty, and community members alike not only how to grow food, but to inspire them to do the same.

Section 3: Case Studies

Case Study 1: Permaculture in the Urban Environment

Gather Round Farms is located in Cleveland, Ohio and is an excellent example of how the goals of permaculture, both in the agricultural and societal sense of the word, can be realized even within the urban setting. Once an empty and downtrodden lot, founders Megan Kresge and Uma Kirkwood, began by spreading wood chips over the asphalt and covering that with vegetables and cardboard boxes discarded from the West Side Market, a simple yet effective way of reusing resources. Even in its creation Gather Round Farms is a project founded in permaculture. In practice the urban farm also employs permaculture techniques including the collection of water from the neighborhood roofs, a clear example of working with the natural

processes rather than in spite of them. With the recent passing of a zoning variance chickens were added to the vegetables that are being grown on the lot and their feces naturally add essential nutrients to the to the ground, a further step in permaculture. These techniques bring the farm closer to being a closed system in which waste is not produced and outside resources are not consumed. Furthermore these practices cut down on the costs of production, an essential function of permaculture in these hard times. In the light of the example set by Gather Round Farms, I am hard pressed to find a better example of how the principle of achieving sustainability by mimicking the relationships found in nature can revolutionize a city.

Case Study 2: Permaculture in the Living Environment

MyFarm is a San Francisco based organization that has developed a new take on the urban farm. Instead of having one plot, the farm is 'decentralized,' being located in various backyards throughout the city. Furthermore, the program is committed not only to local food production in order to secure an affordable food system, but also to creating a sustainable system that works with the earth. In order to achieve this organic practices are used and permaculture techniques are kept at the forefront in the development and implementation of these backyard gardens. For example, when choosing what to grow MyFarms is dedicated to diversity of plants, growing native plants throughout the year based on the microclimate in which the resident lives. They focus on heirloom vegetables and they save seeds whenever it is possible in order to be a self-rejuvenating system. Although MyFarms employees manage each garden once a week and do not require participation by the residents, they aim to involve and educate all those who desire it. MyFarms works to educate people on how to achieve a self-sustaining system through the concepts of permaculture and organic practices. For example they teach their 'farmers' to place the germinating seed table, which produces water and requires heat, above the compost pile, which requires water but gives off heat. This clear example of permaculture resonates throughout the entire organization. MyFarms has found immense success in San Francisco that they envision having at least one garden on every block in San Francisco by 2010, a remarkable achievement and a strong comment on the ability of a garden based on permaculture to thrive.

The Zine project will embody the permaculture ideals encompassed in both Gather Round in Cleveland and MyFarm in San Francisco. One of the largest hurdles to implementing permaculture techniques is the lack of knowledge on the subject. The Zine project recognizes that information can be scarce on the topic and when it is available may be convoluted and difficult to apply. In order to move past ideals and into actions, our Zine will focus on the concrete steps to implementing a garden based on permaculture techniques. Also, through the format of a Zine we can reach both students and residents of Oberlin, spreading knowledge as widely as possible. In these times of financial crisis when an awareness of urban gardening is on the rise, it is imperative that permaculture techniques are employed to achieve maximum production of healthy food. These techniques save both time and money, two things that are essential to conserve.

Section 4: Interviews

There is already significant student and community awareness about permaculture in Oberlin, and there are several committed individuals who are already incorporating permaculture

principles into their lives and the landscape around them. I interviewed Glenn Gall, a town resident who is certified in permaculture, Timothy Ballard, a third year environmental studies student who is spear heading a project to implement a permaculture orchard garden on to campus grounds, and Isabelle Rozendaal, a third year student and resident of SEED house where she is active in getting permaculture garden projects implemented.

Glenn Gall is active in connecting with students and community members who are interested in food sustainability, and does a lot to help educate interested parties. As a town resident, Glenn said that he felt there was great potential and merit for Oberlin to implement permaculture projects. His view on the current global food system is that it is founded on a culture with “no knowledge of the consequences of our actions, and with no sensory connection to stimulate the horror that we would feel if it happened around us” and that this system will lead to “the unspeakable conclusion...that most of us will join the unlucky throng of desperate masses, and the lucky ones will be those who lay the barbed wire and aim the weapons to provide security for the few who control the genetic patents and drinking water.”⁵

As a solution, he enthusiastically advocates for the development of community integrated systems that can be developed, maintained, and used by the members living around the spaces where the projects occur. He believes that projects such as Timothy's permaculture orchard could do a lot to work towards a wider awareness and application of such systems. Projects such as these could serve to demonstrate the viability of such systems, as well as provide the surrounding community with food. In his own daily life, he claims that such projects would benefit his well being and eating habits because he currently doesn't “pick and eat enough”. From his viewpoint, Oberlin has plenty of vacant lots and willing homeowners with lawn spaces that could benefit from similar projects. He believes that we should start small with our projects. If we work on our organizing skills and become successful in engaging people who might not otherwise be likely to participate, we can accomplish a great deal. With properly energized community support, we could realize the vision of a self sustaining, locally focused, community supported food system.

Timothy's vision for his project is to implement a low maintenance permaculture orchard garden in one of the lawn spaces by North quad, across the street from Phillips gymnasium. His hope is for this project to encourage greater awareness of sustainable food systems in people's own living environments. By locating the orchard by Phillips, the orchard would be highly visible and accessible to both students and community members who would be utilizing the athletic facilities. In his words, “What could be better than going and grabbing a nice, juicy apple right after a tough work out?”⁶ He is still working out the details on how to ultimately make the project sustain itself after he has graduated, but he is seeking support from the Green EDGE fund. So far the EDGE fund hasn't supported any permaculture projects, so his hope is that his project can be a starting point and lead to further funding for future projects of a similar nature. As a student living on campus and eating in the campus dining services, Timothy expressed dissatisfaction with how little control he has over the landscape in which he lives and stressed the importance of the campus taking initiative to implement edible landscaping projects. Timothy advocates for growing food in our own living spaces so that we can have “complete control over

⁵ Gall, Glenn. Interview by Erika Oba. March 6, 2009

⁶ Ballard, Timothy. Interview by Erika Oba. March 6, 2009.

what goes into the food and what happens to it between farm and fork.”⁷

Isabelle is currently working on mobilizing students to implement garden projects on the SEED house lawn spaces. She'd ultimately like to incorporate permaculture principles into how all of our living spaces are designed, and not just for food production. As a set of design principles, permaculture can be applied to water, fiscal, transportation, energy, waste management and complete town designs. In her own living spaces, she expressed interest in having her own water catchment and treatment system. By having a rainwater catchment system and wastewater treating system she would be able to meet all of her water needs without contributing to waste water pollutants being emitted back into the environment. She also envisions a permaculture food gardens as being important not only to produce food, but to serve as a site upon which communities can gather, share food, and eat together. For projects specific to Oberlin, she's interested in starting a garden co-op where gardeners can all gather to share tools and resources. She too sees great potential for Oberlin homeowners to convert their lawn spaces into edible gardens, and would like to maybe put together a core group of gardeners who would help implement a new garden every weekend. She also mentioned that she thinks Oberlin could benefit from a kitchen incubator project for local artisans to get local foods businesses going.⁸ Ultimately, by creating permaculture gardens, providing food locally, and educating the community on the merits of such projects, the hope is to transfer Oberlin to a sun based economy rather than a carbon based one.

⁷ Ballard, Timothy. Interview by Erika Oba. March 6, 2009.

⁸ Rozendaal, Isabelle. Interview by Erika Oba. March 17, 2009.