



**The Dirt Rich School  
@ Compass Rose Farm**



**Kat!**

**[“Convergence of the Heart”](#) – Interview with [the 9TH Northwest Permaculture Convergence](#)  
Presenter Kat Fitzgerald, [Dirt Rich School & Compass Rose Farm](#), WA. By Willi Paul,  
[Planetshifter.com](#)**

**[The Dirt Rich School](#)**

The Dirt Rich School is a nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching the next generation to imitate and learn from nature in order to create a more sustainable future. The school is located on Compass Rose Farms, a stunning, lush 40-acre property that is a peaceful sanctuary with forest, fields, creeks and paths. We teach permaculture design, modern homesteading, holistic animal wifery, and sustainable food production through a mentorship program offering a hands on learning experience.

**[The 9TH Northwest Permaculture Convergence](#)**

**Kat’s Workshop: “Working with the Weeds”**

Learn to work with your (Local plants) weeds and not against them. Explore some new ways to increase fertility and reduce labor in the vegetable garden, perennials & orchard. We will discuss how and when to use chop and drop, what to compost and what not to, living mulch, using weeds to maintain soil life through the winter months and identify some amazing plants already working for you and how you can partner with them.

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**Interview with Kat by Willi**

**Is storytelling a part of your teaching or parenting mix?**

Yes, I believe storytelling is a powerful way to pass on knowledge. I grew up in a family that loves to tell stories, often about their own experiences. So, I have listened to my Grandfather tell stories about logging the North Olympic Peninsula in the forties. To my children, who tell stories about the newest discoveries in space science. They have increased my knowledge base, giving me a bigger understanding of the world, and showing me the perspectives of others.

I like to tell my students stories that will help them remember the lessons, expand their knowledge of the world, and make them curious to explore it. Bill Mollison is a consummate story teller, and many of his stories have been passed down through the permaculture community until they have become memes. It seems that the funnier and more outrageous the story is, the more likely we are to remember it. I know, because those are the stories I hear being retold as the students teach the new kids, or as they give their parents a tour of the school.

**Please compare and contrast sustainable food production vs. permaculture food production?**

There are many complex and divergent forms of sustainable food production practiced all over the world, using different plants, and in varying climates. Permaculture is a system that incorporates and uses many of these sustainable food production techniques. Whether you are using permaculture, or another sustainable food production system, we all want to create healthy food and to grow that food in the same soil, without depleting the available nutrients.

As permaculture users, we endeavor to not only be sustainable, but regenerative, to heal the land we work with, and to increase soil fertility, which revitalizes the nutrient density in the food we grow.

Many permaculture techniques imitate indigenous peoples’ food production systems by encouraging alternatives to tilling, to planting in complex polycultures, integrating animal systems, and emphasizing perennial and naturalized plants including: trees, bushes, vines, ground covers, weeds, regional plants, and fungi. The end goal is always to create complex systems that work together to increase biodiversity and build soil.

## **How is Nature changed by permaculture, if at all?**

If “Nature” is our present ecology, then yes, practicing Permaculture is having an effect on Nature. Permaculture teaches us to observe and imitate natural systems, to slow soak and spread water, to plant wind breaks, be responsible for our waste, to build rather than deplete soil, to plant food forests, and many other design applications that work with and have an effect on Nature.

“Nature” as in human nature, is also affected by permaculture when we base our decisions on the three ethics of: Earth Care, People Care, and Sharing the Surplus. When I practice permaculture, it is in hope to bring positive change, positive change that is abundant and in partner with our ecology.

## **What is your spiritual experience like when working the land with sustainable food practices and Permie ethics?**

The place I live and work with every day is now known as Compass Rose Farms. I am the first European that has lived on this land, which is a humbling feeling. A previous generation had logged the valley and left it to the grazing of cattle. The first time I walked on the land, particularly in the woods, I felt the same as when I had gone to the animal shelter and looked into the eyes of my frightened old dog Mick. He looked back, and there was a knowing that we were meant help each other. I spent time listening to this place, and began to recognize it as a unique personality that I wanted to partner with. We started the relationship by camping on the land, and spending time in the forest living with nature. Since then we have come to a working relationship I care for it, and it cares for me and my family.

We are careful to act with respect and gratitude when we take building material from the forest, and we give more than we take from the gardens both in nutrients and in biodiversity. When a new structure is built we ask the land where it should be placed and listen until it feels right, and there always seems to be a “right place.” In spite of the fact there are coyote and other predators that live here, and have been here long before we came, we have very little predation of our livestock. I have a sense of contentment as I work here with this place, and as I walk here, I listen to and observe the constant growth: growth of my structures, the growing health of the valley, and the growth of the local ecosystem. I feel that we have made a good partnership.

## **The name “Compass Rose Farms” is an intriguing mix of symbols. Tell us more about why you named it thus?**

Mentorship and personal empowerment are the foundation of this place. From the beginning, I wanted a place people could go when they did not have direction, and find answers so they could go out from a place of personal power.

“The Land meets the Sea” is a strong archetype for this region. The Compass Rose is the tool on a nautical chart that shows the cardinal directions. The Rose is, quite simply, my favorite flower. The Logo for The Dirt Rich School at Compass Rose Farms is a composite of four symbols:

1. A Cobweb representing the interconnectedness of community.
2. The Compass Rose is for education and direction.
3. The Ram’s Horns represent sustainability and regenerative growth.
4. The Rose is for art, beauty, and creativity, which are woven throughout this place.

## **Your NW Permaculture Workshop is entitled: “Working with the Weeds.” Are there really weeds in Nature?! Please expound.**

Plants are plants, we love some more than others. We use them for food, fuel, fiber, fodder, pharmaceuticals, and remove others that are not being useful to our endeavors. Some plants need help to grow in certain conditions and others don’t. Those that don’t are often rejected as useless and labeled “weeds” with a broad stroke of disdain. Webster’s gracious definition of the Weed is: “a plant that is not valued where it is growing and is usually of vigorous growth.” I have sometimes defined a weed as “a plant that you did not plant, and it is not where you want it.”

If you take the time to learn the names of the plants around us, their food value, their medicinal properties, and observe their behaviors, you may be surprised to find that every plant has many uses. When we remove our inimical personification of plants, and treat all plants as valuable, we open up an amazing assemblage of tools. We can eat many of the greens that spring up spontaneously in our garden beds such as, Chickweed, Purslane, and Dandelion, all of which are more nutritious than Lettuce. There is a pharmacy of helpful flora just waiting for you to collect them and learn their value, such as Plantain and Mullein. Many plants make excellent living mulch, Clover and Round Ivy are a few. Rope and nets can be made from Stinging Nettle and you can spin Thistle down into yarn.

Traditional gardening disturbs the service of the earth by removing vegetation, replanting only a handful of new plants and leaving most of the soil exposed. We need to rethink how we grow our food and how we work with plant systems. We can work with the local plants, AKA "The Weeds" who are germinating quickly and repairing the land by; increasing fertility, de-compacting the soil, preventing erosion, slowing evaporation, building soil and increasing biodiversity. We would be wise to work with them and learn their ways, so we can rest and let the weeds take care of us.

**Tell us about the importance of teaching people to grow and process their own food, and the synergy of working with animals in a holistic way.**

When people gain the knowledge and confidence to be self-caring; to grow food, work synergistically with animals, save seeds, preserve the harvest, and gain the understanding that they are part of the natural systems they inhabit, as well as part of a food chain, it is deeply empowering.

As culture we have lost a lot of the skills and wisdom needed to provide for our own needs. We have broken the chain of knowledge that was once passed down from generation to generation. That is why this is a DIY generation, the ones who want to know how, how to do it themselves, how to do it healthier, how to make it last, how to do it sustainably, how to do more with less. Growing your own food is a great starting place; it opens the doors to explore what we eat, where our food comes from, compost, vermiculture, and other waste systems, water harvesting, seed saving, propagation, food preservation, and community sharing.

Working with animals that have been in partnership with people for generations is a privilege and a responsibility. Most of them could not return to the wild any better than we could and so we share a life of interdependence. It is imperative that we work with them in a posture of gratitude and respect. In this relationship we exchange services with each other. They provide labor: weeding, tilling, and grazing. They eat up the bits we don't, returning them to us as eggs, milk, meat, fiber and manure. We provide and maintain: clean bedding, shelter from the elements, and protection from predators, establish and maintain boundaries, bring them nutrient dense feed, clean water and medicine.

The exchange does not have to end there. We can work holistically with our animals by spending time in protracted and thoughtful observation looking for behavioral patterns listening to the diversity of communication, identifying social structures, and observing personal preferences. The more positive interactions we have with our animals, the more productive exchanges we can make. By using that knowledge, we can create calls that our animals will recognize as a call to food, or a predator warning, to lead the leader so that everyone will follow, using eye contact to challenge or to make friends. We will also know who eats what, who digs or scratches up the soil, when and where there will be eggs, and when there will be chicks. We can then create complex domestic environments where animals, plants, and people all work together synergistically.

**You wrote about repairing our damaged ecosystem in one of your emails. What or who is damaging the environment – and what are your remedies?**

I think we are all contributing to the damage of the ecosystem in many ways, big and small. I don't think we are behaving out of malevolence, but that we are caught up in a perfect storm of wastewater treatment plants, landfills, single use plastics, biocides, and petroleum dependent food. I believe that if we have the power to make a mess that we have the power to clean it up.

We have to start with how we think and how we care for ourselves what we consume and who will use what we don't. The change needs to start in our homes because our greatest leverage point is our lifestyle.

We can vote with our dollar, decide who grows our food and how, or grow our own, we decide where our clothes come from and who is paid to make them, we can manage our outputs by, composting, refusing, reducing, reusing and recycling.

We are our future, and I believe that if we can change our back yards and kitchens, then we can change the world.

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## **Bios –**

**Kateen** is a woman who loves to be working, in her past life she was a Master Gardener, youth leader, seamstress, and home school mom. After 20 years of teaching and mentoring she decided to create something more so in 2007 she purchased 40 acres of land and built Compass Rose Farms, a bio-intensive family farm and homestead. Two years later in 2009 she began an internship program to teach modern homesteading, holistic animal husbandry, and regenerative food systems. Effectually, she began converting the farm into a Permaculture demonstration site, and in 2014 she founded The Dirt Rich School, a non-profit education program dedicated to Teaching the next generation to live sustainably. She now manages the internship program, Local lectures, workshops, and volunteers.

Her passion for homecrafting has been the driving force behind much of the program at the farm school. Teaching her students the importance of growing your own food, harvesting sustainably, perennializing, seed saving, and working with and not against the weeds. She believes that our ability to take up Nature's surplus is limited by our knowledge of sustainable harvesting practices, tools, processing, storage and the ability to share with community.

When asked what drives her she says “empowering others to thrive, by showing them a life that is holistic, and in partnership with their ecology.”

She has worked in Scandinavia, the Philippines, Mexico, Canada, Alaska, Colorado, and the Pacific Northwest. Her most recent volunteer project was to design a daycare for the children of Colonet, Mexico. When she is not teaching, (she is sleeping) you can find her reading a book, sewing, or hanging out in her flower garden. She currently lives with her husband Scott, three “grown up” kids and the extended community at Compass Rose Farm in Port Townsend, WA.

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**Willi Paul** has been active in the sustainability, permaculture, transition, sacred Nature, new alchemy and mythology space since the launch of PlanetShifter.com Magazine on EarthDay 2009. In 1996 Mr. Paul was instrumental in the design of the emerging online community space in his Master's Thesis: “[The Electronic Charrette](#).” He was active in many small town design visits with the [Minnesota Design Team](#). Willi earned his permaculture design certification in August 2011 at the Urban Permaculture Institute, San Francisco.

Mr. Paul has been interviewed over 40 times in blogs and journals. See his early [cutting-edge article](#) at the Joseph Campbell Foundation and his [pioneering videos](#) on YouTube. Willi's network now includes multiple partner web sites, a 3 Twitter accounts, a G+ site, multiple blog sites, and multiple list serves and e-Community Groups including his [New Mythology, Permaculture and Transition Group](#) on LinkedIn, and his popular [New Global Mythology group on Depth Psychology Alliance](#).

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