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**Crystal Waters is the oldest permaculture village in the world. It's a place where people get their hands into the earth to grow their own food, yet take only as much as they need. Jane Milburn reports.**

## **The good earth**

One of the few hard-and-fast rules at Crystal Waters is that cats, dogs and noxious chemicals are banned. As a result, this 250ha eco-village in the Sunshine Coast hinterland is teeming with birds, wallabies and kangaroos. The village is a living example of the total diversity which the practice of permaculture represents.

It is bulging with creative, innovative people working towards the common goal of living in harmony with nature.

Since the group-title village was created nine years ago in the hills behind Maleny, the 83 lot holders have created unique interpretations of permaculture on their .4ha allotments. They've implemented permaculture in sensible and creative ways that suit their lifestyles and needs.

They've been encouraged to build environmentally sensitive, passive solar homes because permaculture is not simply about gardening, it is about designing sustainable systems which emulate nature.

Residents are big on recycling, practicality and efficiency. One resident has laid shingles, left over from his roof, in his vegetable patch to help retain soil moisture and to protect his leafy greens from bandicoot and chook attack.

Another has pioneered the use of local decomposed granite subsoil to create rammed earth dwellings. And yet another developed a natural paints and pigments range, called Only Naturals, after helping create his twin-dome dwelling with mud bricks.

Crystal Waters permaculture teacher and lot holder Robin Clayfield glows with good health and vitality and is a fine advertisement for the raw homegrown foods she promotes.

Like most permaculture gardens, Robin's is a riot of productive plants – some complementing neighbouring species but others randomly seeded from last season's crops. She grows herbs, leafy greens and fruit trees as well as bush tucker and survival foods and tubers such as the juicy yukon, once described as one of the lost crops of the Incas.

"I want to turn people on to raw food," Robin said. "It is so healthy to eat lots of sprouts and green leaves."

She believes the best thing we can do for our bodies is grow our own food. Even in an urban situation with little growing space there is potential to grow sprouts, make yoghurt and other cultures in the kitchen and a variety of easy-to-grow salad vegetables right outside the doorstep or in containers and pots on window sills or balconies.

“You don’t need much area. It’s easier in a small place as most of it is so concentrated.”

To help keep up with the work, Crystal Waters has become the temporary home to a number of WWOOFers (willing workers on organic farms), who arrive via an international association that equates four hours of labour with a night’s board and keep. WWOOFers reside with Crystal Waters’ 180 residents, of whom 60 are children.

Anni Baker, director of the community’s co-operative, says all sorts of people are attracted to Crystal Waters. The co-op manages the office and visitors’ information centre, the community kitchen and café.

Crystal Waters has large areas of common land, including 16 dams constructed as part of the initial infrastructure paid for by lot holders. The dams are used for wildlife habitats, climate modification and recreation.

In keeping with the practical principles of permaculture (defined in the Macquarie Dictionary as a system of agriculture which does not involve yearly crops but crops which are self-sustaining), the dam walls form part of the roads around Crystal Waters.

Architecture in the village is creative. Local builders John and Val Oliver built their home with the pise, or rammed earth, technique using decomposed subsoil granite mixed with about 10 percent cement. Fred Kohl chose mud-brick domes for this home – they glow a splendid shade of ochre against the green hillside – and a rooftop (or sod) garden of succulents for insulation. Other residents have built pole homes, used railway carriages and erected teepees.

The latest is a soon-to-be-completed straw-bale home. The village is home to craftspeople, healers, gardeners, cooks, builders, bamboo and water chestnut farmers as well as authors. Some residents have established small businesses such as organic mail-order supplies.

Bamboo fanatic Hans Erken is a pioneer of Australia’s budding bamboo industry. He’s experimented with 100 species and has moved into a productive phase involving weeding out species that have become a burden. On the 2ha Earthcare farm at Crystal Waters, Hans and his partners have established the southern hemisphere’s most advanced stand of moso bamboo – the most favoured of the edible shooting bamboos – and found a niche market in high-profile Sydney restaurants. As well, he’s researching and experimenting with growing water chestnuts and lotus, which also are sold directly to restaurants.

Crystal Waters residents are alternative, adventurous, experimental types who are keen to nurture themselves and their environment. A number of residents come and then go away for a while to travel or earn money to continue improving their properties. Their methods and lifestyle generate a lot of interest as well as some suspicion, yet they’re happy to spread the word about sustainable permaculture systems.

To give jaded city types a window into this rural eco-village and a little taste of permaculture, Crystal Waters has launched two lifestyle experience weekend courses – one on the permaculture lifestyle and the other on the spirit of nature. The permaculture lifestyle course exposes visitors to practical permaculture applications for everyday living, enables them to participate in projects (and leave a little of their

energy behind!) and study working examples of alternative building and other technologies. Participants in the spirit of nature course get to experience healthy and holistic living, enjoy yoga, meditation and circle dancing, relax in peaceful, natural surroundings and learn the Feldenkrais technique of awareness through movement.

The weekend course and meals cost \$120 and there are three levels of accommodation available: tent site \$6, bunkhouse \$12 and homestay \$20-\$25 per night.

There are also two-week permaculture design certificate courses on offer. Crystal Waters is private property and the residents politely request that sightseers avail themselves of tours every first and third Saturday each month or visit by appointment – 07 5494 4620 – and report to the office on arrival.

### **Breakout – You can have your permaculture and eat it too**

Robin Clayfield believes that people who garden and regularly have contact with the soil tend to be more aware of nature's processes and are more gentle and connected with the earth.

Robin suggests that a high intake of raw foods in the diet is ultimately our best eating pattern. It helps to build immunity, stabilise weight, energise and enliven the mind and body, clear the skin and reduce stress and the need for sleep.

"Wow! Why don't we all eat like this all the time?" she asks.

In her book *You Can Have Your Permaculture and Eat it Too*, Robin draws on her 13 years of devouring the delights of permaculture.

She's condensed her experiences in permaculture gardening, cooking, design, research, teaching and creating into a significant text on self-reliance and gardening methods.

Her easy-to-read text outlines the principles and ethics of permaculture, describes zones and designs as well as gardening and pest-control techniques.

There are extensive instructions on food preparation and exotic recipes such as fried snails, coriander and lime butter, vine leaf rolls, curried macadamias, sorrel soup, dandelion fritters, prickly pear delight, tofu and cheese making and drying seaweed.

But there's much more too, such as cosmetics from the garden for skin and hair care, healing and fragrances.

Robin Clayfield self-published *You Can Have your Permaculture and Eat it Too* through Earthcare Education at Crystal Waters. It has sold well locally and overseas. Copies (\$38 posted) are available by contacting Earthcare Education, Lot 58 Crystal Waters, MS 16, Maleny 4554 or by phoning 07 5494 4707.