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When Gardens, Lives, & Movements Go *Pop!*

Little steps taken together create big changes

Trathen Heckman shares the story of how one inspiring garden helped grow a movement.

While every day more permaculture and sustainability enthusiasts are taking action, the issues seem so daunting that it can be hard to fathom our small actions having real impact. Ironically, there has never been a time when our small acts have mattered more, though individual actions alone are not enough. *Forces for Good* authors Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant write, "As field-wide thinking evolves and more emphasis is placed on fostering networks, understanding ecosystems, and galvanizing collective impact, local NGO's must be at the forefront of adopting these changes. ...They are the vanguard of social change."

So, how do we understand ecosystems and galvanize collective impact? In *Gaia's Garden*, Toby Hemenway writes about a point in an ecological garden when the whole landscape suddenly goes "pop" and surges with vitality. With the right elements in place, it accumulates a richness that is able to transform sun, rain, and nutrients into a thriving community of plants, people, and critters. The direct transmission from entering a garden like this changes lives. But can it change the world?

When I first walked through the gate at the Permaculture Institute of Northern California, I had my mind and senses blown by a backyard transformed into a lush jungle of food, medicine, and wonder. What was once a water-thirsty, chemical-intensive lawn was now exploding with fruit, herbs, and life galore, a living classroom rooted in billions of years of nature's wisdom. I knew I had to somehow live and share this with others.

That inspiration led to the birth of Daily Acts, a non-profit organization founded on the belief that through the power of our daily actions, we can transform our lives, our homes, gardens, and neighborhoods - even the world. We can create nourishing, connected, and resilient communities through action, education, and collaboration.

Helping people experience the practical vision of permaculture felt like the perfect place for Daily Acts to start. Years later, with our core educational programs in place, we installed the first permitted household greywater system in Sonoma County, California. Reconnecting with a friend who was

Above: Many volunteers join the 350.org Challenge and install a healing garden at the Petaluma Health Center.

Erin Axelrod helps teach about fruit trees and other deep connections to be found in a garden.

a Civil Engineer at a permaculture workshop, the relationship we had established with the city of Petaluma, and an example of a permitted greywater system at the Berkeley Eco-House, all helped make the first permit for a home greywater system happen. Next, we partnered with the city and permaculture designers Erik Ohlsen and Patrick Picard, mobilizing 150 people over three days to install the first public food forest in Northern California. This set the stage to transform the Petaluma City Hall landscape. Powered by 250 volunteers and three organizations, 25,000 square feet of lawn was mulched in a single day. We also installed community garden beds with rainwater catchment, food, medicine, and habitat. This helped foster a more skilled and engaged community. The project saved one million gallons of water and $60,000 in installation costs. Stacking functions by linking to the larger movement, it was organized with 350.org's first International Day of Climate Action, in 2009.

One greywater system led to Daily Act's involvement in a multi-stakeholder group that provided input into the proposed California greywater law changes. After people power helped change the law, we partnered with Greywater Action and the City of Petaluma to install five greywater systems in one neighborhood in one weekend. Next it was 13 systems in two days in two cities! Then we launched the 100 Greywater System Challenge, fostering collaboration, installing greywater systems, educating citizens, training installers, and catalyzing a small laundry water revolution!

(See the article "Laundry to Landscape" on page 32 about how you can join the laundry revolution!)

Through these efforts, we've helped establish sheet mulching as a soil-building alternative to ripping out lawns and topsoil. Previously, municipalities promoted "turf removal," where turf would often go to the landfill creating climate-intensive methane gas. Simple community and garden-based efforts helped shift civic programs and policies, affecting behavior and culture change. Sheet mulching is now common practice promoted by cities, businesses, and traditional landscape companies. Working with municipalities to start sheet-mulch focused programs, including the City of Petaluma's Mulch Madness program, Daily Acts has provided free resources to transform over 550 lawns.

As Dave Iribarne from the City of Petaluma said, "Government is often perceived as a slow moving hurdle to change....not in my town. Not anymore. Together with Daily Acts we have engaged citizens, sheet mulched nearly one million square feet of turf, saving over 23 million gallons every year through our Mulch Madness

By reconnecting to the power of our actions, we build the skills and relationships to recreate lush, productive, and resilient landscapes.

program; transformed City Hall and other facilities to food forests, rain gardens, and community gardens; and installed rainwater catchment systems and greywater systems throughout our city. And the transformation train is still rolling!"

Inspired by City Repair's Village Building Convergence (see article on the VBC on page 13) and the Gardens of Gratitude 100 Garden Challenge, a group of organizers set an outlandish goal of planting 350 gardens in a single weekend in Sonoma County. 17 weeks later, over 40 agencies, schools, churches, businesses and organizations came together to register 628 gardens! There were many amazing things about this mobilization, from Water Agency sponsorship to helping launch a civic program supporting home food growing to the 100 Salsa Gardens installed at low-income apartments.

As word spread, Daily Acts worked locally, regionally, and with Transition U.S. nationally to replicate and evolve the 350 Garden Challenge. What started out as a goal so big we were nervous to say it, six years later has turned into 100 times the number of gardens, actions, and projects as part of the annual Community Resilience Challenge; showing the power of small acts, small groups, and a collective impact approach to growing food, health, and communities. Behind many of the actions is a story, like the father who was moved to tears because the project was the first time he connected with his daughters in a deeper way. Or Jim and Nancy, who partnered with Weaving Earth to create a native and edible landscape with community benches and a free library, saving tens of thousands of gallons of water and meeting more neighbors in three months than in the previous three decades in their neighborhood. Or the Health Center action to start a garden that educates young folks vulnerable to diabetes.

In 2015, amidst historic drought in California, because of the power of community and collaboration, more lawns were transformed, saving more water in three months (2,347,500 gallons!) than in the previous six years. Projects included collaborating with Clear Blue Commercial Real Estate on "Mulchstock", the largest known community-powered lawn transformation, with three bands, and over 150 volunteers mulching 60,000 square feet of turf in a day. It now saves 1.6 million gallons of water per year. Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB) and the Sonoma Youth Ecology Corps worked with us to transform 30 lawns in 30 days, saving 750,000 gallons of water. As Cate Steane of CCNB said, "Some of these Corps members are homeless and most grew up in poverty, but because of Daily Acts and this collaboration, they have moved from focusing on survival to seeing themselves as part of a movement. That is nothing short of a miracle."

There have, of course, been challenges along the way. But those challenges have given us space to practice what makes our inner gardens go pop - to find what's most important to us and our communities; to hone in our vision and put priorities first. From this place of personal leadership, we can develop the trusting relationships and shared vision that can unleash the regenerative genius of both nature and community.

Volunteers help remove lawn and replace it with drought tolerant plants.

By reconnecting to the power of our actions, we build the skills and relationships to recreate lush, productive, and resilient landscapes. We can then apply this to how we inspire, mobilize, and transform neighborhoods, communities, and even movements.

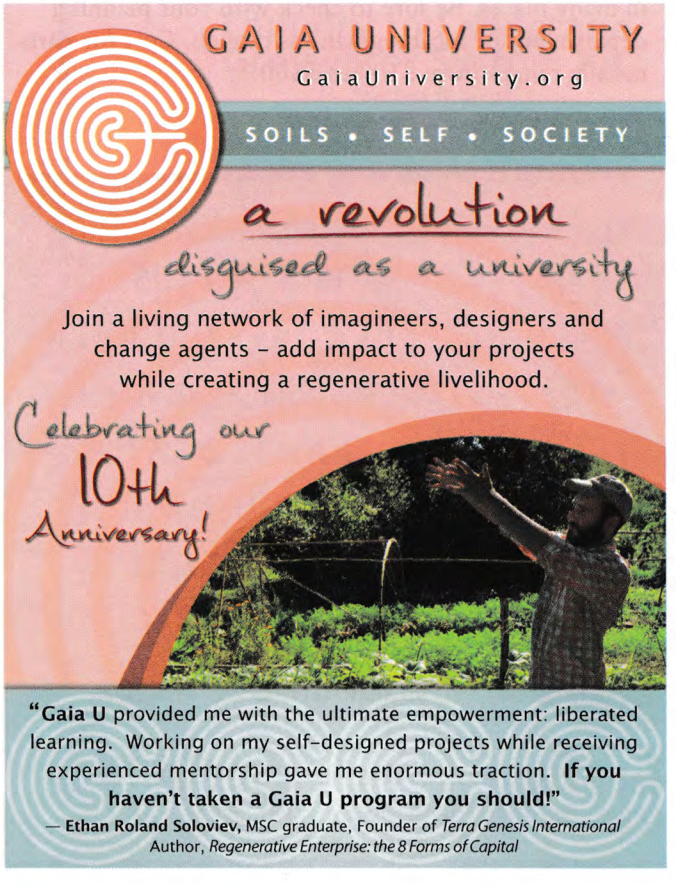
When the garden goes pop, people do, too. When small groups inspire, educate, activate, and collaborate practical models spread, and neighborhoods and towns go pop. Then, regions get organized and, as many felt during the back-to-back International Permaculture and Transition Conferences last fall in England - our movements start to align, and go pop. This pattern is being repeated around the world.

We live in a rare and precious planetary moment. Given the scale

Cotati City Hall gets an eco-facelift saving much water.

Participants of Mulch Stock help prevent grass from growing back by laying cardboard.

of challenges we face, I like to think it is possible to change the world with a garden, or lots of them. That by thinking, acting, and organizing like a garden; groups and networks can rebuild the spirit and resilience of people and place. By working together we can grow vibrant, financially viable, and high impact organizations that regenerate our ecosystems and strengthen local economies. Over the last 15 years, I've been astonished to see the change effected through Daily Acts and our partners; through the Transition Movement, and in this larger emerging "Movement of Movements," as Paul Hawken calls it.



Trathen Heckman is the founder of Daily Acts Organization, Board Chair of Transition U.S. and on the steering committee of the NorCal Community Resilience Network. He works to harness the wisdom of nature and power of community to rebuild personal and community resilience. He lives in the Petaluma River Watershed where he grows food, medicine and wonder while working to compost apathy and lack.

Together we have only just begun to rise to the times. So are you ready to kick off the training wheels and really get this movement moving, and our gardens popping?

Take heart, take action!

WWW.TRANSITIONUS.ORG WWW.DAILYACTS.ORG

Tips For Affecting Personal & Community **Transformation**

Personal - Be the Change

· Practice self-care– Meditate, rest, eat well, exercise, be proactive, focus on your strengths, and connect to nature.

· Live sustainably – Grow food, conserve resources, get skilled and empowered.

· Nurture and engage community – Share your inspiration with neighbors, friends, and coworkers; volunteer for local your Transition Town organization or Sustainability groups.

· Get sustainable DIY resources and action ideas at www.dailyacts.org

Community – Spread the Change

· Inspire and Educate – Host talks, garden tours, and skill-building workshops.

· Collaborate – Engage sustainability advocates at schools, churches, businesses, and agencies.

· Activate and Transform – Organize garden work parties and installations. (And collaborate to do it! You don't have to have all the skills, and it's more fun together)

· Grow and Connect the Movement – Collaborate with local, regional, and national networks. Bring the Community Resilience Challenge to your community.

· Join efforts like 350.org