

Forest Gardening Communities in Cascadia: Then and Now

Gardening Lessons from the Past

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IF WE HOPE TO SPREAD PERMACULTURE throughout our contemporary landscape, and to incorporate into it related techniques observed and adapted from other cultures, regions, and times, then “gardening” people and communities will be as important as our husbandry of the Earth. A network of communities in the Pacific Northwest is promulgating permaculture ethics and principles on a broadening scale as it adopts and adapts indigenous cultural practices.

Learning from precolonial polycultures

Forest gardening as practiced in “home gardens” in tropical and population dense regions such as Kerala, India, and the island of Java is very different from the food gathering practices of the Native Americans of our continent. However, there have been examples of perennial polyculture in temperate regions for millennia. Historical accounts of indigenous intensification methods (enhancing the productivity of native food harvests), burning practices, and more familiar forms of cultivation in pre- and post-colonial North America are just joining the academic mainstream.

Using our area as an example, the historic and present climax ecosystem for much of Cascadia (the bioregional name for the Pacific Northwest of North America) is a dense temperate rainforest. Nearly any small patch or large plot of land left unattended will be colonized by forest. Though most of this bioregion receives average amounts of rainfall, we experience a seasonal summer drought. Because water is necessary to photosynthesis, deciduous trees have a tough time competing with coniferous trees which are able to photosynthesize during the winter when nearly everything else is dormant, light is

modestly available, and moisture is plentiful. With most open areas predisposed to succeed to forest, and with most of the new growth (i.e. food for somebody) and light to be found in the canopy, it is open spaces, access to light, low-growing edible parts, and heat which are lacking in our bioregion.

In response to these ecological lacks and surpluses, many tribes of our area burned favored food-producing landscapes every one-to-four years following harvest in the weeks before the fall rains began. This kept the forest at bay on the glacial-outwash “prairies” and sub-alpine meadows that yielded nutritionally

valuable starchy roots and berries, and attracted herbivores to the new growth. The scraps of hunting and fishing were used to fertilize prized patches of salal berries, camas bulbs, and other foods. These techniques, which were used in both broad landscapes and more intensively monitored patches, served to increase the size, quality, ease of harvest, and reproductive success of the species of interest. The stewardship responsibilities and first harvesting rights to these patches were passed down through families, but others were allowed to harvest, and surpluses were often redistributed to the wider community



Getting friends and neighbors involved is the first step to “forest gardening” community.

through potlatches.

It may not seem at first glance that these ways are applicable to our modern lives. For example, the deliberate burning of landscapes is an alarming concept to most communities. Semi-nomadic harvesting regimes are problematic due to land-use regulations, the loss of traditional harvesting knowledge and sustainable technologies, decreased diversity, declining plant and animal populations, and even extinctions. The cultural presumption of ownership and the enforcement of private property laws affect where and how we garden, steward,