

With design in mind

BY HALEY MAY

Perhaps you too are a designer at heart. Entrepreneur? Farmer? Do you appreciate efficiency, purposefulness and productivity? Do you care about minimizing waste and using resources wisely? Are you an environmentalist? Craftsperson? Maybe you have a passion for animals or enjoy connecting with nature in your own way. What about an observer who walks/watches? Hiker? Bird watcher? Do the fragility of the landscape and the delicacy of ecological balance ever cross your mind? Who knows? Maybe you share some commonalities with local permaculture expert Tom Ward.

Tom has an extensive science background in forestry, botany and herbology and comes from a traditional Quaker upbringing in a farming atmosphere. While teaching at Laney College (and visiting southern Oregon during summers) he was invited by Michael Polarsky of Oregon Tilth to attend the first permaculture course on the west coast in 1982. Later he found himself co-teaching with well-known permaculture developer Bill Mollison. After observing the destructive effects of industrial agriculture in Australia, Mollison realized the need for permanent/sustainable ways of producing food. The term "permaculture" was coined, which Mollison describes this way: *A philosophy of working with rather than against nature; of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless labor; and of looking at plants and animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single project system.*

The concept of living harmoniously with nature is not new; all humans once lived this way and indigenous cultures around the world still do. As Tom reminded me during our interview,

we have only just arrived in southern Oregon. Maybe we have been here for a couple hundred years, but this area coevolved with humans for thousands of years prior to modern settlement. The native Dakubetede people foraged, hunted and practiced horticulture along the Little Applegate River at least 12,000 years prior to our arrival. They depended on reliable salmon populations and versatile basketry skills, maintaining their livelihood and the landscape using fire.

As I write, visibility is dim due to smoke from forest fires in the area. Fire is a catastrophe when uncontained, but careful, small-scale burns replenish soil and reduce fire hazard. The breaking down of dead wood makes nutrients bio-available and the resulting char can be used as fertilizer. The burning practices of the Dakubetede were done with purpose and understanding long before miners arrived in the 1850s, devastating the indigenous culture (and beaver populations, by the way). Both were careless tragedies.

Tom urges us to remember this fact and to approach life here with a sense of humility. It would be foolish to assume that we are using the best farming practices when we have not been here for very long. He cautions that our high values of convenience, legality (licensure) and privilege may lead to mistakes in land and water use.

Tom is a permaculture counselor. He facilitates in the design of various projects while remaining in the background. What qualifies him? The aforementioned degrees and teaching experience, a love for the land and the desire to understand his surroundings, not to mention the thousands of miles he has walked in northern California and southern Oregon, all the while practicing careful observation.

Sometimes he works with groups to design settlements, always with both theory and practice in mind. In other words, while pure science has great value, applied science is necessary for the real world. He has also had a hand in most organic farm operations in the area, especially herb farms. He believes in supporting farmers and encouraging ethical practices and education.

A worthwhile project requires care and persistence, with positive results expected in as early as five years. The Wolf Gulch Project, which Tom is supporting, provides a good example: 13 years in the making, it is showing clear signs of progress such as the increase of pollinator populations, higher soil fertility and improved quality of produce. You can watch a detailed and well-produced video of the project on youtube.com.

Here is a tidbit of advice straight from the "horticulturalist's" mouth: be on a piece of land for a year before you do anything serious. Find your "designer recliner." Sit down. Observe. Be careful, and be there. And again, Tom emphasizes, be careful. For more information, visit siskiyoupermaculture.com.

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Author's Note: Tom is one of the founders of local business Siskiyou Permaculture along with partners Melanie Mindlin and Karen Taylor. Services offered include walk-throughs, permaculture counseling, courses and workshops. They also sell biochar, which is charcoal used as a soil amendment. If you are interested in a walk-through,



Permaculture teacher and counselor Tom Ward.
Photo: Haley May.

you will receive advice and insight about your property and its attributes for \$125. However, there is "homework for homesteaders," so be prepared to spend some time analyzing and evaluating elements of your property, such as soil quality, elevation, water, weather, and patterns in plants and wildlife—before a visit.

Upcoming Course Opportunity: Advanced Permaculture Design

From Friday through Sunday, September 20–22, at Full Bloom Farm in the Applegate Valley, permaculture designers will lead groups in modeling the farm three or four ways. Course price is \$300, and includes campsite and organic lunch. Limited space available. Previous experience preferred. For more information or to register, contact Siskiyou Permaculture at sassetta@mind.net.

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