

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode #79 : Meet: Michael Judd

<https://www.judithdreyer.com>

Welcome everyone to my podcast series The Holistic Nature of Us. This is Judith Dreyer and I invite you to journey with me into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties us directly to the natural world around us. My intention is to be your guide for this half hour as we begin seeing our world with fresh eyes, gaining more understanding and learning how can connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us.

I feature a broad range of guests deeply concerned about the environmental issues of our time and more; authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth and for all species help us create sustainable bridges of understanding. These folks are innovators, action oriented, creating solutions in a variety of ways that honor us and the planet's holistic nature. I am so honored to share their stories, their projects, and their passion with all of you. So, thank you for joining me today for another engaging interview.

And today I am so delighted to introduce you to Michael Judd, who is the author of *Edible Landscaping, with a Permaculture Twist*. He has worked with agro-ecological and whole system designs throughout the Americas for nearly two decades, focusing on applying permaculture and ecological design. His projects increase local food security and community health in both tropical and temperate growing regions. He is the founder of Ecologia Edible and Ecological Landscape Design and Project Bonifide, an international nonprofit supporting agro-ecology research.

Welcome Michael to the Holistic Nature of Us!

MICHAEL: Great. It's good to be here. Thank you.

JUDITH: You're welcome. Tell us about yourself. I know you have so much experience in ecological holistic design and that seems to be an area where we're finding great concern, because we can do so much as local landowners.

MICHAEL: Yes, I know. I was listening to that intro. You know my bio, there's a lot to unpack there and it kind of brings us back to earth so to say and yes, there is so much needed right now. But how do we make it practical? You know, what can we do in our yards and in our landscapes that feed us but then also the cycle the needs for wildlife, for our local watershed. And this is where I look to when I design. How do we stack these functions, so that things look good, which is important in a lot of landscapes but then are productive and support the ecologies around us? And that's kind of what I brought into my first book Edible Landscaping.

JUDITH: Your first book, I have to tell the listeners, is beautifully designed. The pictures are gorgeous so that you get a real sense of the tips and your advice in very practical ways in the Edible Landscaping book.

MICHAEL: Yeah, I'm big on "how to" toward a short on the philosophy and then like, okay so what does this look like? You know when you go out in your yard and you're looking at the sea of grass and you have this head full of ideas but like where do I begin? I like to break it down.

As an example, let's say you want to plant a fruit tree and instead of going out there and digging a hole for it in the middle of the lawn and maybe giving it a foot or two of mulch, think about how you could set-up a sort of a guild, a companion planting patch if you will, where that tree is going to be planted with something that helps fix nitrogen, something that helps draw in pollinators, something that helps create a living mulch. This becomes what we call a food forest patch. It's taking the observations of how natural forests work and it's applying some of those principles when we plant our fruit tree. So, it becomes very practical in this sense. Then what you design helps take care of it and you're not on the hook to go out there and keep maintaining and caring for that tree, as you would if you just stuck it in a sea of grass, then it really needs you. This is a way that kind of creates a small ecosystem when you're planting a tree or looking at shaping and growing food in your landscape. It's really a way to help yourself as well as what you're planting.

JUDITH: I agree. You know, again for the listener's benefit, I had a chance to see you in action or your yard in Maryland. I was impressed when you talked about putting in a fruit tree because we don't often think about companion planting and what would that even look like in the middle of our lawn? So, you gave us a very practical example. I would love you to go

over that with us. Select one little fruit tree, what other companion plants would go with that. You're talking about a small space, right?

MICHAEL: Yeah. I mean it can be anywhere from a small space. So, the term food forest makes a lot of folks think of a large scale but really a food forest can be an 8'x8' patch. It's really a concept. It's an observation of how healthy forest ecosystems work. And you see when you look at a healthy forest there's a lot going on. You have over story and mid story, under story trees, shrubs, ground covers, vines, all doing really well together.

So, it's like okay, how do we take that pattern when we are going to plant something on our landscape? And obviously we're not going to maybe stack it that intimately but let's put some things together. And usually these are perennial plants that you put together. They don't have to be but again, when you're working with perennials like this, they stay and do a lot of the on-going work for you. It can be a small 8'x8' patch where the center of that is going to be your fruit tree. Now I like to work with what are sometimes called uncommon fruits, uncommon but easy to grow fruits. I'm a big fan of Lee Reich and his work. He's a wonderful author and fan of easy-to-grow attractive and tasty fruits. And this usually pulls away from the common favorites which can be a little more time intensive and sometimes more disease prone fruits. I'm thinking in our neck of the woods here that's apples, plums, peaches, even pears with fire blight and things in our area.

JUDITH: So, you choose something different?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I grow Paw-paws. I grow June Berries. I grow flying dragon citrus down here. I grow Jujube trees. I grow a lot of the berries. Elderberry, aronia, and a few of the black currants do well where we are. I work with what's going to thrive and I kind of design for neglect. But putting in a little bit of design allows you to kind of, you know, design for neglect.

And that comes back to this, that when we plant our fruit tree, whatever it is, let's go ahead and put in some of the things that it's going to need so that we're not on the hook for bringing it in constantly. Nitrogen you know is a key element that helps most plants really thrive. There's a lot of nitrogen fixing plants out there, that fix it through the air into nodules on their roots.

Typically, these are in the leguminous family. And on a small scale this could be something like false blue indigo. It could be lupines. You know it could be the smaller more attractive soft perennials that you could put in close proximity to your tree, your fruit tree.

So, when I'm planting fruit trees, I will often stick my nitrogen fixers in the same hole as my fruit tree or within one foot of that young tree, and this goes against most people's concepts of spacing. But really you want this nitrogen fixing shrub or bush right in the root zone of your young fruit tree so that it can begin feeding the root zone. And then over time it can phase out. It's really something that's kind of using, kind of what you might call a nurse plant, something that's helping your main food producer get going.

We have a lot of deer in our area, so I like to work with leadplant. Its cousin is the false indigo bush and they're woody perennials that the deer don't like. And I will also put those in close in with my fruit tree roots with the understanding that I will keep cutting them back if they start to get too big. If they start to crowd out my fruit tree I'll just, you know what we call in Permaculture, chop and drop and that way I'm still planting my mulch where I need it. It's a combination of nitrogen fixing and mulching in one go and it's right there where I need it. So, I'm not going and hauling this or that. I'm not hauling in nutrients. I'm not hauling in mulch. I've planted it right where I need it.

In my case where I have actually a couple of acres of food forest, you know multiple fruit trees and lots of things going on, I can move through those couple of acres within a half hour to an hour. I can chop and drop and I will have fertilized and mulched, you know, upwards of a couple of acres and be back in my hammock, you know, swinging and enjoying myself, and not still working, and I haven't had to go and buy materials. It really, when you combine the plants, you really reduce the input both physically and monetarily. In that same vein I also like to plant mulch plants. Things that will create a living mulch, ground cover for me in the sense that they will help hold that moisture and build the soil and keep out a lot of the plants that I don't really want growing in there, because that means I'll have to maintain it more. And one of my favorites, well I have quite a few favorites, mints in general I like because they're such amazing pollinators and they make great mint juleps.

JUDITH: I'm going to interrupt you here. I have to say that you had everybody's jaw dropping when we saw your land and we saw all the mint around. You inspired us to say that mints are great for chopping and dropping no matter where they show up.

MICHAEL: Yes. Now of course that's very small landscape. You might want to go with a mint that stays put a little more. And that could be, in the mint family you've got bee balm, you've got catnip, you've got lemon balm. You know a lot of these characters that might be a little easier to manage than say a spreading mint. But yes, all of them are wonderful pollinators. They are all great biomass, so they're producing a lot of plant material that yes, you can inject, and you can go in there and you can chop and drop and sort of pulse that cycle. But even if you don't, they're going to die back and they're going to create that organic matter, ground cover habitat for beneficial insects and you know lizards and toads. This all adds up to also balancing the insect ecology in your landscape. Having perennials in your landscape constantly helps create a lot of different types of balances.

Another one of my favorites is running comfrey. A lot of people are familiar with a standing comfrey but there are running comfrees. There's spreading comfrees and again a great pollinator, great soil builder, also medicinal that you can harvest and use yourself. So just know that there are other types of comfrees to find out there and I use them because again, I've got a couple of acres. I need help out there. I get these guys going around my trees and they really do most of the care for me. And if I want to plant another type of fruit bush or something in there, I can do that above that height typically. I can get a little bit of that over-story, mid-story, you know, spaced out concept there with food forests.

JUDITH: Yes, it's amazing to see. I know when we were there you had planted a tree, showed us the mulch, showed us how you cut out that square. And then you had other plants that you were putting in there. I happen to like wild edibles. That happens to be one of my specialties. And it was neat to see, you know, yarrows there and hyssops and mints that we could cut and take and dry and bring home and use for food, especially through the winter months, not to mention delicious ice teas in the summertime. So that was exciting to me to see the variety of plants that you put around a fruit tree in a small space that, as you said over and over, is very helpful because it cuts down our amount of time we have tend to everything.

MICHAEL: And it adds diversity and that's kind of another word for like a little ecosystem. You know for your tree. So, I tell folks not to get too worried about, you know, exactly what these companions might be. I like for people to plant what they want to interact with. If that's a certain type of herb that you know you will harvest and use, let that be, one of your companion plants. And just having a diversity of plants flowering and again just that insect habitat, the organic biomass you know pulsing, all of this stuff adds to your tree.

JUDITH: Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt again, but that's a great teaching because I think what I've learned about trees is you have to be careful say putting impatiens under a shade tree because they need so much water. That's not good for the root system of the tree. But what you're saying is you're putting plants there that don't need as much water, am I hearing you right?

MICHAEL: Well I, so backing up a little bit, when I create a patch, I set the long term soil building by creating a sheet mulch, also known sometimes as like a lasagna garden. So, I'm starting out by building up multiple layers of organic matter, whether that's compost, manure, newspaper, cardboard, woodchips, straw, leaves. You know I'm creating this sort of sponge on top of my, you know whatever it is, usually lawn or some area that probably does not have great soil, which is what most people are dealing with. And I want to be able to get that started a year before.

I'll say, okay well there's the area where I want to put a fruit tree. Let's outline an 8-10' foot patch and let's go ahead now and start layering all these materials on there and maybe just leave that for the full year. You come back after a year and that area is beginning to turn into compost, basically, and there's a lot of available nutrients. There's a lot of available moisture. I'm not so concerned about there being competition for nutrients and water by putting things in close proximity. And again, I'm putting in things that fix nitrogen. And I think in general, we do have a misconception of competition when it comes to plants and yes when you're looking at the annual garden and yes there are certain balances to be had. But when you get into these perennial systems there's a lot of symbiosis that begins to happen, and the benefits. So, I think having that ground cover around your trees typically is going to help feed the soil system overall and help your fruit tree. I mean there might be exceptions to that but generally I would encourage people to step away from the concern of competition and start

putting things together, and then it will guide you. You will see and you will learn this is an endless journey. When it comes to food forests and a lot of these designs, there's no written set rules for how you're supposed to do something. Really the concept is yes, jump in, start doing and start observing and it will teach and guide you and it's wonderful because then you become part of this ecosystem. There's so much to harvest from that.

JUDITH: Yes, I love how you tied that all in. Again, I'm trying to share a message of holism in all different aspects of life and we forget that we're a part of it. And I think gardeners in general tend to know that on some level because they're very connected to their gardens, their plants. They have their passion, their favorites, and they become very good observers. But for those of my listeners who might be beginners or wanting to change something in their yard, I think the way that you described the diversity and the perennial system makes a lot of sense.

MICHAEL: Yes, sometimes you just need to hear it. I've certainly proved it and so have many others who work in the holistic permaculture design. This stuff really works and it's really just kind of letting go and exploring and then yeah, realizing that you're a key part of this system. And that's when it really gets juicy anyway to get out there and get gardening. But yeah when you're new to something and you're looking at a lot of the books which do kind of come from a separatist standpoint, a lot of times teachings come from the university level and they're more scientific, you kind of have to look at the paradigms that information is coming from and feel free to step away from that. And really the main thing is to observe, sort of be unbiased and see and tune in and the plants and the systems will feed you back the information that you need.

JUDITH: That's really true. They're there to help us to on so many different levels and they support us in so many different ways. What you're advice and your story and experience is reminding me, I just interviewed Doug Tallamy who wrote "Bringing Nature Home" and he has a new book out called "Nature's Best Hope" but his premise is, let's look at our front and backyards and add diversity there. And you mentioned how this diversity really supports our insect population and I think right now the insects are really hurting. They've lost habitat and they're getting poisoned from many different sources. So, if we can, as homeowners, add something different this year, something else this year into our yard, and as you say pick

something that you really enjoy doing, we're going to make a difference collectively in the long run.

MICHAEL: Yes.

JUDITH: So, you talk about some of these uncommon fruit trees and I know you've written another book on paw-paws. How about telling us about your work with that particular fruit?

MICHAEL: The paw-paw is a fascinating species, a very adaptive species. It's the only member of its family, the custard apple family, which is a tropical and subtropical family that includes yes, the custard apple, the sour sop, and the cherimoya. Anyway, the Paw-paw at some point, I don't know how many millenniums ago, I don't know, began to travel north from the tropics. It sort of sliced off of the family and started traveling in the guts of giant mastodons and sloths and came on the receding glaciers all the way up to Southern Canada, Ontario and adapted. You know constantly it was changing environment to where we now have a tropical fruit tree that grows in the north. There's nothing else like it. It is a phenomenal species in many ways and the fruit is exquisite. So, when you find the improved genetics, you know some of the best of the fruit of the Paw-paw it's up there with some of the most delicious fruits in the world. The description is that it's custard-like. It has flavors of banana, mango, pineapple and you can get fruits upwards of two pounds in size. It's like a very large mango and it's like dessert. It's very rich. It's very creamy. It's like nature's desert and very nutritious.

JUDITH: Yeah, how cool is that!

MICHAEL: It is. It's very different than any other fruits. And the reason that we're not more familiar with it commercially is that it has a very short shelf life so it's quite perishable, which is another reason to grow it yourself. Now it will grow up into zone 5 but it likes a warm summer to ripen its fruit. So then in Connecticut if you had a bit of a microclimate where things get a little bit warmer, I would encourage you to try Paw-paws. They're very ornamental as well, so even without the fruit the tree is beautiful. We're talking large lobed deep green leaves that aren't really troubled by insects or disease, in full sun. Paw-paws do grow in full sun, so this is another thing most people think about Paw-paws is that it's an under story tree or multi-stem shrub in the woods, and yes it grows there. But remember, we're

talking about a very adaptive species, so you can bring it out into full sun and it takes on this beautiful pyramid shaped tree you know maybe 12-15 feet tall and they can be spaced only 12 feet apart. So, even in a smaller landscape you can get a pair of Paw-paws tucked onto the side or in the back and they will cross-pollinate, or you can go out there and easily pollinate them. And then you can have some of the most exotic fruit in the North.

JUDITH: In the neighborhood too.

MICHAEL: In the neighborhood, in the yard they're great conversation pieces. They make delicious ice cream. So, the trick to their perish-ability is just to pulp them and the pulp freezes really well, sometimes for up to two years. Then you can take it out and put it in smoothies. It makes great jams. It's really exquisite. I love it in recipes, and they are in my new Paw-paw book as well. It makes great wine. If you're a talented wine maker, the Paw-paw wine or Paw-paw mead is exquisite.

JUDITH: Hmm, how about that? I know it's nothing that we talk about too much up here in the Northeast in the Master Gardener Programs, but I believe there was one when I lived in Virginia, in one of the Master Gardener demonstration gardens down there. What a great plant and you've become quite an ambassador getting them into our gardens.

MICHAEL: Yes, I love it! We have a Paw-paw festival as well down here in Maryland usually the third Saturday in September. So, if anyone's traveling or wants to come on down, we celebrate all things Paw-paw here on our homestead. It's kind of an open house to come and see our food forests, our gardens that are designed on swales, our mushroom growing, our circular straw bale house and then of course the Paw-paws and tours, ice cream, music. It's a lot of fun.

JUDITH: Oh, I bet it is. I'm going to see if I can plan a trip down there at that time of the year. I'd love to do that.

Well what I'd like you to do before we conclude is to give our listeners three practical tips. You know we're talking about a holistic concept here. We're talking about diversity. If you want to sum it up into three practical tips for them, I'd appreciate it.

MICHAEL: Okay tricky. So, one I mentioned already is **observe**, and that sounds a little vague but really **observe what's doing well in your**

landscape and go with that energy because it's already there. So, for me here, Paw-paws do grow wild all around me. I'm like okay look, this energy is here it won't take much when I interact with it to kind of get a lot from it. That goes for mushrooms as well around here. It's moist. We have a lot of woods and mushrooms are growing well. Okay it won't take much for me to interact with that energy and then I'll get lots of shitake, oysters, things that I'd enjoy harvesting but I don't have to put a lot of energy into it.

So, it's already here and that's by observation. See what's doing well and maybe start with some of that energy because you'll have success quickly. Observation is good. See how water moves on your landscape and wind. Water and wind are two of the first components that I'm always observing when I'm consulting or looking at landscapes. Really observe and work with those up front. I outline practical ways to do that in my book as well.

Two – **mulch, mulch, mulch**. I don't think folks realize really the extent that that it's very beneficial to mulch. So, for example, when I'm doing a fruit tree patch or something, I will use at least eight inches deep of woodchips, eight inches. It's like almost a starting point for me when I'm mulching an area, especially if I want to transition it. You know if it's lawn, it's grass; it's some weeds, whatever. It's less than ideal soil, mulch it deeply. When you go eight inches or more with mulch you die off what's underneath and that also begins to build soil. And then you start sponging moisture, which is what's needed to build those biological cycles in the soil and bring in the fungi. So deep mulch in general, mulch well and then ideally you get a living mulch in place so that you're not maintaining that. But just mulch, mulch, mulch, mulch deep, mulch wide. That will help the soil, the plants and you in the long run.

JUDITH: Yeah that's great, very, very practical tips. And again, it kind of - you know some of the garden stuff says mulch three inches but you're saying do much more than that and that's great for building the soil in the long run. We're not talking about short-term pretty much in the spring; we're talking about maintaining things for the long term.

MICHAEL: We're talking about soil health and that needs constant feeding. So, if you do three inches, really the top inch or two is just protecting that bottom inch because that top is getting dry. It's not really biologically active too much. It's protecting. It's a cap for that inch below and now that's getting biologically active because it's constantly moist. You need constant

moisture for that soil building but that will exhaust itself pretty quickly during the summer and then you're soil biode and fungi are pretty much out of food, so things kind of slow down or stop or die out. Whereas if you have that thick mulch, you've got in place that constant cycle and constant moisture which will keep your soil biode and fungi pumping, which will keep your plants and everything else pumping. So really, it's habitat that you're maintaining.

JUDITH: Great, again, practical advice for going forward, especially since spring is here and everybody is getting outside so...

MICHAEL: Yay!

JUDITH: Yeah, so Michael what I'd love you to do next is to give us all your contact information, especially not only just the books but your Paw-paw Day.

MICHAEL: Ah sure, yeah, well all this is really visible on my website which is www.ecologiadesign.com Ecologia is a Portuguese word for ecology and there you'll find a lot of how to on there as well, and of course ways to preview my books and see about events. We do a lot of hands on here as well of everything from growing mushrooms and grafting trees to creating food forests. So, keep an eye out, sometimes tours – things like that, opportunities to come visit and see what we're doing. Facebook – I've got a couple of different Facebook pages. One is Edible Landscaping with a Permaculture Twist and the other one is For the Love of Paw-paws. Those are both the names of my books. Those are popular Facebook pages and Instagram, if you're on Instagram. I'm at Permaculture Ninja and otherwise, yeah. I think that's plenty.

JUDITH: Oh yeah that's wonderful. Lots of great ways for us to contact you and ways for people to get your book. I highly recommend the Edible Landscaping one. I refer to it all the time and again, the pictures that you put in here are so clear and beautiful – they're photographs – and you give step by step instructions, so it makes it a great addition to anybody's garden library.

MICHAEL: Great, yeah thanks! I want it to be appealing and let people know that this can be very attractive as well because that's important, you know? That's a cultural aspect to design that should be in realism for people wanting to do this in areas where that's important. So, I keep that forefront.

JUDITH: Well all I can say is thank you again Michael for joining us here at the Holistic Nature of Us.

MICHAEL: Yes, thank you for keeping the holistic nature shared with all of us.

JUDITH: Yeah and all I can say to my listeners is if you have a chance go to his website, check out some of his events going on. I highly recommend them. I was very impressed on the tour that you offered a few years ago on the property because it made everything not only practical but visual, and it came alive. I could see what you were doing firsthand. And I've taken some of that advice and brought it into my own gardens.

MICHAEL: Great, great.

JUDITH: All right folks, I just want to say thanks again. This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "*At the Garden's Gate*", book and blog. My book is available through my website <https://www.judithdreyer.com> as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. Please like and share them. Let's support each other and get the word out.

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