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## PERMACULTURE & PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Sarah Irving describes a new programme which brings together British and Palestinian Fair Trade organisations to highlight the role of sustainable agriculture in supporting livelihoods in the West Bank.

**T**rees for Life – a project of Manchester’s Olive Co-operative, London’s Zaytoun and the Palestinian Fair Trade Association, based in Jenin – gives people in the UK the opportunity to sponsor the planting of new olive trees

*Above:*  
Israeli and Palestinian workers at an OE workshop.

to replace those destroyed by the Israeli army and settlers in the course of building settlements, roads and the Separation Wall. The Applied Research Institute Jerusalem, a Palestinian agricultural NGO, estimates that half a million such trees have been uprooted or cut down since the beginning of the second Intifada in 2000.

The renowned peace activist and permaculturist, Starhawk, commented on the rural Palestinian villages that she visited in 2002: “Now, looking at the land from the perspective of permaculture and ecological design, I find myself impressed by the elegance of Palestinian

agriculture, so integrally suited to the land and climate, frugal in its use of water, making use of the plants native to or adapted to this region, somehow preserving enough fertility in this stony soil after ten millennia of cultivation to produce figs, grapes and oil and bread. The ‘scientific’ agriculture practised in some of the settlements, with profligate use of water, energy, and chemicals, seems to me another form of assault on the land. The Israeli side of the border was green, I now know, because they’d taken all the water, as the Sharon government is now confiscating the aquifers.”



*Left:*  
Author Sarah Irving.

The Trees for Life project is part of a wider movement to explore sustainable ways of making a living for the rural population of Palestine. Unemployment in the West Bank is as high as 60%, and for many families the products of their olive groves are key to their economic survival.

Efforts to bring Palestinian and Israeli farmers together at the village of Budrus illustrate how important permaculture can be in providing a common language for people on different sides of the conflict.

According to Lucy Michaels, a British-Israeli woman living in Jerusalem and working for a joint Palestinian-Israeli NGO, the Alternative Information Centre, "Permaculture has taken off big time out here, with a very active email list – although not all of it engaged with the political situation." In Budrus, however, Palestinians and Israelis have gathered to learn sustainable agriculture together. The Awad family are Palestinians who lost much of their land to the building of the Israeli Separation Wall, and as a result of injuries sustained in Israeli army raids were unable to find other ways of making a living. After friends introduced them to an

Israeli permaculture activist they worked together to devise courses in traditional Arab farming, called Falcha, with accompanying lectures from leading Israeli permaculture experts. The courses now attract around 15 people per week – a combination of international visitors, Israelis and Palestinians.

The Budrus courses are remarkable for being a long-term joint project which, according to Lucy Michaels, "is building connections between Israeli permaculture folk who have never been to Palestine, Israeli activists who have never done any permaculture, a family that has really suffered from the Occupation and a small Hamas village that is being strangled by the Wall. It has a fantastic atmosphere, although it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the two years of connections, trust and respect built up over the weekly non-violent demonstrations against the Wall in Budrus." She also points out that the woman who initially brought the Awad family and Israeli activists together has since been sentenced to jail in Israel for her involvement in the demonstrations against the Wall.



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**Top:**  
Mature olive trees.

**Top centre:**  
A newly planted olive tree as the result of sponsorship by the Olive Co-operative.

**Bottom:**  
A Palestinian farmer in his olive grove.

**ON THE WEST BANK**

Other Palestinian permaculture projects have not fared so well. Villagers in Marda, a village in the Salfit region of the West Bank, set up a permaculture and sustainable agriculture centre in 1993 in order to develop 'local resources for local needs'. The centre became a valuable hub for training on subjects such as composting, organic pest control, irrigation methods and grey water recycling, with senior agriculturalists from all over Palestine visiting to expand their knowledge of sustainable methods. Over 300 varieties of native seeds were cultivated and conserved, many plants, seeds and trees distributed, and a range of other resources offered, including training for women in literacy, English and computer skills. However, such a demonstration of self-



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sufficiency incited the hostility of the Israeli army, who raided the centre in November 2000, destroying the computers, files, seed banks and plant nursery. According to Maggie, a worker at Ma'an, a Ramallah NGO which supported the centre, no-one was allowed to enter the site for four years, and although some of the activities started there have managed to continue, the building itself remains unused and inaccessible.

However, within Israel itself increasing numbers of people are also interested in exploring new ways of relating across communities, and using permaculture and sustainability projects as a way of working together.

### BLOSSOMS IN THE DESERT

At Lotan, a kibbutz in the Arava Desert south of the Dead Sea, interest in organic agriculture and permaculture has been part of the settlement's radical Reform Jewish history. This has

**Centre:**  
Wadi el-Naam's  
strawbale  
clinic.

**Bottom centre:**  
Green  
Apprentices  
on a Centre  
for Creative  
Ecology course  
mulching a  
vegetable  
garden.

**Bottom:**  
Working in the  
organic garden  
at Kibbutz  
Lotan.



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blossomed in recent years with the establishment of a Centre for Creative Ecology and regular courses such as the 10 week Green Apprenticeship and permaculture design.

Mark Naveh of Kibbutz Lotan describes its organic gardens as growing "a fairly wide range of vegetables and herbs: tomatoes, carrots, broccoli, lettuce, onions, mint varieties, basil to name a few. We have lots of companion planting. The main environmental constraints come with being in an extreme desert region with only 25mm (1in) rainfall a year and high temperatures. We produce mainly from November through to May. The garden is pretty much dried out over the summer, except for a few hardy herbs. All our water in the region is pumped up from the water table which is a big sustainability challenge in the wider context. Also it is fairly salty, so we have to mainly go for relatively salt-tolerant plants."

As well as organic and permaculture production for kibbutz consumption and at times a veggiebox scheme, Lotan also engages with marginalised Bedouin communities in the area, many of whom live

in unrecognized villages which are under constant threat from the Israeli authorities. Mark Naveh explains: "The story behind the connection with Wadi el-Naam is that Devorah Brous, the main force behind the organisation Bustan and a long-time friend and associate of ours, approached us to help with a project she was initiating, the building of a straw-bale medical clinic for the village. We ran a one-day building workshop for a few of the adult residents who came to Lotan, then some Lotan residents supervised the on-site construction over the period of a week in 2003 with around 60 volunteers from the village and outside. There have been several additional trips since then when we've taken up a team to help finish the work."

As well as its associations with experimental building in Wadi el-Naam, Kibbutz Lotan has also run workshops in alternative building and agriculture for Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian youth through its connections with Friends of the Earth Middle East and its 'Good Water Neighbors' project, which focuses on the water



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**Bottom centre:** Constructing a strawbale dwelling around a geodesic dome former.

**Bottom:** An almost finished dwelling which is part of an experimental building project at Wadi el-Naam.

settlement agriculture and its impact on Palestinian communities.

The tour will be suitable for anyone with an interest in organic production, Palestinian farmers' co-operatives and suppliers and distributors of Israeli fresh fruit and vegetables. To book a place on the tour and to see the full itinerary, please visit [www.olivecoop.com](http://www.olivecoop.com) or contact [leonie@olivecoop.com](mailto:leonie@olivecoop.com)

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problems facing all the communities of the region and seeks creative solutions.

Buyers of organic fruit and vegetables in Britain's supermarkets will be familiar with Israeli produce. But Israel, unfortunately, is perhaps the epitome of how organic agriculture can become industrialised and divorced from its environment. Much of its produce is grown under intensive conditions, often on settlement land illegally appropriated and using water taken from aquifers under Palestinian soil. But the projects at Budrus and Lotan show that Israeli agriculture can be different, and that relationships between the peoples of this troubled land can also transcend ingrained stereotypes and hostility 🌱

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

For information on the Trees for Life project and on Olive Co-operative's Fair Trade and travel projects in Palestine and Israel, see: [www.olivecoop.com](http://www.olivecoop.com) or email: [info@olivecoop.com](mailto:info@olivecoop.com) or call 0161 273 1970. The Palestine Fair Trade Association is at: [www.palestinefairtrade.org](http://www.palestinefairtrade.org) and Zaytoun at:

[www.zaytoun.org](http://www.zaytoun.org)

For information on the Marda Centre and other sustainable agriculture projects in the West Bank and Gaza, see: [www.maan-ctr.org](http://www.maan-ctr.org)

For more information on the Budrus permaculture/Falcha project, see Lucy Michaels' article in the forthcoming August 2006 issue of *News From Within*, the Alternative Information Centre's magazine, [www.alternativenews.org](http://www.alternativenews.org) or [www.newsfromwithin.org](http://www.newsfromwithin.org)

For details of Kibbutz Lotan's permaculture courses and eco-tourism see: [www.kibbutzlotan.com](http://www.kibbutzlotan.com) and [www.bustan.org](http://www.bustan.org) for Bustan's work with unrecognised Bedouin communities. Information on the Good Water Neighbours project is at: [www.foeme.org/projects.php?ind=32](http://www.foeme.org/projects.php?ind=32)

In November, during the olive harvest, Olive Co-operative will be running an 'Agricultural Tour' which will visit various Palestinian agricultural organisations, including suppliers of olive oil to the UK. A trip to the Jordan Valley will also give participants an opportunity to see Israeli



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