

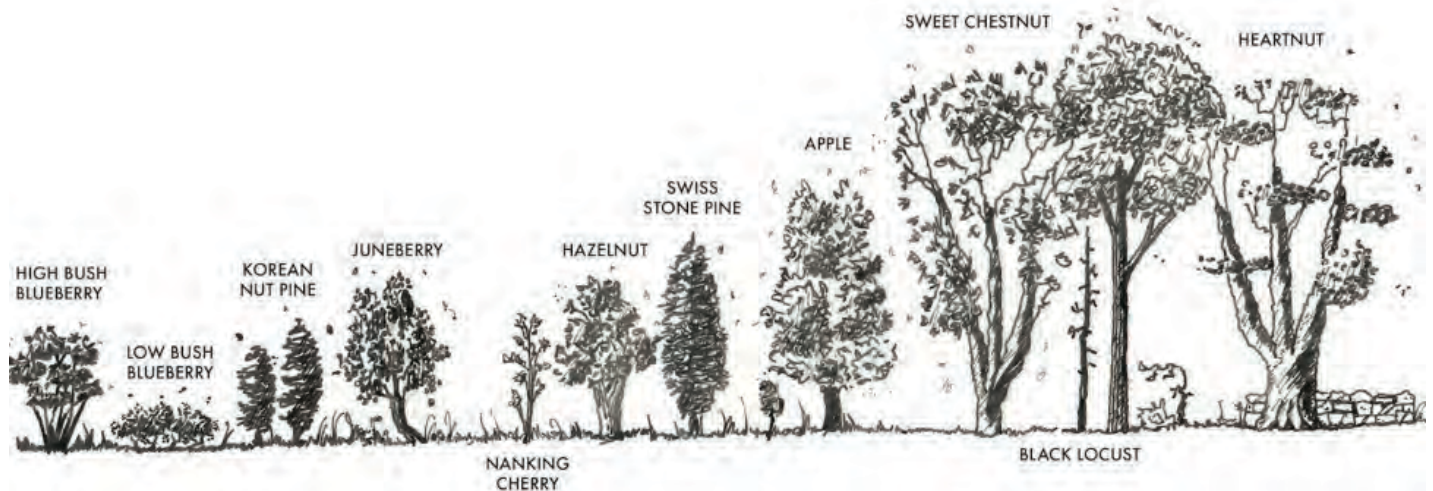
Returning to the Earth Commons

Lisa DePiano, Andrew Faust, & David Harper

IN THIS ARTICLE, WE PROPOSE three key ideas relating to land access: 1) the permaculture movement can begin to decommodify the Earth commons; 2) land can be held as a community trust for permaculture design efforts to provide a true bioregional inheritance for future generations; and 3) you can begin to co-create permaculture commons in the bioregions you call home.

nization with a mission to hold land in trust for community and ecological benefit as a permaculture commons.

It's been 35 years since Bill Mollison spelled it out for us in "Land Access/Trusteeship" in the "Land" section of his *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual*. "As with money, land ownership and thus land usage in society is unbalanced... Many of us do not believe in private land ownership, but in trust ownerships for public use under sound environmental control... Ownership,



Typical heights of mature trees from the perspective of their use in permaculture design.

Commodification of the Earth Commons

Permaculture was formed as a sustainable earth care system that has been shown to bring healing for people and the planet. So, what collective action can we, the permaculture movement, take to root out one of the deepest root causes of our biosphere—the commodification of the Earth commons as private property? What systems can we put in place today to begin freeing the land and water from the tyranny of extractive ownership concepts imposed on them by modern societies? As we design, install, and steward much-needed agroforestry and agroecology systems, food forests, and forest gardens, how can we also design new land commons to ensure these perennial polyculture plantings will endure and reach their full potential as a truly multigenerational, bioregional inheritance?

With these questions in heart and mind, a small group of permaculture designers, educators, and land conservationists came together in 2019 to co-create a permaculture land trust—a nonprofit, landholding entity in service of communities, ecosystems, and permaculture design, capable of weaving together the proven results of the global conservation movement with the ecological ingenuity of the global permaculture movement. Permaculture Living Lands Trust is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit orga-

in effect, gives the titleholder (person or state) a 'right to exploit in the short term.' Trusteeship governs any resource for the very long term, with no right to exploit resources beyond essential needs or replacement time."

It's been 30 years since Rosemary Morrow spelled it out for us in the "Bioregional Prosperity/Control of the Land" section in her *Earth User's Guide*. "Permaculture sees land as a resource to be used for shelter and food, and not a commodity to buy and sell... models of land ownership have been disastrous because they regard land as an inert commodity from which to extract maximum productivity with minimum inputs while paying no attention to long-term effects." She understood land access as a basic human right and called for a range of community land access opportunities—landshare, city farms, and community land trusts.

So how are we doing, Bill and Rosemary? Nearly half a lifetime later, are we any closer to creating a land commons, a trusteeship for permaculture, agroforestry, and agroecology? The land conservation movement continues its vital work of preserving millions of acres of ecologically significant natural areas and agricultural land at the global, national, and local levels. Where are the permaculture commons?

One way for permaculture designers to start is to ask the same questions conservationists do. What is the land tenure of



Hican (pecan x hickory hybrid) growing in a tree crop orchard.

the sites where permaculture designs and agroforestry projects are taking shape? How is the land owned? Whose names are on the deed? Are there investors? Is the title clear? Does it carry debt? Is it leased land? What are the terms? Is it protected by a conservation easement? How is it affected by land use regulations and real estate markets? What funding strategy and legal tools in our current system can be used to permanently protect these sites from destructive land use practices? Finding the answers to these questions can help us to create long-term land security for landscape-scale permaculture projects.

Private ownership on this continent was a tool used during its colonization to take lands that had long been stewarded by indigenous people. The commodification of Earth as property only began in earnest roughly 500 years ago when European monarchs, nobles, and churches began to systematically commodify land for their own benefit. The legal constructs, such as deeds and titles and the courts and troops to enforce them, had no precedent. We *Homo sapiens* have been walking this Earth for something like 250,000 to 300,000 years. For only the last 500 years, modern societies have accepted that individuals and groups of our own species can own the Earth commons as property. We can separate people from their commonwealth and concentrate ownership with those who may exploit the soil, the water, and the biodiverse ecosystems that nourish all life. For nearly all of human time, there existed only territories with an incredibly biodiverse Earth commons which embodied the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous cultures. We are

capable of returning to that mode of land use—that is what Molison and Morrow were saying about land tenure as a foundation of permaculture.

The Roles of a Permaculture Land Trust

As nonprofit landholding entities, land trusts are capable of working shoulder-to-shoulder with permaculture designers to:

- Acquire and hold title to land so that it is decommodified for long-term permaculture design.
- Acquire and hold conservation easements to protect privately or publicly owned land and tree crops for long-term permaculture design.
- Co-create a permaculture commons with locally governed land held in trust for community and ecological benefit.
- Serve and support permaculture commons initiatives as they emerge in different human communities and the bioregions they inhabit.

The thinking that humans should have dominion over nature has failed us, and it is finally changing. We believe that the new emerging human thinking of our time is actually an ancient one: life on Earth is a gift. Live well on Earth as a commons, in reciprocity with all living beings. In service of this approach, Permaculture Living Lands Trust (PLLT) collaborates with communities and landowners to create agroforestry and/or agroecology commons. Our working definition of the commons is “locally governed land held in trust for community and ecological benefit.”

Today, as co-founders of the Permaculture Living Lands Trust, and in collaboration with landowners and partner organizations, we are performing the following activities:

Listening and learning with a collaborative and ongoing process among colleagues and kindred spirits in the Eastern Deciduous Forest Biome of Turtle Island and beyond. The shared learning from these discussions shapes our strategic action plan and highlights niches where we can serve in unique ways.

Increasingly, we are listening to stewards of fruit- and nut-tree crop nurseries and orchards, offering them guidance as they plan to pass on their land legacies as a valuable community inheritance. These fruit- and nut-tree growers, and the orchards and nurseries they create, have a hugely important role to play in meeting the future food needs of our population. As farms shift from pastures and annual row crops to more diverse and resilient perennial crops, we look to the guidance of the tree-crop agriculture pioneers who saw these changes before the rest of us did. Those pioneers were inspired by the inherent wisdom of traditional cultures and by the work of J. Russell Smith in his 1915 book, *Tree Crops: A Permanent Agriculture*. Our founding work as a land trust focuses on honoring and protecting the legacy of these fruit- and nut-tree growers and their tree collections. Their valuable knowledge and the improved genetics of the trees they so carefully selected and tended are an inheritance that can benefit many generations to come.

When we are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to meet with fruit- and nut-tree growers during their lifetimes, or with their heirs after their lifetimes, we listen to what they have to say about their orchard or nursery and its future. By hearing what is shared by the family, and by walking the land with them, we gain an understanding of what is important and unique to

