

Exploring the edges of things

The concept of “edge” serves as succinct philosophical foundation for permaculture design, that is, designs that mimic nature. In the natural world, an edge is any place where media meet — where bank meets stream, sea meets reef, rainforest canopy meets sky, etc. It’s a place of great diversity and productivity that provides niches for species to hide and hunt.

Edges also can be places in time. Sunrise and sunset, where day meets night, are times of great activity because some animals wake, hungry for breakfast, and others search for a meal just before bedtime. Morning and evening are not only frenzied times in the natural world, but they are clearly busy on all of our human commuter routes, too.

Techniques such as herb spirals, sheet mulching, on-contour swales, deep-pipe irrigation, curved-row garden design, windbreaks, fruit tree guilds, and cold

composting (all of which I’ve described in previous columns) are great examples of edge at work in the landscape. But now, as a father, I have a new favorite example of edge: the kid-friendly bean-teepee.

In order to understand what a bean-teepee is, let’s look at how to make one. Place any number of poles, in a conical shape with the tops of the poles meeting above the ground, often at eye level. The bottoms of the poles should then circumscribe a circle in the ground of any convenient diameter. Beans are planted next to the poles and are trained to grow up them. Soon they create a cover for what was once only the skeletal structure.

Make sure you provide east- or north-side access to the wonderfully shady microclimate that you will create inside the teepee. Here, even in the heat of July and August, grow lettuces, greens, radishes, beets, mushrooms, and other

shade-tolerant plant material. If children will be part of your garden this year, forgo planting much inside the teepee, and watch the kids enjoy a beautiful, natural, edible playhouse deep into autumn.

Let’s consider all of the benefits that came from creating the teepee. We increased productivity by using vertical space. We diversified the use of the space by creating a microclimate for plants that normally would be at risk if exposed to the elements by themselves. We created a matrix that will provide food for animals and people, wind protection, beneficial insects, shade for the neighboring plants, and nutrients for the soil, as well as educational benefits and entertainment value. What better way to teach kids about gardening than to create a garden that becomes a place to play hide-and-seek?

Effective permaculture design might be nothing more than the relentless



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application of edges that work well together, because if we create productive places that allow nature to do much of our work for us, we set up the conditions for not only serious sustainability, but also fantastic fun and real relaxation.

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