

Permaculture: Herbalism and Healthcare

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'The future is not what it used to be' – Arthur C. Clarke

What is permaculture? At the core of permaculture is the principle of using natural ecosystems as the model for human agriculture and habitation. It is mainly an ecological agricultural design system that can be applied on any scale from a window box or back yard to a city street or a large farm. You will however also discover from this article that it has many other applications and benefits. When I first came across this system in the early 1990's I was so impressed by how wonderfully practical it was that I trained as a permaculture designer. In many respects permaculture is about *'It is not what you do but the way that you do it'* – and how much of a difference to outcomes this makes. The name has been derived from **'permanent agriculture'** and also **'permanent culture'**, so it is fundamentally aimed at creating sustainable living eco-systems for both the planet and people.

A brief history of permaculture: The principles of modern permaculture were first formulated in the 1970's by two researchers in Australia Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. There has been however many aspects of permaculture used in various parts of the world for thousands of years. Mollison and Holmgren set out their original ideas in the book *'Permaculture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements'*. Since then permaculture has continued to evolve and whereas originally it sought to mainly imitate natural ecosystems such as with forest gardening, it is now applied much more widely and in many different ways. Permaculture has therefore evolved into a way of **eco - logical** thinking that can be applied to many areas of human/planetary activity. It offers many solutions to our planetary ecological crisis and the uncertain future for human culture.

How is permaculture relevant to herbalists and healthcare? There are several ways in which permaculture offers solutions to many of the problems we face now in healthcare or are very likely to face in the near future. This includes the effects of environmental problems upon health, the continual supply of herbal medicines and wholesome foods, and benefits from changes in lifestyle and an improved quality of life.

Environmental illness: There can be few of us who doubt that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis and that this has a major influence upon the kinds of diseases we treat and other problems both we and our patients experience, We are facing the *'modern plagues'* that Dr. Christopher talked about. There are many new forms of pollution and stress that effect us and the natural elements in this respect: **Earth** (soil and food low in nutrients, more toxicity), **Air** (pollution, smog, lowered levels of oxygen and negative ions, Qi or Prana), **Fire** (a lack of exercise, a lack of light), **Water** (denatured tap water with added chemicals and hidden toxins) and **Ether** (audio pollution, microwaves, electro-magnetic pollution, stress) - to name just a few. Permaculture offers practical solutions to many of these health problems through creating user-friendly sustainable living environments along with healthier food and herbal production and healthier lifestyles that are lower in pollution.

'Environmental problems are really social problems anyway. They begin with people as the cause and end with people as the victims.' - Sir Edmund Hilary.

The supply of herbs: If the effects of peak oil and climate change continue as they are it would be surprising if they did not also cause economic problems and political instability which will effect the availability and cost of many of the foreign herbs we use, Although herbs have a high value relative to weight and size compared to many other imported products it seems unlikely that the transport of them often over many thousands of miles from all over the world will not be affected. The percentage of foreign herbs we use varies but it is easy to see that most are imported. One of the main reasons for this is the higher cost of producing herbs here than abroad, this is obviously also likely to change with the above influences. Permaculture helps us to grow herbs here in a sustainable and relatively easy way. Every herbalist, every family and every community could have a herb garden and also grow herbs in forest gardens and amongst other crops as companion plants. There are also of course wild herbs available if we learn how to harvest them in a sustainable way.

Wholesome nutrition: All that applies to the supply and cost of herbs also applies to many of the foods we eat.

It is easy to see when you visit your local health food or other shops how many whole-foods (grains, nuts, seeds, pulses etc) are imported, and also vegetarian and vegan foods such as soya products. Permaculture helps us to produce an abundance of a very wide variety of crops in a relatively small area of land in a relatively easy, healthy and sustainable way. It also improves soil fertility and nutrient levels considerably thus enhancing the health sustaining quality of the food we eat, which can also be picked fresh offering more vitality and higher levels of immune enhancing enzymes.

'Only when the last tree is cut, only when the last river is polluted, only when the last fish is caught, will they realise that you can't eat money.' - Native American proverb.

Lifestyle benefits: I am sure health practitioners will appreciate the benefits of living more in harmony with the seasons and in touch with the land and nature. There is a saying that comes from Ayurveda *'Lifestyle problems are health problems'*. A permaculture plot offers moderate exercise and being more in touch with the earth and nature, fresh air and more daylight and the added benefits of creating something good – living more in harmony with natural cycles and being part of the solution not the problem. In many ways being part of a permaculture project can help us to slow down and deal with modern forms of stress. Many permaculture projects are also community based which gives the benefits of sharing skills and resources, equipment (etc) doing things together not in isolation. The Transition Town Movement is a prime example of this, more info: www.transitiontowns.org If you do not have a garden you could join an allotment scheme or work as part of a team with the community on permaculture and Transition Town projects.

'The natural environment is the great outpatient department where we can go for healing.'
- William Bird, GP, Berkshire West Primary Care Trust (quoted in Sustainable Development Commission 'Healthy Futures' publication, March 2007)

Permaculture as a form of healing: It is not hard to see that our modern culture and our environment is suffering from a serious disease, so if we were to use a holistic and naturopathic approach to help what kind of system would we develop? We would as all traditional medical systems have in the past develop a system appropriate to the people, environment and problems of this time and culture. We would want a system that uses the laws of nature to allow the body-mind-soul to heal itself with the minimum of effort and without doing any harm. This is in effect what Permaculture is, a natural holistic healing system suitable for many of the imbalances we suffer today that affect the planet and humanity!

One of the core principles of holistic/natural medical systems is that everything is connected (the web of life). Another core principle is that of creating balance or homeostasis and this is achieved by applying the laws of nature, by creating the right nourishment, support and environment for healing to take place. These principles are applied as appropriate to individual constitution to help us to live at an optimum level of health and wellbeing.

'It is more important to know what sort of person has a disease than to know what sort of disease a person has.'
- Hippocrates

Permaculture in a similar way applies nature-cure principles to individual 'constitutions' in the form of the constitution of a garden, back yard, allotment or urban area and the relationship it has with the people who live/work there, each has for example a particular soil type, climate (and micro-climates) elevation and resources, needs and problems. Each will be as in human constitution tending to certain problems more than others and each will have certain strengths and resources that can be enhanced and called upon to improve the whole. A good holistic practitioner uses various methods to understand what is wrong and what is needed and then goes about explaining and applying what is needed through different stages of the healing process. A permaculture designer follows a very similar process.

This inter-relationship between different parts of a plot (home/garden etc) is one of the central aspects of permaculture that in essence is all about caring in a fair and balanced way for every part of the whole. This is reflected in the central permaculture philosophy of **Earthcare, Peoplecare and Fairshares**. **Earthcare** is about leaving as much of local and planetary wide ecosystems undisturbed as possible in order to preserve the health of the planet. As permaculture helps us to live on a small area of land in a sustainable way it helps us to achieve this. **Peoplecare** is about creating a sustainable life and culture where our needs are met in a way that is not harmful to us e.g. by avoiding unnecessary hard or long work and creating a reasonable standard of living and wholesome environment. **Fairshares** considers the limitations of both the earth and human resources in the design area (e.g. garden and home) and on a global scale. In order to sustain both human and planetary health

we have to limit our ecological impact. This begs the question 'How much of the global and local resources can each individual use to continue to have a reasonable standard of living and general well-being whilst also sustaining the health of the planet?' The application of permaculture design principles answers this question for each person, family or community and the land/area they live within.

The really clever bit about applying permaculture design principles is in my opinion the way it creates a system of mutually beneficial relationships between all the different parts within the whole design area. This is much like the way different body systems, organs, humours/doshas/elements all influence one another, a problem with one will eventually spread to create problems with the others. If each part is helped to function well in relation to the rest it helps the whole and a synergy is created. The care of the mind and spirit of the individual is akin to Peoplecare, the care of the environment and of food, water, air quality is akin to Earthcare in relation to our health, whilst Fairshares is about not pushing the body-mind beyond what is healthy and sustainable, it is about lifestyle, balancing for example activity with rest and play,

'If one way be better than another, that you may be sure is Nature's way.' - Aristotle

Useful websites and books:

Permaculture Association: www.permaculture.co.uk

An excellent book that gives you more information and practical guidance about Permaculture for Britain and temperate climates than any other I have come across is 'The Earth Care Manual' by Patrick Whitefield. A much smaller but good introduction is 'Permaculture in a Nutshell' by Patrick Whitefield.

For the growing of foreign herbs and unusual but very useful foods in this country visit: www.pfaf.org and read the book 'Plants for a Future: Edible & Useful Plants for a Healthier World' by Ken Fern. The Plants for a Future website has a list with detailed instructions for the growing of many herbs and food crops here that we normally associate with foreign countries, you will be pleasantly surprised by what they have achieved.

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