

Rancho Mastatal Updates

April/May 2010

The rainy season has unquestionably arrived and our newly revamped gardens are loving the daily moisture. We're presently in a period of transition, in between internships and groups, and working hard to advance our projects until our next group in June. Our focus continues to remain on food with an expanded chicken coup (double the original space thanks to TY), a handful of new raised beds, a permanent goat yard, recent fruit and nitrogen-fixing tree additions and preparations to install a fish poly-culture in a new pond on the goat slope. Ducks will most likely follow the fish and then maybe a pig. Localvore

meals have been a new addition to Ranch-life this year. Every Saturday, we've been doing our best to prepare lunch and dinner from products produced only on the Ranch or from within a few mile radius. Cheese, milk, kefir, taro, yucca (cassava), *chaya*, Brazilian spinach, lemongrass, eggs, hot peppers, black pepper, ginger, turmeric, tapa dulce, black and red beans, butter beans, radish greens, pineapple, mustard, quail grass, Okinawan spinach, squash (flowers, fruit and leaves), amaranth, hibiscus, *katuk*, mango, oregano and a host of other locally produced goods have been getting featured more commonly at the Ranch's serving table. Our hope is to increase our quantity of these types of meals over the years. The eventual plan being to serve only food produced locally, though we're still years away from this.

As usual, we've had some pretty tough goodbyes lately. One of the most significant came a few weeks back when GREG packed up his bags to head to California to work on some projects stateside. WATSON has been an integral part of this community for over three years and his departure has us having to answer the question, "What are we going to do without Greg?" For those that know Greg, you understand that the Ranch and the community of Mastatal will be without one of the most capable and selfless humans on this planet. We all wish him the best with his upcoming endeavors and adventures and hope to see him back before the end of the year. To add insult to injury, we've also had to bid farewell to two of our close friends and two individuals that have provided us with incredible inspiration and a totally reinvented idea of what it means to produce food in Mastatal. NICOLE and RACHEL JACKSON (clap, clap, clap) are also both recently back in the States after extended stays with us. Again, we're asking ourselves how we'll cope without these two amazing people by our sides every day. Notwithstanding, we'll find a way, though it make take some time. This summer should be a busy one with our new internship beginning in a few weeks, the construction of the CLSC, caring for our new food systems, the hosting of a



starboard cork in stained glass

photo by sucia

Permaculture Design Course, managing our educational groups, and so much more. We hope to see you down here in the near future. If not, keep us abreast of your endeavors with an email when you get the opportunity. Enjoy the news.

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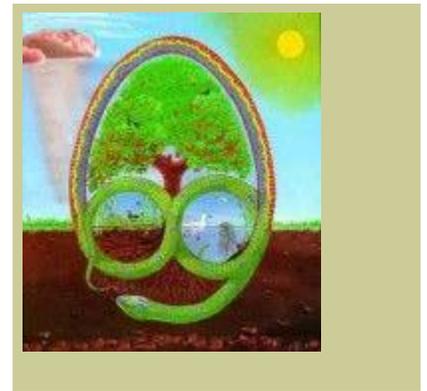
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RM Program News: Permaculture Design Course

We're fired up to announce that we'll be hosting our first Permaculture Design Course (PDC) in late-July. The course will be taught by well-known permaculturist CHRIS SHANKS of [Project Bonafide](#) on Ometepe Island in Nicaragua. The course will cover the core Permaculture Design curriculum including applications of Permaculture in diverse settings and techniques for meeting human needs that harmonize with ecological patterns. After the recent push in our gardens, orchards and with our animals, we're especially excited to keep the momentum strong throughout our summer months. We still have an immense amount to learn about and improve on our food systems and feel that the course will provide an important boost to our food systems. The course runs from July 21 through August 6. Please help us spread the word and for more information check out the Events Calendar on our website.



Building Report: The Maintenance Game

As more and more of the projects around here focus on the gardens and farm, new building projects seem to have slipped to a secondary role. It's a transition that's been anticipated for years as the Ranch infrastructure reaches a level of stability that allows for more time in food production and other creative arenas. Of course, with all the building that has gone on over the years, there is now plenty of maintenance to be had, a monumental duty in and of itself, but fortunately for the Ranch, the HERMANOS HERNANDEZ-PEREZ are up to the task. Indeed, Alex and Junior have been holding it down all across the grounds, ticking off an endless list of projects, including a new main gate roof, a reinforced wood barn, and a slew of rainy season improvements, most notably new gutters at the main house – the much more reliable metal roofing variety (thanks Grande.) Despite everything on their plate, the boys seem to truly enjoy the tasks, exercising creativity and ingenuity on a daily basis, and there is no doubt we could not be where we're at without them.

Meanwhile, the latest major building project, the bio-digester toilet, rolls along with its wattle and daub walls. It's an ongoing push to bring this structure to completion, but we've made some solid

strides thanks to the hands and feet of some new volunteers eager to get into the poop scene. Winter interns ANDREW and JORDAN also got the foundation in for the new garage out at Jeanne's house before they had to continue their travels. We look forward to raising the structure sometime later this year. Apart from these projects, most energy has been focused out at the big dig, where the latest element to the goat slope is steadily taking shape. More on that development below.

As for the CLSC, the pieces are coming together to start construction in June. A good portion of the materials have been procured and thanks to a recent fund-raising effort, we are in good shape to move forward. SPARKY O'ROURKE, close friend of the Ranch and a member of the board of directors of the Mastate Charitable Foundation (MCF), put his videography talent to use in March to make a short video on behalf of the Marion Institute and MCF to help raise funds for the CLSC. The short clip can be viewed and donations made on the [Marion Institute Website](#) where he will also soon be posting a longer video about the project. Many thanks to everyone for their support, and we hope you'll stay tuned as this exciting project comes to fruition.

Conservation Update: Lore of the Luna

As we find ourselves at the crux of the rainy season transition, getting plants in the ground has soared to the top of the priority list. For the past two weeks, "Planting Everywhere" has been a staple on the project board, and as you walk around the grounds here at the Ranch, it certainly shows. Indeed, weeks of caring for starts in the nursery have culminated in a surge of transplants: greens at the main house, *araza* and bananas at the bio-digester slope, neem and cinnamon at the Choza, cacao at the Hooch, and a mix of fruits and nitrogen-fixers out at the ever-changing goat slope. These are exciting times, full of dirty hands and lots of faith that our plantings will stick. But according to local lore, the moon is on our side.

For generations, tico agriculturalists and foresters have operated under the belief that fellings and plantings are best done during the waning phase of the moon. I asked Chepo what he thought might be the origin of this belief. He paused in his fashion and reflected, responding that it wasn't necessarily a matter of origin but rather of tradition and experience. This has been the custom handed down to him from his parents and from their parents before them, each one's personal experience supporting the belief that success is more likely in menguante. In my comparatively poquito time here in Costa Rica, I have to agree. In the process of extending the chicken coop for our younger ladies this past month, I had to take down a few small trees that were obstructing construction. Unfortunately it was not menguante, but since these more or less "weedy trees" were not being felled for lumber and time was of the essence, I let the axe fly. I removed all the stumps but one, the largest, which was to fall inside the coop and could be a perch for the ladies. That stump oozed sap and water for days thereafter, something I later realized would not have happened had I cut it down in menguante. Indeed, if the ocean tides are determined by the moon, why shouldn't the waters inside trees?

Whatever the reasons may be, scientific or spiritual, the moon's effect on the plants of Earth has directed many a tropical farmer and sawyer in their respective endeavors. Do those in the North or other temperate zones follow suit? Or is the "menguante" on par with the "pega" as a mystery never to leave tropical borders? Integral as the moon is to the workings of the world, I can only imagine it affects many more Earth dwellers than just here in Costa Rica. Fact or fable, it seems appropriate to

conserve one of the cultural practices of subsistence living that have sustained generations. And so with this month's planting push having come to a close, we take a little break and watch new buds grow with the May rains, while the moon approaches fullness yet again.



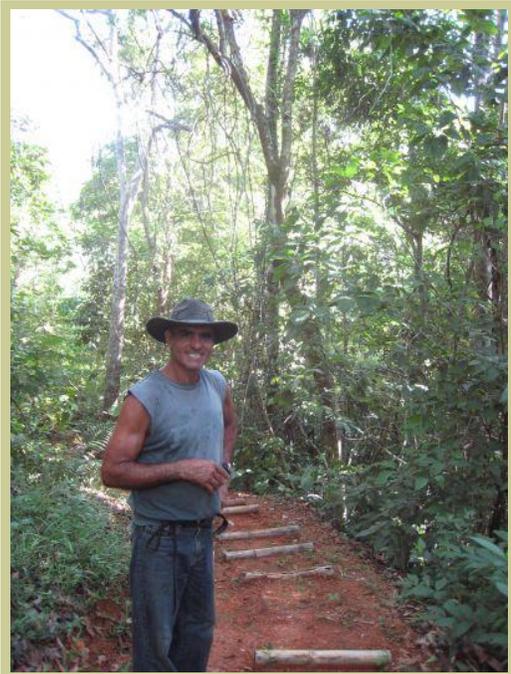
Pico surveys the new vegetable beds

photo by Chris Manning

Farm Facts: Fish

We've been talking about aquaculture around these parts for years but not until this month did we do much more than that. We've hand-dug a beautiful pond so that we may begin to raise tilapia and other fish species in a polyculture out at the goat slope. We're in the process of preparing the pond to receive its new guests in a few weeks. The process was fairly straightforward but did not come about without a good amount of sweat equity. We're proud to be able to say that we did it all without the use of diesel-powered machinery. And we're all a bit more bronzed and fit as a result. The pond features an island that will soon be home to the obligatory coconut palm.

We'll soon be able to market our own "coconut-laden tropical island vacation package". Great fishing literally feet away. After finishing the "Big Dig", we sealed the bottom of the pond with fresh cow manure and added a few bags of lime in an effort to bring the pH of the lake to as close to neutral as possible, as this is the environment that the fish best thrive in. We added a few stakes of bamboo to the bottom of the pond to provide a surface on which the algae can grow as well as providing hiding spots for the fish from avian and other predators and then allowed Mother Nature to fill up the sizable hole we had dug. We'll be adding a few aquatic plants in the coming days and then two species of fish to start with, tilapia and another locally referred to as *guapote*, in a few weeks. Freshwater clams and a pair of ducks are also on the horizon. We'll be using the goat and chicken manure to feed the pond. Algae and phytoplankton will soon colonize the pond providing food for the fish. We'll also be feeding the tilapia seeds from our newly planted *Leucaena* trees once they start producing. *Guapotes* are carnivores and will keep the sexually prolific tilapia in check so that they do not overpopulate the pond, which would limit the number of larger specimens. *Guapote*, although slower growing, are also tasty fish. We should be serving our own fresh fish at the Ranch in 2011, and maybe sooner. We may have to forgo our "vegetarian fare only" title soon. If all goes well, we plan on adding more ponds in the future. We hope this to be a nice, closed system and a great addition to our growing Permaculture world. *Bon appetit.*



Here's a photo of friend and neighbor, Mario, along the trails in the rainforest
photo by Amanda Caudill

Community Stories: Homage to a Man, Part II

There he stood, machete in hand, perched on the trunk of a *guachepelintree* that lay hung up over a slope that, were it covered in snow on a ski mountain, would surely be a black diamond. But alas it is in a tropical rainforest, and his boots are not hard plastic but black rubber, their tread gripping the furrowed bark of a tree which he just felled in less than a minute with a few swift strokes of the axe. "*Cayó mal*," he says, not thinking twice about what he needs to do next. He puts the axe down and sets out across the fallen trunk, using his *cuchillo* now to chop away the branches and vines that are impeding its release. Every few steps he gives a little jump, urging the trunk to break through to the ground, until finally, it goes down and he with it. In a fashion indicative of the many times he's probably been in this situation before, he lands on his feet, machete raised high. "*Ya está*."

The man, of course, is none other than Don Mario, excelling yet again as the Tico definition of the kindhearted bad-ass. He's one of those guys you could easily write a book or

make a movie about, a workhorse of a man, more so than most, despite his fifty-plus years. Yet Mario's not one for the spotlight. A simple man of hand gestures, mesh jerseys and one-liners, he prefers to humbly enjoy the day-to-day action and coast by under the radar as he casually digs a dozen mounds of earth, clears a field of brush or plants a hundred stakes of *caña india*. Looking upon his work after, the most common reaction resembles something like, "Wow, what a machine." And though he doesn't consider himself an educated man, Mario knows more about the trees, plants and animals around here than most. He, too, is a stern believer in the *menguante* planting cycle, the reason he was felling that tree when he did. We were gathering stock to plant living posts for the new permanent goat yard, and *guachepelin*, Mario assured, was one of the best species for the job. And watching him wield an axe and machete, I was sure he was the best man for the job. In fact, he often is, whether it's on the grounds, on the trails, or up in the trees. Sure, he'll talk your ear off about work, but to see that grin come across his face and his shoulders dip as he lets out a modest giggle, it's truly an honor to be in his presence. And so it is with great privilege that I have shared some recent days of work with a man whose mindful muscle and gentle spirit combine to make him one of my all-time favorite people – the Don.

Intern/Guest Gossip: A School Volunteer's Insight

As the town of Mastatal continues to grow, so do its reputation and accomplishments. This past week about 30 teachers from around the country visited the *Centro Educativo Mastatal (la escuela)* to observe the teaching style of Humberto Campos-Madrigal, the teacher of 12 students aged seven to twelve. One of the reasons for the visit is the fact that two of the children, Ion and Moises, placed very highly this past year in a challenging science competition. With their exhibit on wattle and daub construction, the children advanced through three regional rounds, eventually winning one of the categories at the national level in San Jose. The knowledge and skills presented by Ion and Moises, (Ion now a two-time winner), stirred up talk about where exactly these children are from.

Coming from a small rural town in Costa Rica typically means very few resources for learning, and little to no exposure to outside cultures. The children of Mastatal, however, are very fortunate to have not only the direct and indirect exposure to numerous international volunteers, but also the extraordinary teaching skills of Humberto. Humberto is one of those rare teachers who truly cares about his students and the well-being of their education. Likewise, he sees the value that the volunteers bring and utilizes it to the advantage of the students. With many more volunteer visits to come, as well as the development of the town library, the future of Mastatal education is looking bright. One might expect more talk and gossip throughout the country of Costa Rica as this small town is truly put on the map for its well-rounded elementary education.



Cob, wattle and daub house under construction
photo by Tim O'Hara

-Jori Zimmerman



Cob Oven

Comida Corner: Spinach Fritters

This recipe for spinach fritters was inspired by one I found in Indian Regional Classics and then, in the spirit of our new local-vore tradition, replaced most of the items with local ingredients.

Brazilian spinach, quail grass, green bunching onions, *culantro*, turmeric and crushed papaya seeds (black pepper substitute) all came from our newly swaled, buzzing with dragonflies, croaking with frogs, bursting with green, front garden.

- 1 cup of flour
- 1 T vegetable oil
- 8 oz Brazilian spinach and quail grass
- 2/3 cup water
- 2 T chopped green onions
- 2 tsp crushed papaya seeds
- 1 T turmeric
- 2 T *culantro*
- ½ tsp salt

1. Trim and wash spinach, and cut any large leaves. Combine all ingredients for batter.
2. Heat oil in a pan for frying.
3. As the oil is heating up, add spinach to the batter, mix to coat and drop into oil.
4. Fry until golden brown, remove from skillet, serve, and enjoy!

Buen Provecho!

Futbol Follies: And the Rains Are Here...

After months of not hosting a sporting event, Mastatal invited Los Angeles and a mix of others to play a round of games in early April. With fútbol fever sweeping the town, the idea was to have games for the men, women and even the children. Indeed, the *chiquitos de Mastatal* were rip roaring and ready to go for their first official outing, with a hodgepodge of white shirts for uniforms and MARCOS at the helm. They didn't seem intimidated by the Los Angeles youth, decked out in their red and blue jerseys and taking penalty kicks for warm-ups. With IONCITO in the middle and MICHAEL in the net, the Mastatal kids gave it a good go, hustling up and down the field, but ended up letting in a couple of late goals for a disappointing loss. Nevertheless, in a display of the caliber of children they are, they left the field with smiles on their faces, excited to have played their first official outing. Plans are in the works to raise some funds to get them uniforms, and most afternoons they can still be found down on the field tuning up their game.

As for the women, it was their first match with their new baby blue jerseys, looking sharp as they ran circles around the Los Angeles squad. Another convincing victory for Deportiva Feminina Mastatal, showing signs of a renewed spirit and female solidarity that has been special to see. More on their action later...

That day turned out to be a pretty good fundraiser for the Mastatal sports committee, an entity that has resurfaced recently after a curious hiatus. As hosts, the Galacticos yielded their chance to play to the guests, but resumed play the following week in La Vasconia, where they battled a Parrita squad under the late morning sun. The yellowshirts were looking good most of the way, enjoying the nice wide field. They managed to put a couple in the back of the net but also suffered a few defensive lapses that led to a tied game and an anticlimactic penalty kick finale. Marcos did his best but was unable to come up with the necessary stops and Parrita walked away with the victory. Mastatal stuck around as the *cabalgata* and dance gained momentum, watching the women take it to La Vasconia, led by the dynamic gringa duo of NICOLAI and JESS up front, who combined for several goals in the convincing victory. A few beers later, the men took the field again in the rain, delivering a slightly sloppier performance that ended in another loss. Nevertheless, spirits remained high as everyone piled back into the cattle truck for the ride home, another Sunday in the books.

After a mediocre outing in Guarumal, Los Galacticos headed next to the infamous May *campeonato* in La Gloria, where the reputation has been less than stellar for Mastatal over the years. Typically ending in coin flips, penalty kicks or hellstorms, most of their games on this short and stubby field have been less than inspiring. Not surprisingly, this year was no different, as Mastatal suffered an early elimination from the tournament and returned home in record time.

With the rainy season officially upon us, the Sunday outings have become wet ones at times, as was the case the following week in San Vicente. The Galacticos took the field first against San Martin, where they surged a nice comeback in the rain to tie the match at 2-2 before the thunder and lightning proved too much to continue. Minutes before the game was called, the yellowshirts put together a beautiful three touch combo which ended in WILLIAM's shin directing a crossed ball wide left – the would-be go-ahead goal. A solid outing overall, though, for the Galacticos, who stuck around to watch the women battle it out in the pouring rain – less than ideal conditions as the field turned into a giant pool of water, making for next to impossible ball movement. Missing a few key defenders and hampered by the awful weather, the Mastatal ladies suffered their first loss in

months. Not to be dampened for long, the women came back with a vengeance the following week in San Miguel, pouring in 6 goals from CAROLINA, ANNIA, ROXANA, KATTIA and 2 from NICOLAI. It was the farewell game for the star forward, who will be sorely missed but probably grateful to not have her jersey tugged at for 90 minutes every Sunday. She's been a great injection of spirit, speed and skill to the female squad, who will carry on a much-improved team into the coming months.

Lots of action in the past two months, with plenty more on the schedule in June, which also marks the start of the much anticipated *Copa Mundial* in South Africa. The excitement builds, with the Champions League final a nice appetizer to a month of *fútbol* frenzy. Who are you rooting for?

Inspirational Impressions: The Don

"Agua es vida."

-- Don Mario

Abrazos,

The Ranch Crew