

Permaculture effort exploding in western Massachusetts

By CHRIS SHORES

Recorder Staff

Friday, November 16, 2012

(Published in print: Friday, November 16, 2012)

GREENFIELD — With a permaculture garden forming at Greenfield Community College, and one at the University of Massachusetts that has been established for two years, garden coordinators said it is easy for people to think of “permaculture” as only about a place where people can grow food.

But at the heart of permaculture, said UMass Permaculture Academic Coordinator Ryan Harb, is designing spaces that help people, that aid the planet and that share Earth’s resources.

“Permaculture is really about solutions,” he said Thursday night during a presentation at the annual meeting of Greenfield Community College’s Pioneer Valley Institute.

“It’s about finding the way to take all of the problems we have in the world and making something good out of them,” he said.

Harb said permaculture can happen in all sorts of projects — from filling water bottles with trash and using them as “bricks” for furniture, to turning unused land into a sustainable garden.

Abrah Dresdale, farm and food services coordinator at GCC, said that western Massachusetts has become, “one of the hot spots of permaculture in the entire nation.”

New efforts are being made all over the area, including a garden project at GCC that began this fall, she said.

Planting will occur in the spring at GCC’s permaculture garden, located behind the south wing of campus.

It is phase one of a major permaculture effort on campus — one that could, over the next five years, expand to include a micro orchard as well as edible landscaping around the college’s new core building.

To learn how to build their own garden, GCC students traveled around the region, said Dresdale. They studied gardens to learn how to effectively use the contours of land, and how to pair specific types of mutually beneficial plants together.

UMass was one of the examples her students looked at when preparing their own garden, she said.

“UMass ... (has) served a wonderful role in pioneering this path (of permaculture),” she said. “It’s really, really blowing up.”

Success at UMass

The UMass permaculture movement began, in part, in fall 2009 at Harb’s Amherst home.

Harb, then a graduate student working on a thesis project, decided to turn his 1/8-acre front yard into a low maintenance, highly productive garden. He wanted to create a model for others to be able to make their own gardens, he said Thursday.

One year later, Harb was hired by UMass to create an on-campus permaculture garden that would supply food to the school’s dining services.

He led a team that, during the 2010-2011 school year, transformed a 1/4-acre space of unused land in front of the Franklin Dining Commons into a garden.

In two years, the garden has produced 2,000 pounds of local produce for the campus. The effort has expanded to another garden on the opposite side of campus, and there are plans for an additional garden each year.

And Harb said the movement has taken notice. YouTube documentaries about the garden have gone viral, inspiring interest from all over the world, he said. In March, the UMass Permaculture Committee was the top vote-getter in the White House’s “Campus Champions of Change Challenge.”

Harb said that President Barack Obama told the committee that whatever their future goals were for permaculture or sustainability, it was people like them that needed to lead the effort for change.

“What do we want (Obama) to do?” asked Harb Thursday. “I think these next four years are really important for making some sort of movement.”

GCC permaculture
design certificate

Before Dresdale and Harb's presentation, six GCC students received their permaculture design certificate: William Breed, Megan Brockelbank, Jeny Christian, Joshua Freund, Karla Muise and Ian Walton.

The certification program requires 72 class hours and a final design project.

It was previously two courses but has now been condensed into one four credit science lab: "Permaculture Design."

The course will be taught at GCC this spring on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30 p.m. to 1:45 p.m. and a Thursday lab from 2 p.m. to 4:50 p.m.

Anyone interested in learning more about the course can contact Dresdale at dresdale@gcc.mass.edu.

**You can reach Chris Shores at:
cshores@recorder.com
or 413-772-0261, ext. 264**