

Maya interviewing Stephanie about Permaculture

Stephanie: It's principally a design method. It combines the words permanent and agriculture, which denotes sustainability in the way we manage our existence. It teaches us to work with nature, enhance biodiversity and consequently productivity. It achieves this by combining suitable groups of plants and animals and shaping their environment in such a way that their natural functions compliment and sustain each other. By observing nature closely we learn to create natural working systems that require minimal external input and offer abundant output.

Maya: So how did you first get into permaculture?

Stephanie: When I took over our farm in 2011 I knew conventional industrial methods of farming were not the way I wanted to go, and I started researching permaculture. The principles really appealed to me and they seemed very intuitive and manageable on my scale. I got really excited about the number of ideas I could try to implement that would be positive for the environment and for us as a family living close to nature. Coincidentally I saw an online course advertised and that really helped me understand a whole range of approaches and methods in more depth. There were quite a few of these courses available, most of them you go and attend in person and the advantage is that you get practical experiences along with the theory, but I couldn't leave the farm so for me this course was ideal because it taught the whole of Bill Mollison's Bible on permaculture, in clever bite size modules over the space of 6 months. I could watch the modules in my own time and I was able to benefit from the online conversations of several hundred other participants as we were discussing and responding to each others experiences and questions. It introduced me to a whole forum of people with the same interests, and at the end we all had to do a complete design, send it in for review and face comments. It which was a very extensive exercise that allowed me to apply everything I had learnt in a real life scenario. In fact that's how, what is now the gîte garden got designed.

Maya: And who ran this online course?

Stephanie: It was Geoff Lawton, a student of Bill Mollison, one of the inventors of Permaculture.

Maya: What are the advantages of Permaculture, and in what way do you think permaculture is important for the future of our planet?

Stephanie: So to my mind permaculture represents one of the big solutions to the problems that we're facing, on environmental degradation and climate change. Applying principles and learning to think differently reduces the waste that we generate and it regenerates the soil and it builds resilience. I think we need more intelligent and more sensitive interventions to feed ourselves and to organise our needs in the future if we are going to have a future.

Maya: Can you tell us some more about the event itself?



Stephanie: Ah yes, this is the AIKB event. So we had 10 people visit the farm, these were all AIKB members who had some project of sorts and an interest in gardening. And in the morning we took them for a walk around our tunnels and the gardens to show off the mixed planting and included the weeds, and we explained the various uses and their functions. And there we encouraged everybody to pick various edible leaves and flowers and we made a colourful and tasty big salad for everybody's lunch. People asked lots of questions and we shared all of our knowledge and experience. The afternoon was talk on permaculture and how we have used the principles here on the farm.

Maya: So can you give us an example of how you applied permaculture on your farm? Can you tell us more about your animals?

Stephanie: Yes, we have a small herd of Highland cattle who are very rustique and ideally suited to the environment here. They live outdoors year round and they are great for conservation. They're smaller than commercial cattle breeds and so they are less damaging to the soil, but they fertilise it and they keep the scrub down. We've also got a couple of bee hives and most recently a pair of Kunekune pigs. I guess they're a good example of how you can use the natural behaviour of an animal to serve multiple useful functions. When our piglet was very tiny she helped me prepare the garden for planting by ruffling up the ground. Kunekunes are grazing pigs and although they do ruff the ground up a bit in search of food they are good as orchard pigs. They are well known for that. So we have a big apple orchard which we planted 15 years ago and the trees are quite mature now. Where before we were able to take the tractor in and make hay, it's become increasingly difficult not to harm the branches of the trees. So I've tried the grazing cattle in there and the horses, but in both cases they started rubbing on the trees and doing quite a bit of damage to the branches, so what I needed to do was find something smaller to graze in-between the trees. It's not a commercial orchard and the apple crops quite intermittent. Most of the apples are cider apples and one day I really intend to make some cider from them, but for the moment there's always a surplus of apples, even while we've been able to make apple juice and cider vinegar for ourselves just on a home scale. Now I've got the pigs they eat all the wind falls and they eat the grass down and the veg garden is right next to the orchard, so all the garden food waste goes to the pigs as well.

Maya: And finally, can anyone use permaculture? For instance, how can someone apply permaculture for their garden or window box?

Stephanie: Well most certainly it doesn't matter what your circumstances, in fact they say the smaller your range of options, the easier it is to practice permaculture, because the best course of action is more apparent. Also the design process is immediately apparent, it makes you consider what resources you have available.. so how much time do you have to put into the project, who can help you, what materials do you have, that you can repurpose. All it takes really is the will to think differently about what it is you want to achieve. It's extremely rewarding, no matter if you are young or old, if you live in the town or country, whether you are more or less wealthy

Maya: Thank you, that was very interesting. Have a nice day.

Stephanie: And you!