1000 Crops for Northwest Growers

Workshop Introduction by Michael Pilarski

We tend to think that we grow crops on farmland or in gardens. In actuality the whole word is our palette; yards, streets, alleys, walls, waste areas industrial areas, polluted mine wastes, vacant lots, salted soils, desertified land, pavements, eroded areas, overgrazed rangelands and so forth.

Each property can be a center for biodiversity. Pick one to ten plants to bring under your special care, natives or non-natives. Become a biodiversity gene bank for that/those species. Together we can cover all the bases. Because I move a lot, the most species I have had growing at one time in one place is 200 species. Few people get above the 500 species mark. I remember when Richo Cech hit 500 species at his Horizon Herbs and he must be well above that now. The Bullock Brothers Permaculture Homestead on Orcas Island in the San Juan Islands, northwest Washington hit the 1,000 species mark years ago. Stephen Bastow in northern Norway near the arctic circle has 2,000 plant species (most of them edible). One of the most fecund sites I have visited personally, Waimea Gardens on Oahu had over 5,000 species at the time and specialized in endangered plants. At the personal level, the best site I've seen was Fruit Spirit Botanical Garden in northern New South Wales, Australia. The owner had almost single-handedly put in over 3,000 species and operated it as a seed bank business.

Crops can be looked at in the context of replacing globalization with localization. Localization of production and consumption and localization of inputs. This is often called import substitution. Every community and county should undertake import substitution analyses to see what holes need to be filled. What is feasible? What are the low-hanging fruits? The long list of crop categories in this article show the wide range of possibilities. Also look at how local natural materials (such as wood, clay, stone, fiber, leather) can replace imported goods made of plastic and metals.

Crops need to be looked at much more broadly than the current norm that CROPS = $ MONEY.

There are many reasons we grow plants. If a crop can be thought of as obtaining a yield.

* Feeding yourself and family and meeting other material needs. Subsistence, homesteading.

* Feeding your friends, neighbors and community. Through sales, barter, gift economy.

* Beauty, color and fragrance are all yields that increase our quality of life. There is a lot of work to do to make our yards, cities, thoroughfares and landscapes more beautiful. A diversity of crops and cropping systems with a higher reliance on perennial crops will do much to increase the beauty of our cultivated landscapes.

* Crops to regenerate the earth, increase biodiversity and create beauty. There is so much earth repair and ecological restoration to do. This is one of the biggest tasks facing humanity in the coming decades and century. It will take many, many more small nurseries and seed companies growing millions of plants. Mostly native plants This is a big crop category. And one which will pay off economically, as well as saving the world, stabiilizing the climate (our best bet at any rate) and improving the quality of life for humans and the diversity of other species we share the planet with. Permaculture is a good companion to ecological restoration. Permaculture and indigenous land management (Ethno-ecology) can inform restoration in a way that restoration plantings can give economic yields as well as their functional yields.

* Plants have functional uses. We should aim to make our 'crop' plants fill as many ecological functions as well (such as food and habitat for pollinators).

Healing the earth offers ways of healing humans as well. Providing meaningful, useful work to the unemployed, partially employed, young people, and those who have a hard time getting jobs because of mental illness, physical handicaps, people pulling their lives together after substance addiction, people coming out of prisons or military service. Nature centered activities is very helpful to people's well-being. Integrating these types of workers into earth regeneration work can be a win win situation for many.

Growing plants is for me an act of love. I love the plants. Being around them and nurturing them feeds my soul. Earth repair is a form of earth stewardship that allows us fully express our humanity in service to the planet. Service is the new paradigm. Greed and egoism are the old paradigm.

What can we grow? This depends on soil depth and drainage, acidity/alkalinity pH, frost-free season, exposure, slope, precipitation and other physical factors.
What do we like to grow?
What can we sell?
What makes the most money?
Cost/benefit analyses.
How much time is being invested? Labor requirements? Equipment available? Purchased inputs? The more money and labor you throw at a piece of ground, the higher will be the overall yields (gross sales) IF you are a good farmer. But for most people, the important thing is the net income. What crops are cost effective and time-effective that fit into your operation and yield a

decent profit? It is possible to bootstrap it with low capitalization and mostly hours invested by the grower. Start small and work up. The smarter a farmer, the faster this goes.
Plant a mix of crops which yield short-term, medium-term and long-term. For instance, growing vegetables and herbs in a young orchard.

Outlets for products:
Family/subsistence
Barter
CSA
Farmers markets
Local markets (only sell locally grown and locally-made)
Natural food stores.
Wholesale to brokers (such as Charlie's Produce)
Retail to consumer, web based.
Wholesale to manufacturers
Brainstorm other niches ?

When we look at marketing in general, we should consider a number of scenarios:
1) Business as usual, current trends, No major shakeups in the economic/physical world. Opportunities grow at the current rate (relatively fast already).
2) Business booms for local, ecological farmers, producers, medicinal herbs, local food and no major shakeups happen in the economic/geo-political world.
3) There is a major shakeup in the economic, geo-political world. Local food and production systems grow immensely to take up the slack of the scarcity of outside inputs and goods. The general public demands and comes up with ways to do earth repair at all scales. Local farm production and earth repair activities become major economic drivers in a new economy.

In the 1980s I knew a lumber businessman who sold lumber all over the West Coast. He became convinced that the big shakeup was coming in five years. So he deliberately and carefully changed over his business dealing so that he dropped all his long-distance buyers and built up his local markets. Here it is 2015 and I wouldn't give the current system more than 5 years without a crash. Every producer should consider whether what mix of local or non-local markets works best for them.

When doing profit and loss statements for your farm/property/leasehold it is important to properly value the growth of your plant assets as they mature. You should also figure in the value of the ecosystem functions/services provided due to good land stewardship and earth repair. Clean water, air, soil building, carbon sequestration, biodiversity and so forth. Utilizing plants for their useful functions assists a land-owner is a number of ways including: a higher quality of life; the improved environment aids production, yields and net incomes: and gives a marketing angle (Salmon-Safe, Carbon-farming, biodiversity preserve, etc)

Every farmer should consider how much social work they want to take on. The income from involving others can be a side-line income or even a significant source of income. Farmstays, farm dinners, nature awareness, farm training, horticultural therapy, equine therapy, school trips, and so on.

Years to come into bearing
Weeds, seeds, annual vegetables and herbs, Year 1.
Berries 2-3 years
Perennial herbs, small production year 1, full production for species ranges from 2nd to 4th year.
Fruit 5 to 10 years
Nuts 5 to 15 years
Nursery stock, year 2 on.