



photo: Travis Beck

A pond creates a microclimate, moderating temperature swings.

# Jerome Osentowski's Forest Gardens

by Travis Beck

To get to Jerome Osentowski's gardens and the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute you have to drive up a bone-rattling dirt road onto a steep ridge that overlooks the Frying Pan River Valley just outside of Basalt. The summer heat pounds through the windshield and you smell the red dust kicked up by your tires. Then, tucked into a fold of the dry south-facing slope, amidst pinyons and junipers and the occasional flock of wild turkeys, appear Osentowski's unlikely gardens.

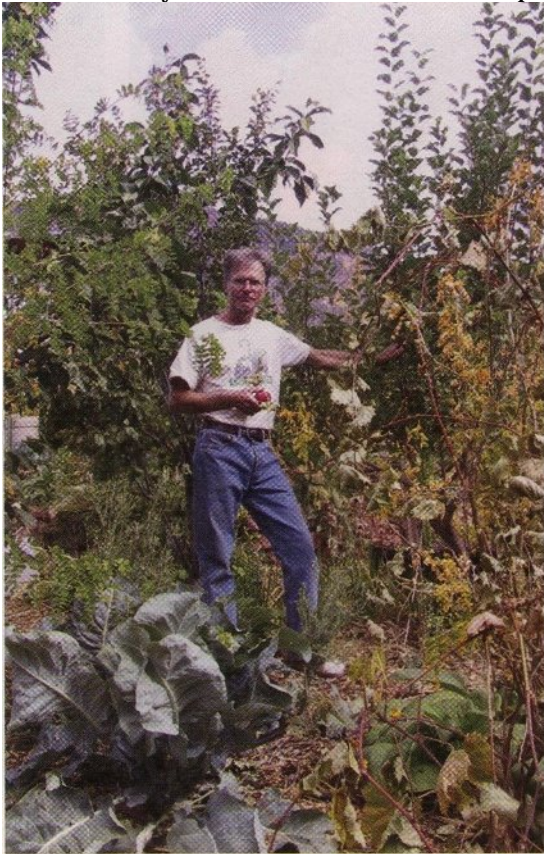
At 7,000 feet, and with a frost-free season averaging just 100 days, Osentowski grows 10 varieties of plums and plumcots, over 15 varieties of apples, 10 varieties of apricots, 6 or 7 varieties of pears, including Asian pears, along with filberts, currants, gooseberries, and 15 varieties of grapes-and that is just out of doors. Creating this cornucopia took Osentowski years of work and experimentation, and has given him an infectious enthusiasm for the possibilities of forest gardening in Colorado.

When Osentowski first moved to his property 30 years ago, it was nothing like it is today. In fact, for many years he deemed his site so marginal that he rented land for a truck farm down on the valley floor. Then this son of farmers, former ski instructor, and onetime builder "stumbled" onto permaculture, an approach to sustainable design that takes natural systems as its model.

Osentowski was hired to run a permaculture project at the Aspen Community School, not because he knew anything about the subject, but because he could grow things. After finishing the school project and completing a design course with permaculture founder Bill Mollison, Osentowski took another look at his own place. Combining the principles he had learned with an adventurous willingness to just try things out, Osentowski began the transformation of his property.

One of Osentowski's earliest steps was to build terraces behind walls of local basalt rock, just to keep everything from sliding down the slope. Today he keeps adding onto his rock walls, and they have become a fundamental element of his high-altitude gardens. The rock walls capture the sun's heat and release it slowly back to the environment. This creates an enhanced microclimate, especially within one foot of the walls.

Further microclimate enhancement in one section of the garden is obtained from a sizable pond, which also serves as a home for beautiful water lilies and numerous fish. The water in the pond moderates temperature swings in its immediate area and the sunlight that bounces off of it doubly warms another series of terraces. While noting the possibility that things are just getting warmer generally, Osentowski says in the past two years the winter temperature in his garden has not dropped below zero degrees. This makes his gardens effectively a zone 7 climate, the same as parts of North Carolina.



Jerome in his forest garden near Basalt

Osentowski used the enhanced microclimate of his

gardens to grow salad greens for market for many years, enjoying just as much success as on his old truck farm land in the valley below. He also grew with wild foods and perennial produce for himself, and began to experiment with wild foods and perennial crops. This led naturally to his interest in forest gardens.

Forest gardens mimic the multi-layered structure of a natural forest. Over the past seven or eight years Osentowski has converted most of his beds from annual production into forest gardens built around fruit trees. Beneath the trees are berry bushes and nitrogen-fixing shrubs like Siberian pea shrub, and beneath these grow a variety of annual and perennial herbaceous plants.

In addition to growing vegetables such as cauliflower, herbs for his expanding herb business, and lots and lots of comfrey (more on that in a moment), Osentowski includes numerous insectary plants. The flowers of insectary plants attract beneficial insects like hover flies, which help control pests in the gardens. Osentowski has had good success growing lovage, fennel and garlic for this purpose, as well as for their obvious edible value.

While Osentowski's forest gardens are full of useful plants, recently he has focused on just making the garden a pleasant place to hang out, with several new decks, benches and hammocks throughout the property.



Forest garden harvest



A thick sheet mulch suppresses weeds

All photos on this page by Jerome Osentowski

Osentowski nourishes his forest gardens by several clever means, and the once spare soil is now full of life. When planting each forest garden area, Osentowski lays a thick sheet mulch. The mulch begins with a layer of newspaper to suppress weed growth, and continues with whatever organic matter is on hand, including spoiled hay, fallen leaves collected from town, and woody material.

Before being spread as mulch, much of this material passes through a chicken straw yard, where Osentowski puts the natural slope of his property to work. He dumps his future mulch in at the top. The chickens pick through it for insects, seeds and edible bits, turning it over, mixing it with their manure, and kicking it down the hill. Osentowski comes back later, opens the bottom of the yard and removes his "value added mulch."

To speed the breakdown of the mulch, Osentowski has released four different varieties of worms in his gardens. These worms live in the mulch and soil, leaving their fertile castings behind, essentially vermicomposting in place.

To further feed his plants, Osentowski gathers the abundant comfrey from his gardens and brews a stinky nutrient-rich tea in trash barrels. This tea, along with the living water of the pond, serves as home-grown fertilizer for the gardens.

