

# Permaculture in Practice

## Go forth and synergize

One of permaculture's most productive principles, "synergy," occurs when a component of a system performs multiple functions. Fascinatingly, healthy fruit trees and committed spouses both exemplify synergy.

Rather than being planted solely for profit (conventional agriculture) or mostly for beauty (late-20th-century landscape architecture), fruit trees can function variously. By providing wind protection, shade, food, energy (fuel from pruned branches), fun (when kids climb them), wildlife habitat, noise abatement, view-screen creation, erosion control, water-source recharge, and an increase in real-estate value, fruit trees clearly resemble our better halves.

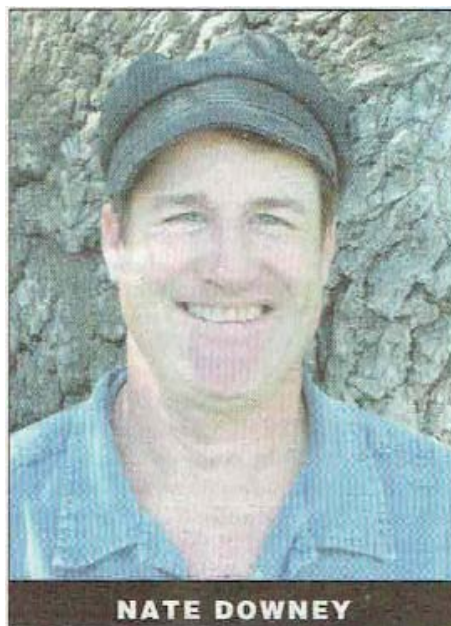
It's great if your soul mate has a high-paying job or good looks, but a person's composure before adversity (like a windbreak) or his/her ability to comfort others (like a shade tree) — these are crucial. Equally important are the amount of food for thought that significant others can convey in conversation and how much energy (fuel for love?) they bring to the relationship. Life partners, like good climbing trees, must be fun and interesting, so we seek humor and an element of "wildlife" when prowling for "the one." Smart people search for those who prioritize their initial friendship by abating the noise of society and by screening out the less-important stimuli that swirl through the petri dish of commitment.

Finally, like any healthy root system, a good spouse will quickly prevent any erosion of their mutual bond and recharge its source whenever possible. Altogether, this increases the real value of any relationship just like mature fruit trees improve the market price of any piece of property.

For me, the remainder of this month's column works synergistically because I will be on a panel at the American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association's annual conference in Georgia on Sept. 16 attempting to answer the question, "Why Consider Alternatives to Active Water Harvesting?" Here, I get to synergize panel-discussion preparation with column-writing time.

"Alternatives" to the roof-cistern-pump systems associated with "active water harvesting" include "passive water harvesting," "wastewater harvesting," and "community water

harvesting." Passive systems use soil-building, mulch, land-contouring, gabions, permeable pavement and many other techniques that require no moving parts. Wastewater harvesting applies everything from the mulched basins of basic greywater recycling to the biology, chemistry, and physics involved in the latest Sludgehammer technology.



Community water harvesting recognizes the power people have to harvest water in groups. When water harvesters work together, for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, government agencies, industry associations, or loose assemblages of friends, neighbors, and colleagues, the positive effects on local watersheds can be dramatic.

We should consider these alternatives to cisterns because they can be less expensive, more productive, easier to maintain, and increasingly profitable in difficult economic times. Especially in cold-winter climates when catchment tanks and pipes are buried to prevent freezing, the cost of active water-harvesting can be high, and alternatives become attractive. But water-harvesting alternatives rarely present themselves as "either/or" choices. In fact, unlike significant-other relationships, your rapport with all forms of water harvesting should resemble an orgiastic experience of polygamous synergy.

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