

Valley's Hermary tops at "Working With Nature"

By Lexi Baines

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Author and Gaia College founder Heide Hermary of Cowichan Station has been voted 2007's Educator of the Year by the B.C. Landscape & Nursery Association.

The group's annual awards recognize excellence in their industry and Hermary was honoured in Abbotsford recently for her extensive work in sustainable landscaping.

She shares her passion for the soil with students in many courses at Royal Roads University, Douglas College and the Burnaby School Board, and also has written a book "Working with Nature – Shifting Paradigms," that is getting rave reviews.

Hermary and her husband, Michael, have only lived three years in the Valley but they are already hard at work on their peaceful Cowichan Station land, which is located behind the historic St. Andrew's Church.



Sustainable landscaping is simple, if you keep certain basic ideas in mind, she said.

"They can call it sustainable, but we call it organic. It means no chemicals and working with very natural processes."

The mental shift that occurs from looking at a garden from the soil up can be a challenge but it is also satisfying, she says.

"We no longer have some tools available to us that conventional horticulture relies upon. I call it health management."

The idea is to create healthy soil and then it will produce great plants, according to Hermary.

"When landscapes are healthy, then disease is not a big problem that needs to be dealt with in a big way."

It's all about nutrition, she says.

The only way gardeners can get proper nutrition in the landscape is by managing our landscapes as ecosystems, using such additives as compost to naturally increase the biodiversity of the soil, she said.

"Disease management decreases biodiversity because it looks at killing all kinds of things, we want to stop the killing and start feeding the soil."

Her biggest effort when teaching is making students realize it's all about relationships.

"It's a partnership with soil. Once you understand what goes on there, then everything falls into place."

Gardeners at all levels are often guilty of trying to dominate using their chemicals, and getting used to doing it organically takes a paradigm shift.

"It's amazing to me how the same course can work equally well for all. We expect that our students are all intelligent human beings and that they can put two and two together."

Even home gardeners who may never take her course can benefit from thinking in a new way.

"First and foremost, stop poisoning everything, stop the pesticides and stop the chemical fertilizers. Anyone can do that. Then, feed the soil, not the plant," Hermary says.

"The soil is an eco-system composed of millions of tiny species, and they all have their job to do. They all rely on recycling organic matter and it doesn't cost anything; we already have that. Compost is a wonderful addition to that. We can replenish some of the biodiversity with it. Those are the two basic things, the big things people can change: we have to stop killing and start feeding."

Hermary has an organic master gardener course coming up this month at Royal Roads University outside Victoria. Check the Internet at www.royalroads.ca for more information.