

Ecological farming, permaculture.

Alpine Garden of Eden proves Mother Nature knows best

Story by Julia Ferguson

REUTERS NEWS SERVICE

RAMINGSTEIN, Austria - In the coldest part of Austria, a farmer is turning conventional wisdom on its head by growing a veritable Garden of Eden full of tropical plants in the open on his steep Alpine pastures. Amid average annual temperatures of a mere 4.2 degrees Celsius (39.5 Fahrenheit), Sepp Holzer grows everything from apricots to eucalyptus, figs to kiwi fruit, peaches to wheat at an altitude of between 1,000 and 1,500 metres (3,300 and 4,900 feet). Once branded a fool, fined and threatened with imprisonment for defying Austrian regulations that dictate what is planted where, he is now feted worldwide for creating the only functioning "permaculture" farm in Europe. Permaculture, an abbreviation of permanent culture, is the development of agricultural ecosystems which are complete and self-sustaining.



"Once planted, I do absolutely nothing," Holzer told Reuters. "It really is just nature working for itself - no weeding, no pruning, no watering, no fertiliser, no pesticides."

Sepp Holzer describing his technique of prepping strawbales, by soaking, for inoculation with mushrooms.

His 45 hectares (110 acres) of land in the mountainous Lungau region in the province of Salzburg are classed by European Union directives as unfit for agricultural cultivation due to the steep gradient and poor soil. When Holzer inherited the farm - then 18 hectares (44.5 acres) - 39 years ago, it was only used for the grazing of the family's cows and sheep. He carved terraces out of the steep inclines - like the ancient Incas and Maya of South and Central America - to stop erosion and trap rainfall.

He rejected the use of pesticides and fertilisers, which he considered poisonous, and the concept of monoculture - the cultivation of just one plant type over an expanse of land - because he believed it sapped the soil of all nutrients. Instead he began growing a host of timber and fruit trees, shrubs and grasses all mixed up together.

"Everyone said I was mad and I had to pay numerous fines because the authorities said that it was illegal to plant such a combination," Holzer said. "When I bought this patch of land off a farmer, it was not fit for the cows and sheep grazing on it. People scoffed that I was neglecting my land - but now they come to harvest cherries from June to October."

"This is the worst type of soil, which just goes to prove that there is no bad soil, just bad farmers," he added.

PROOF IS IN EATING OF PUDDING

Most of the plants Holzer and his wife Vroni grow at his "Krameterhof" holding are not meant to flourish in Alpine conditions, according to experts. In winter, the temperature can

fall to below minus 30 degrees Celsius (minus 22 degrees Fahrenheit) and a blanket of snow lingers into May. Snow can even fall in the height of summer.



Holzer said he found agricultural textbooks and his own years at agricultural college virtually useless.

"I followed their advice initially, but my trees started dying off. I then realised that I had to eradicate from my memory all that I'd learnt at college," he said.

Enlightenment came one winter during one of Holzer's routine moonlight strolls, when he noticed that the only apricot tree faring well in the harsh winter conditions was one he had forgotten to cut back according to ministerial regulations. Unlike the pruned trees whose main lower branches snapped

off under the weight of snow, the "neglected" tree's branches were intact. Their unrestricted length had allowed them to droop with the tips touching the ground for support while the snow slid off, Holzer found. Allowing natural vegetation to grow around the trunk provided further support and nourishment for the tree.

"If people would only realise that if one leads a life in cooperation with nature and not against it, then nobody in the world need die of starvation," he said.

LET NATURE TAKE ITS OWN COURSE

Holzer's philosophy is that nature knows best and needs negligible interference from Man.

"We're born into paradise, but are destroying its foundation, the soil. The soil can look after itself, there's no need for Man to tamper with it." Giant stone slabs pepper the landscape and serve as incubators by absorbing the sunlight and giving off warmth. The trees do their part as well in keeping the ground warm. Fallen foliage helps keep frost from reaching the roots.



Tree stumps dot the plantations to regulate irrigation. Like a sponge they soak up water and later distribute it.

Animals too have a role in the Holzer ecosystem. Scavenging pigs till the soil in place of a tractor, while grass snakes were reintroduced to keep voracious slugs and mice in check.

Holzer is modest about his achievement which has led to projects in more than 40 countries and lectures on "the elimination of poverty in agriculture". He has rejected suggestions that he should have his method of permaculture patented.

"I would consider that as theft from nature. It's not my possession, I got it from nature and have an obligation to pass this knowledge on," the bearded 59-year-old said.

INSPIRATIONAL, BUT ECONOMICALLY VIABLE?



Holzer says his method of organic farming produces a much higher quality of crops than conventional farming, and at a fraction of the cost and effort.

He says his rare strain of grain contains 12 times the goodness of conventionally grown grain and as a result fetches a price 100 times higher. His success means that he no longer lives directly off the crops in his sprawling garden, or the rare fish in his Alpine ponds and lakes.

People pay to pick their own fruit from his land, experts visit to study "Holzer Permaculture", and the man himself regularly

holds seminars when not in a far-off country such as Colombia solving chronic problems of the soil. And only one thing has so far stumped the man with green fingers.

"Bananas," he said with a shrug of his burly frame. "They froze. It's no surprise as they need an average temperature of 30 degrees. But I'm still working on it."

VIDEO - Farming With Nature - Permaculture

<http://www.permaculture.org.uk/>