

**Bustan Qaraqa
Permaculture Farm
Bethlehem
West Bank
Palestine**



Dear friends,

As Eid al-Adha and Christmas have come to Bethlehem and the year is turning, it seems an appropriate moment to send a message from our farm in the Shepherds Fields, updating you on our activities over the last few months and our plans for 2009. We feel it is also important at this juncture to mention the situation in Gaza, as the missiles keep falling and the death toll rises daily, and to express our deep sorrow at such terrible events and our hope for a swift ceasefire. You can sign a petition calling for an immediate ceasefire by clicking the following link:

http://www.avaaz.org/en/gaza_time_for_peace/97.php?cl_tf_sign=1

Let us hope that from such an inauspicious start, 2009 will be a year of peace-building and positive change in the region. We will certainly be approaching it with a renewed determination to help create a better future from the grassroots up, and to work for ecological sustainability, environmental justice and protection of human rights.

It is over 3 months since our last newsletter, and we have passed a turbulent but productive autumn, with thrills and spills coming thick and fast. In fact, so much has happened that it is difficult to know where to start: to recount the curious events of the olive harvest, the departure of our much beloved Bustan Qaraqa co-founder; Nick, the arrival of Roman, the sojourn of the Dancing Dishwasher, Alice's adventures in the United Kingdom, not to mention all the work that has been done with the help of many volunteers to build towards sustainable living and food production both at this site and at others.

Perhaps it is best to start, as they say, at the beginning, or around the time of our last correspondence. The team wilted in the late August heat, doggedly digging swale after swale as the Middle Eastern sun beat down relentlessly out of an azure and cloudless sky. As September progressed, the heat began to dissipate somewhat and the number of guests and volunteers declined. We were able to make a few forays away from the site, going on seed collection missions to Kibbutz Lotan in the far south of Israel, to Jerusalem Botanic Garden,

to the Judean desert to the east of Bethlehem and north to the Golan heights, besides tree planting in Bedouin communities in the Negev Desert alongside our partner organization; [Bustan](#). We also received glad news in the form of our first grant, courtesy of the Allan and Nesta Ferguson foundation, enough money to secure the rent on the site until June 2009, pay for materials for a tree nursery and begin work on sealing the rainwater cistern, as well as supporting the living expenses of our long-suffering project founders and volunteers.



As September turned to October the first rains fell and the season of olive harvesting began. We were delighted to be approached during this time by a group of North American and European activists called the [Olive Tree Circus](#), who needed a base from which to conduct their activities supporting Palestinian farmers in accessing their trees and land and restoring some of the joy to this important cultural event. The olive harvest 2008 turned out to be one of the most problematic years experienced by Palestinian farmers, with more attacks by Israeli military and settlers occurring during the first 2 weeks than in 2007 altogether according to UN reports. A wave of nationalistic fervour appeared to sweep through the settler movement, coinciding with the Jewish holidays of Yom Kippur and Sukkouth. [Arab-Jewish clashes and riots](#) in the northern city of Akko (Acre) added fuel to the fire, and Beit Sahour was not left out of the fall out.

A group of settlers who had been active all summer, have been attempting to seize a piece of land in Beit Sahour known as Ush Ghrab (the Crow's Nest) less than 1 km from Bustan Qaraaqa and stepping up their activities ([watch a video about Ush Ghrab](#)). The site used to be an Israeli military base, but was evacuated and handed back to Palestinian control in 2006. Since then it has been redeveloped by Beit Sahour municipality to create a community space for picnics and sport, a childrens' playground, and the headquarters of youth development organization and a Bustan Qaraaqa partner, [Paidia](#). In addition, a plan is underway and funding has been secured to build a childrens' hospital there. However, Israeli settlers who oppose

Palestinian control of the area have been organizing activities there in order to reassert Israeli ownership of the area ([read settler organization blog](#)).

On the Jewish holiday of Sukkouth, hundreds of Israeli settlers and activists arrived at the site. Local Palestinians and international NGO workers, including staff of Bustan Qaraaqa and Paidia, had decided to be present in the area, in order to demonstrate the fact that it is already in use by the local community, and is a valued space. The action was designed to be non-confrontational in nature, comprising a nature walk and environmental surveying activities in the nearby valley. Unfortunately, the delegation was attacked by Israeli border police and military and 6 people were seized, amongst them Bustan Qaraaqa team member, Nick Marcroft ([read article](#)).

While the other 5 were released after a few hours, Nick was detained in Israeli jail for several days before his anxious colleagues were able to obtain bail conditions. During this time, the Olive Tree Circus arrived at the farm to begin their programme, filling the house with accordion music, jugglers, stilt-walkers and good cheer. The trials of the Qaraaqa team were not yet over, as on the day of Nick's release and the first day of the olive harvest at the farm, Alice fell from the one branch of the one olive tree on the site overhanging the newly dug cistern, and plummeted 6 metres to the ground, landing badly and ending up being stretchered off in a Red Crescent ambulance and taken to Bethlehem hospital. Fortunately no bones were broken and she was discharged on the same day, dazed and staggering, but fundamentally unharmed. The next morning Nick was re-arrested by Israeli police due to not possessing a valid visa, but was later released on condition that he obtain one before November 10th.

Throughout this whole ordeal, the members of the Olive Tree Circus proved to be wondrously supportive and tolerant, fielding phone-calls, helping to leaver Alice out of the cistern, carrying out their own activities and creating music and magic in the midst of the carnage, both at the farm and across the West Bank as they travelled to support Palestinian farmers ([watch a video about the Olive Tree Circus](#)). In addition, a wide array of volunteers from all over the world came to help the team bring in the olive harvest - over 150 kilograms from 60 trees - and to them we offer our undying gratitude, for without them the crop would have soured ungathered on the trees.

November saw the departure of the circus, and also of Alice, who left to go on a speaking tour of the UK, visiting a wide array of groups across the country; from Palestine solidarity groups to students at agricultural colleges and permaculture groups. Soon afterwards, to

our lasting regret, Nick was deported, having not been granted a visa by Israeli authorities to work in the West Bank, despite having filed a request with Palestinian authorities which had been accepted.

This left the team extremely diminished, with a lone and faithful Tom at the helm of the project, and a mountain of work to get done. But just as things were looking desperate, reinforcements arrived in the form of Roman Gawel, an experienced conservation worker and qualified biologist who will volunteer long-term with the project, and Yohan Yohanson, the Dancing Dishwasher, an Olive Tree Circus survivor and resident of [Auroville sustainable community](#) in India, who span chaotically into the Qaraaqa orbit with revolutionary zeal and lent us his accumulated wisdom and joyous energy for a spell. As well as this, Steve and Rania Al Qass Collings, co-founders of the project who had been absent on parental leave, were able to rejoin the team, and so work not only continued through November but even gained momentum.



With the help of volunteers Brittany Baltimore, Erin Abshire, Neasa McNulty and Maggie Coulter, a tree nursery was constructed, winter vegetable beds were prepared, the swales were finished, additional water storage was built, a composting scheme was set in motion at the nearby [SOS childrens' village](#), workshops on non-violent communication and creative reuse of waste materials were carried out and field visits to local farmers were made.

In December Alice returned after a successful speaking tour, and work continued to gather pace as Bustan Qaraaqa hosted volunteer groups from [Birzeit University](#) and the [International Palestinian Youth League](#). Huge amounts of work were accomplished: the tree nursery was finished, winter beds were prepared, pathways were built around the site, a water catchment was built above the cistern and rocks were collected for building projects. As well as all this, the team attended volunteer days in Al Wallaja (with the [All Nations Cafe](#)) and Nahalin ([at the Tent of Nations](#)), and Alice and Tom went

south to give a tree planting workshop in the Bedouin village of Um Batin, near Beer Sheva, in cooperation with [Bustan](#).



And then Christmas was upon us, and the farm turned into a huge campsite and bunk house, as all the room at the inn was rapidly filled and guests were housed in caves and under tables. We had over 30 people staying on Christmas Eve, and a joyous celebration with a barbecue, a bonfire, music and dancing. As the evening progressed we were blessed with rain, which kept falling all night, a much needed Christmas present for land and people. Sadly it was not long before bad news began to dispel the festive cheer. On Christmas day, Israeli authorities demolished a straw-bale and mud eco-mosque in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Wadi El Naam ([read full story](#)), and we learned that our friend Abed in nearby Al Wallaja had received a demolition order for his small cave where he stays on his land. And then the bombs started falling on Gaza.

And so now we hang between the old year and the new, between hope and despair, watching and waiting to see how events will unfold in this troubled land. Elections are imminent in both Israel and Palestine, the political landscape if shifting and ominous clouds gather on the horizon. Of one thing we are certain, however: the environmental crisis that threatens the well-being of all the people in the region will not go away as the soil erodes and is destroyed by pollution and overgrazing, the water resources are contaminated with untreated sewage and industrial effluents and the threat of drought hangs heavy through this dry winter. So we have great plans for 2009 and a lot of work to do, both on this site and others as we continue our journey towards full sustainability, to work with our partners to increase environmental awareness and to develop and implement strategies for sustainable living that have real relevance to peoples' lives.

Upcoming events:

In January 2009 we look forward to tree planting workshops in Um Batin and Al Wallaja. In February 2009 we will hold a 2 week Spring

Action Camp (from February 17th to March 1st), when we will be working at Bustan Qaraaqa and with local farmers, learning about the Palestinian environmental situation, hiking in the Judean Desert and visiting the cities of the region. We invite people of all ages and backgrounds to participate - please email info@eag-palestine.org for further information and see the attached poster and flyer.

Support our work:

As ever, we are greatly in the debt of our volunteers, and our network of grassroots fundraisers and private contributors for the continuation of our work. We welcome volunteers to come to Palestine and work with us for whatever length of time you can spare. In addition, we are particularly in need of funding at the moment to help finish the rainwater cistern that will form the foundation of our work growing native trees and food crops. If you would like to fundraise for us, please be in contact for a support pack. If you would like to make a donation, cheques payable to Bustan Qaraaqa can be sent to The Old School, Lydfords Lane, Gillingham, Dorset, SP8 4NJ. Or, if you would like to make a monthly contribution, please email us at info@eag-palestine.org and we will send you our bank details. All help is deeply appreciated!

Special thanks:

We owe great debts of gratitude to so many people that it is impossible to list every name here, but in particular we would like to thank the Allan and Nesta Ferguson Charitable Foundation, the Bangor and Anglesey Peace and Justice group, the Permaculture Association, Ger Morgan, Mazen Qumsieh, the Olive Tree Circus, the International Palestinian Youth League, Brittany Baltimore, Erin Abshire, Neasa McNulty, Maggie Coulter, Philip and Mary Gray, Jan Bang, Alon Shepon, George Rishmawi, Adnan Atiyeh, Baha Hilo, Rebecca Vilkomerson, Ra'ed Al Mickawi, Eric Winter, Yohan Yohanson, Suzi High, Ed Hill, Michael Whiting, James Cox, Hanni Schoelman, Yamin El Abed, Jared Malsin and Cosimo Caridi for all the many things you have done for us.

And so it remains only to wish you all joy and light for the New Year, and to hope to see you here in Bethlehem. Merry may we meet!

In peace and love,

Alice, Tom, Nick, Steve, Rania and Roman

the Bustan Qaraaqa team

