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## Finding Permaculture in Humboldt

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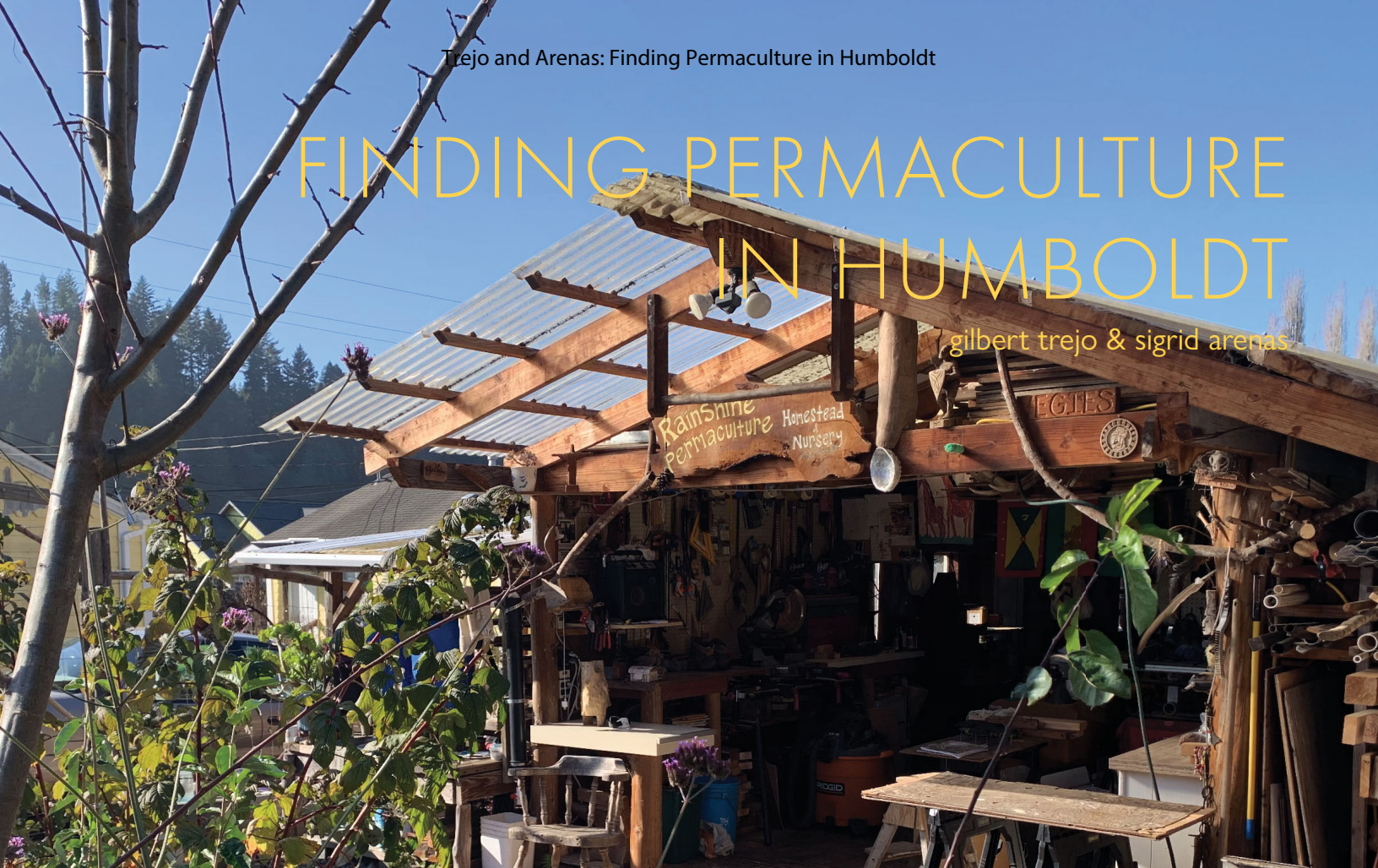
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# FINDING PERMACULTURE IN HUMBOLDT

gilbert trejo & sigrid arenas



**O**n a warm July day in Eureka, a dozen people toss cardboard, manure, and straw. It's a popular permaculture technique called sheet mulching: a no-dig method of building a new layer of soil that mimics soil-building processes in forests. The act is an investment in the future and when the new layer of soil settles, the front lawn of GESA's own Nick Perdue and Laura Johnson's quiet home will be fertile ground for an array of food production. Volunteers from Cooperation Humboldt haul straw bales and woodchips as a part of the Food Not Lawns initiative. It was our first time applying knowledge gained from popular permaculture texts. Being a part of the permaculture community in Humboldt made it feel so much more real, so much more attainable. We were dying to learn more.

**P**ermaculture is a specific approach to food production and community building that incorporates sustainable agriculture, environmental philosophy, and sustainable design. It requires the gardener to respect and honor the natural systems that already shape our forests and focus them in our backyards. We are feeding the land as well as ourselves. An excellent practical example is the idea of companion planting. Under an apple tree, you can plant garlic chives to repel some wildlife and fungus, and some dill to attract pollinators. Additional comfrey will assist in improving the soil and acts as a low maintenance mulch. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides will not only become costly in the long run but will

also create more problems as you tire the soil and poison the watershed. Instead, permaculture offers efficient and sustainable methods for the lazy gardener.

While permaculture can easily be an idyllic picture it can also be extremely difficult to learn and practice alone, especially those of us who do not own property. The systems are complex, the blog posts are full of jargon, and the space to do anything with may be unattainable. Reaching out to your local community becomes more practical and beneficial. Where, then, do you find permaculture in Humboldt County? We sat down with Marlon Gil, owner of Rainshine Permaculture, to understand better the permaculture scene in Humboldt.

## “People talk about self-sufficiency but permaculture is more about community efficiency.”

Marlon is a featured guest in Dr. Laura Johnson’s Global Awareness (GEOG 300) class. He comes to share his permaculture knowledge and offers tours of his homestead to anyone interested in learning more about the local practice, theory, and community. He is happy to talk after lectures and will likely try to recruit more hands to help him at Rainshine Permaculture in Freshwater just a few miles south of campus. We asked Marlon a few questions about how he started and his experience in Humboldt County.



*Permaculture aficionado Marlon Gil takes a moment to rest in front of his greenhouse.*

### WHEN WERE YOU INTRODUCED TO PERMACULTURE?

The first time I heard of permaculture was in the summer of 2008 while living with my wife in Seattle. It was there that I started to hear rumors about a permaculture homestead that was on another Island

that offered classes. Until then, I hadn’t heard of it and it’s not a surprise because it’s a relatively new term (only 40 years old). A couple of years later we were able to move to Arcata, and this [Rainshine Permaculture] was my first property that I was able to experience living on land that I could actually grow food. That was nine years ago.

For me, it’s always been this innate desire to want to use the land and make it productive, even though I didn’t grow up growing food or homesteading. I grew up in Los Angeles in an urban lifestyle with my parents who immigrated from Mexico. They had very little education and I wasn’t really exposed to any homesteading or anything like that. My parents would talk about life on the ranch, where they would process their own foods and had livestock but that’s long in the past.

### HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN IN PRACTICE?

It’s been this incredible experience having this property as an experimental playground where I can begin to cultivate all these different plants and design the property to make it really productive, fun to live in, and beautiful at the same time while supporting all kinds of ecological diversity. Permaculture is often referred to as ecological design because we are trying to understand the innate relationships and expression of the earth and its natural cycles to the best degree that we can.

People talk about self-sufficiency but permaculture is more about community efficiency. There are people who are good at growing certain crops and so on, and where we can’t produce things in our homestead we have farmers or neighbors who can and that’s where we can get those goods, we are still purchasing but doing so from a direct source and keeping the money here. It’s all about not getting in over your head, people have desires to be back to the landers and they buy property and livestock to do all of these farm tasks like it’s some fun thing. People think that they are going to get all of these things while also trying to grow their families and get overwhelmed.

## WHAT LOCAL RESOURCES CAN YOU RECOMMEND?

The permaculture guild is really cool because we just geek out on all of these things. The guild has been here for more than 20 years. My friend started it as a grad project through HSU and kept it going for a few years but stepped back and that's when more and more people kept it going. When I first

moved here I learned that they had a retreat at Sandy Bar Ranch, one of the oldest permaculture homesteads in the West coast. The annual seed and plant exchange is our biggest event, attracting more than 1,500 people. It's this monumental life support of abundance. The event is completely free and open to anyone on the last Saturday of March at the Arcata community center.

## OTHER RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS

### Humboldt Permaculture Guild

*a group of food producers, business owners, builders, educators, and permaculture designers.*

[humboldtpermaculture.com](http://humboldtpermaculture.com)

### North Coast Growers' Association

*regional nonprofit aimed to promote and improve access to a local food network.*

[northcoastgrowersassociation.org](http://northcoastgrowersassociation.org)

### Cooperation Humboldt

*building a solidarity economy on California's North Coast.*

[cooperationhumboldt.com](http://cooperationhumboldt.com)

### Campus Center for Appropriate Technology (CCAT)

*HSU's student-managed, student-funded live-in demonstration home for appropriate technology.*

[ccat.humboldt.edu](http://ccat.humboldt.edu)

