

Out-of-the-Box Thinking!

Are you not amazed by all the new ideas that are emerging to do with gardening and ecology, energy and water use – all those factors that can be seen as opportunities and not merely as problems. Did you read about the barge in the Hudson River near Manhattan that is replete with two greenhouses, solar panels, a biodiesel generator and a small wind turbine? Called the Science Barge, it grows tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, strawberries and peppers.

This barge enterprise is actually a prototype cum learning experience that will aid in developing roof gardens on top of three of New York City's schools. Roof gardens are popular as a temperature regulator for the building itself, which saves on the heat and air-conditioning costs, and to absorb rainfall. But what a wonderful world it opens to the children privileged to visit those roofs.

When I read about vertical gardens, truly plants growing at eye level right smack dab out of the wall, I'll admit it made me dizzy. Like tomatoes dangling from overhead bags of soil, I find the idea discomfiting. Somehow I want plants rooted in the ground. But vertical gardens are being tried in Germany. Large glass cylindrical towers use a conveyor system to pull the plants into the sunlight as the sun shifts around the tower. Wouldn't it be easier to mount the greenhouse on a revolving platform to follow the sun?

Actually there are greenhouses that move, greenhouses that can be rolled about to cover whichever plants need that boost of warmth at the time. There are lots of new ideas to promote gardeners' abilities to grow food for the table both earlier and later. Part of the success depends on the plant breeding that helps the plant survive a wider temperature range and the other factor is the beloved 'American Tinkerer' talent. We are returning to our heritage as we realize that we need to make the essential 'things' in our lives more energy efficient, more economical, and more environmentally sustainable.

Change comes slowly in those areas where there is considerable investment in current practices. More than ten years ago I read of a sort of paving that would permit rain to soak through rather than scoot pell-mell down the drive. (Another 'huh' moment). There is an article in the June 2009 Virginia Gardener about permeable paving, a system that allows rain and snowmelt to pass through and benefit the water table. Patches of asphalt and concrete are not problematic in rural areas since there is sufficient undeveloped acreage to absorb the runoff. However where hardscape is greater this permeable paving is an important improvement for patios and driveways in new subdivisions as well as for parking lots in new commercial areas.

It may not be possible to lessen population pressure but the impact could be ameliorated if towns and counties investigated and adopted 'best practices'. Throughout Virginia farmers have been diligent in managing their acreage to protect Chesapeake Bay but the continued growth of sprawl has nullified any real improvement.

Cabbages & Kings

Virginia Tech does not endorse commercial products, but in speaking to the Gloucester Master Gardeners on June 1, Debbie Dillion, Program Associate, Agriculture & Natural Resources, Loudoun County Demonstration Gardens, related the loss of their demonstration peach crop to a fungus and their subsequent application of a product called “Surround” to successfully protect the peaches the following year. This is powder that is mixed with water and sprayed on the tree’s foliage and fruit, leaving a protective powdery residue. Sunlight penetrates the powder to continue vital photosynthesis but bugs and other ills do not. ‘Surround’ can be found in the Gardens Alive catalog of “environmentally responsible products that work”. According to the catalog ‘Surround at Home’ crop protectant forms a film barrier that keeps plant surfaces cooler, increases plant vigor, and may increase crop yields. If you have ever tried to sell fruit that is not picture perfect, no matter how delicious, you might like to try this product just to increase the profit yield.