

Feature Permaculture



It may look like a pagan ritual but this is a good way to measure how far apart to place fruit trees. In this case Wendy (left) is a mandarin and Rhonnie is an orange.



Permaculture by blitz

When someone needs permaculture inspiration in the Bay of Plenty, a group of enthusiasts carry out the ultimate green makeover.

Words Yvonne Andrew Photos: Yvonne Andrew & Permablitz Bay of Plenty

When permaculture enthusiast Peter Archer wanted to make over his Kerepehi garden he faced a blitz, but it was one he welcomed.

Eight people dug a vegetable garden, two weeded an existing flower patch, and the rest of the willing volunteers planted

fruit trees and shrubs everywhere else. That's some them pictured above doing what looks like a bizarre dance on Peter's front lawn. It's actually just a very practical way to work out spacings of the trees so there's room for them once they're fully grown.

This was a 'permablitz' led by

landscape designer Hugo Verhagen, who helped organise a group of Bay of Plenty volunteers. Permablitz BOP was born in 2012 and already has more than 250 followers. They've now completed more than a dozen projects, helping each other create permaculture gardens and food forests on lifestyle blocks and urban



Volunteer Trish helping to build a new vege bed at a Permablitz project in Katikati.



Creating compost cages in the middle of the garden beds for efficiency - cages are placed right where the waste is produced and where it will be needed once composted.



Double digging the vege beds.



Each group is a mix of experienced and less experienced gardeners so everyone gets a chance to learn.

gardens around the region.

In this case, Hugo outlined the overall plan for Peter's garden, but he's also instrumental in helping out with the practical details. The idea behind people holding out sticks and pretending to be trees was to measure the eventual spread of the trees. Without that input the layout would have blocked the front window.

Energy conservation is an important part of permaculture design, so deciduous trees were planted to the north to allow for winter sun and citrus shrubs were moved to the south to plug holes in the existing band of fence-line shelter trees.

Hugo was inspired by the concept of the permablitz after attending the Australasian Permaculture Convergence and listening to the 'blitz' story of Dan Palmer, a co-founder of Melbourne Permablitz and VEG (Very Edible Gardens).

Dan spoke of having a group of South American immigrant friends who had a wonderful social life but very poor health. They needed assistance in planning their gardens, and the first project was for an elderly woman with a small back yard.

"She wanted the shape of a cross," Dan says. "But we were able to change the design in keeping with permaculture principles. These days she has a surplus of vegetables and is happy she allowed the change."

About a dozen people from the woman's community helped with the garden. They had such fun (including breaks for a little salsa dancing!) that they

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decided to do it again and again, and the idea of a permablitz was born.

"What it brings is a sudden focus of energy," Dan said. "Within six hours, the host has a garden that would have taken months of individual effort to obtain.

The host, in return, provides lunch and coffee breaks and also gives their energy to other people's projects. It's a structured gathering that brings other people into the fold for establishing a pre-designed garden. It's a win/win situation."

Hugo took the idea back to the Bay of Plenty. He had become increasingly frustrated by the impact he felt he was



Christine pruning the bananas.



A terraced garden is a great sun trap and an ideal place to grow food.

Compost piles breaking down, ready to be planted with kumara and pumpkin next spring.



The host puts on lunch as a thank you.



helping perpetuate on the environment.

"I project managed the installation of many landscape jobs where existing concrete pavers would often be carted away on a truck and dumped into landfill. You could say this was for economic reasons, but it takes half an hour to organise a grateful recipient to take pavers away for free via TradeMe.

"I don't think people realise the embodied energy in concrete products. Cement is made by heating lime to more than 1500 degrees, representing the burning of a huge forest of trees for every concrete patio or driveway. The worldwide cement industry has the second biggest carbon footprint behind the airline industry! After ten years of landscaping I realised I was definitely not part of a green industry."

Anyone who contributes to three permablitz projects can put their hand up to have a permablitz held at their property.

A 'blitz' is made up of 20-30 people, with numbers dictated by the size of the tasks and the number of available leaders. A typical day begins with the participants arriving at the designated property in the morning (car-pooling if possible) and making their introductions over a hot drink. Part of the intention is to build community networks and friendships, something the camaraderie of a permablitz leads to quite naturally.

Each project is overseen by a permaculture designer, but it's to a flexible design with changes made in consultation with the property owner on the day. There's a lot going on so if you ever host a permablitz in your garden, delegate a friend to be responsible for the kitchen so you are free to be fully involved in the garden.

In permaculture it is important to design the layout carefully so there will be less work to do once it's in place. It means the garden takes care of itself

without artificial fertilisers or pest control. For example, trees such as peaches and nectarines benefit from air flow to keep them free of fungi so it's best to plant them out in the open where the wind can blow through. Similarly, apple trees should be planted where they can benefit from the frost rather than being too close to shelter.

Hugo completed a permaculture design certificate course at the Koanga Institute prior to volunteering to run the first Bay of Plenty permablitz at Katikati.

"I thoroughly recommend people do the Koanga PDC course," he said. "We typically have a lot of people who are specialists and who do what I call 'reductionist thinking'. We don't have many who look at the big picture, which is where permaculture comes in. We need a holistic understanding about how to live. A permablitz project is part of the gift relationship. It involves reciprocity. First give a little, and receive a lot in return."

Lia Tuerling, another permablitz attendee, has completed a Geoff Lawton Permaculture Design Course which she has done online and says it's very inspiring.

In Peter's Kerepehi garden, Lia gave a workshop to interested participants before they got back to work again in the afternoon. She shared what she had been learning from Lawton's course and her enthusiasm was contagious.

"The course cost \$1200. I decided I'd do this course rather than pay a landscape designer who probably would have cost about the same but not given me all the information I've since learned."



Rhonnie (left) and Sunny tie up one of Peter's new fruit trees.



Giving a lemonade their love.

HOW TO BECOME PART OF A BLITZ

Newcomers are welcome to join the PermaBlitz movement in the Bay of Plenty and there is no age limit. People with experience in permaculture are especially welcome to share their knowledge but others willing to learn positive ways to take care of the land are also important. Even if you are not physically strong, you can have a part to play.

It is important to register to attend a PermaBlitz event. First come, first served as places fill quickly.



Gardening, nature-style

Permaculture. The word is a shortened version of 'permanent agriculture', a term first used by the Australian lecturer Bill Mollison in the early 1970s and then further developed by his student David Holmgren.

In a nutshell, permaculture incorporates the patterns of nature. For instance, through observation it can be seen that plants can be co-operative or equally they can be competitive. Large plants provide shelter for young growth, then fall as compost as they age. Permaculture encourages the deliberate planting of fast-growing tall plants, initially to protect young fruit-producing bushes while they are becoming established, then cutting them down as compost when they are no longer needed.

Food forests are an important part of permaculture and each plant is expected to have more than one function. For example, an apricot tree can provide shade, act as a windbreak, and fertilise the soil, in addition to being a source of food.

Food forests themselves can be seen as guilds. The canopy is provided by large fruit and nut trees, with dwarf fruit trees forming the low tree layer. The shrub layer is comprised of berry bushes and lower still a layer of herbaceous growth such as comfrey. Root vegetables comprise the rhizosphere and ground cover such as strawberries are at the soil surface. The seventh component to make up a guild is the vertical, with vines like grapes and kiwifruit.

Through this kind of diversity there is a resilience that brings about stability. Integration is more important than segregation because monoculture is prone to



Get more info online

www.permablitzbopnz.net or on the BOP PermaBlitz Facebook page, www.facebook.com/permaBlitzbopnz

Koanga Institute's Permaculture Design Course
This is run twice a year in spring and autumn, with the next one in September.

www.koanga.org.nz – click on Shop, Education, then choose from the options.

Geoff Lawton Permaculture Design Course
www.geofflawton.com

To be notified of when the next course is by email, you must sign up and watch the free video lessons on permaculture design on the website.

disease and plant distress, as research is now showing.

In permaculture, gardens are planted in energy saving zones so life is easier for the people who use them. Plants that are used most frequently are planted nearest the living quarters for easy access. Herbs and salad vegetables are likely to be planted in a spiral on a raised mound to conserve space. Perennial plants requiring less frequent maintenance would be further away. Permaculture encourages gardens to have an area of wilderness where there is no human intervention for natural eco-systems on the perimeter.

The idea is to look at a whole area rather than just a small segment, and to encourage resilience through design. A permaculture plan needs to be economically sustainable, with important features such as water supply and patterns of sunshine taken into consideration.

For more on forest gardening, see page 14.