

Zone 5

A Space for Nature

photos © Stuart Anderson

Permaculture always tries to make space for a wild, uncultivated area, but is this the right way of integrating nature? Stuart Anderson investigates.

Where is Zone 5? Stuart Anderson suggests that we should not leave it as an outcrop or afterthought but rather integrate it into every aspect of our designs, in all of the zones...

A quick scout through the various permaculture manuals has Zone 5 as ‘wilderness’, ‘unmanaged or barely managed’, ‘the land beyond the cultivated area’ ... a place to observe, to learn and to meditate. David Holmgren suggests that “Each permaculture zone is not only further from the house, but by implication also larger in area.” But I’m not sure I agree, especially if the garden in your terraced house is only 12m (40ft) long and planted up to feed a family of four. Patrick

Whitefield writes that Zone 5 is a place for nature, “where the interests of wild plants and animals take top priority”. Put simply, Zone 5 is about giving space to nature in our permaculture designs.

Should we leave alone or intervene? In Europe, there’s virtually no land that hasn’t already been profoundly affected by human activity, so simply leaving it alone is rarely the best thing to do. The difference here is that our interventions should be guided by what is required to increase the natural health and

Above: Zone 5 doesn’t need to be a long way from buildings, as can be seen here, where a wilderness has established itself just outside.

biodiversity of the area rather than our own needs, although they needn’t necessarily be mutually exclusive. There exists a theory of ‘spare not share’ with which interested parties try to justify using intensive petrochemical-based agriculture in order to ‘spare’ other land for nature. Beware of false dichotomies: We can have food production and accommodate nature. With permaculture principles – such as ‘stacking’ and that ‘each important function should be supported by several elements’, it seems contradictory to only consider nature in Zone 5. Is it being tacked on as an afterthought when we should be integrating into every part of our designs?



Above: Sparrows nesting in a hole in a neighbour's cob and stone wall.

Below: Providing nest boxes can encourage beneficial bird species.

Nature wants to spot a niche, fill a gap and take any opportunity to creep, crawl or fly in and install itself. With an understanding the biology and needs of various things, we can deliberately create some habitat or simply just leave it some space as we design.

Old houses have inviting cracks and holes but newer houses tend to be smooth and sealed. Nest boxes provide instant suitable habitat. UPVC soffits and fascia boards provide no grip for a swallow but a fabricated terracotta nest offers a simple solution and swift nesting

bricks can be incorporated into the fabric of the wall. Even a flowering plant in a window box or balcony in your city apartment is a meaningful Zone 5, as it provides food for pollinating insects.

In our food and wood fuel growing zones our simplest gesture to leaving space for nature is to not use chemicals. We can go further and create insect habitats out of scrap materials and

old pallets,¹ provide food by leaving a few nettles and think of insect needs when we plan our planting. Our cold compost heaps are alive with creepy crawlies and the odd pile of roughly stacked logs will provide shelter for someone. Although we keep bees primarily for their honey, by providing a home for these under-pressure creatures and for all the work they do off our property, I put a tick under the Zone 5 column too.

Probably the biggest single change to the level of biodiversity on our land was the introduction of a grey water treatment system (plant filter that drains into a pond) but this is very much associated with our house (Zone 0). And in the highly managed polytunnel (Zone 1), we have welcome intruders. Gabrielle had placed a growbag tray on the ground to keep several trays of seedlings watered.



Zones

Zones were originally conceived by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren as numbered concentric circles (see Permaculture One) and are still often taught as six zones:

- Zone 0** YOUR DWELLING
- Zone 1** INTENSIVELY CULTIVATED HOME GARDEN
- Zone 2** ORCHARDS AND SMALL LIVESTOCK (SUCH AS POULTRY)
- Zone 3** COMMERCIAL CROPS, PASTURE, PLANTATION AND LARGE LIVESTOCK
- Zone 4** MANAGED RANGELAND, FORESTS AND WETLANDS
- Zone 5** WILDERNESS ECOLOGICAL REFERENCE

If this seems all too specific and restricting, think of it rather as a simple principle of placing whatever requires the most of your attention nearest to the centre of your activity, so that you'll quickly notice something needs attending to (such as watering your lettuce) and do it; it is one of permaculture's most powerful tools.



Above: Midwife toads found living underneath a growbag tray.
Below: Providing a healthy home for bees is good for us and them.

When she was ready to plant them out, she moved the larger tray to discover several midwife toads with their eggs stuck to their backs. She gently replaced their roof and will work around them until they move on. (By the way, at night, they emit an electronic-sounding beep, like a smoke alarm with a failing battery.)



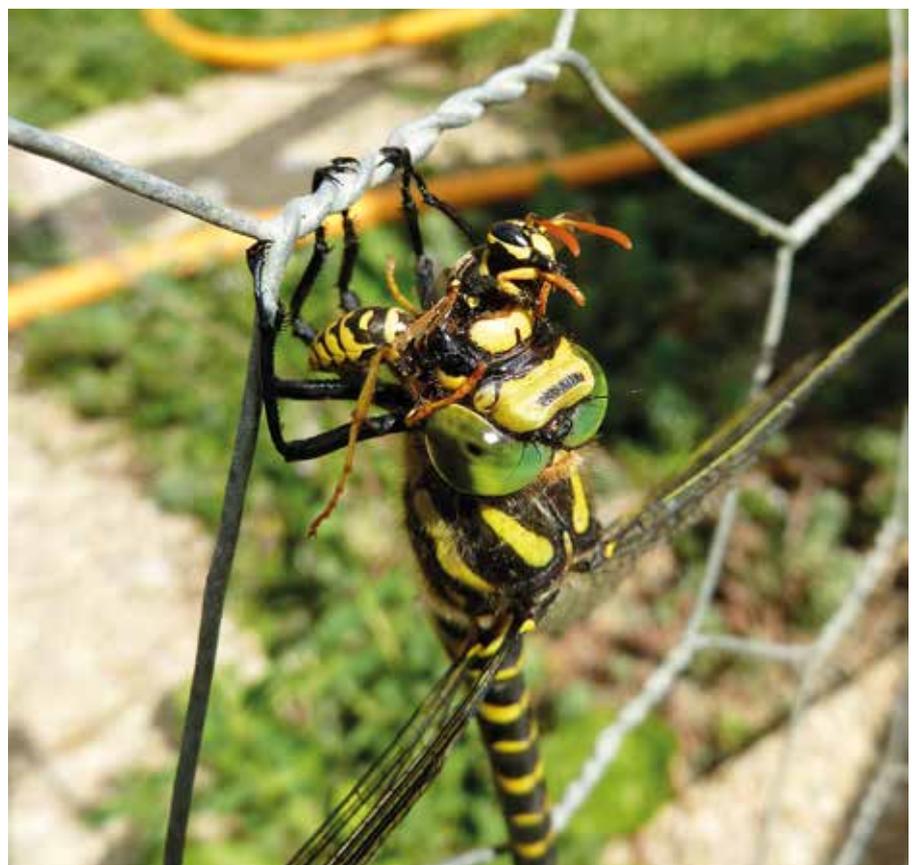
A PLACE TO LEARN

Zone 5 is also a place where we observe and learn. It took six years before Chris and Lynne Dixon obtained permission to live on the land they had bought in Dolgellau, North Wales. During that time, they were staying four miles away, which restricted how intensively they could work the land. This meant that one of Chris's first projects was a 0.4 hectare (1 acre) patch dedicated to 'wilderness regeneration'. They planned to plant trees in this area

but decided to 'wait a year and see what happened first'. Chris says, "For me there was six years of daily observation of the transformation of the landscape that was just a hugely rewarding and valuable experience."

No matter if you don't have the 'luxury' of having an acre to set aside, you can use the spaces around

Above: A log pile provides a winter shelter for some small rodent.
Below: Dragonfly attracted by the grey water pond, eating a wasp.





Right: This article aims to encourage readers to learn more about nature, identification being a key point.

where you live. ‘Borrowed landscape’ is a term in garden design that describes how removing a visual barrier, such as a tall fence, allows your vision to travel further than the boundaries of your own property, seemingly making your garden appear larger. In this way, we can ‘borrow’ landscape beyond our own boundaries to observe and learn. In addition to a notebook and pen, an invaluable aid to help you interpret what you see is Patrick Whitefield’s *How to Read the Landscape* (available in October 2014). You don’t even have to travel to the countryside: I have enjoyed observing nature re-establish itself in an abandoned local sawmill over the last few years. Pioneer plants such as birch, willow, gorse and broom have gatecrashed and are slowly taking over. This idea equally applies to Zone 5 being a place to meditate. You don’t have to own the land to find a quiet, natural place to sit and relax.

There are useful resources on the internet and books such as Chris Baines comprehensive classic, *How to Make a Wildlife Garden* to guide you. According to the Royal Horticultural Society, “...private gardens in Britain cover about 270,000 hectares (667,000 acres)”. We can make much more of this available to Nature if we infuse our ‘Zone 5’ into the whole of our design, from the house to the boundaries and not just as a discrete entity at its edge. Zone 5 is not a specific place, it’s an informing idea 

Stuart Anderson lives with his wife on a 1.2 hectare (3 acre) permaculture smallholding in Brittany, France. They grow fruit, vegetables and firewood, raise sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, rabbits and bees, and rent out their holiday cottage:

www.permacultureinbrittany.com

¹ www.permaculture.co.uk/readers-solutions/making-wildlife-habitat-recycled-found-materials

For details of Patrick Whitefield’s *How to Read the Landscape*, see: www.permanentpublications.co.uk



Wild Gardening

When we first designed our 0.13 hectare (1/3 acre) plot we placed Zone 5 in the top right hand corner (NW) of the site and left the small area uncultivated except for a walnut tree that we planted. We rarely even entered the area, leaving nature to get on with itself. But apart from the veggie patch and area near to the house, the whole garden was to become semi-wild. Our laid hedgerow comprises 23 native species plus edible standards and climbers and provides ample wildlife habitat. In the centre of the garden and under all the fruit and nut trees we grow wildflowers that thrive on chalk downland. This provides a home for insects and reptiles (including the common lizard that is rare in England) and these in turn attract bats and birds. It isn’t unusual to see chalkhill blue butterflies collecting nectar on the flowers and red kites and buzzards flying overhead, and greater spotted and green woodpeckers in the garden.

The advantage of this profusion of wildlife is that the fruit trees are entirely organic and have never been sprayed, and pests like the codling moth have never been a problem. The disadvantage is whereas once we could sit up the garden and even camp out, our wilderness is now full of ‘bitey’ things – red ants, horseflies, spiders – nature has taken over. Zone 5 has escaped from the confines of the design and we now must share our space! Of course, this is no hardship as insects bring pollination, aerobic displays by bats and swallows, and the frogs, toads and lizards eat slugs. The air thrums with life and where once there was an agricultural desert, is now a forager’s paradise. There is room for us all.

Maddy Harland