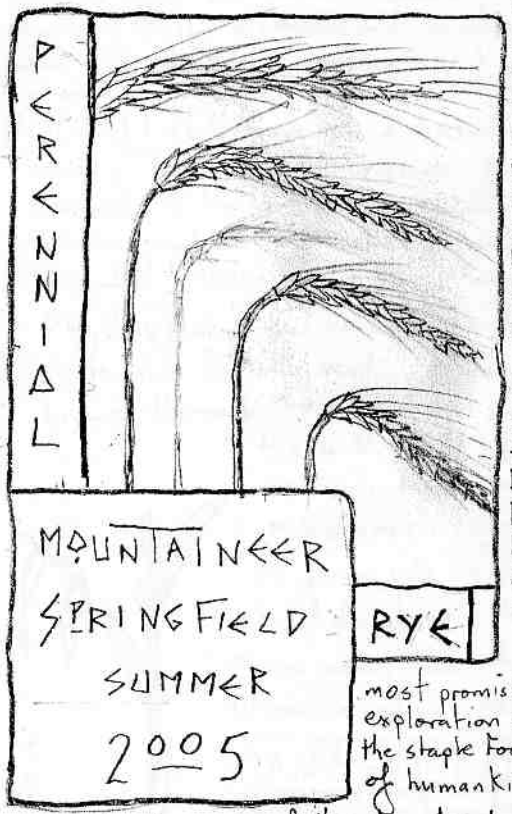
TIM'S QUIET TRIUMPH

"WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYONE ELSE, BUT I AM MORE RESPONSIBLE THAN ALL THE OTHERS."
– ALOYSHA KARAMAZOV, IN THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV.

The defining priority of permaculture is the hitching of our wagons to the evolutionary drift of the landscapes of which we are a part. In other words, we rely more on working with natural processes than in transforming the landscape & our lives through high energy inputs – such as repetitive labor, for example.

It's an approach that puts greater emphasis on 'perennial' as distinct from 'annual' food crops. Admittedly, this shift in fundamentals is in its cultural infancy, not least because recent historical trends have combined to ensure that the foundations of our diet and the overwhelming majority of research & development associated with it, is geared toward high input, conventional, monocrop, annual agriculture. Quite simply, we do not yet possess the range of foodcrops or experience to supplant this construct.



And yet behind the scenes, almost completely unnoticed, the visionary food-plant breeders in our midst have been quietly but assiduously devoting their lives to transforming this model.

One of the most promising areas of exploration relates to GRAINS – the staple food for the majority of humankind – and the emerging story around the decades-long efforts to perennialize them.

For complicated reasons, the creative tensions which hold all life in balance, appear particularly potentized in efforts to shift grains from an annual to a perennial habit. It has not been uncommon to see decades-long breeding programs flounder as the dynamic interplay of genetics runs into a brick wall.

But, as we might hope & expect, the challenge to creatively balance genetics in a way that Nature hasn't yet managed has attracted the attention of the brightest and the best, and right at the forefront of this global effort is an Oregon native, Tim Peters, most recently outta Myrtle Creek, about 2 hours south of town. Tim has been breeding plants for about 30 years. Passionately devoted to the Great Work, he possesses legendary status among the small tribe who have any idea what he has been up to all this time. Tim has devoted almost two decades work to perennializing grains. In a visit and series of phone conversations over 2004–2005 Tim gave context to my own fledgling efforts to root the perennial grain archetype in my own backyard.

FOOD CROPS WITH AN INHERENT CAPACITY TO RESIST EXTINCTION

"Every garden's like a snowflake, and of course every plant breeder's approach will differ, too," observes Tim. And if Thoreau's dictum "In wildness is the salvation of the world", holds any weight, then Tim's life & work has particular relevance for our understanding of 'what works.' That's because, ever since he began breeding work as a teenager, Tim has been fascinated by the interplay of foodcrops with Nature "red in tooth and claw." Arguably, no plant breeder alive has sorted the interface between domestic & wild cultures as keenly as he. When I visited him in 2004, checking out his breeding plots included a long drive around the surrounding hills to look in on multi-year breeding experiments in clearcuts and along roadsides, well off the beaten track. It's precisely this decades-long fascination and experience with how foodcrops interrelate with wild nature that has moved him slowly but inexorably toward his recent successes breeding staple foods with an inherent capacity to resist extinction.

RECONCILING PARADOXICAL PLANT TRAITS

It's an effort that has been almost 20 years in the making, not only because it has taken time for the necessary complements to come together in a genetic interplay with the environment, but also because breeding perennial grains makes for a unique challenge – it involves reconciling some fundamental, but apparently wildly contradictory plant traits. It has been the failure to establish harmony among these 'breeding paradoxes' that has put paid to many of the efforts of Tim's forbears and contemporaries.

For one, the qualities of edibility & survivability are typically at odds with one another – the same qualities that make food palatable to humans, also make them highly desirable to critters: "Animals are supremely