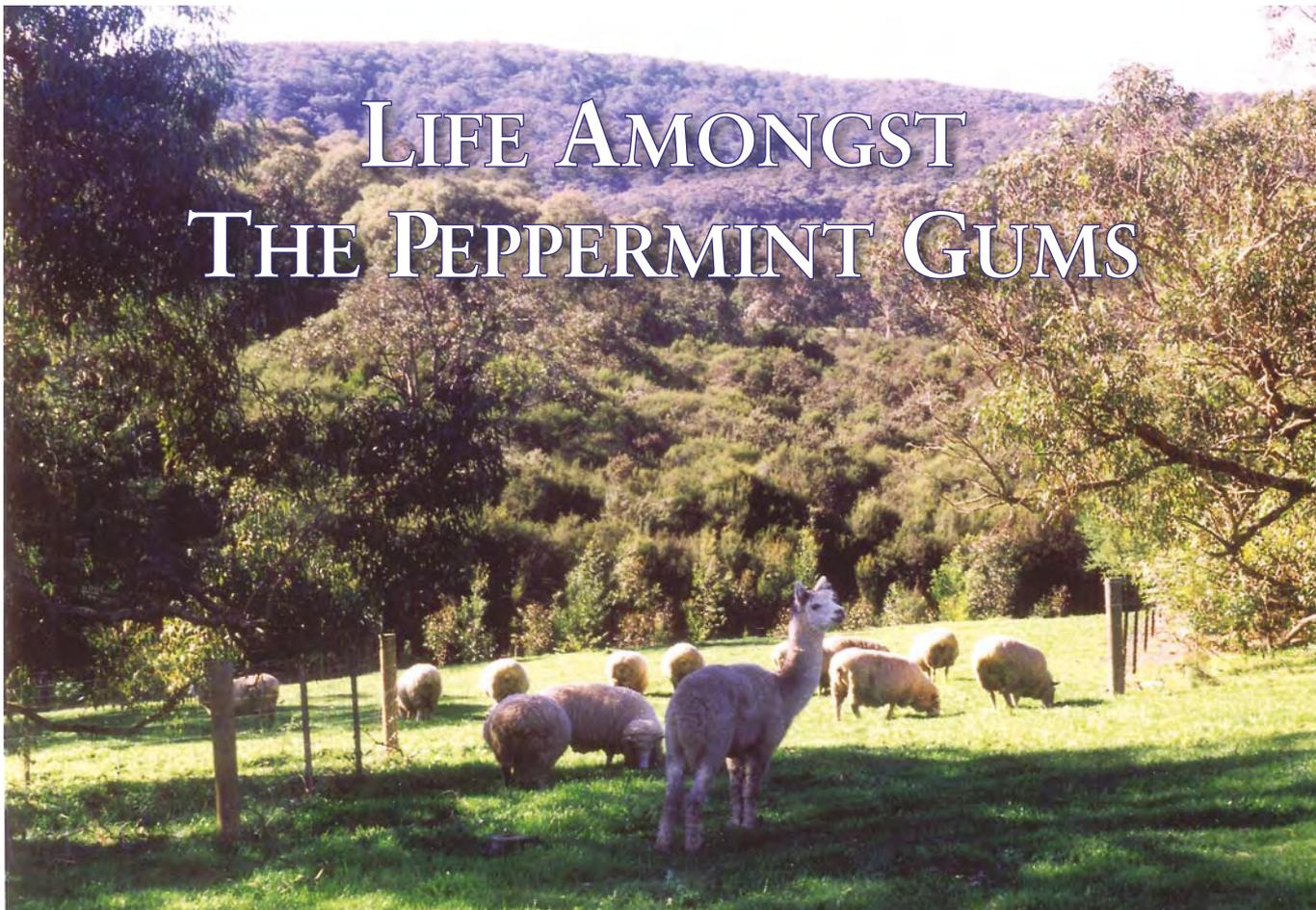


LIFE AMONGST THE PEPPERMINT GUMS



Following on from her article about Rainbow Valley Farm in New Zealand (PM36), Alanna Moore reports on another fine example of permaculture design in the southern hemisphere.

Peppermint Ridge Farm, in Tynong, West Gippsland, Australia is situated an hour's drive east of Melbourne, nestling in leafy foothills that overlook the Bunyip State Forest. The farm is named after the endemic broad leaved peppermint gums (*Eucalyptus dives*) which grow in the area. The owners, Anthony Hooper and Julie Weatherhead, have blended their passion for sustainable agriculture and permaculture farm design with a dedication to landcare and the promotion of indigenous plantings. Now their very eco-friendly style of 'indigenous permaculture' is starting to pay off, as they are beginning to harvest and market native products.

Indigenous herb teas are being

Above:
Alpaca and sheep with fenced off areas to protect remnant bush.

Below:
Alanna Moore.



packaged up, lilly pilly jelly is made and peppermint eucalyptus oil distilled. This therapeutic essential oil is great in massage oil and they use it on the farm to combat sheep footrot and human tinea (ringworm). It is a delightfully sweet smelling oil with a fruity aroma. The eucalypts also provide stock shelter for the sheep, firewood and honey, as well as functioning as windbreaks, soil protectors and wildlife habitat. They are a good example of the multifunctionality of trees – a keynote of good permaculture design, of which this farm is a shining example. A new addition to the farm is a bushfood nursery that stocks many of the plants that Julie uses in her catering.

AWARD WINNING PROPERTY

Having purchased the property in 1984, the couple have gradually transformed the originally degraded, over-grazed paddocks into a productive and sustainable small mixed farming system. As well as sheep, the farm has forestry, organic vegetable gardens and orchards, bushfood plots, a bushfood nursery, a vineyard and a few dozen free-range poultry; while regenerating bush and wet-land areas are protected and enhanced.

A whole farm plan had been prepared initially



to identify sensitive areas on the property needing restoration, and areas suited to sustainable production systems. Permaculture design applied the principles of energy efficiency and the location of production zones relative to the level of human interaction required. The farm has won a number of environmental management awards over the last five years. “Through the sensitive development of their property, Peppermint Ridge Farm is a showcase for sustainable land management,” said Victoria’s Minister for Conservation and Land Management, Marie Tehan.

VALUING INDIGENOUS SPECIES
Standard ‘permaculture plants’ were brought in and trialled, and depending on any rampancy encountered from the exotics, were either integrated into the system or removed. Tagasaste (tree lucerne) turned out to be a rampant weed, as it is in many other southern Australian areas. It has since been replaced by native she-oaks, which are also relished by sheep. These *Casurina* species of trees, while not legumes, are also capable of fixing nitrogen to a lesser degree.

Over five thousand indigenous plants have been planted around the eight hectare (20 acre) farm, mostly along water courses and fencelines, with large areas being returned to bush. These areas will act as important wildlife corridors, connecting the State Forest and the local watercourse, Cannibal Creek.

Anthony told me that recent Australian university studies have shown that pasture output is at its most productive when the proportion of a farm’s tree cover is at 34%. There’s also increased productivity



Above:
The passive solar design house, which is made from largely reclaimed materials.

Centre:
Eucalyptus oil and hand made soaps displayed for sale.

Below:
A selection of bush food grown on the farm.

when pastures include about 50% native grasses (*Australian Landcare* magazine, April 1998, p.48). “If all farms aimed for this balance, biodiversity loss would be pretty well halted and any environmental problems threatening the future of farming could be brought under control,” he said.

The key is to select useful, indigenous or endemic species for agroforestry – this is known as ‘analogue forestry’. At Peppermint Ridge seed has been collected locally of blackwood, silver wattle, peppermints, yellow and silver leaved stringybark, mountain grey and swamp gum. These are well adapted to local conditions and wildlife friendly.

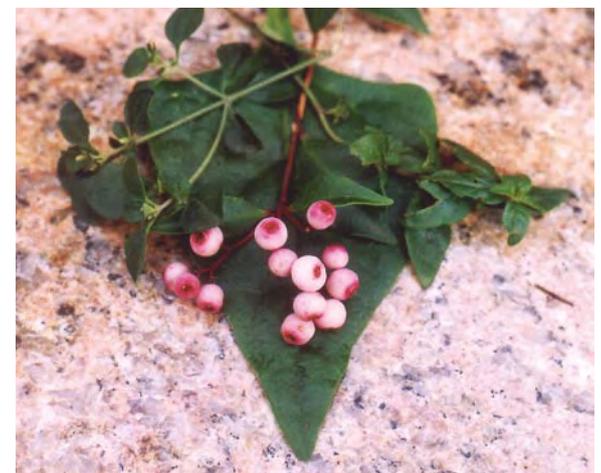
“We plan to eventually phase out many of the exotic trees we first planted,” Anthony explained. “There’s usually a native plant that can be found to fulfil the function of most exotics. *Casurina*, for instance, make a good replacement for the tagasaste and are much hardier.”

ORGANIC GARDENS

At Peppermint Ridge the no-dig vegetable gardens are a colourful tumble of polycultural diversity. It is interesting to see ‘bushtucker’ plants that once sustained the local Koori (Aboriginal) population growing

there. Yam daisies – or Murnong (*Microseris capigera*) – with their abundant sweet tubers were once a staple root vegetable, but have now largely vanished from the wild because of the impact of grazing. Warrigal greens (*Tetragonia tetragonoides*), a yummy spinach substitute, provide a useful garden groundcover and green vegetable, the Mint bushes (*Prostanthera spp.*) are highly aromatic, while Chocolate lillies (*Dichopogon fimbriatus*) have edible tubers, and the attractively flowering Apple-berry vine (*Billardia scandens*) provides small, tasty fruit.

Here exotic alpine strawberries, which were once actively planted in the vegetable garden, have since proved to have invasive weed potential





is generally in agreement with the principles involved, so it's easy to get motivated groups going. Everyone is very excited about the momentum that has built and the potential for whole creekways to be enhanced.

KOORI HERITAGE

A striking feature of the entrance to Peppermint Ridge is a large rock which looks like it has a few stories to tell. Visiting members of the local Koori Wurundjeri tribe have identified the site as an ancient meeting place. Now classified as a Koori Heritage site, Anthony and Julie are delighted by this, and the Kooris, impressed by their commitment to earth care, have held youth camps there to teach their culture. The ancient site has become a place for Koori cultural expression and spiritual renewal.

Julie's father had earlier unearthed old Koori tools and artefacts, including part of a grinding stone and a greenstone axe, sparking her original interest in Aboriginal culture. (Her family has lived in the local area for over 100 years.) The presence of these

in the area, with birds taking the fruit and spreading seed into the bush.

SUCCESSFUL LANDCARE

Looking out from the passive solar designed house that Anthony and Julie built from 30,000 secondhand bricks and old timber items, is a vista of regenerating wetland around Cannibal Creek. Despite decades of degradation from roaming cattle, the fenced-off creek is now regenerating nicely.

Julie is passionate about landcare and is the co-ordinator of a landcare network in her area. She is mindful of the far reaching benefits of the work of landcare groups including the protection of waterways. "Improved water quality will encourage the growth of sea grasses downstream in Westernport Bay. These important fish habitat areas have long been on the decline," Julie enthused.

The couple founded Cannibal Creek Landcare group in the mid 1990s, which was kickstarted by a battle to stop a nearby mining development. The successful five year campaign to stop a granite mining development on land that borders Bunyip State Forest mobilised a lot of support. Problems of access, destructive quarry discharges

Above:
Indigenous species are a feature of this farm forestry plantation.

and the presence of three rare owl species eventually knocked the proposal on the head, while it encouraged local people to take greater care of their creek.

Now many local land-holders around Cannibal Creek are members of the Landcare group and they have been busily fencing around waterways and remnant bush land and planting trees on each others' properties in a wonderfully co-operative spirit. Working to link up remnant vegetation with green corridors, everyone

Below:
Part of the no-dig organic vegetable garden.



artifacts has been recorded by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria. Judging by the wide range of beautiful artifacts found on the farm, there was probably both a men's and women's gathering place there.

In October 1998, 400 people came to Peppermint Ridge for the official opening of the Sustainable Land Management and Permaculture Education Centre. Seated on a circle of logs around the awesome looking boulder visitors were treated to a taste of Wurundjeri culture with story telling, boomerang throwing and didgeridoo music. Local bands also provided entertainment. With the five dollar entrance fee, Aus\$2,000 was raised to donate to an indigenous ministry in nearby Warragul, to be spent on encouraging young Kooris to finish their schooling and provide them with social and emotional support.

As well as the visiting Aboriginal groups, at regular intervals Auntie Dot, a local Wurrundjeri woman elder, comes to the farm to teach traditional Aboriginal basket weaving to students and share bush food refreshments.

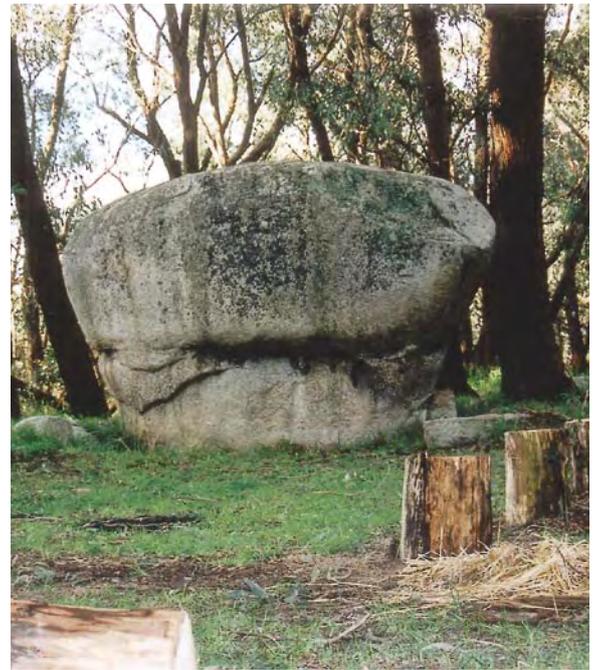
THE EDUCATION CENTRE

Julie and Anthony both come from adult education backgrounds. Anthony has also been a social worker and tutor of community development courses, while Julie also has a science background and has worked for the government on salinity education for farmers in northern Victoria.

In 1994 they began to offer short courses on sustainable living and farming. People can come to Peppermint Ridge for a half day 'Bushfood Experience', touring gardens, discovering bush tucker plants and learning how to grow and eat them. Other practical workshops on offer focus on sustainable land management, indigenous permaculture, designing windbreaks, organic vegetable growing, small property management and horse and land management.

In 1997, when the NarNar-Goon North Primary School building was about to be demolished, they saw a golden opportunity for some recycling and heritage conservation, so the 1920s building was relocated to Peppermint Ridge to become their education centre.

Gama-dji Education and



Above: Koori heritage site boulder at the entrance to Peppermint Ridge.

Below: The Education Centre, which was formally a 1920s Primary School.

Community Development is the name of their registered training organisation, which now delivers the nationally recognised Diploma in Landcare and Natural Resources course. There are no special pre-requisites for the course, which is offered flexibly, combining home based study with intensive weekend workshops at the farm.

Gama-dji is a Wurrundjeri word meaning to awaken, as if from sleep. "We believe that this term represents the change needed in our land management practices. For us, education is a powerful tool for change, provided it is relevant and challenging." Somehow, in between all this, when not farming, making up their value-added products, teaching or assessing land, the couple are raising two boys and Anthony has just completed his studies for a PhD 

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact for Peppermint Ridge:
Tel: +3 5942 8580
Email: prfarm@sympac.com.au
Web: www.peppermintridgefarm.com.au

Alanna Moore is an environmental journalist and author living in central Victoria. She has a website at www.geomantica.com and can be emailed at info@geomantica.com

