

ECOLOGY ACTION

NEWSLETTER

News from the Common Ground Mini-Farm, Willits

APPRENTICESHIP LEADS TO GROW BIOINTENSIVE BUSINESS

Margaret Lloyd was an Ecology Action apprentice, starting in 2005. This is her story about turning that experience into a business.

What to do after Ecology Action? Exactly two years ago, I asked myself that question. During my apprenticeship there, I was equipped with the skills to grow food and an incredible passion for doing so. Following the model that EA had established, I took it to what was the most obvious place to me—backyards around the Bay [the San Francisco Bay Area]. Prior to becoming an apprentice at EA, I had started to grow food at my parents' home in Los Altos, California. While I undoubtedly expanded my Biointensive knowledge and refined my skills during the apprenticeship, I did not waver in my perspective that this type of farming is ideal for suburban homes. Hence, I carried over my training to a business that I love: sustainable "home farming."

The enthusiasm has been remarkable and encouraging. The business has been a natural expansion of the workshops that I have given. Over the course of the workshop, participants begin applying/implementing the various steps, and those who want more support or quicker results decide to ask me for it. And so each circumstance is different. At times, I act as a consultant, providing technical and design support. In other cases, I work together

with my clients in the yard, teaching them skills along the way. And lastly, in some cases, I work with a crew to install the garden and manage its upkeep. I work one-on-one with people to design, install, plan and cultivate their space over a 2- to 3-year period. However, the backbone of all the work with my clients involves having mini-classes in which we cover in detail the philosophy, physical mechanics and specific subjects needed such as seed propagation, double-digging, a discussion on a particular crop or how to harvest for maximum yield. The results have been positive. On one level, my clients are building their technical skills. For example, removing an intact seedling from a flat proves to be a difficult challenge the first several times. I am able to show them techniques, and with practice and repetition, the accomplishment is exciting to people. Refining their skill through practice advances people's sensitivity, involvement and attention to detail.

The Georgia family in Palo Alto were extending their front yard vegetable garden and wanted to devote one bed for neighborhood children to cultivate. Word passed around the neighborhood and an 11-year-old boy, named Skyler, came over one day to ask if he could plant in it. "But of course!" was their response. He chose to grow corn and almost every day, he

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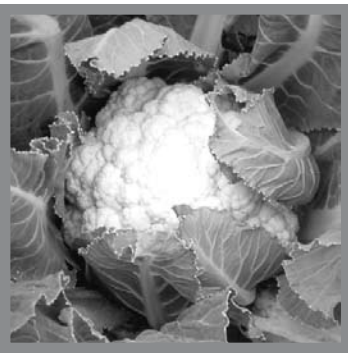
rode his bike over to water, watch and wait. As the corn sprouted, his curiosity grew. He compared different sowing dates and the differences between transplanting seeds and direct sowing. He enjoyed measuring the rates of growth

to see which approach was better and got really excited when the plants grew taller than him.

He began by planting the seeds, but once he noticed that we were building compost piles, he wanted to be a part of



Margaret watering in the Research Mini-Farm Garden.



that as well. His family began saving their kitchen waste, and Skyler would come to deliver it to the pile, adding carbonaceous material, soil and water appropriately. Naturally, summer came, as did summer camp and other fun excursions. However, his work was not abandoned. Instead, his parents began to get involved, watching the corn grow and learning to make compost. One week, his father asked if he could plant some tomatoes, and so he took the next spot in the bed to care for his own crops. And now, his father began stopping by on his way home from work. The Georgias were hoping that through a child's involvement in the garden, their parents would become interested and involved, and that is exactly what happened.

In San Jose, I work with a lady named Lynne, who particularly loves seasonal displays. Word traveled around the neighborhood about Lynne's garden. The children started showing up, not just to play, but to work and help in the garden. Lynne particularly loves seasonal displays; hence, we sowed many pumpkins so that she could have a pumpkin pile and be able to liberally give them away. One child began coming several times a week. He would play outside the house in order to see when I arrived so that he could help me. He found a pumpkin that we fell in love with, and everyday, he would come and water it, clean it, prop it up on rocks and watch it grow, anxious for Halloween.

I see producing food in the backyard as beneficial to society in several ways. It has the potential to provide food when large-scale agriculture has a crop failure or when war or natural disaster challenges the food distribution system. It supports the natural ecosystems by providing dwellings and food, relieves the landfills via home composting, and increases genetic diversity through home seed saving. In addition, it can provide beauty and a place of homage.

The practicalities of establishing a functional, sustainable home farm are exciting and essential and they provide a way in which I can help. However, it is the taste, physical attraction and closeness to the land that do the real teaching. Home farming fulfills in people a deep, often unconscious, need and keeps my phones ringing.

Check out Margaret's upcoming workshop schedule on her website: www.home-farming.com.



Margaret transplanting summer grains in the Research Mini-Farm Garden.

— Margaret's Garden Necessities —

In a step-by-step process, every garden design must establish the infrastructure that can support the 8 concepts of Biointensive farming:

The Compost Area is 9'x3', with a space for 2 piles and a place to turn them. One pile is curing, while the other is currently being built. Beside this area are 2 piles or bins, for bed soil and carbonaceous material, so that they can be added easily to the pile as kitchen waste or weeds are delivered. Apart from these, a separate area can be chosen to store extra carbonaceous material and sticks for putting underneath new piles.

A Seedling Table has a slatted table top with a frame above it from which to attach, as appropriate, shade netting, Reemay (floating row cover), birdnetting, or even a piece of glass. For a backyard with anywhere from 50 to 400 square feet, a table top will range from 2'x 3' to 3'x 4'. Accompanying this seedling table are flats. I have found that the most useful size for the home farm has been 8"x 8"x3" with other sizes to supplement, such as 4"x 4"x3" or 11"x 14"x3". In addition, a few 6"-deep flats are needed as well.

Tools I suggest a minimum of a spade, fork, rake, digging board, trowel, hand fork, pruners and buckets or wheelbarrow.

Lastly, a Comprehensive Garden Book and Log are essential.