

Squeeze water from stones this summer

When the report came out about New Mexico and North Dakota tying for second, behind Alaska, in “most per-capita hypothermia-related deaths,” it wasn’t hot news, but it generated a cool segue for wrapping my brain around this column’s topic: making moisture.

Of course, Alaska and North Dakota are, by definition, butt-cold. Seeing them in the top three made sense. But our state has a reputation of being not merely hot, but blisteringly so. Surely, even if you don’t count green chile, the Land of Enchantment often bakes. Locals know, however, that we often get smothered with extra chilly weather dropping down from snow-packed peaks and barren *barrancas*.

What tourists and hypothermia-prone locals might not know is that daily temperature extremes swing outrageously here. Our thin air, sharp changes in elevation, sparse vegetation, and lack of proximity to a large body of water make rapid 40-degree temperature shifts quite common. The bad news: these conditions

are perfect for hypothermia. The good news: this phenomenon is perfect for creating condensation.

Native Americans from this area piled rocks around saplings planted in holes or along the contours of hillsides. The rocks would heat up with their daily dose of our obstinate sun and soon react to the raw cold — in essence, squeezing water out of stone.

Mary Zemach’s “waterless tomato” technique exemplifies another application of this concept. Zemach clips heavy, black, plastic sheets to the insides of strong, rigid wire cylinders that stand three feet tall and two to three feet in diameter. In the fall she fills these columns with leaves. In the spring she comes back with a tomato plant (started in her basement) and adds a few shovelfuls of soil around its roots. Like the Anasazi’s ore of yore, the plastic (and associated leaf mass) heats up daily. Then it cools each night leaving behind, in the continuously decomposing leaves, plenty of moisture for use by her tomatoes

throughout the day.

“Nature takes over from there,” she says. “I never water them directly, but about six times a year they get some overspray when I’m watering other things in the garden.”

Zemach semi-regularly holds tours for the public on her inspirational property perched on a steep third-of-an-acre at 740 Canyon Road on the eastern edge of Los Alamos. This year, mark your calendars for Saturday, June 25, between 10 a.m.

and 4 p.m. Not unlike older, more health-conscious guests at Willy Wonka’s famous chocolate factory, you’ll be dazzled by all of the edible (and otherwise efficient and productive) components interconnected among the systems of what is, by definition, permaculture in practice.

In other news, an archive of about half of my published work about permaculture can be found at www.practicalpermacultureonline.blogspot.com. Both new columns and other works from my personal archive will periodically condense there starting in May at a rate of about one article per week



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through 2005. Please also note that, during April, American history buffs who glom on will easily find my favorite, “Declaration of Independence — from Aquifer,” as the lead article.

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