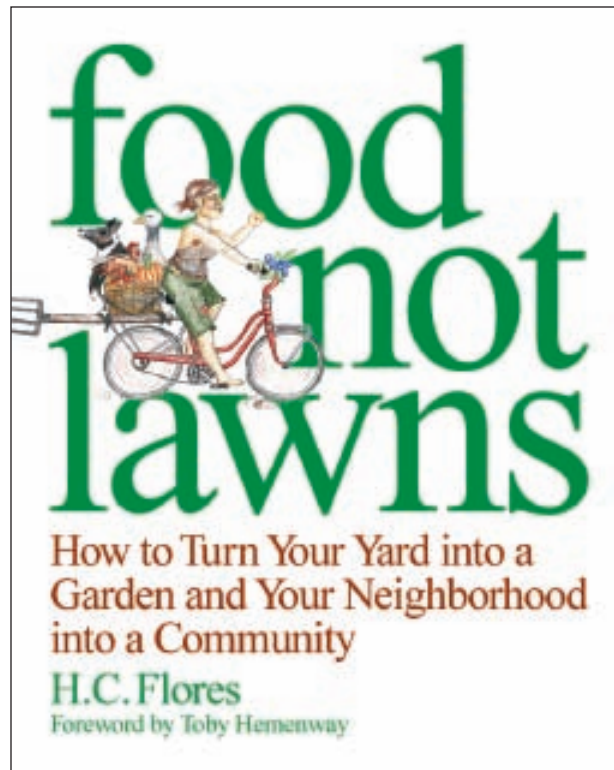


FOOD NOT LAWNS: A COMMUNITY HANDBOOK

BY GREG PETERSON



In my yard, known as the Urban Farm, there is little distinction between the edges of the property and the edible delights that spill into my neighbors' yards. In large part this is because gardening is not a solitary venture for me, but more of an invitation to the community to join in, maybe get their hands dirty and then share in the bounty as it arrives.

Every visitor who ventures into my edible landscape leaves with a bag of fresh delicacies and a smile on their face from having learned something like, "Oh, that's how broccoli looks when it grows!"

I use a community-oriented concept called Permaculture to design and grow my gardens and my life. Volumes have been written on this subject, but Permaculture can be simply described by saying it is ecological design or designing with nature in mind. One easy-to-read book that sums up the Permaculture concepts of good design, gardening and community involvement is *Food Not Lawns*, by Heather C. Flores (Chelsea Green, 2006). As you may well imagine, when I first heard the title I was hooked, and had to have my own copy.

This green lifestyle manual inspires readers to apply the principles of the edible garden—simplicity, resourcefulness,

creativity, mindfulness and community—to all aspects of life. Living and looking through my green-colored lenses, I think the best part of the book is where the author carries her work out into the community. She offers small, easy steps that we can all take to slow down and enjoy a greener lifestyle: ride our bikes, build a community garden, collect rainwater for irrigation and, most importantly, take time to talk to our neighbors.

Creating a workable Permaculture design can be baffling but Flores takes the edge off this challenge with what she calls the Gobrady Design Process. Although she never defines what the name means, the process makes planning a snap. Step one has you defining just what goals you have for your garden space. Here at the Urban Farm our main goal is education, so I have designed many of our processes to help visitors discover just how they can "do this at home."

As for defining *your* goals, start by simply deciding what your priorities are. For example, here in the desert water conservation is a goal that results in plans for a low-water vegetable garden, often with simple rainwater or gray water harvesting systems. Decide what you like to eat and share and the methods that best suit your goals and lifestyle.

Then you are ready to move to the next step (one of my favorites): observation. In fact, one of the basic tenets of Permaculture is protracted observation—just sit back and watch. Where does the water flow when it rains? What part of your yard is warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer? Are there wild animals that frequent your garden?

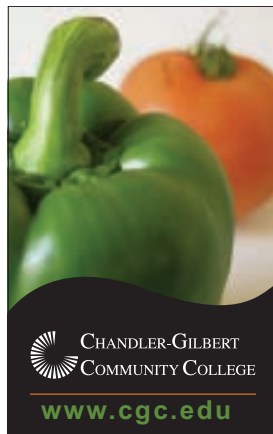
Answering these kinds of questions provides invaluable information for an efficient and effective design. From there you can evaluate resources, analyze the project, create the design and then implement the plan for your space.

Particularly intriguing in *Food Not Lawns* is the chapter on plants, explaining the “eight-layer garden.” This concept encourages building a bio-diverse, strong ecosystem in the yard so that it becomes self-seeding and productive into the future with little or no work on our parts. For example, many plants, including parsley, nasturtiums, lettuce, arugula, onions and garlic, live in my yard from year to year with little assistance from me. Truly free food.

The eight-layer garden includes the soil/root layer; ground covers that provide green mulch to preserve valuable moisture; herbs and vegetables; shrubs; small trees; tall trees; climbing vines; and ponds. This system replicates that of a natural forest in how it stacks the different layers into “guilds,” or beneficial groupings of plants that work together in a very productive biological system. I have found that the stronger I make this system the less work there is for me to do. Similar to forest inhabitants, my job then becomes foraging and sharing with the community around me.

So if you're having trouble seeing the “forest” for the trees and grass in your yard, pick up a copy of *Food Not Lawns*—a great handbook for getting our entire community involved in creating healthy, vibrant living spaces that integrate growing food into our everyday lives. Read, enjoy and go share the book with your neighbors. ☼

Greg Peterson owns the Urban Farm (www.urbanfarm.org), a sustainability showcase home on one-third of an acre in Central Phoenix, and is the host of the new television series “Smart Spaces: Inside & Out.” For information on living a green lifestyle and to receive a weekly green living tip, visit his website at www.YourGuideToGreen.com.




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