Intrigued by what permaculture is all about, I popped into Te Moata Retreat between Tairua and Whenuakite last month and spoke to some of the people who were involved in the retreat’s annual two-week Permaculture Design Certificate course.

Canadian actor, Ann Proctor, travelled from Australia to take the course and she loved it. “I’m feeling deeply enriched because it’s given me a new perspective on life,” she smiled. “I now have a clearer view of how we can live in this world. Learning about permaculture has brought back my trust and belief in things, the way I felt when I was a child. It’s so empowering.”
“Wow,” I thought. “This is obviously about way more than planting spuds.”

In the cosy cushioned space next to Te Moata’s peaceful meditation room, I met with course tutors, Daniel Tohill and Trish Allen. They told me permaculture is a design process, incorporating ecology, gardening, energy and social community. What makes it different is that it takes into account how these things relate to each other. It’s holistic.

The permaculture concept was developed in the 1970s by two Australians, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. Trish and her late husband, Joe Polasicher, discovered the permaculture way of life in 1982 and founded the award-winning Rainbow Valley Farm outside Auckland in 1988. Now Trish spreads her enthusiasm throughout the country as a tutor. “A lot of people think permaculture is just gardening, but it’s much more than that,” she said.

Landscape designer and environmental consultant, Daniel, has won awards for his innovative and artful work focusing on ecology. He told me there are more creatures in one tablespoon of healthy soil than people on the planet. “The soil is so alive,” he said. “In fact, about eighty percent of all the species on earth are actually in the ground.”

It was at the national Fieldays one year that Daniel first introduced permaculture to New Zealand farmers, offering his services as a consultant. He has seen a big shift in attitudes since then. “With the will to adapt, permaculture methods can be used anywhere, from backyard gardens to large scale farming that meets the needs of urban populations,” Daniel said. Some of his clients seek advice when they leave the city and move to lifestyle blocks with their families.

“There are concerns about the quality of our food and where it comes from,” Daniel told me. “Our planet’s biodiversity is rapidly disappearing. We need to work with nature, not against it.”

Trish is of the view that plastic waste is one of the biggest challenges to the environment waste. She recently founded a charity called Mahurangi Wastebusters who have just been
awarded a contract by Auckland Council to set up two community recycling centres in the Rodney area. She congratulated Thames-Coromandel District Council and the Seagull Centre Trust on their foresight in setting up one of the first community recycling centres in the country - the Seagull Centre in Thames.

“Now that China no longer takes our plastic, we have to face up to the problem of plastic waste,” said Trish. “We must think globally, but act locally.”

When asked what her biggest reward is when teaching, Trish pointed to the enthusiasm of her students and hearing them say that learning about permaculture has changed their lives. “It’s so heart-warming to hear this,” she said. “And Te Moata is one of my favourite places to teach. It’s so beautiful here with its abundance of nature. It’s really nice to teach in a place so connected to the natural land, where I can watch the sunrise and the sunset.”

Internationally, the permaculture movement is growing, with 1,200 people from 72 countries attending an international permaculture conference in India last year.

The three ethics of permaculture are “Earth Care,” “People Care” and “Fair Share” - the return of surplus to the Earth and the people on the planet. The international Permaculture Design Certificate course offered by the retreat analyses permaculture principles governing natural systems and holistic design, looking at maps and the contours and elevations of the Earth.

Climate is a key part of the equation, examining climatic regions of the world, global weather patterns, micro-climates, shelter and shade. Permaculture designs also look at passive solar means, using or excluding the sun and the wind.

Then there is also the concept of earthworks, which is the magic of soil - the life in it, the different types of soil and how to enhance it. Daniel told me earthworks can have a positive input in permaculture systems, but can often get overlooked or used wrongly. “Stripping vegetation often causes people to shudder and write this whole process off as not being ecologically sound,” he said. “But in reality,
nothing could be further from the truth, as long as there’s a good reason for it.

“Earthworks such as ponds and terracing can actually accelerate the evolution of natural systems. Although they are initially labour and resource intensive and may seem destructive to the current landscape, they can lead to increased abundance and resilience of the land.

“In some cases, earthworks are done where they aren’t necessarily needed. It’s all about the right design decisions, understanding soils, topography and hydrology.”

Six ways to make compost are included in the course. The course furthermore covers the home garden, including its design, companion planting and crop rotation. Trees, forests, wetlands and pastures are also part of the course and there’s a section on water and aquaculture.

One of the important principles of permaculture is to create no waste and guidelines are given on reducing waste in our lives. Then there’s the hands-on fun of building things with natural materials like straw bales and mud.

In addition, the course considers how strong communities with ethical choices can be created, how food can be grown in cities and how food can be preserved and stored, everything from fermentation to making jam.

Sustainable farming, a subject close to Daniel’s heart, is also addressed, as well as orchards and keeping bees in a bee-friendly way. A recipe for a wonder bio-fertiliser that costs only $10 for 4,000 litres is included in the course.

In the last instance, the law, our money system and alternative currency, including green dollars and time banks, are looked at. Permaculture even has a plan for catastrophes, examining ways to deal with them through the right design.

For more information on permaculture courses run by Trish and Daniel, email trishallennz@gmail.com or danieltohill@xtra.co.nz.
Pictured: Daniel Tohill and Trish Allen, the tutors who present the annual Permaculture Design Certificate course at Te Moata Retreat between Whenuaite and Tairua. Photo by Norachai Thavisin.