



forest gardening



what is it?

It's a garden planted to mimic a natural forest ecosystem, except that the species chosen are mainly edible. Some will be chosen for other reasons – firewood, nitrogen fixing or medicine. “Imagine a garden that needs no weeding, watering, digging or feeding and can be left to look after itself for weeks, even months, on end.” - from *the Garden of the Future? Guardian, 2007*.

So a forest garden uses diverse, perennial edible species, based on the structure of native woodland, which means that there are layers – from the treetops to the ground, and to the roots under it. Seven layers are generally identified:

- canopy trees – standard large trees
- smaller shade tolerant trees, from dwarf stock, for fruit and nuts
- shrubs and bushes such as currants and gooseberries
- herbaceous layer of perennial herbs and veg
- groundcover plants
- underground layer - root crops
- vertical layer of climbers and vines, beans etc, trained to climb up the trees and bushes

Forest gardening is an ancient practice. In tropical Asia, China and Africa, complex forest gardens have existed for thousands of years. In the UK most temperate forest was lost a long time ago - cleared for monocultures of grain crops, grazing or felled for ships and housing.

Forest gardening pioneer Robert Hart visited tropical forest gardens and was inspired to create the first temperate forest garden on the Welsh



3 layers of perennial plants - the herb layer is valerian (medicinal), the shrub layer flax (fibres), and the canopy fruit and fuel trees

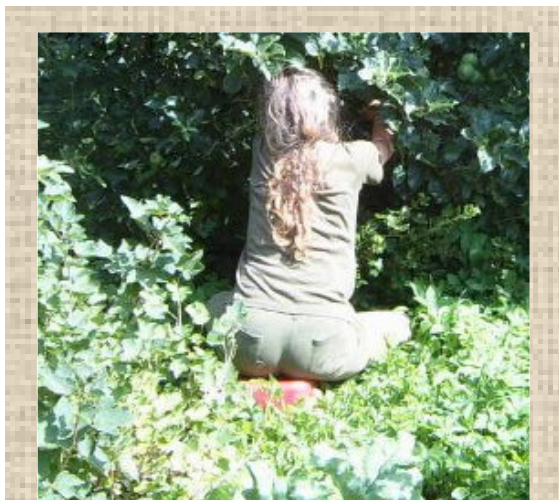
borders 30 years ago. He also wrote the first books on the subject. His work has been the inspiration for the UK forest gardening movement and many people have built on it. There are around 60 forest gardens (often also called ‘home gardens’) in the UK. Most of these are less than 10 years old and small scale (0.25-2.5 acres).

what are the benefits?

Modern monoculture systems are heavily oil and chemical dependent and are slowly eroding and polluting our soils and water courses. Farming may need to change radically quite soon though as oil is used faster than it is discovered.

The benefits of forest garden systems are many:

- resilient, drought and flood resistant through well-developed root and mycorrhizal networks
- maintain soil fertility and can be used to reclaim soils that have been polluted
- control soil erosion and water runoff
- provide their own nutrient requirements, through annual leaf fall, the planting of deep-rooting mineral accumulators (e.g. comfrey) and nitrogen-fixing plants and trees such as Eleagnus, alder and clovers, avoiding the need to constantly import materials, or use chemicals
- low maintenance once established
- the food they provide is nutrient rich and diverse, promoting good health
- excellent for wildlife, creating a variety of habitats and attracting beneficial insects
- can prevent or remedy soil salinization and acidification
- utilize sunlight far more effectively than monoculture systems



harvesting gooseberries from a forest garden, with rhubarb in the foreground and apple and damson trees forming the canopy



- attractive, and provide great spaces for play, education and relaxation

A few examples of typical forest garden produce:

trees: apple, pear, cherry plum, quince, mulberry, medlar, peach, chestnut, pine nut, almond, hazelnut, junberry, strawberry tree, pawpaw, blue bean, persimmon, bladdernut, snowbell tree

shrubs: currant, plum, blueberry, wineberry, Oregon grape, almonberry, whortleberry

perennial vegetables: bamboo (shoots), fat hen, sea kale, perennial spinach, good King Henry, wild garlic, Babbington leek, everlasting onion

roots: pignut, Jerusalem artichoke, horseradish, earthnut pea, wasabi

herbs: whole range of medicinal and edible herbs

climbers: grape, loganberry, tayberry, strawberry grape, kiwi fruit, hop

fungi: oyster shiitake, lion's mane

cut and come again salad: sorrel, wild rocket, lambs lettuce, mustard, wrinkled cress

plus: fuel wood from coppice, basketry materials, dye plants, garden canes and ties

what can I do?

- transform an underused part of your garden into a mini forest garden, or adapt the entire garden into a multi-layered edible paradise
- think about what you, your family, like to eat and how you would like to use your garden



a good example of a guild: comfrey provides ground cover and is a mineral accumulator, aromatic herbs protect fruit from pests, currants are planted around the drip line of the trees so they get watered, plus redcurrants do well in the shade of the apple tree

- tailor your diet to include more of the things that a forest garden can produce. You can plant some non-perennials in there as well, or have another area to grow your onions, salads, potatoes, cabbages and other annuals
- broaden your knowledge of edible perennials (there are many species most people have never heard of, or realise you can eat)
- attend a forest gardening course, treat yourself to a book or search the web for information
- carefully observe your garden, and how it changes through the year, then make a base map (plan of area, including aspect, existing structures/plants, type of soil and elevation)
- create a design (remember that the plants are perennial, and will stay where you put them for a long time)
- gather materials and tools (many of the things needed can be recycled or gathered for free)
- some animals (e.g. chickens - originally forest birds) love scratching around in a forest garden, and will help control pests, and add manure
- source the plants; this doesn't have to be expensive – take cuttings and save/swap seeds, and build up your garden slowly
- choose plants that are mutually beneficial – that can do things for each other like offer shade, fix nitrogen, attract insect predators, repel pests, drop leaves for mulch and compost, drip water or bring up nutrients with deep roots. This kind of mutually-beneficial group is known as a guild
- make a big pot of soup, get some beers in, invite friends, and get planting – after that, the main work should be just harvesting

resources

- LILI run forest gardening courses
- these books (and more) available from LILI:
- Robert Hart, *Forest Gardening*
- Patrick Whitefield, *How to Make a Forest Garden*
- Dave Jacke & Eric Toensmeier, *Edible Forest Gardens vols 1&2*
- agroforestry.co.uk – the Agroforestry Research Trust: information, publications, consultancy
- aftaweb.org – Association for Temperate Agroforestry (US): information and resources
- pfaf.org – Plants for a Future: huge database of useful perennial plants

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