

Melbourne backyard Photos Laura Hesse



permablitzing

It's a backyard blitz with a permaculture twist.

Samantha Allemann decides to get her hands dirty

It's the craze that's sweeping not only the nation, but the world. From Melbourne to Montreal, Perth to Portugal, Hawaii to Houston, Istanbul to Indonesia, people are getting together and converging on backyards, shovels and rakes firmly in hand.

Peer over the fence at one of these gatherings to see a flurry of activity from chookhouse building, trench digging, seed sowing, planting, installing composts and worm farms, mulching, and a whole hive of other happenings.

Permaculture is described as "a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless labour; and of looking at plants and animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single-product system", by its co-ordinator Bill Mollison. Mollison and fellow Australian David Holmgren are credited with coining the term in 1978, as a contraction of "permanent agriculture". In other words, sustainability, long before it became a buzzword.

It's quite fitting then that just like the permaculture concept, "permablitzes", backyard working bees that use permaculture designs to create or add to edible gardens, also started here in Australia. The first permablitz was held in Dandenong in the southern-eastern suburbs of Melbourne in 2006.

Dan Palmer had completed a permaculture design course and started growing vegetables and keeping chooks with his housemates. He was also involved with a community group of South American immigrants called CODEMO, and when they heard about his interest in permaculture, he was asked to help with a veggie patch at one of the group members' homes.

"Once we had the idea to do it, the South Americans put the word out to their people, I let my permaculture friends and housemates know, and all we just rocked up with a ute-load of compost, wood shavings, a bunch of seeds and seedlings, and an excess of goodwill," Dan explains.

"The rest we figured out on the day. The energy was incredible and we had so much fun that we organised another, and then another, then a friend Asha coined the term 'permablitz'

for what we were doing. Adam [Grubb, co-founder] and I made the website and started a mailing list, and it grew from there."

The permablitz concept is very simple and the network is purely volunteer-driven. When a permablitz is announced, people interested in attending RSVP and then turn up on the day to the host's garden to provide much-needed elbow grease. Many hands make light work, and in the case of permablitzes, many hands make trenches form, seedlings sprout and weeds disappear. The day also provides an opportunity for participants to learn skills related to gardening and sustainable living, with various workshops being

says. "I guess word got around, and it grew organically through word of mouth from folk that were coming along telling their mates to come next time. The whole idea met a need many people were feeling to learn about and try out permaculture approaches to designing and implementing food gardens in a low-key, informal, non-intimidating way, and it seems that it continues to do so."

"What's remarkable is that nearly every blitz books out with volunteers well before time," says Adam. "Certainly for something which sounds a bit dubious on paper, it is pretty impressive. You imagine people's thought processes: 'So you want

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held throughout the day.

Attend a couple of permablitzes and you will be able to host your own, with the network based on a reciprocal model. As a host, you'll be linked with a volunteer designer who has completed their Permaculture Design Certificate, who will draw up a design based on your needs and desires for your garden. The host needs to acquire the plants and materials, as well as feed the troops on the day, and in return they receive a personalised design plan implemented on the day.

For Permablitz Melbourne, admin duties such as connecting hosts and designers, maintaining the website and mailing list, writing newsletters and responding to enquiries are done by a small "collective", also volunteers.

"It wasn't until 2010 that a little informal but well-organised collective was formed," Adam explains. "Now all this back-end work is shared which is much more effective and more fun."

Eight years on and the Melbourne Permablitz group is just about to reach its 160th blitz. There are permablitz groups active in most states around the country, and a growing list of international groups as well.

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us to go to someone else's house and do base manual labour, bring our own tools and get all dirty and sweaty on our own time, so they can have a better garden? Um... run that by me again..."

Adam notes that most blitz attendees aren't just doing them so they can have a blitz of their own, but are there for the experience.

"If you're naturally a bit cynical, it's really amazing to see just how well strangers can work together, and to be part of that," he explains. "It's probably a little bit like the feeling you get on a sports team, the dynamism of working together intensely towards a goal. But the goals aren't arbitrary; they are things really worth caring about."

"Add to that a shared meal and some educational workshops, bless the whole thing with a bit of the spirit of permaculture and its practical optimism about taking our problems into our own hands, and it's quite an infectious mix," Adam says. "I remember the sensation early on, when it felt like a tiny crack was opening up in some supposed 'reality' I had internalised, where people are mostly too dysfunctional, lazy or greedy to make things like this work. Instead you leave on a high with a palpable sense of possibility."

To find out more about permablitz and see if there are groups in your area visit: www.permablitz.net ●