

Gardening

Written by Jeff Poppens
Tuesday, March 19, 2013

I love thinking about land use and talking about gardening. It would be a laugh to say I'm taking these things more seriously, but I am getting paid to do them, now. The dire stresses on our society, health and environment from corporate food systems compel me to help start small organic farms and share my 40 years of ridiculously stupid gardening mistakes, and here is how I go about it.

After sniffing the air and glancing around a new farm, I sit down and interview the landowners. They are the most important part of land use. I save walking the farm for later, but first I need to get to know them and what they want.

I may ask "Why are you incarnated on earth now?" in an effort to draw out a mission statement. Before I can help them achieve their dream, they have to verbalize it. We will discuss the belief systems they rely on for their decision-making, so the base care values that will dictate land use surface.

Specific goals become apparent as we work our way to a vision of the land ten years from now. A list is formed of likes and dislikes, which will help us keep their quality of life in mind. Finally we picture the other people involved, their present and future resources, and what they want to produce from the land. Now lets walk.

The land has been used for many centuries. Native Americans ringed unproductive trees, so the Eastern Hardwood Forest contained mostly mast-producing species like oak, chestnut and beech. They also cleared land for crops. European settlers cut down the forests and made pastures for livestock and much more cropland. Thinking about land use has been going on for a long time.

Most forests are whatever is left after several removals of the best lumber. I observe the prevalent plant growth and not non-native invasives running amok. I usually explain how to rid the woods of poison ivy, which is by cutting the hairy vines off of the trees. Possible woodland crops are Shiitake Mushrooms, or herbs like ginseng, golden seal and black cohosh.

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Most pastures are under grazed, an unusual concept for many new owners of land. Soils are formed from grass plants being grazed and then resting without grazing. Too much of either destroys the soils productive capacity. Of the farm has cleared land, it needs cattle. Their proper management supplies the fertility necessary for the whole farm.

Most garden spots are compacted, and now we discuss soil tilthe. Again, it is the grass plants that create good tilthe, it cannot be done by tillage. We till in a way that destroys the tilthe as little as possible. A rototiller is the worst, and most common, implement. I much prefer plowing slowly for preserving soil structure.

As we study the plants, nutrient deficiencies become noticeable. Remineralization will likely be required, so we look for sources of lime, rock phosphate, granite meal and other rock dusts. I'm a fan of kelp and I love compost. Manure, leaf mold, rotten wood chips and old hay can be found and used to improve the biology on the farm through composting.

I often recommend utilizing the neighbors' cattle, tractor and organic matter. Let them run their livestock on your land, and manage hay fields, in return for some old manure and plowing your garden. A few baskets of tomatoes later on will sweeten the deal.

We'll have to fence out deer, and think about other varmints. Looking at slope, aspects and sunshine, we'll pick spots for an orchard, berries, vegetables, flowers and cold frames. After considering bees, chickens and larger livestock, I'll try to talk them out of horses. Markets, machinery, buildings, labor and management may not be as fun as gardening, but it would have behooved me to think about them long before I did. I want to shorten the long learning curve (and wrong turns) I've traveled on.

I follow up with more thoughts in a week or two, and continue to help when needed. Introducing them to books, people and organizations, I try to draw them into the circle of new age, old time farmers who are changing the way we look at food and land use.

Gardening is fun to teach, because people really want to learn about it. They ask a lot of questions as I discuss minerals, tillage and biology. Varieties, mulching, weeding, insects and

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many other topics and techniques get covered. By building up our soil humus, we've grown 5 to 8 acres of vegetables with no irrigation for decades, and I love sharing and learning with others.

This year the classes will begin on Sunday, April 21, between 1 and 4 pm. We'll hold them at Green Door Gourmet, which is on River Road, off of Charlotte Pike, exit 201 from I-40, west of Nashville. We also take interns on our farm in Red Boiling Springs, for a few days up to a few years.

Let's fill up Middle Tennessee with organic and biodynamic farms and gardens for better health, meaningful work, and a clean environment. Although becoming a "local food" town, Nashvillians probably get less than 2% of their diet from local organic farms, we are on the right track and still have a long way to go.