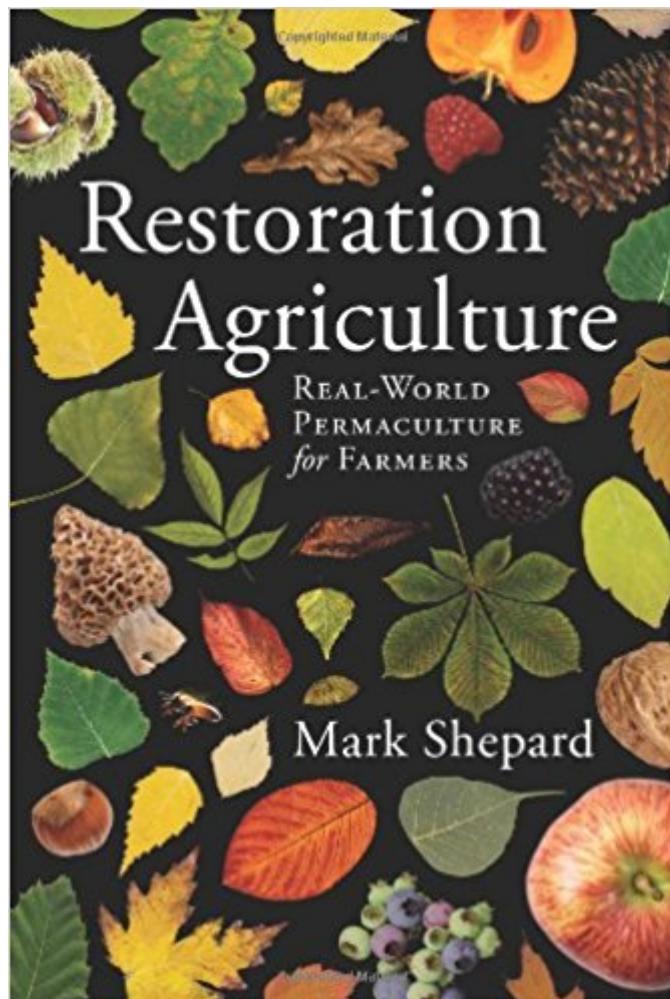


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# Restoration Agriculture



## **Synopsis**

Around the globe most people get their calories from annual agriculture - plants that grow fast for one season, produce lots of seeds, then die. Every single human society that has relied on annual crops for staple foods has collapsed. Restoration Agriculture explains how we can have all of the benefits of natural, perennial ecosystems and create agricultural systems that imitate nature in form and function while still providing for our food, building, fuel and many other needs - in your own backyard, farm or ranch. This book, based on real-world practices, presents an alternative to the agriculture system of eradication and offers exciting hope for our future.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This work attempts to be an introduction to sustainable farming. The author's assertion (well supported by the evidence he cites) is that our current agricultural model is failing, and that we need to move away from a system built on annual plants, and towards a system built on perennial growth. This is permanent agriculture, or "permaculture". His model for this is an idealized, carefully structured combination of plants, or "polyculture" for food, fuel, and animal forage. In his words: "[w]hat we are doing is designing an agricultural system that closely mimics the savanna in its structure, the species mix, and in ecological function." This model has been outlined in pieces in other books. Much of his ideas about livestock forage are similar to what Joel Salatin writes, though Shepard is less strident, and more open to the idea of a vegetarian diet. He spends a great deal of time demonstrating with chart and figures how, exactly, a more perennial agricultural model can

generate more nutritious calories per acre than the current single crop. But the graphs do not overwhelm. I was pleased by the concrete examples in the book. Shepard demonstrates, in color pictures and with facts and figures, the viability of a farm based on permaculture principles. He gives tree spacings, plant yields, and grazing techniques. He explains the proper ratio of cows to sheep, for instance. However I was expecting a lot more details regarding plant choices, harvesting techniques, etc. What can be said for Shepard is that he stays on point better than, and is more accessible than, Bill Mollison, who has a tendency to wax philosophical. That said, *Permaculture: A Designers' Manual* remains a better resource than *Restoration Agriculture*. Occasionally his hypotheses are supported only by assertion. For example, he states outright "every culture built on annual crops has failed". This is either false, if you take into account current civilization, or unverifiable, if you assert, as the author does, that our culture is doomed to fail. Additionally, while he describes growing vegetables in places, he also seems to state that this will be phased out as the forest matures. I don't think any system of agriculture that phases out vegetables can be entirely nutritious. But this aspect of the book is not entirely clear, and I may be misreading the author's intention. My one concern about permaculture is that the staple crops derived from trees are not as easily palatable. Certainly anyone who has eaten "bread" from acorn flour will be unlikely to prefer it to bread from whole-wheat flour. So a place will likely remain in society for grain crops. But we could all do well to read this book and encourage farmers and landowners to start implementing these principles. If you consider that the nutrition in, say, an ear of corn has to come from somewhere, and that "somewhere" is largely out of the ground, and out of fertilizers derived from petroleum, you can easily see that our current agricultural model is essentially mining the topsoil. Since current practices do not build topsoil, and at some point, maybe in 10 years, maybe in 100 years, we are going to see petroleum reserves stable off and eventually decline, we are not in a sustainable cycle of production. Whatever your political conviction, you should think about the issues addressed here. Overall, however, a very well written distillation of the classics of permaculture, plus examples of how well it works, and a plan to implement it on a large scale across North America. I think the target audience here is not the well read, inspired permaculture enthusiast, but instead the average person who has not heard of this concept. For that purpose, he succeeds well at introducing concepts, and demonstrating how well they work. Go to other sources to get the details though.

Good book but is basically a rehash of the 1929 classic *Tree Crops* by J. Russell Smith which is publicly available from a dozen sources. Actually in many ways Smith's book is better because he

actually conducted research and correspond widely with others and didn't just showcase his own farm, which is what Shepard basically does. Shepard is also heavy on the personal opinion and light on the practical advice. It is not a bad book, but I would get it from a library if you can, or just read Tree Crops. I sure regret dropping \$25 on it! It sure doesn't contain much in the way of instruction. More than a few times he says to go read other peoples books to figure it out. It comes off as lazy to me. After reading this book a second time I will add that I commend some of the ideas in the book, however, I must denounce some flaws. To begin with, perennial crops are not more reliable than annual. I have perennial and annual crops. It's almost an every other year that a late frost, for a season, makes either apples, pears, or peaches a TOTAL loss where I live by killing the blossoms. It's rare, where I live, to find a wild nut bearing tree where fewer than half the nuts are wormy or ruined for anything but pig feed. And, as someone who has sat down and shelled a big bowl of hickory nuts, I can tell you it is tedious and you don't end up with a whole lot of food after about 8 hours. In fact, that quantity of nut meat bits (and they will be little bits) can be consumed by some greedy children in mere minutes. A harvester built in 1980 can make ready as many calories in a millisecond. Part of what makes modern agriculture possible are the machines that work very well at harvesting. And there seems to me that there is considerable variability among food bearing trees that will make mechanical harvest inefficient and expensive, even if someone were to feel it economically worthwhile to develop such machines. J. R. Smith understood this. This is why he urged grafting of "genius" scion wood to ordinary trees and attempts at breeding native species into economically efficient crop trees. Shepard seems to advocate the exact opposite...basically he thinks that wild plants are better because they require fewer inputs. This is true no doubt, but it also marks a philosophical return to nomadism and hunting-gathering. It is basically the opposite of agriculture. I have no problem when affluent folks buying worn out farms and turning them into clever tree plantations, but it is a bit of a stretch to call it agriculture, and he admits it will not be profitable. Meanwhile, I have never known (nor do I know anyone) who has known a modern corn crop to fail. Might be a disappointing year (under 180 bu/acre), but corn is tough stuff. I've seen it withstand winds that toppled apple and oak trees, I've seen it weather droughts that toasted perennial pastures, and it isn't planted when floods or winter weather are a worry, while all perennials need to withstand both. I am very glad to see that Shepard mentions alley cropping practices. These are what can allow a transition to perennial agriculture, and for that matter, offers greater diversity on the farm. There is abundant evidence (mostly out of the University of Missouri center for agroforestry) that many ordinary annual farm crops grow well among trees, and it is proven that most cool seasons grasses and legumes (the stuff of animal forage) grow better

beneath the shade of moderately shading trees (Hickory-Pecan-Walnut-Butternut tribe, the Locusts). I was disappointed to see that no mention was made of Management Intensive Grazing (or MIG). MIG can work with silvopastural practices even better than it does in just an open pasture (the shade problem is already solved). MIG is the way to maximize the productivity of forage plants and get more calories per acre while relying less on feeding annual plants to animals. Furthermore, I am left wondering how the harvest of the diversity of crops at all different heights and whatnot is supposed to be achieved with a reasonable amount of work. I wonder if it has dawned on the author that the reason why orchardists and farmers that row crop a few species of plants do what they do not because they are stupid, but because they want to get in the harvest in with reasonable time expenditure and effort. I suppose that is what pigs are for he'd probably say. I would follow up with what are the pigs going to eat in the other three seasons? If you have enough pigs to clean up the mast/fruit crop, you will have too many pigs the rest of the time, and no you can just fatten a pig up in a month and then slaughter them. You will need to keep back some brood sows at a minimum. The truth is that almost all omnivore and herbivore animals in savanna biomes traveled around a very large area to meet their nutritional needs. Since the whole world has been fenced in or out, man has to substitute storage of feedstuffs instead..or he can plant annuals in an intelligent way and let the animals harvest it for him out of the field. And this dovetails nicely with alley cropping practice. No-till organic agriculture is a well developed method that the Rodale folks have worked out and it allows ROTATION of crops, which is a key weapon against pests. Ever wonder why orchardists spray so much? It's because, in large part, trees are perennials and the bugs that survive one year don't have to travel very far to re-infect the plants the following year. It isn't simply because any tree that has been bred up to make good fruit is weak or that all non-native trees are weak as Shepard suggests. In short, this book has many good points. It correctly points out the disaster that modern agriculture is heading into. And I immensely respect people who actually go out and do things to correct it. It's just that at times the considerable arrogance of the author comes through on these pages and as it is described it is admittedly not a viable alternative for the non-wealthy at present. I happen to think that tree crops are a viable alternative, and there are many good ways to transition to a more permanent agriculture, and that most of this information is free on the internet. Just search the terms Silvopasture, Agroforestry, Alley cropping, etc...It turns out that University of Wisconsin extension service has a bunch of videos on YouTube where they interview and tour Shepard's farm. Much can be learned from these for free. I am a bit alarmed by the fact that U of W Extension is featuring Shepard's farm like it is an actual economically profitable farm, when Shepard states very clearly in his book that it is not. Though it was worthwhile to learn about

his mowing techniques and how he tries to train trees like apples into a shapes that make mowing efficient. This is the kind of practical information that is mostly absent from Restoration Agriculture.

This is a pretty broad overview of the Restoration Agriculture system(?). You will not get much how to, or step by step instructions so you can copy what Mark has on your land. Besides you don't want that, unless you are Mark Shepard, in which case, could you sign my book? This is more of a call to action, how to act, and why-kind of book. This is the bridge, not the vehicle; the means of how you cross the bridge doesn't really matter. Likewise what plants you need to plant, what techniques you will use, and what your goals are will vary. This book will help snap you out of focus on the details, and help you build the framework that you need for your situationIf you want how to so you can permie up your postage stamp you can find that online and in other books. If your interested in feeding people en masse, in a smart and cost effective way to build a self sustaining future free of chemical ag, foriegn oil, and building a strong ecosystem (or whatever social-ecological-economical-political reason you have) you should really read this book.Side note, the quality of the actual book is very good. Good paper stock and quality cover. I did tape the cover so it would last longer.P.S. Mark, your "grains causes the downfall of civilizations" argument is a logical fallacy.

Good information but way too wordy. I was convinced his arguments were valid half way through the book but he not only beats the dead horse he whacks at it until there is nothing but hair and eyeballs left. Buy it but don't feel bad about skimming through the often repeated hypothetical arguments

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