

Gaston Grower Spotlight- December 2021



Nature's Gift

Exchanging gifts is a traditional practice this time of year. As a child I remember quickly setting aside "the boring gifts" like clothes. I wanted to open toys, not socks. Toys offered instant gratification but the new wore off quickly and the toys saw less use. However, the "boring clothes" I continued to wear.

I think our deciduous trees are treated similarly year after year. We are quick to gawk over the vibrant colors that they offer in October and November. After the leaves lose their appeal the most practical gift they offer is often put into a neat pile and thrown to the side. The value of the leaves as a mulch is rarely realized by both the gardener and the farmer. Leaves provide a practical covering for our soils as a natural mulch. The leaf layer holds moisture, insulates soil, suppresses weeds, aids in preventing erosion, and is slowly broken down into nutrients to be utilized by plants. Fallen leaves are a practical gift that can be utilized far after their flashy fall showing.

Peculiar Practicality

Joel Stroot's orchard pictured above is a local example of a farm that realizes the benefits that a natural leaf mulch layer offers the soil. He farms utilizing many permaculture principles contrary to conventional agriculture production. I'm sure he would argue, as would I, that the convention of leaf mulching existed far before any other system that is considered a conventional practice today. Joel has spent a considerable amount of effort building up the overgrazed and compacted soil he inherited with his land. He has done so by implementing cover crops, amending with compost, and protecting his investment with the leaves that add to his existing organic matter. The leaves are collected and delivered by a local municipality, giving the "yard waste" a welcome home.

Permaculture puts a unique spin to agricultural land management as we commonly know it. It takes the concepts we see existing naturally and applies it to production space. While Joel has found a niche producing elderberry syrup his orchard is home to a multitude of crops and varieties. The diversity within the orchard means that if one crop fails the farm does not, because all of his eggs aren't in that one basket. The diversity adds an element that mimics the natural ecosystem, and offers barriers for pests and pathogens to travel from plant to plant. If a tree dies within a permaculture orchard it can be seen as success rather than a failure. The death of a tree implies that it could not tolerate the growing environment, and more energy is utilized for those trees that have proven to do well. There is far more to learn about Joel's farm than I could explain, feel free to learn more through this link, [Faith Family Farm](#).

What's in Joel's Orchard? Peach, Nectarine, Fig, Jujube, Olive, Hazelnut, Plum, Apple, Paw Paw, Cherry, Elderberry, Mulberry, Apricot, Chesnutt, Almond, Pecan, Hardy Kiwi, Quince, Honeyberry, Walnut, Pear, Aronia Berry



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