



The Resilient Farm and Homestead: An Innovative Permaculture and Whole Systems Design Approach

Ben Falk

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"The Resilient Homestead" is a manual for developing durable, beautiful, and highly functional human habitat systems fit to handle an age of rapid transition. Ben Falk is a land designer and site developer whose permaculture-research farm has drawn national attention. The site is a terraced paradise on a hillside in Vermont that would otherwise be overlooked by conventional farmers as unworthy farmland. Falk's wide array of fruit trees, rice paddies (relatively unheard of in the Northeast), ducks, nuts, and earth-inspired buildings is a hopeful image for the future of regenerative agriculture and modern homesteading. The book covers nearly every strategy Falk and his team have been testing at the Whole Systems Research Farm over the past decade, as well as experiments from other sites Falk has designed through his off-farm consulting business. The book includes detailed information on earthworks; gravity-fed water systems; species composition; the site-design process; site management; fuelwood hedge production and processing; human health and nutrient-dense production strategies; rapid topsoil formation and remineralization; agroforestry/silvopasture/grazing; ecosystem services, especially regarding flood mitigation; fertility management; human labor and social-systems aspects; tools/equipment/appropriate technology; and much more, complete with gorgeous photography and detailed design drawings. "The Resilient Homestead" is more than just a book of tricks and techniques for regenerative site development, but offers actual working results in living within complex farm-ecosystems based on research from the "great thinkers" in permaculture, and presents a viable home-scale model for an intentional food-producing ecosystem in cold climates, and beyond. Inspiring to would-be homesteaders everywhere, but especially for those who find themselves with "unlikely" farming land, Falk is an inspiration in what can be done by imitating natural systems, and making the most of what we have by re-imagining what's possible. A gorgeous case study for the homestead of the future.

The Resilient Farm and Homestead: An Innovative Permaculture and Whole Systems Design Approach Details

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Adam says

The Resilient Homestead is in a class of its own. It is a book about agriculture, but its attitude to production is idiosyncratic. It is a permaculture book, but Falk keeps the looming specter of Peak Oil and gridcrash squarely in view, which lends it an urgency and thoroughness that most of the play-garden "home-scale" permaculture books never approach. At a glance, it doesn't sound very unique - like most permaculturists, Falk bandwagons on all the permaculture fads in technique and theory, so it advances all the same concepts as any other of its ilk - but Falk is one of those intimidating people who've invested serious time and considered effort into learning anything they've ever been interested in, which in his case cohere into a total skillset for self- and community-sustenance in the long term in terms of nutrition, water, shelter, heat, and energy. More than anything else, the book is a ridiculously thorough account of all the things you ought to be able to do to take care of yourself in the absence of industrial civilization. Fortunately, the list of things he's good at includes writing, photography, and graphic design, making this book substantially more eloquent, concise, and beautiful than Mark Shepard's Restoration Agriculture.

In one sense, Falk eschews the business mindset to a degree that is extreme even in the permaculture movement. I don't think he even once mentions selling any farm product. This is just the opposite of Shepard's approach, which seeks to propagate perennial polycultures due to their economic advantages - a Paul Hawken kind of deal, where the free market's strength to influence widespread social decision-making is exploited to rapidly enact sweeping reform. Falk often notes social failings in a sort of abstract way, giving pretty vague condemnations of the Fundamental Cause of social and environmental issues. But fortunately he generally refrains from presuming the reader's situation, so the advice can be applied as well to an isolated commune as to a functional market or community farm.

On the other hand, he's clearly not dogmatic about the ills of money. His clients are clearly almost all wealthy white people scared of losing their quality of life when their needs can't be filled at any price. It's the sort of privileged, greedy mindset that most permaculturists and Leftists (it's exactly the kind of isolationist withdrawal from the consequences of massive inequality that Naomi Klein warns about in Shock Doctrine) decry, and see their movement as opposing. But Falk takes some good, practical lessons out of it instead.

Permaculturists are a relatively radical branch of organic farming, and people my age (at least) interested in permaculture can often be dogmatic and obsessed more with personal purity of action and body than with serious work. Falk avoids this trap better than most. Rather than seeing money and fossil fuels as purely evil - since they're what caused the storms our homesteads must weather - he encourages us to leverage them as resources that, like any, can be used for good and ill. He points out that a little money and fossil energy applied now can help us create systems that will increase in yield over the long term despite decreasing labor and energy inputs and increasing climatic hardship.

This bespeaks Falk's practical long-term thinking. Most organic farmers, for instance, premise their work on principles of sustainability and conserving resources. But Falk's book made me realize that so much of the work I'd done in that vein was actually not very effective or intelligent. Organic vegetable farms are premised on keeping back a flood of weeds every year, cycling through bare soil, cover crops, and annual vegetables, usually with seeds purchased from Vermont and California. On our end, we used freezers, plastic

bags, and vacuum sealers to ensure local nutrition year round. Total reliance on electricity and plastic, not resilient to even a brief power outage, and it doesn't support the establishment of tree crops, which represent the best investment in long term food supply.

A lot of the weaknesses of the book stem from Falk's short tenure and relative inexperience. For instance, I got the impression that his nut trees were not bearing yet. In a lot of cases, he will simply refer to the permaculture fad (biochar, humanure, nut trees) as something he intends to do and will "report on in future editions." It's nice to get the honest sense of an evolving farm and practice, but it makes a decent portion of the book feel like a list of things you should learn about and try. There is also a Cosmo style, 1000-point "How (un)prepared are you for the Collapse?" quiz at the end of the book where you can tally your inadequacies and imagine how many ways you could die without the support of the industrial economy (and unless you're Ben Falk, this quiz is definitely a glass-(more than)-half-empty deal). Given Falk's bewildering amount of existing skills, it's astonishing to realize that he is still relatively new and inexperienced. He has a tremendous life ahead of him as a permaculture leader and pioneer, and as more people join the bandwagon, his role will probably expand.

On the Subject of Exotics:

Despite his impressively broad and deep intellectual background, Falk is prone to uncritically stating his own pet theories and biases as fact. He avoids this quite well while describing practicalities, limiting himself to personal experience on the WSD Research Farm, but in theoretical matters he is quite fallible.

The worst example concerns non-native species. This is a very complex question that I have been turning over in my mind for months. I have come to the conclusion that the question is in fact (at least) two questions: how should agricultural land managers treat existing weedy, persistent invasive species, and, by extension, the introduction of new species from abroad; and what role non-native species should play in restoration agriculture systems meant to serve dual-duty in food production and habitat for threatened native organisms. The first question, of course, is widely discussed in the restoration literature, and there are very few people who advocate careless introduction of exotics today. Permaculturists are, to varying degrees, one of those groups, and that is one of the only marks against their claim of ecologically minded design.

Falk makes an extreme argument that essentially conflates the two questions I noted. He opposes the ideology of eradication, and supports the introduction of any and all species that can make niches produce food/medicine/resilience. This mindset makes sense superficially, but in historical perspective it's clearly the same philosophy that created so many costly and damaging ecological situations we are dealing with (using, among tools, permaculture).

It's not like his argument isn't persuasive. He's not advocating we introduce wild cats, rats, and tree snakes. He's talking about chinese chestnuts, apple trees, and goats. By this point, crop plants are generally altered enough (using their resources on produce, not survival) that they are unable to colonize wild ecosystems. They survive because of human aid. All the Eurasian plants that can colonize wild systems are already here as weeds. Encouraging them probably won't make much of a difference.

On the other hand, the question of restoration agriculture is essentially unresearched. It is the logical conclusion of the bioregional argument, of a historically informed human-inclusive model of restoration (all the North American ecosystems restorationists seek to restore supported plenty of Native Americans). But Falk sees no value in this possibility, and attacks those who seek the ideal as naive, limiting, or even xenophobic.

For better or worse, a quick look at Falk's source material on the issue discredits him tremendously. He cites

a book called "Invasion Biology: Critique of a Pseudoscience," written under a pseudonym by seed salesman J.L. Hudson, whose short summary of his position on exotics cites himself (as "JLH") and no one else, inspired a review titled "Time to expose this environmental fraud!" and is premised on the argument that the ecological science damning invasive species is a deception driven by greedy academics and Monsanto. Casting Monsanto and greed as your villain is a great way to get environmentally minded consumers on your side, but the argument is essentially as thin as the one conservatives level at climate science, and just as dastardly. The fact that Falk was taken in by a book David Soberloff described as "squarely in the realm of crank literature" is a pretty big warning sign about some of his other theoretical conclusions.

Melissa says

This is probably the most inspiring, and yes, empowering book I have ever read. I'm sure the author's intention was to motivate the reader toward the holistic, self-sufficient path we should be on (probably 'should have been on', for years). In this, he succeeded with me. I have often regretted the sale of my great-grandparents' farm when I was a small child, because as I recall, they had done most or all of these things at the farm/homestead and raised several generations on it's bounty. Now, I REALLY miss the pear, pecan, sassafras, and cherry trees!...and the spring, although it was at the bottom of the hill.

I broke all the highlighter-rules while reading this book, and had to make myself stop painting the book yellow. Actually, I didn't read this book - I devoured it slowly, creating an even bigger list of books to read along the way.

"Inaction quickly consumes a lifetime. Be curious, be bold, pay close attention to the world in front of you. And start trying stuff."

My only complaint, having shared his journey and "watched" his farm develop, is that I may never find a piece of property I like as well as the WSRF!

Jocelynn says

Good but I prefer books that also include a deeper intersectional analysis, awareness and celebration of ancient traditions a sort of wholeness that wasn't really there. It's a good book with lots of hard facts and information but it doesn't necessarily address the people aspect as much as I'd like and again it's fairly white.staight.male I mean this makes sense because that is the author but just because one is positioned in such a way doesn't mean the book has to be. :)

Miquela says

In this book, Falk talks about updating his findings in another edition. I wasn't even finished with this one before I wanted to read the next, which I'll be buying when it comes out. Why? Because Falk has written a highly readable and informative book about his life and findings so far at the Whole Systems Research Farm. The second edition can only be better as he continues to relate his successes and failures.

While the book is chockfull of practical information for those wishing to create a resilient homestead, I think

it would be an interesting read for anyone who is the least bit curious about how to lead a more conscientious life for both him- or herself and the planet. And speaking of the planet, Falk's attitude towards human beings and our place in this world is a refreshing change from the doom-and-gloom one often hears from those who seem to think Earth would be a lot better off if people ceased to exist. The book is a great mix of helpful and hopeful, providing advice for the climatological, economical, political, etc. dangers that will someday come along. According to the author--and I must agree--disasters are not a possibility but a certainty; it is not a matter of *if*, but *when*. All things break, all things come to an end. Maybe sooner, maybe later, but it is always nice to be prepared. But as I said before, Falk does not descend into melodrama or paranoia when talking about such things, and that is refreshing.

I started this book with a vague idea of what a resilient homestead might look like; I finished it full of motivation, concrete information, and resources to bring our hopes for a farm out of dreamland and into reality.

Julie says

An absolutely fantastic resource, written in a way that you want to start at the beginning and take the journey to self-sustainability with him.

Diana Par-due says

This book is incredible. It's extremely educational without being dry and I found the whole concept very inspiring. My own journey with homesteading is very different but weirdly enough, though I'm halfway across the country, I am also in zone 6 so it was neat to see what he was doing in zone 6 that I never thought possible.

Justin says

I liked the overall philosophy a great deal but didn't find too much actionable for me

Molly says

An especially important book for New England homesteaders, gardeners, and small-scale farmers. Falk's Whole Systems Research Farm above the Mad River in central Vermont has a climate and topography similar to what many of us in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and parts of Massachusetts and New York experience. Falk goes into some depth concerning rice-growing, pond- and swale-making and earthworks in general, fertility harvesting (urine and humanure, cover cropping, scything, fungi), perennial crops, animals such as ducks and chickens, maintaining and harvesting a firewood crop, and resilient systems for emergencies. Many enlightening diagrams, appendices and photos. Recommended for permaculturists.

Megan Woodrich says

A dense text rich with ideas and the science to back them up. I will need to revisit this when I am planning a future homestead. Recommend wholeheartedly to anyone interested in permaculture or "green living."

John Szarowski says

Terrific book. It's hard to find permaculture information applicable to my area, so I was excited to find this. It's very inspiring, and we have big plans for our five acre. This book gave me a great grounding in the knowledge I need... Now it's just about finding the time and money!

Nick Woodall says

I loved this book! It's about a guy who bought a farm and was only going to stay there a couple of years. He is now 10 years into it, and it documents his journey on this particular piece of land. He built rice paddies, lots of trees, a house, raises animals, fruit crops, garden crops, and more. Lots of pictures and charts. Very, very informative.

Aleksandar Jankovi? says

If you're overwhelmed by all the Permaculture literature out there and you're not sure where to begin, this book is the perfect place to start. Along with Gaia's Garden, this is a great all encompassing introduction to permaculture system thinking and acting

Anna says

There are so few books that are really helpful for homesteaders and permaculturalists beyond the beginner stages, but this book is one of them. What I enjoy most is the way the author has clearly tried out lots of techniques that are presented theoretically elsewhere, then explains why they did or didn't work for his farm. It's also handy (for me, at least) that his farm is medium-sized, like mine, so he doesn't bother with things that are really only appropriate for small backyards, nor does he expect you (usually) to have a big tractor and other heavy equipment (the way Sepp Holzer does).

My only complaint is that he doesn't have a blog. So we'll just have to wait for book number two to figure out what he learns after year ten on the farm! In the meantime, if you haven't hunted down a copy of the book yet, you can read highlights on my blog.

Danni says

This book is one of the most easy to read and enjoyable non fiction works I've read in some time. I sat down one afternoon and wanted to gobble up all the great information as fast as I could. Besides being well organized and written clearly, it features beautiful pictures and succinct graphs. It isn't a introduction book nor is it written for dummies. It assumes the reader is educated and has some basic information on permaculture, agriculture, or similar field. However, it is approachable for those new to permaculture or sustainable systems purely through its down to earth language and the realities of experience backing the methods and systems. You really feel that the author is sharing his own stories, successes and failures, without any pressure for the reader to blindly agree. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is hoping to live more consciously or start working with permaculture! I'm so thrilled I splurged and got a physical copy for myself.

Bre says

This book was a game changer for me. Or, perhaps, more properly gave me the information I needed to do something I hadn't dreamed of doing before.

I bought a small farm in SE Michigan around the New Year, and had this book from the library about that time. As I was mulling over a way to use the area in the creek's floodplain I got this book, where the author talks about growing rice in Maine. I'm now a few weeks away from bringing in a rice harvest on an otherwise marginal piece of land.
