

With winter, gardeners who use permaculture technique tune into nature-based environmental cycle

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By Paul Clark, staff writer
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SANDY MUSH - Ceara Foley is getting her garden ready for a long winter's nap by doing very little herself.

She's covering some of the beds at Soulflower Farm with leaves and planting others in cover crops. By covering the beds, she'll have moist, healthy soil to plant again in the spring. Like many other gardeners in Western North Carolina, she's an advocate of permaculture.

Less is more in permaculture, which is a gardening and life philosophy that seeks to heal the earth while fostering close human relationships. Permaculture as a movement began in Australia in the 1970s as an agricultural alternative to farming methods that were polluting the environment and depleting the soil. In recent years, the movement has taken root in WNC.

Permaculture is about creating homes that work harmoniously with the land they're on and the animal and vegetable worlds around them.

"I try not to disturb the soil a lot," Foley, director and teacher at Appalachia School of Holistic Herbalism in Asheville, said. "But if you're going to do anything to change your rows or beds, do it now so it can sit a long time before you plant. Anytime you disturb the soil, it increases the number of harmful insects that come to the soil."

"Things this time of year have a whole season to break down," said Peter Bane, publisher of Permaculture Activist, a magazine produced in Black Mountain. A good way to create new beds, he said, is to cover a grassy patch with thick layers of newspaper, cardboard and straw (or wood chips). By spring, worms will have eaten the cardboard, the grass will be gone, and you'll have a beautiful space ready to plant.

Foley likes to plant alfalfa and red clover as over-winter cover crops, because they put nitrogen in the soil and they're medicinal herbs. Bane likes Austrian winter pea (you can buy seeds for all of these at feed and seed stores in the region). To plant, just poke the pea into the soil (you don't have to work it in). Plant thickly and cover lightly with leaves.

Will Hooker keeps his beds planted in mustard, kale and other greens all winter. He lives in Raleigh - he's a landscape design professor in N.C. State University's horticultural science department. But even in WNC, greens will grow way into the winter, he said.

As mild as November has been, there's still time to plant flower bulbs here, Bane said. Put them around fruit trees - they taste so nasty that they'll keep the mice and other

rodents away from the trees, Bane said. This is also a good time to put in berry bushes and fruit trees.

If you're lucky enough to have chickens, run them through your garden to eat the last of everything edible and fertilize the beds, Bane said.

Learn more

Check out Permaculture Activist, a magazine produced in Black Mountain, at www.permacultureactivist.net.

Earthaven Ecovillage in Black Mountain, which has about 60 members, uses permaculture as the basis of its sustainable living community. Permaculture workshops are offered there from time to time. The Earthaven Learning Center is at 1025 Camp Elliott Road, Black Mountain. Call 664-9935 or (866) 666-9935 toll free. www.earthaven.org