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## Rice and Ready

Review by Peter Bane

**BEN FALK**

### *The Resilient Farm and Homestead*

#### *An innovative permaculture and whole systems design approach*

Chelsea Green. White River Jct. VT. 2013. 276 pp. paper. all color. \$40.

READERS OF THIS MAGAZINE may remember Ben Falk as that crazy fellow growing rice in Vermont. If you wondered what that was about, this book provides the answer. Rice paddies turn out to be a good way to use a cold, wet, sloping landscape. The land-shaping they require works well for a host of purposes. And Ben is all about getting multiple uses from every element and project.

It is a pleasure to see a younger author contributing strongly to permaculture's still modest shelf of literature. Falk's personal story involves strong interactions with landscape and strategic decision-making—he writes of wilderness camping—so the systematic thinking that characterizes whole systems design (Falk's business handle and his preferred term) seems to come naturally from his being.

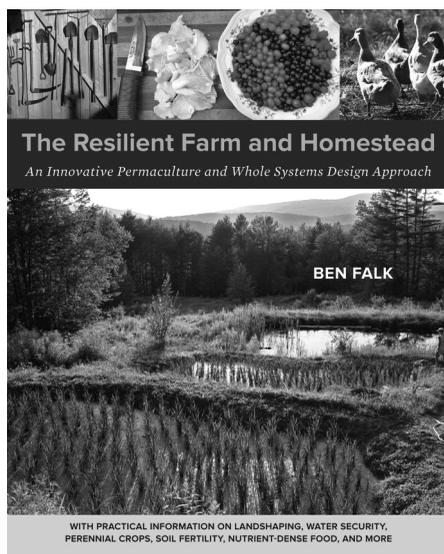
This book is tightly argued and rich with information. Modest in scope—it really is a case study of his 10 acres in Vermont—it nevertheless packs a wallop, in part from the author's intensity of consideration and attention to detail, and in part from the gravity of the subject. Though he assures us toward the end that quality of life is his primary driver (good...he's sane), the discussion of living well on the edge of a shaky economy ranges across a vast terrain from the weight of firewood to detailing of buildings that last to making medicine from plants and fungi in the garden. And though he modestly announces the limits of his knowledge on a range of subjects, the treatment he typically provides is not lightweight. We have to wonder what he hasn't yet turned his attention toward. There are lists of tools and species, firewood densities, specific recommendations for brands and types of equipment (do not miss the discussion on chainsaws), thoughtful exploration of the nature and durability of fuels, foods in

storage, and the caliber of communication equipment you might need with the electric grid down. Layer upon layer of thought and care have gone into creating his system. The reader will benefit.

The illustrations present a pleasing array of large and high-quality action shots with people doing everything from drawing maps and splitting wood, to making tinctures and working an excavator. These are interspersed with tables, lists and maps, and some intriguing graphs that suggest the seasonal and developmental rise and fall of various kinds of labor on the homestead—from food preservation to creating shelter, to animal management and preserving

chicken breeds, for example) may be a boon in disguise or better suited to certain management situations. Might be true.

To his enduring credit, the author admits where he doesn't have problems solved or techniques mastered. Making compost is apparently one of those: damping off problems with seedlings, indifferent performance; he buys in his compost from a pro. Fair enough, problem solved. And we see that Falk, for all his intensity and ambition, is not a superhero. It's bad enough that he's smart, good-looking, successful by all accounts, and surrounded by friends. You can't begrudge him though, because he's learned to share. Certainly this book shares ample amounts



food—further evidence of a systematic mind at work.

This range of subjects is present in the book as well. Falk is strongly opinionated, and in most arenas I would have little reason to challenge his judgment, though I suspect he has more to learn about a few things. He's most critical of other authors in his discussion of animals, breeds, and characteristics, which he largely dismisses as irrelevant distinctions, insisting that animals are almost entirely individuals, that their behaviors vary widely with setting, and that seemingly undesirable qualities (laconic foraging in some

of his learning, very well chosen and presented in a concentrated style.

I found his practical discussion of succession fascinating. He tried for several years to move a degraded pasture filled with goldenrod and other clumping herbs toward better grazing but couldn't master it by rotational pressure from sheep, even when combined with mowing. Finally he tried fire, which apparently reset the conditions to a place from which the animals could move the sward toward greater health and diversity. This took determination and insight and speaks well to his adaptability. The same approach might be ill-advised in a drier climate.

The range of subjects in the book is impressive, and with many authors this means they would be treated somewhat superficially. Falk seems not to know how to do that. In the broad chapter on Fertility Harvesting and Cycling, we get a good look at animal management and pasture renovation, leading into a 20-stage graphic explication of keyline fertility development, showing how this integrates with continuing rotations for soil building. The emphasis is on function and that permaculture essential, connection: the keyline subsoiling allows plant roots to go deeper where their decay builds humus. The animals are there to manage the plants. And while it's necessary to

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know how to treat the animals properly, it's just as important to know when the paddock needs to be mowed and how to sharpen the scythe. We get these details, carefully explained, in the context of the systematic development of fertility. Oh, and some great pictures of sheep, the crop that nearly destroyed Vermont 150 years ago. That Ben enjoys the rhythmic peace of scything wet pasture grasses in Spring more than almost anything is a lovely bonus.

The book's largest theme is the dialectic between regeneration and resilience—renewing the fertility and richness of natural systems and of our knowledge and interaction with them, even as we plan for dramatic volatility in social, economic, and ecological conditions. All of the book's sections use this template to present their material, beginning with the first chapter on Legacy and Change, which asks such questions as “Dwelling or fleeing?” and “The Green Distraction and the Political Black Hole.” Here he addresses emergencies and scenario planning. From this meta-view, coupled with an introduction to his own site, Falk launches into Design Process and Site Establishment with a wide range

of excellent drawings and techniques illustrated. Note to reader: Learn to draw! The middle chapters cover fundamental elements of the farm and homestead: Water and Earthworks, Fertility, Food Crops, Adaptive Fuel and Shelter, and lead directly to the final chapter on Long-Term Regeneration and Resiliency. In this section, the author considers forms of land tenancy, the nature of cooperation, care of the human genome through medicine and responses to increasing toxicity in the environment. The whole is a thoughtful assembly.

I could single out any of the areas Falk covers and find many things to praise. His view of Shelter is very practical and informed by experience. Here, as in other areas of the book, the sense comes through that Vermont's difficult climate presents the ecological designer with few options. Falk seems to relish cracking these nuts to extract the kernel of necessity, then wedding each to comfort and grace to build an enjoyable life. His mind runs in ways I appreciate: heat with wood, he says. It takes more work, but you can control the process from start to finish and capture all the benefits. And you need

never be cold. Then he tells you that your shelter must be efficient because burning a cord means moving 12,000 lbs. of wood in a year. (Oh, and he'll tell you how to stack it to dry well and how to use it too: burn the top 3/4, then restack the bottom 1/4 onto a new stack for the next year—the bottom wood has been buried in snow!) The typical Vermont house uses 5-10 cords annually. Good building design and lots of insulation free up time to think, play, write...

Whether you have 10 acres in the Vermont hills or a half-acre in suburban Louisville, this book will help you make better energy, technology, cropping, and land management decisions and will give you the context for understanding why you might want to choose a pathway of self-reliant living. Doubtless *The Resilient Farm and Homestead* will inspire others to follow their dreams soberly toward a thriving future. We should look for more from Mr. Falk in the years to come. Carrying a hefty price, but delivering generous value, this volume is highly recommended. △