Ethical living

The garden of the future?

Forest gardens that replicate woodland ecosystems provide food, fuel and medicine, support wildlife, and could boom in popularity as the climate changes. Jill Tunstall explores a horticultural haven

Jill Tunstall

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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. Go further: it's organic, wildlife-friendly, disease resistant, reduces your weekly food bill and brings fashionable foraging to your doorstep.

It might sound too good to be true, but this garden can be a reality for anyone with some outdoor space, whether it's the backyard of an innercity terrace or the grounds of a country vicarage.

Just over a year ago Jennifer Lauruol's modest garden at her home on a new housing estate in Lancaster amounted to little more than a lawn that the previous owner's dog had been peeing on for the past four years. Others may have seen stained grass, but Lauruol's vision was to mimic a system of planting that goes back to the Aztecs but was reinterpreted by the late Robert Hart, a visionary gardener who brought the idea to Britain in the 1960s and named it "forest gardening".

Studying the woodlands and forest around his Wenlock Edge home on the Shropshire/Wales border, Hart realised that they were both productive and self-maintaining. He set about rearranging his own garden on forest principles with edible layers of self-sustaining perennials that would provide food, fuel and medicines, as well as support wildlife. His philosophy was recorded in two books, The Forest Garden and Beyond the Forest Garden (Green Books), both published shortly before he died in 2000.

It was this idea that Lauruol, a garden designer herself, envisaged at her semi. As soon as she moved in she got busy planting 14 trees and importing tonnes of bark chippings to mimic the self-mulching forest floor.

"It's all about layers and building them up year on year," says Lauruol, who is still at the investment stage; putting in trees, shrubs and vines which will eventually largely look after themselves. Hart had identified seven layers: roots, ground cover, herb layer, fruiting shrubs, dwarf trees, tree canopy and the high canopy (or vertical layer), all of which coexist happily within their own ecosystem. In Lauruol's garden, apple, plum and cherry trees will soon be underplanted with shade-tolerant fruiting shrubs once the trees are established.

"And underneath I've got herbs and salad leaves such as these dandelions, which I eat regularly," she says. "And I planted nettle."

She actually planted nettles?

"Oh yes, because they are edible and the bees love them," she insists as we walk around the garden, still productive on a wet and windy autumnal day. "I'm not afraid of them. They make fantastic soup." Instead of stopping to pluck out weeds, as most gardeners do, she gathers a handful of dandelions and shepherd's purse as salad. There's no such thing as a "weed" in the forest garden.

Lauruol hasn't actually planted the brambles that grow along her fence, but they too are welcome for their blackberries. More exotic fruit-bearers such as kiwi and vines, are being trained up the trees. Even her containers are planted forest-style. She has six whisky barrels containing fruit trees underplanted with calendula, lettuces and cabbage on her disused drive - Lauruol and husband Richard Gibbens decided to become car-free and gave their van to a friend in exchange for help planting up the garden.

The lettuce and cabbage, being annuals, are not forest garden plants, but

are included as "companion plants" to add variety. As if to prove a point, while the couple were away on a three-week bike trip this summer these were the only plants to suffer.

Far from being a wilderness Lauruol's garden is neat and ordered. "It's really important to me that my garden's also beautiful rather than just full of birds and butterflies but messy," she says, adding proudly that her garden is home to six different species of earthworms.

In line with Hart's vision of spare bits of wasteland being turned into forest - a disappearing habitat he cared passionately about - Lauruol has indulged in a spot of guerrilla gardening, putting in an edible hedge on an uncared-for verge outside her property. "It hardly cost me anything. These are all cuttings, rescued plants and cheapo things from garden centres which will attract bees and butterflies."

To a generation raised on the Ground Force principles of decking and water features, mixing roses with onions, rhubarb and beetroot, as Lauruol does, may seem a move too far. But it may be the one we all have to make. One of the biggest selling points of a forest garden is that the sustainable foundation underpinning its philosophy means it is ideally suited to coping with the effects of climate change. It could even act as a sanctuary for species fleeing threatened habitats.

"The English model of a neatly clipped lawn and borders that need watching over is not one we should be taking forward in the face of climate change," says Adam Thorogood, a forest garden expert at the Centre for Alternative Technology in mid-Wales. "A productive garden may seem a radical idea in the face of reduced water supplies, but forest gardens are not so radical. I think we'll start to see more of them as the climate changes."

If and when it does, Bangor Forest Garden, a community project in north Wales planted 10 years ago, is ready. At around a third of an acre, this maturing forest garden shows what's possible when size is not an issue and when exotic species such as figs and quinces are mixed in among the high canopy of native trees such as beech, oak and holly.

"A lot of forest garden plants are what you might find in motorway service stations or supermarket car parks, because they are hardy and maintenance free," says director and volunteer Natalie Ansell. "We don't plant anything that needs watering." A South American monkey puzzle and European pinus pinea are grown for nuts, while New Zealand flax leaves are used as twine. Jerusalem artichokes thrive in the soil beneath a Chinese sea buckthorn, a nitrogen fixer for the soil that produces vitamin C-packed berries.

"When this bamboo invades the path we chop it back and stir-fry the new shoots," says Ansell. "There are no problems in forest gardening, only solutions. Climate change? This garden will adapt and survive".

· Further reading: How to Make a Forest Garden by Patrick Whitefield