

## URBAN PERMACULTURE: HELPING RESIDENTS RECONNECT TO NATURE

### What is permaculture?

According to the Permaculture Research Institute, “permaculture is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people – providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs sustainably. Without permanent agriculture, there is no possibility of a stable social order”.

As professor Ana Vovk, founder and owner of the Dole Self-Reliance Training Ground, a permaculture garden with educational facilities in Poljčane (partner city of the BiodiverCity network), Slovenia, says: “Permaculture is not only about sustainable agriculture and producing food. It is about restoring soil diversity, fostering biodiversity, using water carefully, building the resilience of local economies, and nurturing people’s social existence”. Permaculture is a

design philosophy and a system for sustainable living that mimics natural ecosystems to create self-sustaining agricultural environments. Permaculture combines elements of organic farming, renewable energy, water retention and community action.

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According to its three pillars, permaculture highlights the importance of soil diversity, puts humans’ well-being in the centre and boosts community action. It consists of vertical cropping systems, water reuse, support for soil diversity and pollinators, natural construction, use of wood, renewable energy, composting and recycling.

### What is urban permaculture and why is it important?

There is a misconception that permaculture is only for people who live in the countryside. Contrary, some of the most effective and innovative permaculture gardens can be found in cities! Urban permaculture is thus a valid expression, and the same permaculture principles apply in urban environments too, even in the smallest plots and backyard gardens. Since permaculture is a design philosophy, urban permaculture is also very much linked to sustainable urban development and climate resilience.



Ana Vovk in her permaculture educational centre  
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However, some of the features of permaculture are more important in cities than in rural areas, since in urban areas perhaps not food production is the priority. However, **community resilience** and collaboration can be more in the spotlight in the dense urban fabric, because permaculture is about growing thriving communities who work together for the benefit of the planet and each other.



Dole Self-Reliance Training Ground  
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The importance of **biodiversity** applies in urban environments too. What's more, in some parts of Europe, urban areas can be far more biodiverse than rural areas monopolised by industrialised agriculture (sadly). The collective effort across millions of gardens, patios, balconies, tree alleys, parks and other green areas provides a habitat for a huge number of species.

**Composting** also has huge potential in urban areas, both in private gardens and at community composting spots. Besides the known added value of the “black gold” correctly managed composts can produce (helping plants grow, nourishing the soil, reducing chemical use), in the dense urban fabric it could significantly reduce the amount of waste we send to landfill sites (not to mention that small hot compost bins and wormeries can even operate on a balcony).

## FROM EDUCATIONAL PERMACULTURE GARDENS TO PERMABLITZ: IMPLICATIONS FOR CITIES

Embedding permaculture principles into the planning of urban green areas is an important possibility, but two, rather simple initiatives could work as quick wins in every city:

### Create educational permaculture gardens at existing community gardens!

Permaculture-based education centres can stimulate the potential collaboration between humans and nature. You can create such a new facility, but if you have a running community garden, it might be more practical to dedicate an area within the garden to permaculture. If our connection to nature, deeply rooted in cultural values, attitudes and norms is key to using nature-based solutions more efficiently in cities and beyond, to make urban green spaces more biodiverse, restore habitats and tackle the climate and biodiversity crises, participatory learning in a permaculture garden should be the driver to boost community resilience and increase the adaptive capacity of urban (and rural) areas. Among others, highlighting the connection between soil diversity and the nutrient level of the food we eat, is a great opportunity to nudge people towards a more pro-environmental behaviour.



## Organise a permablitz!

Copying from bioblitz, it is an informal gathering of a community to create edible gardens, share skills related to permaculture and sustainable living, build community and have fun (even in a backyard or a small garden (blitz simply means a focused effort to get something done). These events are always free, led by a qualified expert, with free workshops and shared food, where you get some exercise and have a good time.



## Why is it so important to deal with permaculture in urban areas?

As for the big picture, it is important to have such educational places since according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature agriculture is the no. 1 threat to biodiversity on the planet – thus using nature-based solutions in agriculture is a high priority to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises.

In the shadow of climate change, there is a lack of global discussion of soil biodiversity and soil degradation. The grave results show that the paradigm shift in agriculture is inevitable and speeding up the transition is of utmost importance. According to the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), droughts, heat and water scarcity will make production impossible on a third of the world's cropland by the end of the century. Soil moisture in nearly half of Europe's agricultural areas has declined substantially in recent decades (while agriculture in general consumes 70% of freshwater resources). Permaculture can be an efficient tool to raise awareness, and cities can offer unique opportunities for learning and education about a resilient and sustainable future and have a significant potential to boost innovations and governance tools.



*BiodiverCity study visit in Poljčane*  
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*Permaculture is like a pair of glasses you put on which allow you to see possibilities; that rubble-filled backyard as a food garden, your local community as a sustainable settlement, yourself as part of the hugely complex web of nature and the natural patterns which form the world around you.*

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*Rob Hopkins*