



forest gardening



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

what is it?

It's gardening in a way intended to mimic a natural forest ecosystem, except that the species chosen are mainly edible. Some will be chosen for other reasons – e.g. firewood, nitrogen fixing, flowers or medicines. Perennial, edible species are used, based on the structure of native woodland, which means there are layers – from the tops of trees down to the ground, and to the roots underneath it. Seven layers are generally identified:

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

Forest gardening is an ancient practice; there's evidence that people (and animals) have consciously shaped the forests in which they lived for millennia. In tropical Asia, China and Africa, complex forest gardens have existed for thousands of years. In the UK most of the temperate forest was lost a long time ago – cleared for grain, grazing or felled for timber.

Forest gardening pioneer Robert Hart visited tropical forest gardens, studied ecology, and used his knowledge to create the first temperate forest garden in Shropshire in the 1970s, and to write the first books on the subject. Many people have built upon his work, refining and adding to the theory and practice.

There are now hundreds of forest gardens (often called 'home gardens') in the UK. Most are less than 20 years old and small (0.25-2.5 acres).

Here are some examples of the kinds of produce you can expect to harvest from a forest garden:

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

Shrubs: currant, plum, blueberry, wineberry, Oregon grape, almonberry, whortleberry.

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

Roots: pignut, Jerusalem artichoke, horseradish, earthnut pea, wasabi.

Herbs: whole range of herbs for cooking and medicinal use.

Climbers: grape, loganberry, tayberry, strawberry grape, kiwi fruit, hop.

Fungi: oyster, shiitake, lion's mane.

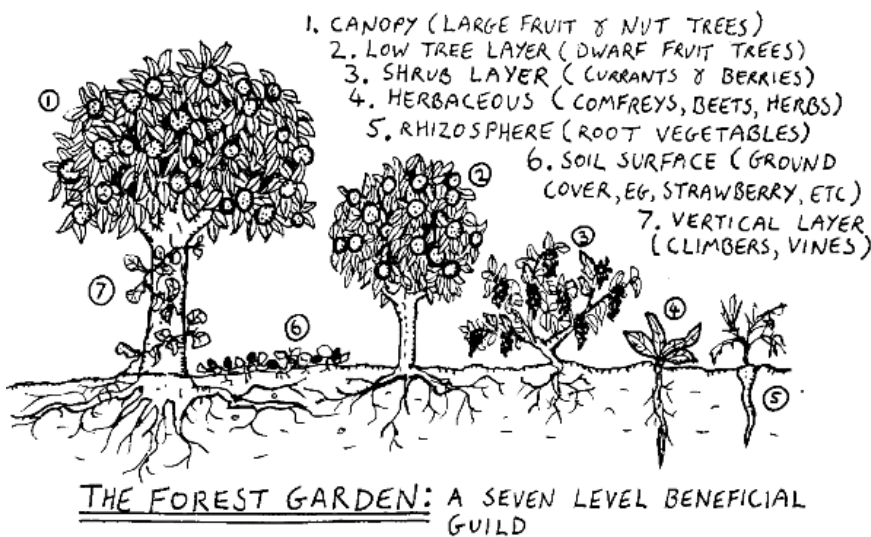
Cut and come again salad: sorrel, wild rocket, lambs lettuce, mustard, wrinkled cress.

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

what are the benefits?

Forest gardening presents an alternative to pesticide-heavy monoculture that:

- is resilient, withstanding drought and flooding via well-developed root & mycorrhizal networks;
- maintains soil fertility and can be used to reclaim soils that have been polluted;
- controls soil erosion and water runoff;
- provides its 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 synthetic chemicals;
- is low-maintenance once established – you're working with nature, not against her;
- delivers nutrient-rich, diverse food that promotes good health;
- is excellent for wildlife, creating a variety of habitats and attracting beneficial insects;
- can prevent / remedy soil salinization & acidification;
- utilizes sunlight far more effectively than monoculture systems;
- is attractive, and provides space for play, education and relaxation.



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.

Preparation

- Carefully observe your garden, and how it changes through the year.
- Think about what you and your family like to eat and how you would like to use your garden.
- Learn about edible perennials (there are many species most people have never heard of, or realise you can eat).

what can I do?

Possibilities

- Transform an underused part of your garden into a mini forest garden - maybe a marginal piece of land at the end of your garden, beside the garage, behind the shed, a shady side of the house or where the children build dens.
- Alternatively, go the whole hog and adapt the entire area around your house into a multi-layered edible paradise.
- Adapt part of your allotment into a perennial source of food and materials.
- Transform your lawn, or a part of it, using a tried and tested 'no dig' technique.
- Add to your design, year on year, as you would with any garden.
- If you're going to have a forest garden, it's probably a good idea to tailor your diet to include more of the things that a forest garden can produce. Of course, you can plant some non-perennials in there as well, or just have part of your land as a forest garden, and another part to grow onions, salads, potatoes, cabbages and other annuals.
- Some animals - for example chickens (originally forest birds) - will love scratching around in a forest garden, and will help to control pests, and add manure.
- Choose plants that are mutually beneficial - i.e. that can do things for each other like offer shade, fix nitrogen, attract insect predators,

- Attend a forest gardening course / treat yourself to a book or two.

Getting started

- Make a base map (plan of existing area, looking at aspect, existing structures/plants, type of soil and elevation).
- Create a design (this can be as simple or as complex as you like - but 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).
- Source the plants; this doesn't have to be expensive - you can take cuttings and save/swap seeds, and build up your garden slowly.
- Invite your friends and get planting - after that, there shouldn't be much more work other than harvesting.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/forest-gardening for more information, links, courses & books, including:
- Catherine Bukowski & John Munsell, *the Community Forest Handbook*
- Martin Crawford, *Creating a Forest Garden*
- Tomas Reimarz, *Forest Gardening in Practice*
- apiosinstitute.org - perennial crop polycultures
- nationalforestgardening.org - promoting forest garden development in the UK
- bit.ly/2WfdCMr - designing a forest garden

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