



## The Subsistence Gardener

# SUBSISTENCE BUILDING

A definition of subsistence buildings could be buildings made from materials collected from the piece of land that they serve, and on which they are built. They therefore automatically fit into the landscape, and are completely compatible with local wildlife. At one time, nearly all dwellings in the countryside would have conformed to this definition; and homes in small towns and villages would have deviated from it only slightly. Nowadays, it may not be practical to live in a subsistence building, but that does not mean that other buildings on your land, apart from your official dwelling, should not be on a subsistent level.

When simply using material from the land, there is no clear dividing line between what is a building, and what is not. A hay stack is not a building, it is a pile of dry grass, but if it is made carefully, the top layer acts like thatch, and keeps the rest of the hay dry, just as though it was indoors. Similarly, a log pile can be covered with a thick layer of cut grass or bracken, which creates an impenetrable layer of thatch, that will keep the wood dry until it is seasoned, and ready for use.

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Simple structures such as these, can be made as soon as you move onto a new piece of land. If the land has been unused for a while, and trees have started to colonise it, they have to be cut down, or pulled up; the wood will probably not be useful for anything except firewood. It is particularly helpful to have a way of storing it, without extra expense of having to bring foreign material onto the land, such as plastic sheeting, or corrugated iron.

Materials for more sophisticated buildings emerge gradually, as your work on the land progresses, for example:

**Coppiced Poles:** Coppicing is a time-proven method of obtaining wood suitable for building. A mature hazel, for example, that has been properly looked after, will produce

stout, straight poles that are three or four metres in length, eight or nine years after being cut to the ground (depending on local conditions). These poles can easily be cut by hand with a small axe, and are easy to work with, as they are relatively light; but they are strong enough to make quite a large structure – a tool shed, or a field shelter, for example. For simple structures, forked hazel poles can be wedged together and will hold each other up. Poles can also be tied together with string or basket willow; which will last for several years if kept dry.

**Straw Thatch:** In time, subsistence gardening inevitably starts to generate large amounts of straw. Straw from cereals, particularly rye, has remarkable water repellent properties, and is an ideal roofing material. A layer of rougher material can be applied first (bundles of mustard straw, broom, or hazel branches, for example), to stop the straw slipping. The straw can be pegged in place with strips of split wood.

**Stones and Earth:** In many areas, subsistence gardeners spend a lot of time removing stones from their fields. These stones can be added to the banks, but the better ones can also be put to one side, and used in building projects. If you have clay on your land, you can pack it between the stones to make thick walls that will support a roof structure.

## Keeping Things Dry

In your main dwelling, you probably want things to be completely dry, particularly if you have electrical equipment; but for other buildings, the aim may simply be to keep off most of the rain, for most of the time. It does not matter if a few drops of water get through to fall on a wood pile, or a pile of straw, and even a shed in which you store your hand tools does not need to be completely watertight – old tools are more robust than modern ones.

If you have the straw, it is always worth using it to make a shelter, even if it is not perfect. There are always things – such as coppiced poles cut in the winter, baskets, willow, etc. – that keep better under shelter.

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## Living Buildings

One of the main features of subsistence buildings is that they are life-friendly. From the outset, they welcome living creatures – mice and birds search amongst the thatch for any grain that you have left, and, in the spring, make their homes amongst it. None of the materials are treated, so the process of decomposition starts straight away, even though it may proceed slowly. Fungae will set to work, and all sorts of insects will colonise both the straw and the wood, which, in turn, will attract more birds, and other small animals. Having a few natural buildings in the heart of the garden is not only useful, and human-friendly, but also makes it a centre for wildlife, and will improve your chances of establishing a balanced ecosystem in the garden.

