



The Seven Seeds of Natural Happiness

Many people are seeking new skills, new approaches to help them to thrive amid too much change, uncertainty and complexity. A good model is *cultivated natural systems*: where an ecosystem such as a garden, or farm is steered to meet human needs sustainably.

The Seven Seeds approach grows from Alan Heeks' experience of creating gardens, a 130-acre organic farm and a 70-acre conservation woodland: working successfully for over 20 years. It also grows from the many groups he has led for individuals and organisations using ecosystems as teaching models. Alan's first book, *The Natural Advantage: Renewing Yourself* shows how people can use organic growth principles to improve their resilience and wellbeing.

1. Nourish Your Roots: take the tree test

A tree is highly resilient to storms, drought and other pressures: key to this is the balance between roots, trunk and branches, akin to inputs, processes and outputs for people. So imagine yourself as a tree, and use this test:

Roots: is your root system broad and deep enough to give you stability under pressure, and to access the resources you need?

Trunk: are your core approaches to life and work giving you flexible strength?

Branches: do your outputs feel in balance with the roots and trunk below; or are you over-extended or under-stretched?



A big insight for people from natural systems is that nourishing your ground condition and your roots is key to sustaining your fruits and wellbeing. So look at your inputs, not just outputs, and ensure you're able to take in the resources you need.

2. Cultivate Your Ecosystem, Harness Natural Energy Sources

The main energy sources for gardens and organic farms are sunlight, water, air and waste: natural, abundant, low-cost and non polluting. Intensive farming depends on energy from fossil fuels which stimulate growth short term, but deplete the underlying fertility of the land, and its resilience to pests and diseases.

Can you see the parallel for people? Where does your personal energy come from? Often, our efforts are fuelled by stress, fear, pressure and coffee. Pushing ourselves and suppressing problems is like using fossil fuel and pesticides: it builds up residues that reduce natural resilience and creativity. Recall times when you were deeply appreciated, or highly inspired: remember how energized you felt, how things flowed more easily. Appreciation and inspiration are like sunshine and fresh air: they can generate abundant energy, without polluting side effects. Gardening methods

like pruning, mulching and crop rotation can help us to cultivate our human ecosystem and raise our resilience, as can the seasonal growth cycle.

3. The Joy of Crap: composting waste

The beauty of any natural cycle is that there is no waste: every output becomes the input to the next stage of the cycle. In a wood, dead leaves rot down to enrich the soil. The organic farmer composts both animal manure and plant waste to create a major source of future fertility, and this is a key to improving soil condition whilst increasing outputs.

Where is the waste in your life and work that has energy and value? Think about negative feelings like anxiety, or conflicts and failures. Waste is usually messy: it takes new skills to collect and recycle it, but it can be done. For example, negative feelings can become a source of fresh understanding and constructive energy: both for you personally and in your relations with others. A key resilience skill is handling conflicts with other people. This is another example of composting: if conflicts are faced and processed, they can generate growth and learning.

4. Shaping Nature – the co-creative way

How do you respond to change and uncertainty? Often we try to suppress it by imposing control; deny it; or give up, because it's all too much. Gardeners and organic farmers are great examples of how to work *with* creative tension: using uncertainty, finding the 'gift in the problem'. By combining our active intent with the skills of receptiveness and adaptability, we can create a natural process of dynamic growth which harnesses change to create output.

This approach, co-creativity, is central to staying positive and achieving results amid uncertainty. It is staying positive and a dance combining hopes and facts, pushing and yielding, focused and peripheral vision. The elements in co-creativity include:

- ⊗ Tolerance for ambiguity, within and around us.
- ⊗ Developing both intuition and logic, and integrating them: The Diamond Process.
- ⊗ Synergy: using tension and uncertainty to find the 'gift in the problem'.

If you spend time with gardeners, organic farmers or foresters, you'll notice a quiet, reflective quality alongside huge capacity for action. Their vision, strategy, and response to problems arise partly from listening to the land, or whatever natural resources are involved (for example, yourself). There are two crucial skills here: sitting with stillness, and 'stalking the vision'. This is to the way observation and tracking are taught in wilderness skills: you must learn to sit or walk in total silence, and to cultivate wide-angle vision, so that you can see what is peripheral and marginal. Tracker vision is invaluable for people in all walks of life. The skills of Mindfulness are another approach to this.

5. Finding Strength from Community

So what's special about community in organic ecosystems, and what can people learn from this? Let's look at three aspects:

Symbiosis: this is the natural mutual support abundant in ecosystems: between different species of plants, animals, insects, and across categories. The relevance for people is to be ingenious and generous in building cooperation with others: give where you can, receive where you need.

Diversity: diverse plants and crops can nourish and protect each other, and raise resilience to disease and pests. Individuals and groups may find it hard to include enough diversity but it's worth stretching to do so.

Wild margins: these are the unmanaged areas at the edge of the system, and they play a crucial role in resilience. Wild margins are home to many 'unplanned' species of plants, insects and animals: when a new pest or disease strikes the main crops, its antidote is often found in the wild margins. Consider the human equivalent to this: what are the wild margins in your own personal talents, or your community's? Studies of human innovation repeatedly show that much of it comes from the wild margins in society, and in individuals.

It's clear that the mutual support, collective wisdom and other benefits of community are helpful for all of us. This calls for new skills like the ones above, and for more organisations to grow as communities.

6. Natural Inspiration

Sustaining inspiration and positive perspective really matters when we have to face so much complexity, uncertainty, and the troubles of the wider world. Nature is a great ally in this, especially linked with methods like Mindfulness and Deep Ecology: it can help us relax, expand, and see different perspectives. The way a gardener evolves and reshapes the vision for a garden can guide us too, also permaculture principles like People Share – Earth Share – Fair Share.

7. Life as A Garden: local, natural, personal

Keeping your life more like a garden is a good antidote to the impersonal artificiality of 'screen world'. Gardeners celebrate progress, compost their failures, and realise that the process is a big part of the product. In other words, the love and care we put into everyday life and work can really nourish our happiness and other people's.

Many of the 'outputs' from a garden are intangible, yet deeply valuable: it helps to see our life this way, and especially to value the quality of our connections to people and nature. Gardeners give more attention to the journey, the here and now, than to the destination, and they are happier for it.

*The seven seeds of natural happiness form the basis of Alan's forthcoming third book, titled **Natural Happiness: The Roots of Resilience**. If you would like to see more material from the book, and keep informed about related events and publication details, click here to sign up for Alan's free monthly [e-newsletter](#), or see www.naturalhappiness.net*