



## Permaculture: Getting Started

**You can begin integrating permaculture methods into your garden, yard or farm with simple, subtle changes.**

If you want to start a permaculture garden, begin studying permaculture practices and your property for potential garden placement. The wonderful thing about permaculture is how easy it is to practice. At its heart— whether applying it to your life or your garden, yard or farm—it is using your time, energy, soil, water, plants or other resources in a more self-sustaining manner.

When I began studying permaculture, I envisioned a massive landscaping effort like Dan Halsey carried out. (For more on this project, see “Change Your Garden ... Change Your Life” in the January/February 2010 issue of Hobby Farms.) However, the more I read, the more I realized I was already practicing some elements of permaculture in my yard and on my farm. My challenge became discovering how I could integrate other elements that would increase my productivity and personal return on investment.

### Our Accidental Permaculture Garden

Our garden is on a south-facing slope and comprises multiple 10- to 12-foot terraces. Several years ago, we planted a mix of native and non-native perennials on the slope between the lower two terraces. The terraces were created by pulling logs into place and backfilling with soil. The logs will eventually break down. In the meantime, they absorb and release moisture throughout the season. Below the logs are day lilies. Above them are chives and four apple trees.

The slope is home to coneflowers, autumn sedum, phlox and rudbeckia. All these flowering plants near my apple trees attract beneficial bees, wasps and other predator insects throughout the growing season. They also hold the soil and retain moisture.

The lowest garden-bed terrace was filled with raspberry beds until this fall. We plan to replace the berries with mixed beds of vegetables and flowers next spring. We will also introduce insect-loving perennials and self-seeding annuals to the slope between this terrace and the next level up. I am considering introducing low-growing berry bushes to both slopes.

### Stepping into Permaculture

Venturing into permaculture is doable if you take baby steps. Here are some ideas to help get you started:

1. Check books, articles and websites on permaculture. Join local permaculture groups and study your property.
2. Review current permaculture practices for companion-planting opportunities, such as pollinator- and predator-friendly flowers.
3. Examine your landscape for the placement of run-off water retention structures, such as pools and swales.
4. Identify existing fruit or nut trees and bushes that can serve as a focal point for a “guild” or combination of complementary plants.
5. Sample soils and integrate a compost and soil-supplement application. Then introduce beneficial plants that build soil fertility and health.
6. Create flexible, short-, mid- and long-term goals and plans that fit your needs for recreation and personal pleasure, as well as sustainable vegetative productivity.

In the end, adopting permaculture is a matter of adapting its practices to your land, be it a garden, yard, field or forest. Changes can be made as quickly or slowly as it fits your situation and your comfort level. Whether you plant an acre in a day or in a year is up to you. Either way, the land and your plants will be better for it.

About the Author: Jim Ruen lives, writes and works with his garden and tree farm in the Bluff Country of southeastern Minnesota. You can follow Jim’s insights on farm equipment, tools, maintenance and repair on his blog, Shop Talk.