

Permaculture workshop provides introduction to natural building

By

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Utilizing ancient cob and cordwood building techniques, Certified Permaculture Designer Hazel Speer wants to teach people a better way to construct low-cost buildings that are long-lasting, fireproof, provide natural insulation and are able to withstand earthquakes.

"Really, it takes a massive flood to destroy these structures," Speer said.

Feb. 8, Speer, co-founder of Treesong Permaculture Institute, is presenting a free workshop from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. that will include a slide show providing an introduction to natural building. Workshop participants will also visit a planned, cob construction project.

The workshop, held at the Rusk Ranch Nature Center, at 27746 Redwood Highway, will also serve as a preview of a Natural Building Training & Camp that Speer will lead in April and May, 2015.

"The free workshop will give people an all inclusive overview of these processes," Speer said. "From initial soil and water sampling to site design and foundations, choosing the right location is very important."

Though permaculture encompasses so much more than building, Speer explained that, "It's about a paradigm shift guided by ethics and principles that includes earth-care, people-care and fair share, which means you're not greedy about earth's limited resources. Natural building and appropriate technology is just a piece of this. The workshop will also cover these broader principles."

Many people delve into natural building by constructing a barn, goat house or other outbuilding to gain skills and confidence in the processes, and then decide to go farther. Speer, an expert in cob construction, has helped shepherd the building of many such structures in the area.

"In our community, with so many of us getting by on small incomes, these techniques offer strategies to become more

self-sufficient while creating economically viable homes they can be proud of," Speer said. "Those who own or have access to a small piece of land can utilize these techniques and principles to construct a sound building for pennies on the dollar."

"There's so much potential for people to become empowered, heal their lives and create sustainable futures," Speer added. "Resources are limited and these principles are really the only way we can effectively sustain our planet."

Recycling is a key permaculture principle and Speer pointed out that many in the Valley are already very innovative and could utilize discarded or unused materials just lying around on their properties, or barter with friends and neighbors, to acquire supplies for natural building projects. In the process, she says people increase their connections and find support with both their own and others' projects.

"Think of the old barn-raising ethic - that sense of community and labor sharing, 'you help me build mine and I help you build yours,'" Speer said.

Some turn to natural building for health reasons, as trailers are composed of toxic materials and are prone to molding, while natural building techniques result in structures that are healthy to inhabit and comfortable in all seasons. And nationwide, increasingly, there is a shift, as municipal zoning authorities are beginning to recognize and acknowledge the structural integrity and soundness of well-designed natural homes.

Speer began her career by reading about permaculture 15 years ago and then really plunged in after apprenticing in Natural Building with Ianto Evans, a renowned applied ecologist, landscape architect and inventor with experience on six continents. Speer received her certification through the Cascadia Permaculture Institute and also studied permaculture design with Tom Ward in Ashland. She continues to attend workshops, and now, also teaches these techniques and skills. Speer is also certified in Optical Surveying for Earthworks & Water.

With a background in sculpture, Speer recognized early on that natural design was

more like an art form.

"In natural design there are no corners, everything flows according to the potential of the site and the materials at hand," Speer said. "It's about so much more than just a square building composed of 2 by 4's."

Speer also promotes family involvement in building and land improvement projects.

"After one week of training, at 10 years of age, my daughter Sarah helped us build our house. This helps children gain confidence and practical skills," Speer said.

Speer got involved with the Rusk Ranch Nature Center when she helped design playground equipment for the organization. The center endeavors to benefit the community by providing opportunities for the public, particularly young people, to appreciate the natural world and instill a sense of stewardship toward the earth and its inhabitants.

Many community leaders and volunteers are involved with the popular

nature center, which is growing each year, as more resources and varied activities are offered, according to the center's Executive Director Patty Downing.

"We value the long-term wholeness of our Valley, and we recognize that people and nature are inseparable," Downing said. "We strive to nurture whole families, multiage groups and children. And offering instruction in permaculture and natural building is a logical progression of our mission."

The Natural Building Training & Camp will convene for four weekends in April and May at the Rusk Ranch Nature Center and costs \$300. Local families who register early can get up to \$150 in discounts and those who complete the training will receive a Certificate in Basic Natural Building. Adults or Families with children over 8 years of age are welcome, as space permits. The camp has flush toilets, shower, kitchen facilities and river access. For more information, call 541-287-0172, or go to the Rusk Ranch Nature Center's website or Facebook page.



Hazel Speer (right) and a helper build an oven.

(Courtesy photo for The Illinois Valley News)

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