Renée Rhodes and Alli Maloney

LETTING THE LAND LEAD

An Interview with Nance Klehm

Nance Klehm *Nance in prairie grasses*

Nance Klehm is a radical ecologist whose work explores the intersections of soil, community, health, and ecosystem wholeness. She works to reimagine waste streams, soil contamination and fertility, and agroecological practices. Nance leads community soil science trainings and workshops, is a landscape designer and horticultural consultant, and has written books such as *The Soil Keepers: Interviews with Practitioners on the Ground Beneath Our Feet*. After years of centering her work in urban places she bought a multi-acre property called Pachamanka in the Driftless Area, where she is working to build health and connectivity.

What drew you to the land you're currently stewarding at Pachamanka?
I had been looking for land for fourteen years and had just settled on a smaller piece in central Illinois that had only a few trees on ten acres, surrounded by an ocean of corn and soy. I went to an Earth Day celebration and learned that they were going to start mining fracking sand from the state park very near this land. I went home and cried in the bathtub and decided to walk away from the deal. Someone suggested I attend a land auction that was happening. I went and, in just over eight minutes, I became the owner of this land, Pachamanka. It was a sideswipe, although looking for land has been my intention because I grew up rural on five hundred acres. It's all been part of my ancestral story for generations.

This land is in the southernmost part of the Driftless Area, a region that stretches from Illinois into Wisconsin and Minnesota, about forty minutes drive from the Mississippi River. Illinois is known for being flat but this area is not; there's elevation change because it wasn't glaciated and thus not scraped flat by retreating glaciers. We have deep soils made by prairie ecosystems and extensive riverways and streams as well as thin soils that exist on limestone ridges. It's a mineral-rich soil that is currently dominated by farmed corn and soy, with some wheat and oat and dairy and wool operations in places where rock is too close to the surface and farming isn't possible.

What feels important to you to be doing there?
I make a punch list every morning and evening, but when I walk outside, I let the land lead what I need to do. I have a diversified growing operation, mostly perennial crops, not so many annuals: mushrooms, perennial vegetables and medicinals, fruit and nuts. I'm growing for habitat and for the greatest biodiversity, not growing with food as a goal—food will be abundant. I keep Cayuga ducks, Bobwhite quail, and honeybees, and anytime you have animals you answer their call first. I don't consider myself a farmer and I don't use the term permaculture. I use the term agroecology because it more aptly fits what I'm doing. I build soil, insect, and bird life, all that supports the health of plant fungi and keeps systems moving around. I insert projects into larger living systems and do some restoration of the woodlands and prairie here, although it's not conventional by any means.

I've been here seven seasons and actively growing here for five. There's woodland and an old timber woodlot remaking itself. I've just started working in that area in the rows of trees that would never grow together in a natural woodland like the registered forester of the forestry service designed it. It's a very biologically non-diverse part of my landscape—in fact, most unbuilt lots in Chicago have more biodiversity than this four acre woodlot.

What plant communities are present on your land? How are you participating and exchanging with them in the work that you're doing?
There's plant and fungal communities, grassland, bottomland, wetland, woodland, prairie, and recovering agricultural fields, plus this woodlot. What I'm doing now is not about identifying but understanding how everything is working together over time and extreme seasonal change. Year to year change has happened: we're heavily impacted by flooding and face colder winters. It has fluctuated widely in the five years I've been engaged

I have been noticing weather my whole life in relation to plants because I come from a horticultural family. Our livelihood depended on it. I'm watching how plant communities work as opposed to individual plants or species. I'm recording notes on the shift, not fighting it, or trying to hold ground on it. I'm trying to go with what is happening.

We have had two back-to-back, once-in-a-hundred-year floods. And two years ago, I started losing my pond to drought which means I lost amphibian diversity, insect diversity and bird diversity. The sound scape changed. In 2020, two acres of a pond disappeared. In 2021, also a dry year, the water table dropped and other plant communities took over those formerly saturated soils.

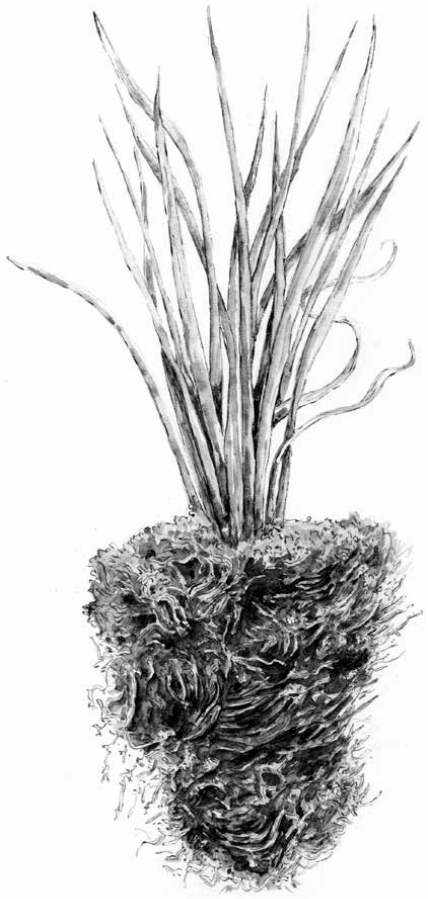
Pond soils are conditioned to be low oxygen. A whole different plant community succeeded in the drought and successfully went to seed. I didn't see any caterpillars last year. We had a low number of fireflies. We used to have some of the best firefly viewing anywhere because half of my property is bottomlands and they like the tall grass with wet feet. It wasn't just impacting what I was trying to keep alive—everything was different.

This year we started getting the pond back and Sandhill Cranes came back for the first time in three years as a result.

What you're observing is changing what you work on or how you tend to the place in the day-to-day. Do you have a longer-term plan that you're making adjustments to as needed?
I'm trying to blur the edges of the land that's cultivated around me with the land I have. Two, arguably three, sides of the land are cultivated farmland by my neighbors. I'm interested in blurring those edges because they can be quite abrupt. I have what I would call the "hairy" property. It's a stark difference. I'm interested in how I can work transitional zones to soften that and to create edge habitat that is the most productive, biologically speaking. I'm interested in how I can work with a new diversity of tree species—new in the sense that they don't exist very much in the current landscape, but they're indigenous to this area and have largely already been milled out—different species of oaks, hickory, butternut, and pecan.

I spend a lot of time planting trees and tall shrubs. Other areas are trying to hold the line between the invasive grass that was introduced by the federal government to feed cattle back in the fifties, by burning and mowing. I don't spray, which is what's advocated by state, county, federal, and even restoration companies. I'm much more hands-on. I don't have any children; I'm working to give this land back. I believe in the Land Back movement and I've been opening those conversations because I know they take a long time.[1] That's where it's going, back to someone, be it the Black farmers of this area, or the Indigenous.

What are some of the changes being projected for that region as the climate shifts? Are there ways of preparing the land for those shifts?

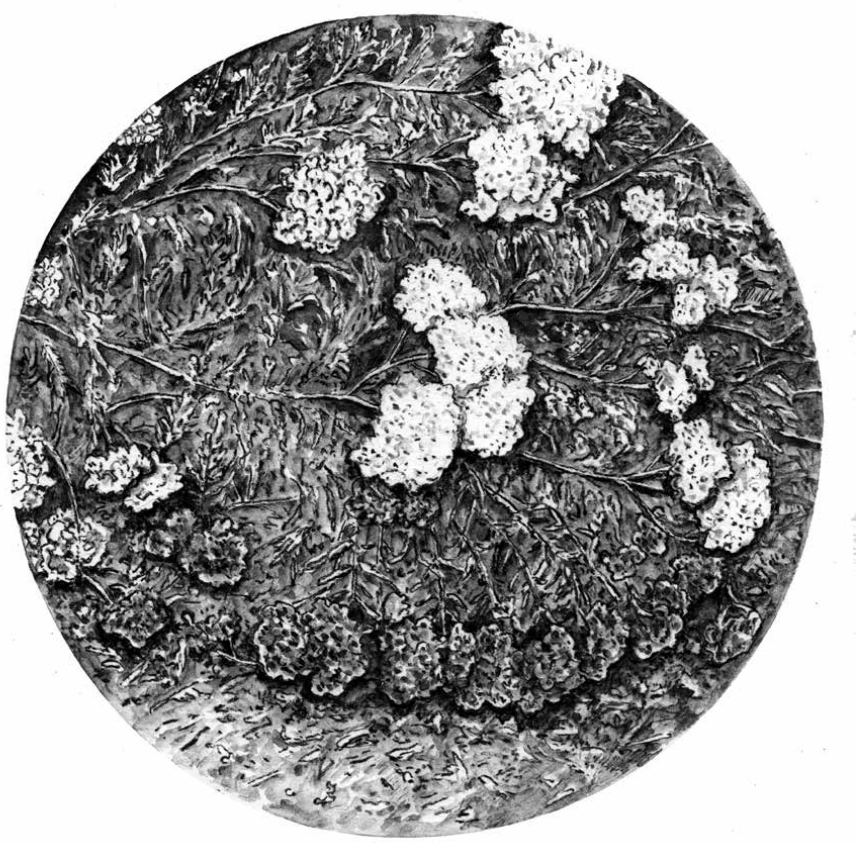


Vincent Waring *Blue Eyed Grass*

Everything's about the soil. Even if I'm planting, I'm thinking about soil, about what I'm putting in with that seedling, or with that tree, or what I'm top dressing it with. I do a lot of chopping and dropping of vegetation, or green mulching. I work with all nitrogenous and carboniferous waste to stay on site. I'm madly collecting clean farm wastes and have tremendous compost piles. I have a diversity of processes including a lot of ferments that I'm working on and I try to marry all those processes every time I expose soil, whether I scrape it with my tractor because I bumped over something or I burn a prairie, or till, which I very rarely do. I'm always thinking about what I lay down on the surface of the soil in copious amounts. I have a layered—most people call it 'overgrown'—highly forageable landscape, because it's not about markets or products. It's about the health of the landscape and the health of the soil.

I plant more than I need to and always plant an understory underneath all my trees. I'm not planting guilds. I'm planting prairie plants as understory in my orchard. I'm throwing down alfalfa and different clovers. It's not a perfect plan. I'm looking at broader communities: I step on those seed heads at the end of the season, I knock into them with a stick and let them fly. I'm interested in how these systems perpetuate with minimal, but continual, engagement—minimal in the sense that I'm not overthinking anything, but I'm continuing to engage a little bit more like an animal than a planning person.

What is your perspective on soil and soil health? Does it shift when you're working in a city context?
I grew up on a very diversified farm with animals. Manure piles and working with waste was something that we did because we understood waste as production and besides, where is it gonna go? I went to Washington, D.C. for school. My academic background is archaeology, which is when I really started



looking at soil. I noticed neglect: people saw themselves running across the surface and didn't see the dimensionality of it. The world goes up and the world goes down and they're just running over the surface. Most peoples' vision of their world is just whatever their body takes up. It is just real estate. As an archaeologist, I noticed that soil changes depending on what's in it. I knew that, but to see how it changed visually and chemically with different materials that were buried. I came to Chicago after graduating and doing fieldwork in coastal

Vincent Waring *Pathway*

Peru to work at The Field Museum of Natural History and I started getting involved in gardens because gardening was something that I did and knew. I've always been interested in all that urban crap is doing in soils and what does it mean or how it affects the people that live there—not just because of what they grow in them and then put in their mouths but because they're walking over soil's surface. In the past twenty years, I have been looking at that, hard.

No one seems to make a connection between soil health and community health. They do if you stick it in your mouth, but they don't if you just happen to be living there. Community gardens and urban growers generally don't want to know and don't have the money to test the soil. And even if they find out the imbalances and contaminations, what are they gonna do then? That's the question we are all facing. There are many challenges. I love big problems and I just have been going at it head-on ever since.

Working professionally in bioremediation, I build soils for resiliency so they best meet the challenges they face unique to their specific context. With compaction and/or repeated disturbance being the most common in any soil, I address this first and foremost. Pollutants or nutritional imbalances I dive into later. I feel like I'm a student of soil in its intersection with water. Water is something else that I spend a fair amount of time watching.

You hope for your land to be a place for community and for people to come together and engage. Are there projects or work that you're looking forward to?

There's always new ideas in the mix. I've had individuals to groups of 250 people here for a week. It's wide-ranging and some things are retreat-based, and there's a creative residency called "Chop Wood, Carry Water." I'm interested in the more expansive definition of creativity, outside of and beyond the art world. Some people organize groups to come here for discussions because it's a lot easier to have discussions on land than it is to have it indoors in a city where everybody runs home or is checking their phone. Here, they can do it on walks. They can do it around fires while they're camping. People come through and do long-term studies or their own about plants, animals, or growing systems. There's a school that's going to be happening, too. A lot of conversations happen out here. I believe land facilitates important conversations.

I've been developing the buildings to be of community use. There's a lot of studios and a barn kitchen, and there's a big lounge. I'm trying to make it useful to people—it's not just for growing, it's a space for gathering, too. I'm trying to build a broader flow of community with the idea that I'm gonna give this to somebody at my death, or when I'm tired.

It's hard not to think about legacy at my age. I'm 56. What am I gonna do with all this, given where the world's at? I believe in food sovereignty, I'll get behind it, but that's not what I'm working on. I'm working on land health and land politics and interested in how those cycles can also interface with an agricultural movement in a healthy and powerful way. ○

Note

1. The Land Back movement is a call for the return of Native lands to Native peoples.