

Permaculture gardens *to inspire*

Aleksandra Kudojare from Permakultur Danmark shares why 'permaculture gardens' are so important as demonstration sites, and reveals how she exemplifies the concept in her own garden



Last year the National Permaculture Association in Denmark (Permakultur Danmark) introduced a new permaculture demonstration concept that enables more people at different levels of involvement with permaculture to show their work and inspire communities around them.

Practical permaculture is typically demonstrated at LAND (Learning, Activities, Network, Demonstration) centres which aim to provide learning activities for regenerative lifestyles. The 'Permaculture Garden' concept is also about inspiration, demonstration and interaction, but how is it different from LAND? And more importantly: do we need another demonstration concept besides LAND?

In Denmark, it was decided that we clearly do. One of the reasons being that not all permaculture enthusiasts choose or have the opportunity to set up a LAND centre, but rather develop their own gardens. It is important to recognise and celebrate those smaller scale efforts, e.g. a traditional garden turned into a food forest. It is as important to show that these efforts also bring yield, benefit the environment and provide wellbeing; and can be combined with more 'regular' lifestyles. Permaculture gardens have the capacity to reach out to another niche and help more people embrace regenerative living values.

We arrived at this understanding having travelled our own journey. A couple with three kids, both of us full time employees, we speculated about moving to a farm and living off the land in harmony with nature. However, after getting out there and seeing all that this would involve, we came to the conclusion that we are not ready. At least not right now.

And then we turned back and looked at the place where we live now, this gorgeous, abundant, fertile garden that we had been building up for the past five years. And then we looked further, at the neighbouring gardens. We saw a huge variety: Organic villa gardens, wild gardens with a focus on biodiversity and many, many ornamental gardens with endless grass lawns. We realised, there is enough work and enough room to make an impact right here. And as it usually happens, there must be like-minded people around us and we shall have a way of finding each other and uniting. This is how the 'Permaculture Garden' idea was born.

The Concept

Permaculture is a complex, holistic, design-intense concept. It is certainly not a simple self-explaining concept, such as 'no-dig', 'grass-fed' or 'free-range'. So what are the key characteristics of a permaculture garden that also distinguish it from other garden concepts, e.g., organic, poison-free, focus on biodiversity? Well, a permaculture garden covers it all and more. Its characteristics are summarised in the seven permaculture gardening principles, developed by the Danish Permaculture Association.

All seven principles are interconnected and impact one another. Nature and Design are on opposite poles, representing natural forces and laws on one hand, and human effort to design nature-like systems, on the other. Both are more holistic and to some extent vaguer than the more specific principles in between: Living Soil, Diversity, Perennials, Yield and CO₂ Capture. All principles have to be demonstrated in the systems and elements in one's garden to register it as a 'Permaculture garden' in Denmark.

7 Permaculture Gardening Principles

Nature as a Model

This means working with nature and not against it: Learning from nature by observing it continuously and thoroughly, using the laws of succession and holistic approaches. Understanding how ecosystems and symbiotic relationships function is the way to make your garden thrive and show its magic again and again.

Living Soil

Eighty per cent of soil microorganisms that are responsible for the health and fertility of our soil, are found in the top 5cm (2in), and they want to stay there! Not be tilled, not be exposed to the sun. To nourish the soil and improve the humus content while we cultivate it, we use mulch (any available organic material at the given time). We make good use of ground cover plants, nitrogen fixers, dynamic accumulator plants. All garden 'litter' is allowed to compost in the garden. We also make compost from all the kitchen scraps.



The forest garden in the early days – a thick mulch of straw keeps weeds down and feeds the soil

PREVIOUS PAGE The forest garden in September 2023. Chilling under the silverberry with a bowlful of berries.

Comfrey
Nitrogen fixer

Bronze fennel
Edible
Attracts beneficial insects

Marjoram
Dynamic accumulator (Ca, K, Mg, Fe)
Attracts beneficial insects,
Groundcover
Spice

Chicory
Dynamic accumulator (Ca, K)
Edible
Attracts beneficial insects

Black oyster plant
Edible



Garlic
Pest repeller
Edible

Hosta
Edible

Ground Ivy
Ground cover
Attracts beneficial insects
Tea

Mint
Attracts beneficial insects
Pest repeller
Edible, spice, tea

Malva
Edible
Attracts beneficial insects

Rhubarb
Edible

Perennial plant guilds
utilise the symbiotic
relationships between
plants

Perennials

Without human intervention, nature will evolve towards perennial and larger plants. They are more robust and have larger and deeper roots. They can provide a lot of yield with almost no maintenance. In addition, perennial and wild plants are a source of many different vitamins and minerals.

I must confess, I didn't quite understand the perennial vegetables concept at first. Leaves, shoots, flowers, roots... where are the vegetables? Indeed, in the beginning it seems like there is no food in this. To truly enjoy them and obtain all the benefits – health, environmental, gastronomical – it will require a bit of knowledge, a bit of courage, a bit of open-mindedness and a bit of willingness to experiment.

A bit of scepticism is ok, as long as you are willing to give it a proper try. At first it can be a real struggle to put unknown weeds into your mouth, let alone giving them to kids. It is much easier if your neighbour tells, shows and treats you to a nice meal that is centred around perennial vegetables. This is where 'Permaculture Gardens' can make a tremendous impact! Consuming local self-grown products, buying less, changing what we consider food... imagine the potential ripple effect!

Diversity

Diversity creates balance and health in the garden. The more diversity, the greater the chance for plants and insects to find a partner, a friend, a symbiotic relationship in the garden. The greater the diversity, the healthier the soil, the plants and the wildlife.

To help the diversity we work to improve soil health by introducing dynamic accumulator plants, nitrogen fixing plants, insect attracting plants. Every year we introduce new plants and are excited to see whether they will find their niche in the garden. We create habitats for animals – stone bunks, branches, access to water. We do not remove garden litter or cut down the plants in the autumn, leaving it all as winter hibernation space.

When transitioning to a permaculture garden, one has to let go of some previous beliefs and stereotypes of what is considered beautiful or 'right'. Having biodiversity in focus, and starting to pay attention to who depends on my garden, helped me a lot to let go of feelings of guilt and shame about my garden not being neat, having weeds, etc.



Habitats of natural stone and a trial with a bumblebee house



ABOVE Grilled veggies with flowers: borage, perennial kale, ramsons and chive flowers

RIGHT The fruit orchard

BELOW Educational garden tour in May 2023. Understanding microclimates – dry shade on a terraced slope can be used for growing herbs.



Yield

It is important that our garden does not just become an expression of our ideals, because then it won't last. We need to use the garden actively and obtain yield from it in different ways. In our garden we grow as much food as makes sense, taking into account our lifestyle and priorities (full time jobs and kids). Still we are amazed at how much we can produce, and a lot of it is not things that can be bought in a supermarket. Not to mention the quality, the freshness and the taste. Every year brings us the leafy greens, herbs and spices, berries and fruits, as well as some annuals that do not require any effort, such as garlic and beets.

The garden also generates food and habitat for all the visiting animals. Ourselves, we get recreational and health benefits from just spending time in the garden. We use the garden as the education and demonstration space and share it with others.

CO₂ Capture

Gardens can be the perfect place to capture CO₂ from the air. The plants are made to store CO₂ from the atmosphere within themselves, especially trees and shrubs, due to their large biomass. That is why we value all the gigantic trees in the garden. In addition, we do not drive garden litter away, but everything is decomposed in our own garden. We have a hedgerow fence we absolutely love. When the wood mass is dead, the stored CO₂ breaks down slowly and the soil's humus content increases. We love it because we no longer need to consider what to do with all the branches but also it serves as a shield from the wind (because it is placed strategically) and at the same time supports vertical growth of blackberries and hops. It also provides habitat for wildlife. Which brings us to the next principle: Useful design and combining several functions in one element.

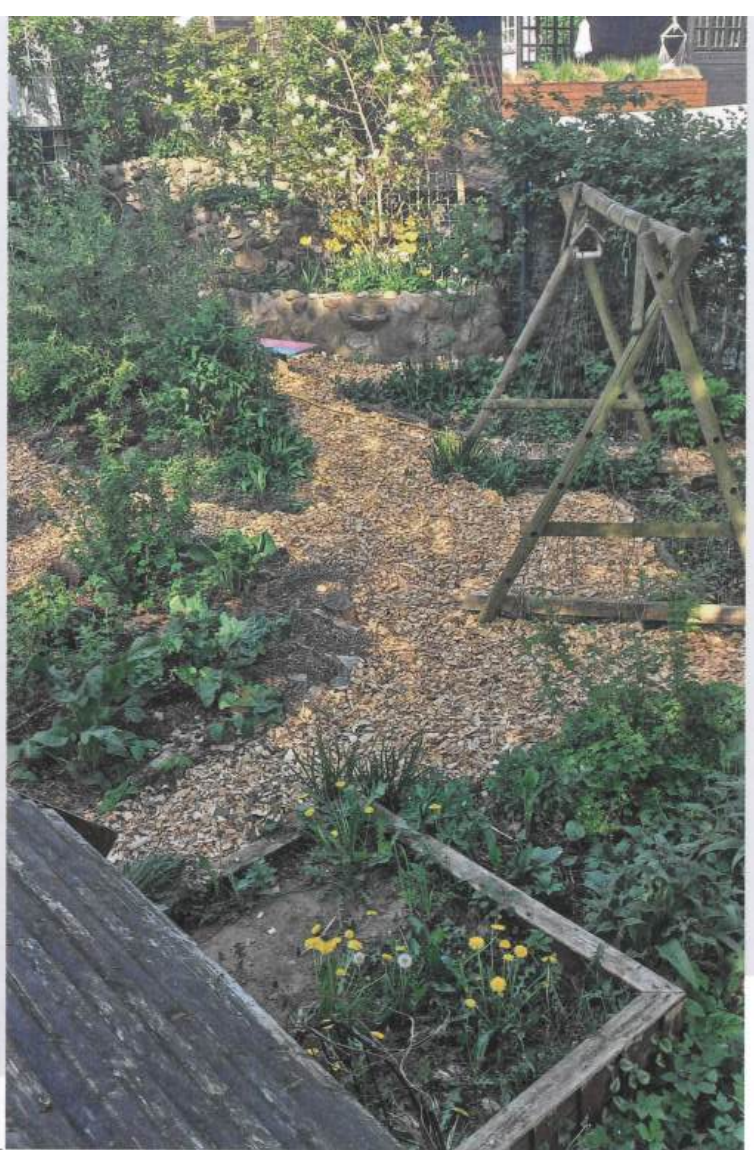


Design

Permaculture is all about design, design, design. Design frameworks, tools, principles and ethics help us again and again to create something that works, that is robust, that gives energy. It creates a garden that is connected, that functions as one whole!

For more information on the design principles and tools see Aranya's *Permaculture Design: A Step-by-step Guide* or Jasmine Dale's *Permaculture Design Companion*. Or why not try a Permaculture Design Course with an experienced teacher? – contact the Permaculture Association of your country for more information. Also search the *PM* digital archives to find a range of design articles.

“...there must be like-minded people around us and we shall have a way of finding each other and uniting.”



ABOVE The forest garden in spring 2023

LEFT Aleksandra showing the newly received 'Permaculture Garden' logo

The permaculture garden concept was launched in Denmark in August 2023. It was a great feeling to receive the new label and put it on the postbox.

At the moment, there are 25 gardens registered, which is three times the number of LAND centres in Denmark. New networks are being formed as we speak, and new forces are joining to promote permaculture gardening and to work towards the first Open Permaculture Garden Day in 2024.

More on permaculture gardening:
'The Forager's Garden' (PM108)
'The Ecological Gardener' (PM103)



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Permaculture Garden application:
www.permakultur.dk/permakultur-have