

Life in a Food Forest

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Have you ever wondered how a forest supports all the plants and animals that live in it, without any help from mankind, while we gardeners work so hard, and spend so much, to produce one tomato? Pondering that question has sparked several related gardening movements, including permaculture, food forest gardening, and edible forest gardening. These movements are based on mimicking the natural processes and beneficial relationships within a natural forest. They spring from a desire to live a little lighter on this earth, and take their cues from Mother Nature.

Think about how a forest evolves. It begins with an open piece of ground. The first plants to colonize are the annual native weeds and grasses. After a few seasons these pioneer plants support a colony of worms and soil bugs that convert their rotting leaves into rich organic matter that begins building soil. Their flowers attract insects and their seeds attract birds and animals. The birds and animals bring with them the seeds of longer living plants like blueberries, wild plum, crabapple and persimmon and nut trees. Over time these larger stronger growers work out their place within the forest. The taller nut trees colonize in groups, while the shorter, sun loving crabapple, wild plums and blueberries find life on the edges of the forest. The grasses and wild flowers become the pioneer force on the outskirts, building new soil to continue the advancement of the forest. If a tree is blown over in a wind storm, or a fire wipes out a section of the forest, it is soon healed by the pioneer plants and the process continues. It is the co-working of the group that makes a forest thrive; the plants and animals working as a whole create a guild that sustains them. And notice, nobody has tilled, irrigated, or fertilized anything.

We can use this model to create beautiful gardens, full of plants to feed ourselves, while creating habitat for beneficial insects, pollinators, small farm animals and wildlife. By creating guilds of plants and animals that we as humans find useful, and following the same practices that a forest uses to create rich soil, we can avoid the back breaking labor of tilling and weeding our gardens. These guilds are just groups of plants that work well together; a guild can be a food forest that covers acres, or a 2x6 flower bed in your back yard.

Many great books have been written on the subject. If you're interested, pick up the book *Gaia's Garden A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture*, by Toby Hemenway. It's a wonderful introduction to the techniques to turn your back yard into a useful space that contains all your favorite flowers, as well as habitat for wildlife and food for your table. *Forest Gardening*, by Robert Hart, is also a good guide into the world of home-scale food forests.

There are many good websites to check out, and groups that have regular work shops and teaching tools to help newcomers learn. Some of the one's I've found useful include <http://www.permacultureactivist.net/index.html> and <http://patternliteracy.com/>. If you'd like to see some great case studies Peak Moment has several videos on You Tube that show wonderful examples of successful urban food growing. Take a tour of Scott McGuire's White Sage Gardens in "An Experiment in Back Yard Sustainability" and "Cultivating a Suburban Foodshed"; these are both quite eye opening.

To see a local example we invite you to our farm and nursery Just Fruits and Exotics www.justfruitsandexotics.com where we are exploring the concepts of food forests. We have a three year old orchard that is thriving without the use of any commercial fertilizer, chemical sprays, or tilling.